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The Hidden Signs of Emotional Abuse

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Bruises and scratches aren't the only signs of abuse.

This was one of the main takeaways of the recent Netflix series *Maid*, which followed a young mother who was trying to get away from her emotionally abusive partner and make a better life for herself and her young daughter. The humiliation, control, and condescension she endured brought the topic of domestic emotional abuse into the spotlight and [sparked an overdue conversation](#) in many publications, including *Ms.* and *Marie Claire*.

Emotional abuse also causes wounds. A [2013 study](#) looking at emotional abuse in romantic relationships noted the possible links between the abuse and issues such as loneliness, despair, depression, and low self-esteem, which could then have a compounding effect on illnesses like chronic fatigue syndrome and fibromyalgia.

It's also sadly common. The National Coalition Against Domestic Violence [estimates](#) that close to half of all women and men have experienced at least one psychologically aggressive behavior by an intimate partner. One of the more insidious aspects of emotional abuse is that it's not always easy to recognize.

What Is Emotional Abuse?

According to the [American Psychological Association](#), emotional abuse is defined as "a pattern of behavior in which one person deliberately and repeatedly subjects another to nonphysical acts that are detrimental to behavioral and affective functioning and overall mental well-being." It's a pattern in which the abuser disregards the "personal boundaries of a victim," explains [James Tobin, Ph.D.](#), a psychologist in Irvine, California.

But there is another key element, Tobin says, and that involves manipulation and what he describes as "a need to possess." "The abuser needs control and domination," Tobin says.

An emotionally abusive partner has an "intolerance of the victim's independence, autonomy, personal agenda, rights, and freedoms," says Tobin.

The Patterns of Emotional Abuse

Emotionally abusive relationships, Tobin says, typically evolve into a repetitive pattern. For example, the abuser may set their own arbitrary rules and then show affection when the victim follows them, and anger when the victim does not.

According to Tobin, the abuse may escalate when a victim attempts to oppose their abuser. This dynamic is not restricted to romantic relationships; emotional abuse can happen between parents and children, at work, and within friendships.

How to Tell the Difference Between Healthy Conflict and Unhealthy Abuse

"Disputes, disagreements, conflicts, and even heated arguments are natural, even healthy, components of all relationships," Tobin says. On their own, they do not necessarily signal the presence of emotional abuse.

In fact, he notes that relationships that allow for the communication and expression of opposing views, opinions, and strong feelings can be a sign of a stable match.

Emotionally abusive relationships are different, he says. They involve a power differential in which the abuser has knowingly or unconsciously implemented a campaign of manipulation of—and dominance over—the victim.

"As the dynamics of emotional abuse take hold, the victim is denied and ultimately loses the ability to voice distress or disagreement regarding the abuser," Tobin says. He adds that, over time, many victims can lose the ability to even understand their own thoughts and feelings as different from their abuser's.

Why It's Confusing for Victims

"Emotional abuse is subjective, and oftentimes, it's passive-aggressive," says [Sherrie Campbell, Ph.D.](#), a licensed psychologist in Yorba Linda, California, and author of [Adult Survivors of Toxic Family Members](#). People who experience emotional abuse have certainly been abused, but they find themselves having a difficult time communicating or rationalizing how and why. And if a victim confronts their abuser, Campbell says, they are often told (by their abuser) that they are "crazy" or "too sensitive."

This type of psychological abuse is also more difficult to prove. Because it includes nonverbal insults like dirty looks and nonphysical attacks, victims have a harder time showing evidence. It doesn't usually cause external wounds, Campbell says. She notes that manu

people won't notice someone being emotionally abused even when it's happening right in front of them.

6 Hidden Signs of Emotional Abuse

So what does emotional abuse look like in practice? Here are six signs that Tobin says are often missed by friends, family, and even organizations that help support people exiting abusive relationships.

