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[Home](#) > [What about emotional abuse?](#)

What about emotional abuse? ^[1]

Dear Alice,

I notice in your mental health section, you only have info on sexual abuse. What is emotional abuse? I've heard a lot about it lately, but it doesn't seem very real to me. How can simply being called names, or whatever, be as devastating as people say? Short of being threatened with murder, what people say is just words. I can't seem to find very good articles about emotional abuse on the web.

Thank you,
Confused-by-media

Answer

Dear Confused-by-media,

Your line of questioning brings up a crucial point because emotional abuse can be complicated to discern, especially when compared to physical abuse since no visible wounds or scars are present; however, the impact of emotional abuse can be just as traumatic. Verbal abuse is the most common form and can be as obvious as threats, judgmental statements, blaming, lying, ordering, and name-calling, but it can also be subtle and difficult to recognize. The words and behaviors of the abuser can be controlling and manipulative (keep reading for more specifics). Emotional abuse can affect anyone, regardless of gender identity, sexual orientation, age, ethnicity, race, and economic background; although rates of abuse with those who identify as female are higher, folks who identify as male are also affected by emotional abuse. And while all these variables may make it a challenge to identify, it's key to know that there are ways to address this type of abuse as well as support and resources for those dealing with emotional abuse.

This type of abuse can take on many forms. For instance, abusers may argue against any point their victim makes, shut down conversation, minimize or discount their partner's feelings, undermine their partner's confidence by invalidating what they say, or deny promises or statements made previously. Emotional abuse can also present itself through control gained through withholding physical and emotional resources such as money, love, support, and communication. Abusers can also sabotage their partner's support network by forbidding contact

with others or by acting jealous and threatening punishment. This increases feelings of isolation, vulnerability, and separation. Over time, these behaviors from the perpetrator can break down the victim's self-esteem and self-worth, and some may feel afraid, helpless, alone, or unable to leave the relationship. Those on the receiving end of such abuse may develop anxiety and depression. However, given the insidious nature of emotional abuse, in many cases it goes unnoticed and may be hard to identify in many cases. Additionally, abusers tends to manipulate and blame their partners for the abuse. Therefore, since they believe they're to blame, recipients of abuse in an emotionally abusive relationship may feel unable to report the abuse or seek help.

Identifying emotional abuse can be tricky but key for the victim's well-being. Those experiencing emotional abuse could likely answer "yes" to several of these questions:

- Do you feel anxious or afraid around your partner?
- Do you feel isolated, emotionally numb, or unable to seek help?
- Does your partner often criticize you, yell at you, or humiliate you?
- Do you monitor what you say to avoid angering your partner?

For a person who hasn't experienced abuse, it can be hard to understand why words can be so damaging and why a person might stay in a harmful relationship. However, while emotional abuse can be incredibly damaging, those subject to the abuse may feel love for their abuser, be embarrassed, or feel compelled to stay in the relationship for cultural reasons. There may also be practical issues such as money, children, or housing that keep people in an abusive relationship. For some, abuse may have been a common feature of family and other relationships throughout their life, including in childhood. While everybody deserves to be in respectful, healthy relationships, it may be difficult for some to admit or identify that a relationship is abusive.

What can someone who is in an emotionally abusive relationship do? One option is to try developing a plan to help protect their emotional safety. This can include finding supportive people whom they trust, practicing self-care (e.g., making sure basic needs such as eating and sleeping are met, doing activities that they enjoy), and finding a peaceful space to spend some time. Another component of this plan may be to create achievable goals, such as finding a local resource that may be able to help and calling them. There are a variety of resources that can support those in emotionally abusive relationships to escape the abusive situation, regain self-esteem, and form healthy relationships in the future. Support can be accessed by reaching out to a mental health professional or by accessing a number of hotlines and online resources, including:

National Domestic Violence Hotline ^[2]

1-800-799-7233 (SAFE) (Accessible 24 hours per day, seven days a week, bilingual; interpreters for over 140 languages)

Domestic Shelters ^[3] - website with a search tool for resources by zip code, as well as a "Leave Site" button that redirects to a weather website in case the user needs to exit quickly

While emotional abuse may be harder to conceptualize than physical abuse, it's no less dangerous. The damage to a person's mental health, self-worth, and ability to participate productively in relationships is a reality for those who are subject to emotional abuse. Thanks for asking and helping to shine a light on this often overlooked form of abuse.

Take care,

Alice!

Category:

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[Nonconsensual Relationships](#) ^[5]

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[Bullying](#) ^[8]

Resources

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[Counseling and Psychological Services \(CPS\) \(Morningside\)](#) ^[10]

[Medical Services \(Morningside\)](#) ^[11]

[Mental Health Services \(CUIMC\)](#) ^[12]

[Medical Services \(CUIMC\)](#) ^[13]

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Footer menu

- ▼ [Contact Alice!](#)
 - [Content Use](#)
 - [Media Inquiries](#)
 - [Comments & Corrections](#)
- ▼ [Syndication & Licensing](#)
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Links

- [1] <https://goaskalice.columbia.edu/answered-questions/what-about-emotional-abuse-0>
- [2] <http://www.ndvh.org/>
- [3] <https://www.domesticshelters.org/>
- [4] <https://goaskalice.columbia.edu/category/relationships>
- [5] <https://goaskalice.columbia.edu/category/nonconsensual-relationships>
- [6] <https://goaskalice.columbia.edu/answered-questions/healthy-versus-unhealthy-relationships-0>
- [7] <https://goaskalice.columbia.edu/answered-questions/setting-boundaries-work-relationships>
- [8] <https://goaskalice.columbia.edu/answered-questions/bullying-1>
- [9] <https://goaskalice.columbia.edu/resource/sexual-violence-response-rape-crisisanti-violence-support-center>
- [10] <https://goaskalice.columbia.edu/resource/counseling-and-psychological-services-cps-morningside>
- [11] <https://goaskalice.columbia.edu/resource/medical-services-morningside>
- [12] <https://goaskalice.columbia.edu/resource/mental-health-services-cuimc>
- [13] <https://goaskalice.columbia.edu/resource/medical-services-cuimc>