

EMOTIONAL WELLNESS MATTERS

VOLUME XIX, NUMBER 2



A home should be a happy place, or at least a safe place. Dealing daily with the outside world, with its tensions, pressures, and surprises, can be difficult. The home is a place to come back to, a place to feel free, relaxed, and comfortable. The home should be the place where we feel loved and accepted just for being ourselves. This is, of course, an ideal description of what a home can be.

In truth, home is also the place where our personal conflicts are worked out, sometimes in destructive ways. Our internal conflicts may involve issues of anger, power, and control – all of which can lead to verbal abuse. The verbally abusive household is usually not a happy place, and, in extreme conditions, it might not be a safe place. It is important to recognize verbal abuse when it occurs – and then do something about it. Fortunately, there are effective ways of dealing with such situations and making the home a safe haven.

Verbal abuse leaves no physical scars, but the emotional wounds can be just as deep and recovery can be prolonged. On the surface, others may see both the verbal abuser and the victim of the abuse as a happy couple, the nicest of people. But behind the scenes there exists a subtle pattern of manipulation and intimidation, unreasonable demands, sarcasm, and angry outbursts. At the onset of these relationships, everything may seem wonderful. The person who later becomes verbally abusive may shower the eventual victim with gifts and compliments and make that person feel like the most important person in the world. Gradually, however, the relationship deteriorates. The abuser's anger and need for control are projected onto the victim. The victim is blamed for not being "good enough," and the relationship gradually turns into

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an emotional roller coaster. When things seem to be going well, a fight emerges unexpectedly.

The victim may adjust to this situation over time, so that he or she is unaware of the extent of the abuse. Victims may come to see themselves as not “good enough.” They may feel that they are truly at fault, and if only they could change their behavior, the abuser’s anger would stop. The abuser usually fails to take responsibility for creating the problem and it is the partner who takes the blame. These relationships, then, are characterized by denial, poor interpersonal boundaries, control and power issues, trust issues, and unresolved anger.

Codependence and Verbal Abuse

The partners in a verbally abusive situation are usually involved in a codependent relationship, and neither partner may realize that verbal abuse exists. But they do know that something is wrong. Codependence exists when the partners in a relationship have grown up in dysfunctional families. In these families, the needs of the parents are usually put before those of the children, there is great instability, and interpersonal boundaries are poor. The children may be verbally battered so that they grow up with unresolved anger and a negative image of themselves. People who grow up in this sort of household may find themselves in a verbally abusive relationship in adulthood. The abuser is charming at first and the victim is eager to please. Neither party is clear about his or her own boundaries, so the abuser feels justified in imposing anger on the victim while the victim in turn tries to win love and approval – often by accepting blame and adjusting his or her reality to conform to what the abuser demands. The agenda for the victim is to be loved by taking care of the abuser. The agenda for the abuser is to control the victim into taking care of him or her. And both parties want to end the pain associated with negative self-esteem. The victim seeks to win approval, which provides some semblance of self-esteem. The abuser, who also suffers from damaged self-esteem, sees him or herself as the victim and uses power and control over others as a way to survive in what he or she sees as a threatening world.

Recognizing Verbal Abuse

Verbal abuse can almost always be seen as a control issue. Ironically, it is the abuser who sees him or herself as the victim. Thus, the abuser feels the need to control the partner in order to allay his or her own insecurities. The victim, hoping for closeness and approval, goes along with the control and may accept blame for causing the problems. In a sense, then, roles become confused – the abuser is the victim and the victim is the abuser. The situation becomes murky and perpetuates the conditions which breed abuse.

To confront verbal abuse we need to become aware of the conditions which lead to abuse. Consider the following examples.

Blaming: The verbal abuser will accuse the partner of inciting trouble. “Dear, let’s talk about who will drive the kids to practice tomorrow.” “You’re always planning out my life! Can’t you just give me a break once in a while?” (Notice here how the abuser feels like the victim.)

Denial: The abuser claims that the reality of the partner is invalid. “Hon, remember when we were talking about taking a weekend just for ourselves?” “We never talked about that. You’re making it up.”

Discounting: Similar to denial, discounting trivializes the feelings of the partner. “Larry, I don’t like it when we fight like this.” “You’re just too sensitive, always making problems when you could just leave well enough alone.” (Notice that the abuser retains the control, especially if the partner then goes along with his suggestions.)

Blocking Discussion: The abuser refuses to respond to a communication, thereby blocking resolution of a problem. “Joyce, let’s go through the bills tonight and see how much we can put into savings this month.” “Who asked for your opinion? Get off my back, buster!”

Countering: The abuser sees the partner as the enemy and immediately counters anything the partner has to say without thinking it through. “Look at that lovely vase of zinnias.” “They’re dahlias, dummy.” (Notice here that **Name Calling** is also an especially destructive, and obvious, form of verbal abuse.)

