

Papercut Zine Library



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[B] - HEALTH + SEX - CONSENT /
HEALING /

SEXUAL ASSAULT

#15428



Behind the closet doors:

Confronting
Emotional Abuse
in intimate
partnerships

A smidge of a disclaimer!

The contents of this zine have to do with emotional abuse in intimate relationships. An intimate relationship is often romantic but is not exclusively so --both can be abusive. For this draft of the zine we decided to focus largely on emotional abuse as it manifests in romantic partnerships, but hope that in future editions more work will be done on how it occurs between friends, in collectives, at work, and within families. Despite our focus and use of language, most of the behaviors outlined in this zine can be observed and in all these different relationships, the thread that connects them all (and why emotional abuse occurs so often between romantic partners) is that it happens behind closed doors and in private.

Take care of yourself when reading this. Be in a place that feels safe & comfortable. If friends are handy, they might be nice to have around if the zine gets to heavy or is triggering.

*THIS IS OUR FIRST DRAFT! We love, love, LOVE input, helpful critiques, and personal accounts of emotional abuse. If you would like to contribute or have thoughts surrounding this work PLEASE EMAIL US. There is not a lot of work about emotional abuse, and we are learning as we write this. Your thoughts and experiences may help someone else and would certainly strengthen our understanding and growth regarding emotional abuse.

Thanks for reading,
The kids at Support New York

RESOURCES

Books/Articles

- *You Carry the Cure In Your Own Heart by Andrew Vachss
- *The Verbally Abusive Relationship by Patricia Evans
- *You Can't Say that to Me: Stopping the Pain of Verbal Abuse -- An 8-Step Program by Suzette Haden Elgin, Ph.D.
- *Stalking the Soul: Emotional Abuse and the Erosion of Identity by Marie-France Hirigoyen
- *Emotional Abuse: The Trauma and the Treatment by Marti Tamm Loring
- *You Don't Have to Take It! A Woman's Guide to Confronting Emotional Abuse at Work by Ginny McCarthy, Naomi Gottlieb, Sandra Coffman

Organizations

Support New York: grassroots organization dedicated to healing effects of interpersonal violence of all kinds through survivor support and perpetrator accountability. <http://supportny.org/>

Anti-Violence Project: dedicated to eliminating hate violence, sexual assault, and domestic violence in lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, and HIV-affected communities through counseling, advocacy, organizing, and public education. <http://www.avp.org/aboutavp.htm>

Center for Anti-Violence Education offers classes and resources to women, queer and trans communities. They give a free self defense course for survivors of domestic violence, sexual assault or child abuse. <http://www.caeny.org/programs.html>

Safe Horizon works with all survivors of domestic violence, offering counseling, mediation, support groups and a 24-hour hotline. <http://www.safehorizon.org/index/what-we-do-2.html>

**SUPPORT
NEW YORK**

Addressing and Challenging Emotionally Abusive Behavior

If you choose to stay in the relationship you are in, here are some things that may help change dynamics:

- Identify what helped your self esteem before, what you were into, noticing that you don't do those things anymore, try to build that back up
- Remembering activities and other things that you liked before the relationship
- Stay aware & concentrate on how you feel, what your senses tell you
- Setting boundaries is important, stick to them!
- Finding a community outside of the relationship and friends that value you
- Taking steps to ask partner to transform and clearly committing to a time limit (for yourself and with a friend) to leave if it doesn't change
- You can tell your partner (or write a letter) letting them know that you have been unhappy with the relationship, and that you may be responding to patterns differently.
- Beware of getting caught up in someone else's argument, trying to explain your actions, etc. Call the behavior what it is and tell them simply that you don't like it.
- There is a difference between threats and setting boundaries ("If you...then I..." vs. "I need..." or "I want...")

Remember - when confronting someone who has been abusive there will be a million reasons why they justify themselves as right but its important to trust in your experience and not invalidate yourself.

Also! Sometimes addressing fucked up behavior increases the behavior. Changing usually requires folks to look into some really deep shit, and challenging them on that can be really difficult. May sound dramatic, but it's never a bad idea to have a **Safety plan**. This could mean having your clothes elsewhere, important documents with you or stored somewhere away from your partner, and a friend who knows your situation and would be willing to give you safe housing till you can safely return home

A few specific responses to verbally abusive behavior:

- **Withholding (purposeful silent treatment)**
Let your partner know you are bored, leave and do what you want
- **Trivializing, Threatening, Ordering, Etc.**
Call it like it is - naming the abusive behavior can do a lot ('don't threaten me!' 'can you say please?' 'I don't like being ordered around.') But what is important is that you don't respond to it and do not engage. Don't get caught up in a fight about whether something is or is not the behavior you believe it to be.
- **Forgetting and Denial**
People often get caught up 'trying to explain.'
Try to respond in the moment, focus on yourself and your feelings and how you are hurt at the moment. You don't need to explain, but let them know you don't like what is happening. If your partner says they forgets and denies something they said, you can say 'I don't believe you, and I don't want it to happen again.'
- **Abusive Anger**
Don't respond to what is being said. Immediately call out the yelling, the name calling, whatever it is. You can demand to be spoken to nicely.

