

EMOTIONAL ABUSE: the most Common Form of Abuse

BY KALI MUNRO, M.ED., PSYCHOTHERAPIST, 2001

Emotional abuse is the most common form of abuse – and yet least talked about. Part of the reason it is so easy for people to overlook is that so much of what is considered normal and acceptable forms of communication is in fact abusive. Many people don't know that they have been – or are being – emotionally abused. In addition, a lot of emotional abuse doesn't appear to be severe or dramatic, although its effects can be.

EMOTIONAL ABUSE IS CHARACTERIZED BY A CLIMATE OF ABUSE

Unlike physical or sexual abuse, where a single incident constitutes abuse, emotional abuse is made up of a series of incidents, or a pattern of behavior that occurs over time. Emotional abuse is more than just verbal insults, the most common definition of emotional abuse. Emotional abuse is a series of repeated incidents – whether intentional or not – that insults, threatens, isolates, degrades, humiliates, and/or controls another person.

It may include a pattern of one or more of the following abuses: insults, criticisms, aggressive demands or expectations, threats, rejection, neglect, blame, emotional manipulation and control, isolation, punishment, terrorizing, ignoring, or teasing.

Harassment, physical and sexual abuse, and witnessing abuse of others are also forms of emotional abuse.

Emotional abuse can take place anywhere: at home, at school, in relationships, and in the workplace. Contrary to popular beliefs that bullies are only found in the school yard, many bullies also exist in the workplace.

EMOTIONAL ABUSE AND GENDER

It's unclear whether males or females are more emotionally abusive, however, it seems that girls/women are more likely to use emotional abuse to gain control and power, while boys/men are more likely to use physical intimidation, aggression, and violence.

THE EFFECTS OF EMOTIONAL ABUSE

Emotional abuse is not only under-reported, but its effects are minimized. The famous childhood verse, "Sticks and stones may break my bones, but names will never hurt me" is simply not true. In fact, many physical and sexual abuse survivors have said that the emotional abuse was often more devastating and had longer-term effects.

Emotional abuse cuts to the core of a person, attacking their very being. Emotional abuse, if frequent enough, is usually internalized by the victim, and leaves them feeling fearful, insignificant, unworthy, untrusting, emotionally needy, undeserving and unlovable, and as if they were bad, deserving of punishment, and to blame.

Survivors of emotional abuse often have a hard time understanding why they feel so bad. The abuse may not sound like much, and often people around them will minimize the experience, telling them it's not so bad. But a climate of disregard for a person's feelings, where one is subjected to constant or frequent criticisms, being yelled at, or being ignored – has a deep and profound effect, attacking the very self-image and confidence of a person.

IDENTIFYING EMOTIONAL ABUSE

How do you recognize emotional abuse? One thing that can help is to step back from your situation and

examine the overall climate in your home or your workplace. Trust your instincts and feelings about people. Sometimes, a person can just look at you and you know that they are looking down at you. Other times, their words are okay but their tone is mean. Emotional abuse is insidious and can be very subtle, so trust your gut; it's telling you something.

NAMING IT

Because it is harder to name emotional abuse as abuse, it can be harder to heal from as well. The first step is to name your experience as abuse. Trust how you feel. Many people can identify the abuse once they know what to look for because they change from being outgoing, self-confident, and care-free to feeling nervous, anxious, and fearful in the company of an emotionally abusive person. Just because you're feeling those feelings doesn't mean that you're being emotionally abused; there could be something else going on. But, those feelings combined with abusive behavior is convincing evidence that you are being abused. Try describing to other people how this person behaves. Be honest, and listen to the feedback you receive. If you don't feel good about the feedback, try someone else. Remember that emotional abuse is frequently minimized.

OVERCOMING THE DYNAMIC

Emotional abuse sets up a dynamic where the victim comes to believe that they are to blame and that they must work harder to fix the problems (such as improving the relationship.) This never works because the problem is not the victim; the abusive behavior is the problem. Nothing you do will change that. No matter how nice and accommodating you are, nothing that you do will change an emotionally abusive person's behavior. In fact, many people get even more aggressive when you try to make it better, because they sense that you think it's your fault, and this confirms their own beliefs!

It can be very hard to not fall into the role of being "good girl" or "good boy" when someone is emotionally abusing you, but it's important to avoid that.

IF YOU'RE PRESENTLY BEING EMOTIONALLY ABUSED

If you know that you're currently being emotionally abused, you'll need to find ways to protect yourself emotionally; to reduce or stop contact with the abusive person; to find allies; to talk about what is going on, and to look into options to keep yourself from being further abused. This can get complicated, depending on the context, but there are many resources to help you with workplace bullying and abuse in relationships.

IF YOU'VE BEEN EMOTIONALLY ABUSED IN THE PAST

Identifying the abuse as abuse is an important step in your healing. It means that you recognize that what happened to you was wrong, hurtful, and not your fault. Placing responsibility for the abuse on the abuser is key to healing from abuse.

COUNTERING NEGATIVITY

Countering the negative messages that you received is also really important. You may need to write down all the insulting things that you learned about yourself and counter each one with the truth. It may feel unnatural or foreign to counter these messages, but it will help you to feel better in the long-run. Catch yourself when you find that you are putting yourself down. Take a breath, and remind yourself that you don't want to do that anymore, that you don't deserve to be hurt, and that you want to think of yourself differently.

See if you can come up with something that you like about yourself. If you can't come up with something good, think about how you would like to think about yourself. The idea is to interrupt the flow of insulting thoughts you have, and to find ways to replace those thoughts with self-soothing ones.

By finding ways to be gentle and soothing with yourself, you are directly countering those messages. Being kind to yourself by asking yourself what you need, what you want to do, and letting yourself do those things are all ways to create a more positive and loving relationship with yourself.

No matter what you've been told or how you've been treated, you are worthy of love and respect. The more you know this, the less likely you will be to accept disrespectful or abusive behavior towards yourself or others. You should not have to take emotional abuse from anyone – no matter what the excuse. You deserve to be treated well.

Copyright © KALI MUNRO. All rights reserved.

<http://kalimunro.com>