

When Words Are Used As Weapons: The Signs of Verbal Abuse *(Part 2 of a 4 part series)*

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Verbal abuse is a form of domestic violence and often is a precursor to physical violence. It can be difficult to recognize verbal abuse and often excuses are made for it. Understanding what constitutes verbal abuse is explained here.

Verbal abuse is finally being recognized as a form of domestic violence and as the behavior that usually precedes physical violence. There has been little support for individuals who are verbally abused because it's not as readily visible as a broken arm, black eye, or bruise. After time, many individuals, usually women, suffer from verbal assaults from their partners. These usually escalate into aggressive acts of physical attacks. Research indicates that more females are becoming verbally aggressive in dating situations, and so it is both women and men who must use caution with their verbal behaviors towards their partners.

The following are some examples of verbal weapons used to gain dominance and control over a partner.

Withholding: The abuser refuses to share ideas, feelings, intimacy, thoughts and dreams with the partner.

Countering: The partner's thoughts, feelings, perceptions, and experiences are disputed or any point or idea is argued.

Discounting: The partner's accomplishments or experiences are minimized or dismissed as unimportant.

Verbal abuse disguised as jokes: The abuser jokes about the partner or things the partner has done, causing humiliation and embarrassment to the partner.

Blocking and diverting: The abuser purposefully creates barriers to block the partner's efforts to communicate and will change the conversation to gain control.

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Accusing the blaming: The abuser blames the partner for the abuse, thereby excusing the abuser's actions. This often happens when the partner confronts the abuser about the hurtful behavior.

Judging and criticizing: The abuser puts down the partner's thoughts, feelings, or actions.

Trivializing: The abuser acts as though the partner's opinions, thoughts, actions, or concerns are trivial or don't count.

Undermining: The abuser tries to erode the self-confidence and self-esteem of the partner. Nothing the partner does is "good enough."

Threatening: The abuser implies harm to the partner's well-being. ("Don't you dare talk to your sister or else I'll show you something to be upset about.")

Name calling: The abuser tries to strip away the partner's dignity and identity and replaces them with a foul name.

Chronic forgetting: The abuser regularly "forgets" or is regularly late for appointments and other important events to the partner.

Ordering and commanding: The abuser shows obvious displays of dominance and control over the partner.

Denial of anger and abuse: The abuser will deny the partner's reality and the abuser's fault.

Abusive anger: The abuser has aggressive outbursts that threaten and may escalate to physical violence.

Using any of these verbal weapons regularly, whether separately or together, erodes self-esteem and the capacity to act independently. They are methods used to weaken, control, and manipulate another person. They create shame, humiliation, hurt, and anger.

Individuals who are emotionally or verbally abused may feel more confused, demeaned, or self-blaming than those who

have been physically beaten. A person with a swollen lip or bruised stomach knows she has been abused. Emotional or verbal abuse is so complex and bewildering that it is difficult to name and take action against. If it cannot be clearly defined, the assaulted person may believe she's imagining it, or even worse, causing it.

One abuse survivor reported, "Emotional abuse to me is the worst. The soul dies a slow death." (Bosch and Bergen, 2006). Those who are abused suffer many losses, including the loss of freedom, peace, and a life free of fear. They suffer a personal loss of self-confidence, independence, and having a fulfilling relationship.

Recovery from abuse begins with its recognition. With the support of others and counseling, those who are assaulted may set limits and ask for change. Abusers must be willing to give up their denial of abuse if they are to have any chance of rehabilitation or change. To develop understanding and empathy, abusers must explore their desire to exert dominance and control over someone else. The more severe the abuse, the more difficult it will be for the abuser to change. Those who are abused cannot change abusive situations alone and need outside intervention.

Although you may not suffer with physical and/or sexual abuse, if you are in a verbally abusive situation, help can be found. Each state has a toll-free telephone number

for domestic violence shelters and outreach services in addition to emergency telephone numbers such as 911. If you are being verbally abused, you may call a domestic violence shelter.

Reach out to a trusted friend or family member, a social worker, a teacher, a mental health professional, extension educator, or religious leader. If one person cannot help you, please do not give up. Talk to someone else. The first step to recovery is being able to tell someone, "I am being verbally abused and it is not acceptable to me." The first step to help those who are abused is to listen to them and validate what they are telling you.

References

Bosch, K. and Bergen, M.B. (2006). The influence of supportive and nonsupportive persons in helping rural women in abusive partner relationships become free from abuse. *Journal of Family Violence*. July, v21, No5, p311-320.

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