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Emotional Abuse

is such a covert form of intimate partner violence & abuse that many people aren't able to recognize it. They may have a feeling that something is wrong. They may feel stressed out; a sense of depression; anxiety but they can't quite identify what is causing those feelings. The very nature of emotional abuse adds difficulty in seeing a person's behavior as abusive. Unlike physical abuse, where there are visual signs that the abuse is occurring or has happened, emotional abuse is seen and felt by no one other than the person experiencing it. It is also pervasive in the sense that it can happen anywhere at anytime.

A whispered insult is just as effective as a loud argument.

How is it defined & how do I notice it when its happening?

Abuse is any behavior that is designed to control and subjugate another human being through the use of fear, humiliation, intimidation, guilt, coercion, manipulation etc. Emotional abuse is any kind of abuse that is emotional rather than physical in nature. It can include anything from verbal abuse and constant criticism to more subtle tactics, such as repeated disapproval or even the refusal to ever be pleased.

Relationships are hard, and people are not always good to one another. Most of us have probably been guilty of critical, manipulative, or coercive behavior at some point in our lives. The important distinction of emotional abuse is that it's not an isolated action or occasional fight - its a pattern of behavior that consistently gives one person esteem at the expense of the other.

Each points out that that emotional abuse is the "systematic diminishment of another. It may be intentional or subconscious, or both but it is always a course of conduct not a single event."

Threats:

Threats and intimidation are designed to control and create fear. Some examples are angry stares, slamming doors, throwing things, punching walls, standing over someone yelling, clenching fists, getting in their face, destroying their favorite things, and hurting or threatening to hurt pets, children, friends. Sometimes your partner will threaten to hurt or kill themselves if you don't do what they want. Your partner might keep weapons around or hold them during an argument. The intention underlying all of these actions is often to intimidate you so deeply, that you will either do what they want or simply to ensure that they are the person who holds the power and control in the relationship.

Criticism:

Criticism is a way of acting superior, one partner comments on what the other partner says and does, dresses, looks, cleans, cooks, or on their friends, family, abilities, intelligence, mental health, income, job, gender performance, queerness/being out, sexual performance... the list is endless. And the goal is to undermine confidence and create insecurity, thus allowing the commenter to feel more powerful. Sometimes these criticisms are framed as helpful or for self-improvement. One example of this would be, "I didn't say you were fat. I just said that outfit would look better if you lost a few pounds."

Contempt:

Like criticism, contempt is delivered as an absolute judgement and often contains words like "never", "always", "should" or "ought". For example, "You never do anything right," or "You always say the wrong thing." Statements are often accompanied by contemptuous body language. Rolling eyes, hands on hips, shaking heads, looks of disgust cause the listener to take offense no matter how "accurate" the statement might be.

Isolation:

Isolation is forbidding or strongly forbidding any contact with the outside world. Jealousy and insecurity fuel this punishing and controlling behavior. Sometimes actual actions are taken to limit or prevent access to friends and family. For example, if your partner has a car and you are in an area with no public transit they might not give you transportation. If they control your money they may not give you money for transit or allow you access to a phone so that you can't call friends or family. Ultimately with limited contact to friends and family your partner has more control over the relationship and your social support systems are limited opportunity to find out about the abuse.

Control:

Controlling behaviors are used to invade another person's boundaries. One way that your partner might do this is to control how you dress, walk, look, feel, think, talk, or behave. They might do this by demand that things are done their way. They might not be willing to help or talk to you unless you comply with how they want things done around the house, in the relationship, at social gatherings, etc. They may constantly argue that their way is better than how you do things.

Financial:

Financial abuse involves controlling money, checkbook, credit cards, budget, assets, spending habits, and purchases in the relationship. This does not include relationships where one person has requested that their partner be responsible for all the financial decisions. Sometimes this involves your partner trying to convince, intimidate, or guilt you into letting them have control over your finances and then doesn't allow you to have any discretion or decisions as it pertains to money. Motivation to do this could be to control all decisions or to control you through cutting off any means to independent choices or actions. The overall goal is to eliminate your individual freedom.

Types of emotional abuse and "red flags"

The next page is a list of some of the common types of emotional abuse. It is worth noting that they will not always apply precisely as they are listed here, and are as varied in their affect as they are in their manifestations. As mentioned earlier emotional abuse is likely to advance in severity and frequency over time, so identifying it as abusive or dangerous earlier in a relationship may not seem merited since the abuse is more subtle. This is seldom a reason to dismiss what is at one point not considered abusive as simply a "personality" quirk, but rather can be observed as a "red flag" in order to inform later action. Keeping track in this way might help someone who is being abusive to check their shit, and hopefully stop. But more importantly, it is a way for the one experiencing the abuse to be prepared to counter any ways an abusive partner might deny or minimize their actions, or aid someone in leaving an abusive relationship before the abuse escalates further.

