

How to Recognize the Signs of Mental and Emotional Abuse

- Humiliation, denying, and criticizing
- Control and shame
- Accusing, blaming, and denial
- Emotional neglect and isolation
- Codependence
- What to do

Let's dig deeper

You probably know many of the more obvious signs of mental and emotional abuse. But when you're in the midst of it, it can be easy to miss the persistent traces of abusive behavior.

Psychological abuse involves a person's attempts to frighten, control, or isolate you. The exploitation is not only in the abuser's actions but also in their words, as well as their persistence in these behaviors.

The abuser could be your spouse or other romantic partner. They could even be your business partner, parent, or a caretaker.

No matter who it is, you don't deserve to be mistreated. And it's NOT your fault.

Humiliation, denying, criticizing

These tactics are meant to weaken your self-esteem. The abuse is harsh and merciless in matters big and small.

Have you experienced any of the following?

- **Name-calling.** They unashamedly call you "stupid," "a loser," or words too awful to repeat here or anywhere.
- **Push your buttons.** Once your abuser knows about something that irritates you, they will throw it in your face every chance they get.

- **Insulting “pet names.”** This is just more name-calling in not-so-subtle disguise. “My little dimwit” or “My chubby pumpkin” are NOT terms of endearment.
- **Character assassination.** This usually involves the word “always.” You’re always late, wrong, screwing up, disagreeable, and so on. Basically, they say you’re a bad person.
- **Insult your appearance.** They tell you, just before you go out, that your makeup makes you look like a whore or your outfit makes you look fat.
- **Demean your achievements.** Your abuser might tell you that your achievements mean nothing, or they may even claim responsibility for your success. Either way, they do not want you to feel good about what you’ve accomplished.
- **Yell.** Yelling, screaming, and swearing are meant to intimidate and make you feel small and insignificant. It might be accompanied by hitting something or throwing things.
- **Belittle.** “Aw, honey, this is way beyond your intelligence.”
- **Public humiliation.** Abusers pick fights, expose your secrets, or make fun of your faults in public.
- **Condescend.** You talk about something important to you and they say it’s not important. Body language includes: eye-rolling, smirking, headshaking, and sighing.
- **Sarcasm.** Is often camouflaged digs. When you object, the abuser claims to have been teasing you and tells you to stop taking everything so seriously.
- **Criticize your interests.** They might tell you that your hobby is a selfish waste of time or you’re not good enough when you play sports. They hate to be left out. And sometimes, they’re jealous of the time you spend with others.
- **Jest.** Their jokes might have a thread of truth to them or be completely made-up. Either way, they make you feel foolish. Their jokes are at your expense.

Control and shame

When they make you feel ashamed of your shortfalls, they feel empowered.

Have you experienced any of the following?

- **Intimidation and threats.** When you've been told they'll take the kids and disappear. Or saying something like, "There's no telling what I might do."
- **Track your whereabouts.** They want to know where you are at all times and often insist that you respond to calls or texts immediately. They might show up and see if you were telling the truth.
- **Track you digitally.** They might track your internet history, emails, texts, and call log. They might even demand you hand over your passwords.
- **Lecture you.** They might verbally attack your mistakes with long speeches that make it clear they think you're less than them.
- **Direct orders.** "Get my dinner on the table now" and "Stop taking the pill," are commands that are expected to be followed despite your plans.
- **Tirades.** You were told to cancel the lunch date with your friend or mow the lawn or take out the trash, but didn't, so now you have to suffer through a red-faced rant about how obstinate you are.
- **One-sided decision-making.** They might make all the decisions for you and your children, cancel your doctor's appointment, or speak with your boss behind your back.
- **Financial control.** They might keep bank accounts and debit and credit cards in their name only and make you ask for money. You might be expected to account for every penny you spend.
- **Artificial helplessness.** They may claim to not know how to do something. Sometimes it's easier to do it yourself and avoid opposition than to explain it. They know this and take advantage of you.
- **Unpredictability.** They blow up for no reason, then out of nowhere spray you with affection or instantly become moody to keep you walking on eggshells.
- **They split.** In a social situation, stomping out of the room like a toddler leaves you hanging. At home, it's a way to keep the issue unresolved.

- **Treated like a child.** You are told what to wear, what and how much to eat, how much money you can spend, or which friends you can see.
- **Use others to knock you down.** Abusers may tell you that “everybody” thinks you’re crazy or “they all say” you’re this or that.

Accusing, blaming, and denial

This behavior stems from an abuser’s insecurities. They want to create a ranking where they’re on top and you’re at the bottom.

Have you experienced any of these?

- **Jealousy.** They accuse you of flirting. Or worse yet, cheating on them.
- **Accuse you.** You become the cause of their rage and control issues. It’s all your fault.
- **Deny something you know is true.** An abuser will deny that an argument or even an agreement happened. They want you to question your sanity.
- **Guilt.** “You owe me this. Look at all I’ve done for you,” they claim in an attempt to get their way.
- **Make light of.** When you want to talk about your hurt feelings, they accuse you of overreacting. Again, it’s all your fault.
- **Say you have no sense of humor.** Abusers enjoy making personal jokes about you. And if you object, they’ll suggest you lighten up and get over it.
- **Their problems are your fault.** Whatever’s wrong in their life? You’re to blame. You didn’t support them enough, didn’t do enough, or stuck your nose in their business.
- **Destroy and deny.** They might crack your cell phone screen or lose your car keys or hide your medication, then deny it.
- **Abuse denied.** When you approach them with concerns over their attacks, abusers deny the occurrences, befuddled at the very thought of it. Them abuse you? No way.

