

EMOTIONAL ABUSE: What We Can Do

By Dr. Katia G. Reinert

Mary's Story

We talked about Mary. Her husband, John, was a leader in their church, but verbally abused her and discouraged her from going back to school. Even so, Mary still has a difficult time saying she was abused.

Her husband knew the Bible well and proclaimed his Christian faith boldly. They studied Scripture together, prayed together, and hosted Bible studies in their home. But a domineering nature lurked behind his confident, God-fearing front. He spent years tearing down Mary's sense of security and self-worth.

"I had things broken around me, threats made to me, emotional games played on me—a knife held to my throat, a gun held to my head," Mary says. "The Bible itself was even used as a weapon against me—always out of context, mind you, but used nonetheless."

He blamed his outbursts on Mary, and for years she bought the lie that she was partially responsible. "I had to have been doing something wrong if things weren't going well in a relationship that included God, right? I tried so hard to be godly ... and the Bible told me to submit to my husband. Maybe God just wanted me to suffer a bit, to make me more holy. Besides, it wasn't that bad—he could also be loving and kind sometimes."

John abused Mary, but it could have been the other way around. Women also inflict as much emotional abuse towards men. So, let's reverse the story. Can you picture this? Mary says disparagingly to her husband, "You can't back to school! You never liked school. You don't have the brains for that."

Here are a few questions we would like to pose :

- What **techniques do emotional abusers use** through their words, indifference, actions?
- What is a **self-assessment** for emotional abuse?
- What are **the effects** of emotional abuse?
- How should the **Christian respond** to someone being abused?
- What if you are the one being emotionally abusive toward someone you love? Are you willing to recognize and change your behavior?
- What if you are the survivor? **Are you willing to seek help?** Do you know where to turn to?
- What are **helpful resources** for emotionally abused survivors?

WHY IS EMOTIONAL ABUSE DIFFICULT TO RECOGNIZE?

Emotional abuse may be hard to recognize because it can be subtle, and because abusers often blame their victims. They may act like they have no idea why you are upset. Additionally, you may have been treated this way in past relationships, so it's familiar to you and harder to recognize. Over time, the abuser will chip away at your self-esteem, causing you to feel guilty, doubt yourself, and distrust your perceptions.

Other aspects of the relationship may work well. The abuser may be loving between abusive episodes, so that you deny or forget them. You may not have had a healthy relationship for comparison, and when the abuse takes place in private, there are no witnesses to validate your experience.

THE PERSONALITY OF AN ABUSER

Many men and women assume that if they're not being physically abused by their partner, then they're not being abused. That's not necessarily true. You may be in a relationship which is draining something from you—your partner is eroding your self-esteem and happiness—and you might not have recognized it.

Abusers typically want to control and dominate. They use verbal abuse to accomplish this. They are self-centered, impatient, unreasonable, insensitive, unforgiving, lack empathy, and often are jealous, suspicious, and withholding. To maintain control, some abusers “take hostages,” meaning that they may try to isolate you from your friends and family. Their moods can shift from fun-loving and romantic to sullen and angry. Some punish with anger, others with silence – or both. It’s usually “their way or the highway.”

Characteristics of Male Abusers

- **The Demand Man.** Very entitled, easily enraged and extremely critical, often overvaluing his household contributions.
- **Mr. Right.** Sees his own perspective as the ultimate authority and doesn’t value his spouse’s feelings. He also distorts his spouse’s rational logic into something absurd, causing the spouse to regret even having her own opinion.
- **The Water Torturer.** Manages to verbally assault his spouse without shouting or raising his voice. These quiet attacks can cause his spouse to get angry, making it appear to as though the abusive one is the spouse.

According to research, these profiles are manifestations of a distorted belief system. In their book, *When Love Hurts: A Woman’s Guide to Understanding Abuse in Relationships*, Jill Cory and Karen McAndless-Davis write that abusive men believe they are central, superior, and deserving.

“The man uses abusive tactics in order to impose his belief system,” they write. “The abusive tactics allow him to stay in control and to have more power than his partner. An abusive man will use whatever form of abuse he needs to ‘win’ and get what he wants.”