When red flags are not noted it is common for folks to simply accept abusive behaviors as "normal" parts of their relationship or to blame themselves for the abuse. You can always refer back to the list of questions in this zine to help parse through the extent that something is abusive to you personally. Doing so might aid in calling out fucked up behaviors as they occur. For folks who are not experiencing the abuse themselves, but observe it in someone else's relationship, those questions might help in talking someone through how they are feeling and what's going on. It is really important to not apply what is abusive for one as abusive for everyone. Check out the section on "effects" as well as "how to help a friend in an emotionally abusive relationship" sections of this zine for more of a discussion about healthy ways to navigate identifying and observing abusive dynamics.

The list!

Stonewalling:

Stonewalling is when your partner completely ignores or refuses to communicate with you. The goal is to maintain power and control over when conversations take place, and to make you feel small, invisible, and sub-human. This power play is exacerbated by fruitless efforts to communicate with your partner and can result in simply ceasing all attempts to argue. As a result your partner remains in the power position and can use this tactic to control the relationship further.

Profanity:

Every ugly word that has been used to degrade, humiliate, and inflict pain. Calling someone a "fucking fat whore" or a "Sick, stupid son of a bitch" may be more potent due to the vulgarity.

Denial:

Denial is an incredibly pervasive form of emotional abuse, and is marked as your partner convincing you that any abuse that occurs is your own fault or that there is no abuse at all. They deny having done anything wrong, minimize the events or accuse you of initiating or instigating the abuse. Confusion is common, and sometimes you will find yourself adapting your actions to avoid abuse or feeling guilt and shame for behaving in the "wrong way". This response is common, but is an effect of your partners abuse and not necessarily because you have done anything wrong.

Emotional abuse is used to control, degrade, and punish a partner.

It is similar to brain washing in that it systematically wears away at the victim's self-confidence, sense of self-worth, trust in their own perceptions, and self-concept. Whether it is done by constant berating and belittling, by intimidation, or under the guise of "guidance," "teaching," or "advice," the results are similar.

Eventually, the recipient of the abuse loses most of their sense of self and remnants of personal value. Emotional abuse cuts to the very core of a person, creating scars that may be far deeper and more lasting than physical ones. Because it doesn't leave physical evidence people sometimes have a hard time seeing it as abuse, but the effects of both physical and emotional abuse are surprisingly similar.

Both result in a pattern in which one person becomes afraid of their partner and begins to change in ways to keep their partner happy. The happier the partner, the less wrath they have to suffer. Emotional abuse is meant to cause a person to question their every thought and behavior, so much that they doubt themselves and their sense of reality.

It's not uncommon for a survivor to blame themselves for the abuse they experience – the power imbalance in the relationship often reinforces that feeling of self-doubt.

Later in this zine we discuss the effects of emotional abuse and the multitude of factors which enable its prevalence in interpersonal relationships and in our community.

We also outline a various different types of abuse as they are commonly seen.

Queer-specific Contexts for Emotional Abuse

In general, emotional abuse doesn't get a lot of lip service, and of the information that does exist *most* of it is incredibly heterocentric. This lack assumes and implies that either abuse doesn't happen in queer relationships or is something that only occurs when it involves people who are socialized to be "emotional" (i.e. ciswomen). Below is a list of the things we thought could be particular for folks who aren't in a hetero relationship. And also, the types of tactics a person who is being abusive might wield.

1. The use of isolating folks from their family by outing OR capitalizing on someone being ostracized from their family, whether it is because they are out or far away or their family is absent for whatever reason etc etc. Non-consensual outing in general.
2. Using homophobic language as a form of profanity to exacerbate already brutal insults or abuse. This may not be considered abusive by many folks, in the sense that some people view homophobic language used by queers as always OK because it implicates the aggressor as well (since both folks are queer). Nevertheless, it is still language being used by someone to hurt another, and the applicability to both parties doesn't lessen its impact. It can be even more triggering for survivors of hate violence, and might even be used deliberately by the aggressor in order to intimidate their partner and attack them further.
3. Questioning the authenticity of a person's queerness, particularly a person with less queer sexual experience than the partner, or using it to insult them. Making them feel less than or like their queerness depends on the partner.
4. Questioning the authenticity of a person's queerness by using their gender expression against them, or to insult them such as in the case with a person who is often not perceived as visibly queer.
5. Otherwise using oppressive language behaviors specific to the gender identity/expression and sexual orientation, sexuality or sexual experience of the partner.
6. Forced/coerced closeting about the partner's queer identity/wanting the partner to be "stealth" if they are trans.
7. Devaluing, limiting, policing or controlling the partner's body, gender or sexual expression in any way. This is not always specific to queer situations, but an example that is would be like making a person feel that they are too much or not enough of something - femme, feminine, masculine, butch, gender normative, gender variant, skinny, fat, kinky, slutty, vanilla, etc.
8. Emotional abuse that intersects with other oppressions outside gender/sexual identity, such as sizism, racism, ableism.
9. Punishing/rewarding behaviors around gender/sexuality.
10. Biphobia in a relationship