1. Gaslighting

Gaslighting is a form of manipulation directed at making the victim feel uncertain about their own thoughts, feelings, and perceptions. "In emotionally abusive relationships, gaslighting is often the most intense precisely when the victim begins to set boundaries, communicate his or her needs, or even attempt to leave the relationship," Tobin says.

An example of gaslighting would be saying something intentionally hurtful or cruel and then brushing it off as "no big deal" or even denying it happened.

2. Manipulation

"When a victim begins to differentiate and distance themselves from the abuser, the abuser experiences this as offensive," Tobin says. "It represents the victim's attempt at empowerment, which corresponds to the abuser's disempowerment."

Thus, he explains, an abuser will often use criticism to manipulate their victim and exploit their vulnerabilities. "If the victim ends up leaving the relationship, the emotional abuser will often remain quite critical of the victim and will not hesitate to communicate these criticisms to others," Tobin adds.

3. Ambushing

"Often occurring in the workplace and corporate settings, ambushing involves 'surprise attacks' of the victim, particularly at times when the victim appears to be gaining strength," Tobin says. For example, the victim may be called into a meeting with their manager and arrive only to find that the manager has invited three other executives to attend.

In an intimate relationship, it could mean gaining traction and feeling good about a hobby or activity only to have your partner find a way to make you feel bad about it.

4. Guilt Induction

This is a common tactic employed by abusers, especially when the victim is actively resisting them. "Psychologically, guilt is one of the most potent emotional states," Tobin says. "If the abuser can induce guilt in the victim, the victim is usually paralyzed emotionally and far less able to assert his or her own needs."

Any of the following example accusations may be an emotionally abusive attempt to induce guilt:

- You don't have gratitude for all I've done for you.
- Nobody else feels the way you do.
- You are not understanding of all the challenges I face.
- I have been more than patient with you and accepting of your flaws.

5. Lack of Accountability

A key feature of emotionally abusive individuals is their resistance to taking personal accountability for their own mistakes, limitations, and problematic behaviors. "In short, the abuser is never wrong," Tobin says.

In fact, abusers will often offload their own problematic characteristics onto the victim. "This involves criticizing the victim for a quality that, in reality, is an attribute of the abuser," explains Tobin.

6. Favoritism

An important tactic employed by emotionally abusive people, both at the beginning and end of relationships, Tobin says, is favoritism—of other people. "This is employed and broadcast to isolate the victim and trigger the victim's desire to be accepted, admired, and praised by the abuser," he explains.

It's a way that the abuser punishes the victim psychologically because the victim is experienced by the abuser as threatening or oppositional. "The abuser's message to the victim is 'You, too, could be as close and important to me if you just do what I say.'"

How to Get Help

If you suspect you may be experiencing any of these signs of emotional abuse, or often feel confused, manipulated, or verbally beaten down in your interactions with another person, it may be helpful to seek help from a professional with expertise in relationships, Tobin says, adding that it's important for a victim of abuse to "understand how his or her family of origin and other developmental/historical issues" may factor into the bigger picture.

Campbell also recommends working with a [therapist or mental health professional](#) trained to identify these types of relationship dynamics. The following resources may be helpful:

Psychology Today: The directory, searchable by location and expertise, features profiles of licensed psychotherapists and mental health clinicians.

Crisis Text Line: This text-based form of therapy can be a crisis intervention resource for people with a range of problems and psychiatric issues.

National Center for PTSD: This is a government-based organization that can help veterans and nonveterans get help and resources for dealing with post-traumatic stress disorder and other traumatic experiences, like abuse and its consequences.

National Child Traumatic Stress Network: This network is designed to specifically help children, teens, and parents who have experienced traumatic stress (including abuse) and can be a great resource for families seeking help.

You May Also Like:

- [7 Signs You May Be in a Toxic Relationship](#)
- [Where to Turn If You Have Mental Health Concerns](#)
- [5 Tips for Managing Relationship Stress](#)

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