However, as noted earlier, men experience emotional abuse by women just as much as women experience emotional abuse by men.

Characteristics of Female Abusers

- **She was verbally abused as a child**, witnessed it in her own family, or was verbally abused by a previous partner.
- **She has low self-esteem.**
- **She has an intense temper**, triggered by minor frustrations and arguments.
- **Her sense of power or control depends on her partner's acquiescence** and his performance per her demands. She feels “in control” only if her partner is totally passive and giving in to all of her preferences and decisions.
- **She has rigid expectations or fantasies of marriage**, partnership, or men, and will not compromise. She expects him to behave according to her expectations of what her partner should be like; perhaps the way her parents’ marriage was, or its opposite. She demands that he change to accommodate her expectations.
- **She projects the blame for all relationship difficulties onto her partner.** She wouldn't get angry if only he would be who she wants him to be. She wouldn't drink if he didn't make her unhappy. She denies the need for counseling because there's “nothing wrong with her, only with him.” She might not want him to get counseling because she’s threatened by the risk of an outsider “taking sides” with him.
- **Abusers are extremely possessive and jealous.** They experience an intense desire to control their mates.
- **Abusers often have superficial relationships with other people.** Her primary, if not exclusive, relationship is with her husband/boyfriend.

- **She may be described as having a dual personality**—She is either sweet or exceptionally cruel and sharp. She is selfish or generous depending on her mood.
- **A major characteristic of abusers is their capacity to deceive others.** She can be sweet, calm, charming, and convincing.
- **The mate is usually a symbol.** The abuser doesn't relate to her partner as a person in his own right, but as a symbol of a significant other. This is especially true when she's angry. She assumes that he is thinking, feeling, or acting like that significant other—often her father (or other family member or authority figure).

Our culture excessively, irrationally accepts the "I'll Change Him" philosophy, where a woman selects and then "molds" a partner to her liking. "Marry the man today – and change his ways tomorrow!"—Lyric from Broadway musical *Guys & Dolls*

Certainly, equal loving partners may decide to change their physical HABITS to please each other, but a partner should never demand that the spouse change LIFESTYLE, PERSONALITY, HOBBIES, or CAREER CHOICES against her/his will for the sake of the partner.

It is important to understand that abusers are not hopeless people and they may have a painful experience of their own. **Research points out that abused people tend to abuse others.** So abusive behavior can sometimes come from feelings of fear and shame that may have resulted from abuse they suffered prior to marrying their spouse. This often results in the need to control their shame through subsequent abuse. The abuser may tell themselves, 'I will never be that frightened little boy or girl again...I will never be in that place of vulnerability again, so I will stay in control.'

WHAT ARE THE TECHNIQUES USED IN EMOTIONAL ABUSE?

1. Emotional Abuse Through Words

- **The Overbearing Opinion.** The person who refuses to consider your opinion and forces you to always accept his or hers.
- **The Person Who is Always Right.** The person who must always be right and have the last word whenever a disagreement occurs.
- **The Judge and Jury.** The person who incorporates harsh judgments of you, as a person or your behavior, to produce your personal shame and guilt.
- **The Put-Down Artist.** The person who uses comments like "You're crazy! How could anyone think such a stupid thing?" to devalue your decisions and feelings.
- **The Stand-Up Comic.** The person whose use of sarcasm is meant to dig up past issues, drive home a point of view, or belittle you as an individual.
- **The Great Guilt-Giver.** The person who uses unrealistic and undeserved false guilt to control your behavior.
- **The Historian.** The person who says you're forgiven but then proceeds to bring up every past issue again and again to shame you into accepting his or her decisions and feelings.

2. Emotional Abuse Through Actions

- **The Commander-in-Chief.** The person who desires to control every aspect of your life—from your thoughts to your actions—by rigid, militaristic behavior and expectations.
- **The Screamer.** The person who uses screaming, yelling, and name-calling as weapons to control you.
- **The Intimidator.** The person who uses intimidation, fear, anger, and inappropriate threats to get his or her way.
- **The Roller-Coaster.** The person whose moods and behavior swing from one extreme to another, removing any sense of safety and consistency from your relationship.