Communities have a hard time handling these things. As mentioned earlier, people can mistake what is going on in a relationship due to prejudices based on looks, popularity, or scene cred. But even when information about abuse is presented, people have a hard time knowing what to do with it. As with other kinds of abuse, some people tend to disbelieve and demonize the survivor. Because they are the ones who have been hurt, and often the ones who must lead a reaction, the survivors are sometimes mistakenly seen as the ones who caused the problem. A complicating dynamic is that survivors often become vocal about emotional abuse after a breakup. The way we often treat emotional abuse - by ignoring it, or demonizing either the perpetrator or survivor - makes it incredibly hard for either person to be honest about what is happening in a relationship until ties are broken. Plus the effects of emotional abuse - reduced self-esteem and distrusting one's perceptions - make it hard to name emotional abuse while experiencing it. Yet this can lead to some people doubting intentions, believing the survivor is simply "bitter about the breakup" or "getting even."

I've seen great communities, close knit groups, and incredibly important organizations implode after abuse comes to light, and people take sides. It's vital to community sustainability to find new ways of dealing with it.

Possible tips:

- *Talk about interrelationship dynamics all the time, not just when it's a problem.
- *If a relationship seems abusive, first check your assumptions, then check in with one of the partners. Know that there can be considerable danger to the survivor if the perpetrator feels threatened; make sure you keep everyone safe.
- *Resist impulses to demonize either the giver or receiver of emotional abuse, and check anyone else's language that does this. Resist the temptation to analyze how this happened or what it means about the people involved. Instead, attempt to keep the focus on 1) stopping abuse and 2) healing its effects.
- *There's a difficult but important balancing act required of making sure the survivors' needs are being met and community responses are survivor directed, without putting all the responsibility on the survivor of deciding what should happen or doing the work. Tread lightly, checking in with the survivor often.
- *Don't let it be ignored! Every instance of abuse that's accepted by a community gives it more power, and weakens trust. We all want to feel like people have our backs.
- *Hold the abuser accountable. Even if the survivor doesn't have demands for them, make sure they are doing what they need to do to be good partners and good community members. Without judgement or blame, check in with them often to see how they are working on their shit.
- *Empower the survivor. Counteract messages you know they've received, give them props for their bravery, and work hard to lessen the isolation that has most likely developed. Reinforce the power they have to make decisions that affect them.
- *Work on the hierarchical, sexist, homophobic, and power-hungry aspects of society that allow abuse to thrive. BUT don't make the common mistake of letting your work or theory overshadow the very real people being affected.

I think a relationship I know of is emotionally abusive!

It's important for communities to start playing a better role in eradicating emotional abuse. We have a responsibility to call out abusive behaviors and hold people accountable for their actions! Unfortunately there's a lot of dynamics at work that make community response to emotional abuse extremely complicated.

Most importantly we need to remember that emotional abuse is very private and often well-hidden, and the only people that really know what's going on in a relationship are the people in it. Abusers often have a very different private and public face, it's one of the things that is so crazy-making about emotional abuse. There's a particular dynamic that seems so common I have to bring it up: the highly visible community leader and his uptight partner (I'm using male/female pronouns here because that's been my experience in this composite of about six relationships. The males I refer to include cis and trans, females mostly cis. More on gender later). In the many instances I've seen this, the community leader is charming, handsome, popular and an effective activist. His partner, is generally seen as less active and less friendly. The relationship gets seen as abusive - on her side. People see the partner as often angry and bitter towards the leader, and hear that she is controlling and keeps him from other relationships. However, eventually the community learns that the leader has been critical, abusive, and dishonest to the partner; that he has taken credit for much of the work the partner has done and demeaned projects done without him often has insisted on monogamy while not practicing it, which in several situations resulted in passing the partner an STI. Unfortunately the information often doesn't come to light until after a bad breakup, and a community is almost always split into camps for each partner. What have I personally learned from this?

* Abusers are often the most charming, sweetest people in public, which makes it hard for others to see them as possibly being hurtful. I actually have a very unscientific theory that the two are related - when someone needs to be constantly seen as "the good guy" or be well liked by everyone, they may build up stress that gets taken out in private, on their partner.