Withholding: Refusing to communicate and share thoughts and feelings can also be seen as a category of verbal abuse, especially because it damages the chances of achieving intimacy and empathy. Withholding occurs when the abuser distances him or herself and reveals as little as possible to the partner. This is a way of keeping control and leaving the partner feeling frustrated and lonely. The partner may excuse this behavior by believing that the abuser is just a quiet person. (This is also known as passive-aggressive behavior.)

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Joking and Verbal Abuse: The abuser claims that he or she was only joking and then blames the partner for not being able to take a joke. “Did you really mean it when you said my mother couldn’t come here for the holidays?” “You just don’t have a sense of humor. Like, duh....”

Dominating: Commanding the partner to do something undermines the equality of a relationship and puts the abuser in the dominant position. “You get dinner on the table right now,” or “You are going to my office party and I want you dressed in ten minutes.”



Changing the Verbally Abusive Relationship

Because the partners in a verbally abusive relationship have usually adapted to their situations, as painful as this may be, it might require the intervention of a trained therapist to interpret the communication patterns objectively and empathically. In therapy the partners in the relationship may learn how dysfunctional families breed codependence, as well as how negative self-esteem and lack of adaptive interpersonal boundaries can lead to a verbally abusive relationship. New and healthier ways of communicating can be learned, along with the issues of control, the need for equality in a relationship, and how to trust and respect one’s partner. Learning assertiveness and refusing to participate in the cycle of abuse are crucial steps in coming to terms with the destructiveness of the verbally abusive relationship.

Our homes can, and should, be happy, loving and safe. We owe it to ourselves, and to our partners, to confront the issues which prevent us from making trust and love essential ingredients in the recipes of our lives. The rewards of doing so are immeasurable.

The Cycle of Abuse

The typical abusive relationship falls into a three-stage cycle, and the participants may not be aware of the cycle. One of the main ways of coming to terms

with verbal abuse in a relationship is to increase your awareness of this cycle so that you can respond more appropriately.

The Buildup of Tension. The verbal abuser during this stage becomes increasingly critical, detached, preoccupied and contemptuous. The abuser becomes jealous and controlling. They may try to make the victim account for his or her actions and criticize how the victim dresses, talks, or cleans house. The abuser usually places limits on the actions of the victim in an attempt to assuage his or her own insecurities. It is during this stage also that the victim tries to accommodate the abuser by going overboard to please him or her in an attempt to keep the peace. The tension increases until the next stage of the cycle, the abuse stage, erupts.

The Abuse Stage. A major fight erupts and it is usually over a trivial incident, an incident so minor that the participants may not recall later what the fight was all about. There may be a great deal of yelling and threats, and sometimes the abuse can turn physical. One characteristic of growing up in a dysfunctional household is that people never learn to process their anger adaptively as a problem-solving tool, and in the verbally abusive household this anger may erupt as uncontrolled rage. Words which are very damaging, but which usually have no basis in reality, are hurled at the victim. The victim is left confused, hurt, and in need of retreat from the painful interaction.

The Regret Stage. Once things calm down, the victim feels distanced from the abuser and the abuser feels remorseful. The abuser may promise never to lose control again and then makes an extraordinary effort to win back the approval of the victim. The more distant and self-protective the victim is from the abuser, the more the abuser becomes conciliatory. The abuser uses all of his or her charm to make things right again, and because he or she is in the controlling role, is usually successful. This honeymoon stage lasts until tension begins to build up again – and the cycle is repeated. Unfortunately, over time the cycle can repeat itself more rapidly and usually with greater intensity – with the abuser taking less and less, or no, responsibility for the pattern.



T H E B A C K P A G E

A Verbal Abuse Checklist ✓

Verbal abuse is often difficult to recognize, mainly because living in such a relationship involves denial, rationalization, and other distortions of reality. If you feel that you may be the victim of verbal abuse, check off the situations below which may apply to your relationship. If you check at least half of the following statements, you may want to seek a professional consultation to start the process of learning to change the situation.

Does your partner frequently ...

- present a positive face to the world but negative behaviors at home?
- seem to pick a fight just when you are getting closer?
- complain about how badly you treat him or her?
- ridicule you and then tell you it's a joke?
- threaten to leave or to throw you out of the house?
- drive you into a rage and then blame you for getting angry?
- manipulate you with lies?
- accuse you of having affairs?
- create "double bind" situations (where you're damned if you do and damned if you don't)?

- use alcohol or drugs, and things get worse at those times?
- make you go out and socialize, even when you don't want to?
- come alive during an argument, while you just get drained?
- consistently promise never to hurt you again?
- leave you stranded with no way to get home?
- twist your words and blame you for things you had no intention of saying?
- start arguments after you have been intimate with each other?
- criticize you and call you names?
- complain about the way you talk and dress?
- threaten to hurt you or leave?
- humiliate you privately or in public?
- ignore your feelings?

(If you recognize yourself as engaging in any form of abusive behavior toward your partner, you probably feel stuck in a vicious cycle. *There is a way out.* It begins with heightened self-awareness, a willingness to accept responsibility for behavior choices and a sincere desire to change. Seek help at once.)

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