- **Accuse you of abuse.** They claim you're the one with anger and control issues; they, of course, are the helpless victim.
- **Prod then blame.** More button-pushing. But once the trouble begins, it's always your fault for starting it.

Emotional neglect and isolation

Abusers tend to place their own needs ahead of yours. Many of them will try to come between you and your circle of love and influence to make you more dependent on them.

Have you ever experienced any of these?

- **Dehumanize you.** They look away when you talk to them or focus on something else when they speak to you.
- **Isolation.** Whenever you have plans to go out, they tag along or beg you not to go. They also tell family members that you don't want to see them or make excuses as to why you can't attend family functions.
- **Withhold love and affection.** They refuse to touch you and may deny sexual relations to punish you or to get something they want.
- **Call you needy.** When you're having a hard time and reach out for support, they tell you you're too needy or the world can't stop for you and your stupid problems.
- **Dispute your feelings.** Whatever you feel, they say you're wrong to feel that way or that's not really what you feel at all.
- **Demand respect.** Every mishap is punishable, and you're expected to submit to them. But they can do whatever they want.
- **Halt communication.** They ignore your attempts at face-to-face conversations, by text, or by phone.
- **Dismiss you.** They dismiss you, change the subject, or just plain ignore you when you want to talk about your relationship.

- **Turn others against you.** They tell co-workers, friends, and even your family members that you're unstable and prone to hysterics.
- **Interrupt.** When on the phone or texting, they get in your face and try to get your attention on them.
- **Indifference.** They see you hurt or crying and do nothing. Worse, they might even chide you for feeling bad.

Codependence

A codependent relationship is when there tends to be a severe imbalance of power. Often, one person may be giving much more time, energy, and focus to the other person, who consciously or unconsciously takes advantage of the situation to maximize their needs and desires.

A codependent person will plan their entire life around pleasing the other person, or the enabler.

In its simplest terms, a codependent relationship is when one partner needs the other partner, who in turn, needs to be needed. This behavior becomes what experts refer to as the "cycle" of codependency.

The codependent's self-esteem and self-worth will come only from sacrificing themselves for their partner, who is only too glad to receive their sacrifices.

It's a vicious circle of unhealthy behavior.

You might be codependent if you:

- constantly neglect your own needs for the sake of theirs
- ditch friends and family to please your partner
- keep quiet and repress your feelings to keep the peace and stay safe

- regularly seek out your partner's approval
- evaluate yourself through your abuser's point of view, ignoring your instincts
- sacrifice often to please the other person, with no reciprocation
- choose to live in the current state of chaos rather than be alone
- feel responsible and even take the blame for their actions
- try to rescue them
- feel guilty when you stand up for yourself
- defend your abuser when others point out what's happening
- believe you deserve the abuse
- believe that nobody else could ever want to be with you, especially because they've told you so
- remain in the abusive relationship and try to be better because your abuser claims, "I can't live without you."
- are unhappy in the relationship, but fear alternatives ones or fear harm or death if you try to escape

Your plan

If you're being mentally and emotionally abused, you don't have to live this way.

If you fear immediate physical violence, call 911 or your local emergency services.

If you aren't in immediate danger and you need to talk or find someplace to go, call the [National Domestic Abuse Hotline](https://www.nad.org/) at 800-799-7233. This 24/7 hotline can put you in touch with service providers and shelters across the United States.

If there's no physical danger and you choose to stay, you can . . .

- **Accept that the abuse is NOT your responsibility.** Don't try to reason with your abuser. You may want to help, but it's unlikely they'll break this pattern of behavior without professional counseling. That's their responsibility.
- **Detach and set personal *boundaries*.** Don't respond to abuse or engage in arguments. Limit exposure to the abuser as much as you can. Go to a friend's place if necessary.
- **Get Help! Get Out!** If possible, cut all ties. Make it clear to your abuser that the relationship is over and don't look back. You might also want to *find a therapist* or pastor who can show you a healthy way to move forward.
- **Give yourself time to heal.** Reach out to safe and supportive friends and family members. If you're in school, talk to a teacher or guidance counselor. If you think it will help, find a therapist or pastor who can help you in your recovery.
- **If you're in a violent relationship, get help before you get out.** Some experts say that every year, more than 3 million women in the U.S. are abused, and more than 1,600 are killed by their abusers. 75 percent of domestic violence-related homicides occur upon separation. **Make a plan.**

Leaving the relationship is more complex if you're married, have children, or have commingled assets. If that's your situation, seek legal assistance. Here are a few other resources:

- [Love Is Respect \(National Dating Abuse Hotline\)](#): Giving teens and young adults a chance to chat online, call, or text with advocates.
- Get help and support from your Pastor and church family.
- [Break the Cycle](#): Supporting young people between 12 and 24 to build healthy relationships and create an abuse-free culture.
- [DomesticShelters.org](#): Educational information, hotline, and searchable database of services in your area.

Sources and Resources:

<https://www.marriage.com/advice/domestic-violence-and-abuse/signs-you-are-experiencing-emotional-and-mental-abuse/>

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