* This also demonstrates an important point: emotional abusers know what they're doing enough to hide it. People know they have to act in certain ways in public, where they are more accountable. Someone might say they don't believe they are being emotionally abusive, but would be reluctant to let friends overhear the way they talk to their partner. They may be funny and charming at a party, then blow up at their partner as soon as they leave. Or they may respond to a partner's concerns in a way they would never respond to a friend, boss, or fellow organizer. Obviously everyone has different private and public faces and we all treat our partners differently than other people. But a drastic contrast between the way a person acts with friends and when alone with their partners can be a big red flag that something isn't right.



Am I in an emotionally abusive relationship?

There's no one model for abuse, and no formula to decide for you what is happening in your relationship. Behaviors are completely dependent on **context**. For example, an instance of name calling could be:

- *a part of consensual role play
- *a joke, when the speaker is aware of the hearer's sensitivities (and both find it funny!)
- *an isolated incident during a moment of anger, for which the speaker is accountable and apologizes

It could ALSO be a part of a larger pattern in which one person feels disrespected and put down by the other, and is consistently the recipient of that aggression. In this situation, since it is not consensual or fun(ny), and actually produces harmful effects, it can be considered abusive.

Relationships are complicated and often bring up issues with communication, boundaries, and past experiences. People can often hurt each other without meaning to. However, emotional abuse is different from a relationship that's going through a rough time. It generally means that one person holds the majority of the power and uses it in a way that seriously limits the other. A pattern gets established in which one person tries to understand and not upset the other, whose behavior is directed towards maintaining control and dominance. One person is slowly robbed of their self-esteem, the ability to think rationally, and their independence and autonomy. The other seems to be able to do what they want.

The most important thing isn't whether your relationship fits one definition of emotional abuse but how it **feels to you.**

However, because emotional abuse is so insidious and difficult to recognize. This is especially because an abusive partner will railroad discussions, so that you don't have time to think about what's right & what's wrong in their behavior. Take a moment to consider the next page of questions. Your partner might have behaved as though these things were okay, even though it was obvious that they aren't okay. Trust your gut! And how those actions made you feel.

LGBT Power and Control Wheel

This wheel is one of many variations of the way intimate partners can wield privilege or power imbalances in order to **manipulate, harm or control their partners**. While abuse is often referred to in terms of the "male/abuser-female/victim" dichotomy this does not preclude prevalence of abuse in queer relationships. Intimate partner violence (IPV) is manifested in many forms and different relationships; it is not confined to gender roles or hetero relationships.



Many people experience different degrees and extents of the types of abuse listed above. If you are experiencing abuse, touching bases with friends or family about it is a huge step in acknowledging & addressing the potentially severe – and at times invisible – effects of IPV.

Adapted from the Power & Control and Equity Wheels developed by the Domestic Abuse Intervention Project

www.supportnny.org

I think I've been emotionally abusive!

The most important thing to do is to get help. Unfortunately, it can be hard to find the right people. Many counselors are uninformed and may tell you that your behavior doesn't fit their definition of abuse. It's important to find people who know about power and control issues and will hold you accountable without blame or judgement. This is the time for those friends that are honest with you and will call you on your shit!

The biggest commonality in people who are emotionally abusive is a large amount of defensiveness. When your partner calls you on something, do you feel adrenalin pumping? Are you already composing arguments in your head? Work on acknowledging when you are becoming defensive. Notice what you feel physically, what your body language is like.

Recognize that defensiveness isn't in order to protect you from others, it's to protect you from stuff you don't want to feel. So work on feeling it. It may help to breathe, take a walk, splash some water on your face. Then, listen, really listen to what you're hearing. Every time you have a strong response, repeat to yourself "it's not about me." Because it isn't. When your partner is telling you, "that 'joke' you made was critical and disrespectful" it's easy to feel unfairly attacked and argue your side, or to go the other way and feel like the worst person in the world. The truth is neither! It's that your partner is feeling criticized and disrespected and you both need to figure out how to make it better now and not happen again later. It's natural to feel bad when you realize you hurt someone you love, but the focus should be on your actions and their effects, not who you are as a person.

It's always good to work on having better communication and especially less defensiveness, but if you've been called out on emotional abuse it's definitely time to call a ship, as mentioned earlier. Ask (or ask someone else to ask) the survivors what you can do to make amends, and do them. An organization like Support New York can help.

An emotionally abusive partner is likely to call you stupid, crazy, or otherwise question your ability to assess when something feels OK, or when it doesn't. It may not always be abusive, but if it makes you feel bad or shitty, then it is worth discussing. Someone who is unwilling to discuss those things &/or their behavior, is also more likely to keep doing those things. Dodging or dismissing your feelings and their actions in this way is sometimes referred to as a "red flag". For a brief note on red flags see page _____ of this zine.