- **The Person Who Plays Favorites.** The person who displays favoritism by saying, “Why can’t you be more like…” making it clear that you do not measure up to someone else.
- **The Role Reverser.** Relational roles become confused and reversed, with the parent taking the role of child, the child assuming the responsibilities of the parent, or the child being put in the role of the emotional spouse.
- **The Wrath of God.** The person who misuses Scripture to get his or her own way and who equates his or her own opinion with that of God.
- **Gaslighting.** The person who causes you feel like you are losing your mind or memory is gaslighting. It occurs when she/he denies an event happened, calls you crazy or overly sensitive, describes an event as completely different from how you remember it. When you question your mind or memory, you may be more likely to feel dependent on the abuser and stay in the relationship. Gaslighting happens over time, and you may not notice it at first.

3. Emotional Abuse Through Indifference

- **The M.I.A. Parent.** A parent physically removes himself or herself from any interaction in your life.
- **The Absent Caregiver.** A parent removes himself or herself emotionally from interaction in your life.

WHAT ARE THE EFFECTS OF EMOTIONAL ABUSE?

Staying in an emotionally or verbally abusive relationship can have long-lasting effects on your physical and mental health, leading to chronic pain, depression, or anxiety.

You may also:

- Question your memory of events: “Did that really happen?” (Gaslighting)
- Change your behavior for fear of upsetting your partner or act more aggressive or more passive than you would be otherwise.
- Feel ashamed or guilty.
- Feel constantly afraid of upsetting your partner.
- Feel powerless and hopeless.
- Feel manipulated, used, and controlled.
- Feel unwanted.

Your partner’s behavior may leave you feeling as though you need to do anything possible to restore peace and end the abuse. This can feel stressful and overwhelming.

WHAT IS A SELF-ASSESSMENT FOR EMOTIONAL ABUSE?

Take a moment to consider these questions. Your partner might have behaved as though these things were okay, even though it's obvious that they aren't okay.

1. Do you feel that you can't discuss with your partner what is bothering you?
2. Does your partner frequently criticize you, humiliate you, or undermine your self-esteem?
3. Does your partner ridicule you for expressing yourself?
4. Does your partner try to isolate you from friends, family, or groups?
5. Does your partner limit your access to work or material resources?
6. Has your partner ever stolen from you? Or run up debts for you to handle?
7. Does your relationship swing back and forth between a lot of emotional distance (clammed up) and being very close?
8. Do you sometimes feel trapped in the relationship?
9. Has your partner ever thrown away or destroyed things that belonged to you?
10. Are you afraid of your partner?

HOW SHOULD THE CHRISTIAN RESPOND TO A FRIEND WHO IS BEING ABUSED?

If a friend comes to you and shares snippets of her/his life and they sound anything like what has been described here, please know that she/he is trusting you with her/his heart and that she/he may be scared. Your friend may be desperate for help, and she/he has chosen to reach out to you, possibly under a threat that if she/he were to ever tell someone, things could get even worse for her/him at home. Keep in mind if the abuse is severe, a danger assessment is advised.

General guidelines for dealing with this kind of situation:

- **Acknowledge her pain and that it is indeed real.** She/he may not believe that what is going on is truly that bad. She/he'll need to hear from someone else if it really is.
- **Ask gentle questions.** Try to gain more information such as how long it's been going on, and what kinds of abusive acts are being done. But know when to pull back a bit if it becomes too painful for her/him to talk about.
- **Be careful not to lay blame.** Odds are, she/he's been blamed for too long for how things have ended up, so try not to say that if maybe she were to change something specific, he might not fill-in-the-blank anymore. Though every relationship takes two, there will be plenty of time later for her/him to figure out her/his part in the dysfunction.
- **Do not give your friend marching orders to simply do more of something.** She/he's probably thought of all this anyway—pray more, serve more, praise more, cook more, initiate sex more—and it probably hasn't changed much of anything for more than a few days or weeks. (That's what is called the honeymoon phase... where things seem to be getting better, but it never lasts.)
- **Do not try to help her/him all on your own.** Determine what kind of help she/he might need, whether it be a visit with a pastor (choose wisely) or a Christian counselor.
- **Offer to go to any meetings.** Your friend might be ashamed or scared. Taking the first few steps out of abuse can be terrifying and she/he'll need support.
- **Do not advise any rash decisions.** It will not help to say, "I don't know how you've lived this way so long," or "If I were you, I'd meet with a lawyer right away." It just might serve to further paralyze her/him. Your friend needs to take small, steady steps into health and healing. And you might just be overlaying your past or emotional scars onto the situation when it doesn't really apply.
- **Check in with your friend.** Victims often feel isolated. Asking for help took courage; asking for more help may take more courage than she/he has if you do not follow up, and your friend might not reach out again.
- **Point your friend to Scripture.** Share Bible texts that affirm your friend's worth in God's eyes and that assure us of God's power to heal and be our strength. She/he needs to be reminded repeatedly that she/he is loved, that she/he is precious, that she/he is being taken care of.
- **Pray.** Pray with her/him. Commit your friend to God and keep bringing her/him before Christ, asking for divine healing to wash over her/him.

These thoughts just scratch the surface of a hugely controversial topic. If you or someone you love is in this kind of situation, please get help. There may not be a black eye, but a heart is being broken a little more each day.

FINAL QUESTIONS

• **What if you are the emotional (verbal) abuser?** Are you someone who has used these techniques to abuse another? If so, are you willing to recognize it and seek professional help to change your behavior? Are willing to seek help from above?

• **What if you are the survivor of emotional abuse?** Are you willing to confront the abuser with kindness, but with firmness, and to set healthy boundaries? Are you willing to seek professional help? Are you willing to seek healing and wisdom from God in dealing with this situation?

I pray you will!

ELLEN G. WHITE'S COUNSEL FOR COUPLES IN DYSFUNCTIONAL RELATIONSHIP

Adventist Home, p. 107:

Let each give love rather than exact it. Cultivate that which is noblest in yourselves, and be quick to recognize the good qualities in each other. The consciousness of being appreciated is a wonderful stimulus and satisfaction. Sympathy and respect encourage the striving after excellence, and love itself increases as it stimulates to nobler aims.

Adventist Home, pp. 111, 112:

Love can no more exist without revealing itself in outward acts than fire can be kept alive without fuel. You have felt that it was beneath your dignity to manifest tenderness by kindly acts and to watch for an opportunity to evince affection for your [spouse] by words of tenderness and kind regard. You are changeable in your feelings and are very much affected by surrounding circumstances.... Leave your business cares and perplexities and annoyances when you leave your business. Come to your family with a cheerful countenance, with sympathy, tenderness, and love. This will be better than expending money for medicines or physicians for your wife. It will be health to the body and strength to the soul. Your lives have been very wretched.... You think it beneath your dignity to manifest love, to speak kindly and affectionately. All these tender words, you think, savor of softness and weakness, and are unnecessary. But in their place come fretful words, words of discord, strife, and censure....

You have not the elements of a contented spirit. You dwell upon your troubles; imaginary want and poverty far ahead stare you in the face; you feel afflicted, distressed, agonized; your brain seems on fire, your spirits depressed. You do not cherish love to God and gratitude of heart for all the blessings which your kind heavenly Father has bestowed upon you. You see only the discomforts of life. A worldly insanity shuts you in like heavy clouds of thick darkness. Satan exults over you because you will have misery when peace and happiness are at your command.

Without mutual forbearance and love no earthly power can hold you and your spouse in the bonds of Christian unity. Your companionship in the marriage relation should be close and tender, holy and elevated, breathing a spiritual power into your lives, that you may be everything to each other that God's word requires. When you reach the condition that the Lord desires you to reach, you will find heaven below and God in your life.