

What Is Emotional Abuse?

- **Emotional abuse** is any ongoing, negative behavior used to control or hurt another person. Emotional abuse ranges from consistent indifference to continual belittling of character.
 - All forms of abuse—emotional, verbal, mental, physical, spiritual, and sexual—damage a person’s sense of dignity and God-given worth.
 - All forms of abuse wound the spirit and, therefore, are emotionally damaging.
- Proverbs, the book of wisdom, poses this probing question.

“... a crushed spirit who can bear?”
(Proverbs 18:14)

- **Emotional abuse** or “psychological mistreatment” scars the spirit of the one abused.

What Is Verbal Abuse?

- **Verbal abuse** is the systematic, ongoing use of harmful words or sharp tones in an attempt to control or dominate another person.
 - Abuse is mistreatment: the destructive misuse of something or someone.
 - Verbal abuse is always harmful.
- Those who practice it may, sometimes unconsciously, delight in its power to destroy.

*“You love every harmful word,
you deceitful tongue!”*
(Psalm 52:4)

- **Verbal abuse** injures the feelings of others with reviling, insulting, or contemptuous words.

*“I live in disgrace all day long,
and my face is covered with shame at the
taunts of those who reproach and revile me,
because of the enemy, who is bent on revenge.”*
(Psalm 44:15–16)

The Cost of Ongoing Abuse

- **Loss of self-worth:** Increased self-doubt
- **Loss of self-confidence:** Increased self-consciousness
- **Loss of self-perception:** Increased self-criticism
- **Loss of happiness:** Increased emotional flatness
- **Loss of freedom:** Increased vigilance
- **Loss of self-assurance:** Increased insecurity
- **Loss of security:** Increased desire to escape
- **Loss of trust:** Increased distrust
- **Loss of sexual identity:** Increased sexual confusion
- **Loss of a clear conscience:** Increased guilt or shame
- **Loss of friendship:** Increased isolation
- **Loss of faith:** Increased fear
- **Loss of safety:** Increased sense of danger
- **Loss of self-respect:** Increased self-destruction
- **Loss of optimism:** Increased pessimism
- **Loss of pride:** Increased self-hatred
- **Loss of hope:** Increased despair
- **Loss of inner peace:** Increased “peace-at-all-costs” behavior

*“Those God foreknew he also predestined
to be conformed to the image of his Son.”*
(Romans 8:29)

Key Verse to Memorize

*“Love does no harm to a neighbor.
Therefore love is the fulfillment of the law.”*
(Romans 13:10)

Key Passage to Read

Matthew 12:34–37

How to Change the Course of an Abusive Relationship

After Determining Your Plan of Action ...

1. State clearly, in a conversation or letter, what you are willing to accept and not accept from the abuser.
“The one who has knowledge uses words with restraint, and whoever has understanding is even-tempered” (Proverbs 17:27).
2. Announce the consequence you will enforce if the abuser violates your requests.
“A man reaps what he sows” (Galatians 6:7).
3. Enforce the consequence every single time abuse occurs.
“Let your ‘yes’ be yes and your ‘no’ be no” (James 5:12 ESV).
4. Hold your ground and absolutely do not negotiate.
“Sin is not ended by multiplying words, but the prudent hold their tongues” (Proverbs 10:19).
5. Respond when your boundary is violated—never react on “gut” emotion or out of anger.
“The end of a matter is better than its beginning, and patience is better than pride. Do not be quickly provoked in your spirit, for anger resides in the lap of fools” (Ecclesiastes 7:8–9).
6. Solicit the support of one or two wise, objective people to help you through this process.
“Listen to advice and accept discipline, and at the end you will be counted among the wise” (Proverbs 19:20).
7. Expect manipulative maneuvers and emotional ups and downs.
“The tongue of the wise brings healing” (Proverbs 12:18).

How to Recover from Abuse

1. “I recognize that I am powerless to heal my damaged emotions resulting from abuse, and I look to God for the power to make me whole.”
2. “I acknowledge that God’s plan for my life includes victory over my experiences of abuse.”
3. “The person who abused me is responsible for the acts committed against me and for the words spoken to me. I will not accept the guilt and the shame resulting from those acts or words.”
4. “I am looking to God and His Word to find my identity as a worthwhile and loved human being.”

5. “I am honestly sharing my feelings with God and with at least one other person as I try to identify those areas needing cleansing and healing.”
6. “I am accepting responsibility for my responses to being abused.”
7. “I am willing to accept God’s help in making the decision to forgive myself and those who have offended me. I will trust Him in the process of doing so.”
8. “I am willing to mature in my relationship with God and with others.”
9. “I am willing to be used by God as an instrument of His healing and restoration in the lives of others.”

By faith, claim the words of the psalmist. ...

*“You turned my wailing into dancing;
you removed my sackcloth and clothed me with joy,
that my heart may sing your praises and not be silent.
LORD my God, I will praise you forever.”*
(Psalm 30:11–12)

How to Break Free from Being Abusive

1. Discover your trigger points.
“Get wisdom, get understanding ...” (Proverbs 4:5).
2. Be aware of your early family background.
“When I was a child, I talked like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child. When I became a man, I put the ways of childhood behind me” (1 Corinthians 13:11).
3. Restrain angry thoughts and actions.
“Refrain from anger and turn from wrath; do not fret—it leads only to evil” (Psalm 37:8).
4. Choose the right time and the right way to express your feelings.
“An angry person stirs up conflict, and a hot-tempered person commits many sins” (Proverbs 29:22).
5. Begin absorbing truth.
“A gentle answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger” (Proverbs 15:1).
6. Come to Christ, seeking His help with a sincere heart.
“To all who did receive him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God” (John 1:12).

Take Responsibility for Your Abuse

- **Don't** vent your pent-up anger on another person.
Do ... Understand and admit that you may not know how to handle your anger.
- **Don't** say, "You're the reason I am so angry."
Do ... Realize that you may be using your anger to get your own way.
- **Don't** say, "I can never please you!"
Do ... Begin to see things from the other's point of view.

Questions and Answers

"What does the Bible say about emotional abuse?"

The Bible doesn't use the term "emotional abuse," but it does instruct us as to how we are to treat one another. The Bible details numerous attitudes and actions we should have toward each other. If we follow these guidelines, we will never be abusive toward anyone.

"Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility value others above yourselves, not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of the others."
(Philippians 2:3-4)

"What hope is there for someone broken by abuse?"

For the one who has been broken by abuse, God offers great hope. That hope is in Him. Begin to deepen your dependence on the Lord by seeking Him in His Word and praying for His comfort and healing.

"The LORD is close to the brokenhearted and saves those who are crushed in spirit."
(Psalm 34:18)

"Why do people who are being abused continue to stay in abusive relationships?"

One major reason is fear. Isaiah 21:4 says, "My heart falters, fear makes me tremble." Fear can be a powerful weapon used to control another person. One effective strategy that instills fear is the use of demeaning messages, such as verbal threats, that manipulate a person to stay in an abusive relationship. Another fear tactic is to leave or to withdraw emotional support.

The Lord wants us to turn from fear to faith and to trust Him to meet our deepest needs.

"Fear of man will prove to be a snare, but whoever trusts in the LORD is kept safe."
(Proverbs 29:25)

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The information in this resource is intended as guidelines for healthy living. Please consult qualified medical, legal, pastoral, and psychological professionals regarding individual concerns.

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