- *Do you feel that you can't discuss with your partner what is bothering you?
- *Does it seem like you try to understand your partner's feelings, but they don't try to understand yours?
- *Does it seem like your partner's needs always come before yours?
- *Does it sometimes feel like you can't do anything right in their eyes?
- *Do you find yourself apologizing for all the problems in your relationship?
- *Does it seem like you are manipulated into feeling guilty for things that have nothing to do with you?
- *Does your partner frequently get very upset over small infractions, criticize your actions and behaviors, or give you constant "advice" with the expectation that you listen and follow it?
- *Does your partner dismiss your difficulties or issues as unimportant or an overreaction?
- *Does your partner have a very different public and private face? Are they extremely generous and caring around others yet often callous towards you when alone?
- *Does your partner threaten to out you to family or work? Do they criticize your gender presentation (like making fun of feminine characteristics) or sexuality (like putting you down for being bi)?
- *Do you feel like you often give in to arguments because you don't have the energy to fight back or doubt your ability to defend your thoughts and opinions?
- *Does your partner put you down for being less politically active than they are? Do they pull "scene cred" such as being more queer/anarchist/punk than you?
- *Does your partner diminish outside support you receive by belittling friends/groups/organizations/bands you're involved with?
- *Do you feel like your partner is frequently hypocritical, such as getting mad at you for something they often do, or calling you selfish, jealous, or overdramatic while exhibiting those qualities? Does it seem like you're expected to follow different rules than they are?
- *Does your relationship swing back and forth between a lot of emotional distance and being very close?
- *Does your partner limit your access to work, money, or material resources?
- *Do you feel like you have to support them or deal with debts that they've run up?
- *Have you ever felt obligated to have sex, just to avoid an argument about it or because you don't want to disappoint them?
- *Has your partner ever thrown away your belongings, destroyed objects, hit or kicked walls?
- *Have they ever hit or hurt themselves in a fight?
- *Are you ever afraid of your partner?

Am I being emotionally abusive?

It's important to know that emotional abuse crosses all lines of gender identity, sexuality, class, survivor status, etc. And that anyone can be abusive. It's always good to check yourself & your behavior. Reading the previous list can be a first step, asking your partner if they've ever felt any of those things can be a second. Communication is vital in stopping bad patterns before they start.

- *Do I listen to my partner? Really listen, without interrupting, composing counter-arguments, offering suggestions/excuses/defenses, even when I disagree or am upset by what they are saying?*
- *Have I ever been so upset in a fight or talk that I've punched walls, or hit myself?*
- *Have I ever threatened suicide to win a fight, or prevent my partner from leaving me?*
- *Do I seem to get my way an inordinate amount of the time?*
- *Does it seem like my needs automatically get met, while my partner's doesn't necessarily?*
- *Do I justify it by feeling it naturally happens that way?*
- *Do I win most arguments? Am I using any tactics that might be considered intimidating or "below the belt"? Thinking honestly, will I do anything to "win" a fight?*
- *Do I ever, unintentionally or knowingly, punish my partner for not doing what I want?*
- *Do I pout if I don't get sex?*
- *Do I refuse to give affection or ignore my partner if they do something I don't like?*
- *Do I see my partner in a disrespectful way? In my mind, is my partner the "crazy one"? The "weak one"? Do they seem to embody characteristics that I deny in myself?*
- *Do things generally go on my time frame?*
- *Do I decide when we hang out, when we are affectionate both privately and publicly, or when we have space or separate time?*
 - **How do I react when my partner wants the opposite?*
- *Am I energized by fighting, while it seems to exhaust my partner?*
- *Do I keep things from my partner, such as STI status or other relationships?*
- *Am I clear about my desires and intentions regarding monogamy or polyamory?*
- *Do I set up situations where I have more information about their relationship interests than they have about mine?*
- *Do I create drama and constant chaos with crying, violent outbursts, unpredictable mood swings, and stating wants as desperate needs (like "I can't deal with this!" instead of, "I don't like what you're doing")?*
- *Do I lie, change the subject, or distract my partner to avoid conflict or difficult conversations?*
- *When I know I've done something wrong or have hurt my partner, do I try to avoid responsibility by talking about my own hurts to deflect their anger into compassion for me?*

**Show through your words and actions that you are on their side. Emotional abuse can be incredibly isolating and worse, many emotionally abusive partners can be good at getting mutual friends "on their team." Even if you are also friends with the person who caused harm, let the survivor know that you believe what they have gone through and that you will hold the person who caused harm accountable for their hurtful actions in the relationship.*

**Empower the survivor in every way you can. Tell them over and over that they have the power to leave, the power to stay, the power to make choices in their lives. Deciding that they need to leave a relationship just makes you another person deciding what's best for them.*

**However, draw a line between enabling and support. Definitely share your feelings if you think your friend is being harmed. Tell them observations like "I notice you have been apologizing so much more since being in this relationship." It might be a good idea to draw up a "mental health safety contract."*

An example of this would be to make a written agreement with your friend: "If my partner (criticizes me, hits a wall), I will (call these friends, take a walk etc).

Doing this allows your friend to have control of their situation. They also are prepared to combat the often chaotic state abusive arguments thrive in.

**Set positive examples with them both by setting healthy boundaries for yourself, and role playing ways for them to confront their abuser.*

My friend is being emotionally abused!

For folks who are not experiencing the abuse themselves, but observe it in someone else's relationship, the questions and effects listed might help in talking someone through how they are feeling & what's going on. It is really important to not apply what is abusive for one as abusive for everyone. Alternatively, talking through how one is feeling and how they are impacted by their partner's actions can aid them in navigating what is abusive for them personally, not because the person observing the situation or helping them identifies it as such. Even if this is the case for you, attempting to force someone or convince them that something is fucked may encourage them to bond further with their abusive partner. It may create an "us vs them" mentality that their partner could capitalize on as a way to isolate their partner further. Keep the conversation on how to make things better for your friend and not on what a jerk the abusive partner is – the focus has been on them too long already!

**Listen! Ask open-ended questions and listen well to the answers. Make sure you understand what they are saying. Because emotional abuse is so insidious, tricky, and traumatizing it can be difficult to talk about, so help a survivor express themselves by asking questions and repeating what you've heard.*

**Believe and support. Even if it's hard to imagine their partner acting a certain way, if you think what they are describing would not have bothered you so much, or that you would have handled it differently. Accept that you can't possibly know the true experience of this person in this relationship. Allow compassion for the hurt, fear, guilt, anger, etc. they are feeling.*

**Counter some of the messages they've been receiving, preferably with examples. If they tell you, "My partner said I was lazy" you could respond, "That's not true! You did all that work for the benefit."*

Because their reality has been defined by the abuser, can help to give them some objective, supportive information about how things really are.

Remember: context is everything

Something that may be an abusive act in one relationship may not be in another. One way to sort out what is happening is to look at the effects. Even though the person who causes harm is often unaware of what they are doing, they can often see the benefits. Maybe they didn't realize they were being vague and manipulative in discussion about monogamy, polyamory, and jealousy, but they can see how much freedom they have to be with others compared to their partner. Maybe they see their arguing style as normal, but notice they generally get their way. The trouble is that it's hard to see a problem when you are benefitting from it, so it's vitally important to notice what you are getting out of the ways in which you relate and to accept feedback from your partners about how your actions affect them. One way I tend to categorize the difference between an abusive act and an accidental boundary crossing is how the other person reacts when a hurt is brought up. A person can demonstrate their intention to healthy, non-abusive relating by compassionately listening and doing what they can to make amends. It's really common to be defensive when you're told you've done something wrong, but focusing on the hurt that was caused leads to better communication for everyone. Avoiding accountability, blaming others (particularly the person calling them out), and keeping the focus on their own feelings and needs is a typical response of the emotionally abusive person.



Obviously we're not perfect people, and we're not in a perfect world. Chances are, many of the relationships you've been in have been a mix of healthy and not-so-healthy patterns. No one is ever compassionate, respectful, validating, and non-defensive 100% of the time. Not only is perfection impossible, but we have all been raised in a hierarchical capitalist culture in which one-upmanship, competition, countering, and intimidating are the norm. We probably got further training through parents and authority figures, and breaking down the power plays so engrained in us is difficult at best. Again, teasing apart the threads of emotional abuse from those of mistakes born of programming takes time and context. Often the end result is the best yardstick – is this interactional pattern ending in the soul-searching, work, and growth of all involved? Or is it ending in hurt? Emotional aggression can be recognized because the impact of the behavior on the survivor is a hurtful one.

Unlike when someone has been physically abusive, emotional abuse isn't something that we can always visually quantify. Sometimes friends, families, or oneself will notice a difference in ones involvement in social things they used to enjoy or a shift in mood since entering a relationship, however these things can be far less obvious than a bruise, a black eye, or a scar. This is why when the physical representation of abuse is absent, the folks experiencing it may find it difficult to notice the extent that that abuse affects them or be able to acknowledge it is happening. This is a product of emotional abuse tending to occur gradually over time; and so its effects become harder to gauge and they are built upon each other day by day by day. Over this period of time a person experiencing abuse might gain the impression that changes in their sense of autonomy, self worth, or mood are simply a consequence of how they have grown or changed in a relationship and not that some of those developments are influenced by their partners actions/abuse.

Get counseling support. Find a supportive counselor who is experienced with issues of emotional abuse and with whom you feel comfortable. Agencies at the end of this zine may be able to give referrals.

Ask your partner to go to this counselor with you. You can stay in the relationship, you can leave the relationship, or you can decide to decide later. Asking your partner to see a counselor you trust will both be a chance to work issues and a way to check how willing your partner is to make things better.

3. Start setting limits. This is hard. Many people have a hard time knowing what their limits are; and/or trusting their partners to respect them. It can feel vulnerable and new. However, this is how things change. You get to decide what is harmful and what is nourishing to yourself. Choose, possibly from the questions listened earlier, something you want to start with. For example, "I will not accept comments or 'jokes' that are disrespectful or put me down." Remember this is not manipulative and this is not a threat. Threats are stated in the form, you ___ then I will ___." Setting a limit is simply stating a fact.
4. Stay in the present, trying to dwell neither in the past nor on your concerns for the future. Become aware, moment to moment, of any disparagement directed towards you. With this awareness, respond to your partner in a new way. In the past you may have told your partner when you were upset and tried to explain why, but found it ineffective. Your goal now is to call the abuser on every offense. Do not explain, simply state your limit. And know that no matter how they just themselves, you will not accept it.
5. Be aware that you can leave any abusive situation. Almost every physically abusive relationship started with emotional abuse, and like all abuse emotional abuse tends to increase in severity as time goes on. Be prepared and keep yourself safe. Be ready to walk out any time; from a party, from a hotel, from a house, etc. If you stating your limit has not stopped the put down, yelling, etc. Even taking a break to go to the bathroom can give you breathing room to take control.
6. Ask for changes you want in the relationship. Intimacy requires a mutual intention to understand and support each other. Many people find that their partner is simply unable to live in mutuality, at least at this point in time. This is a hard realization to make. But it is vital to get the support you need to choose yourself out of a destructive relationship. If your partner wants to change and is willing to do the work to make your relationship mutually cooperative, you may want to ask for some changes, such as negotiating how much time you need to yourself, and how much time you would like to spend together, and setting aside time to discuss issues in the relationship.

I think I'm being emotionally abused!

The first stage of recognition is the beginning to change from doubting yourself to doubting your partner. You realize one day that your partner is not who you thought they were, like you don't even recognize them. It is a time of realizing that in healthy relationships one doesn't yell at, put down, or hurt the other and if such infringement upon personal dignity does occur it is an unusual and generally unprecedented event for which the infringer takes great pains to make amends. It becomes a time of realizing that you and your partner live in different realities. When awakened from the illusion of a shared reality - the abuser acts to dominate and control, not because there's anything wrong with you.



If your partner remains abusive, it is not your fault, nor is it your responsibility. Your job is not to change or fix anyone nor to insure your partner doesn't hurt anyone else - your job is simply to work on healing the wounds of the relationship. By recognizing emotional abuse and taking the steps to ensure you are no longer subject to it, you are already on a path of recovery. Recovery is a process of healing and reorienting that doesn't follow a schedule. Be gentle with yourself. Work on accepting all of your feelings and recognizing their validity. Get the support you need. Take care of your body, mind, and spirit. Allow yourself to grieve the loss of love that you deserved and didn't get, the loss of the relationship, the loss of parts of yourself. Know that it will get easier. By realizing what happened was wrong, you can start gaining back parts of yourself. By grieving the lack of love and support from your partner, you can begin to understand how much you deserve support and love.

This is a common conclusion to come to, but it can be dangerous when it pardons the person who creates those emotional effects, and more so if that conclusion impinges on one's ability to leave the relationship due to all of the various ways emotional abuse impacts those who sustain it.

Below is just a few of the many, countless different effects of emotional abuse. As mentioned, they adapt, influence, & exacerbate each other over time. But the first step is noticing them in the first place. Hopefully this gets y'all started,

- **A distrust of spontaneity**
- **A loss of enthusiasm**
- **A prepared, on guard state**
- **An uncertainty about how they are coming across**
- **A concern that something is wrong with them**
- **A loss of self-confidence**
- **A doubt in one's abilities and perceptions**
- **A concern that one isn't happy and ought to be**
- **A desire to be different - less sensitive, more fun, etc.**
- **A reluctance to come to conclusions**
- **A desire to escape or run away**
- **A tendency to live in the future...**

"Everything will be great when/after..."

-from "the verbally abusive relationship"

So what's a healthy relationship?

We get so many bad examples of healthy relationships from society, the media, parents, and our own past that it can be hard to know what a healthy relationship is like. There is also no single standard for a healthy relationship. They are as multifaceted as the folks who are a part of them. One of the ways we can look at relationships is by thinking about them in terms of how well they meet our basic needs. Abusive relationships, often rob folks of their agency to access some of those needs. Below is a list of a few things we suggested as needs in a healthy relationship. Maybe some of these things are not crucial for you, and that's totally cool! We left the following page open, so that you can start your own personalized list of needs. This way if you find yourself in a relationship where someone is messing with or limiting you access to those needs, then you are prepared to reassess and analyze where you're at in the relationship and where you want to take it.

Some basic needs:

- *The need for emotional support. *
- *The need to be heard by the other and to be responded *
to with respect and acceptance.
- *The need for good will from the others. *
- *The need to have your own view,*
even if others have a different view
- *The need to have your feelings & experience acknowledged as real*
- *The need to receive a sincere apology for any *
words or actions you find offensive.
- *The need for clear, honest and informative answers to*
questions about what affects you.
- *The need to for freedom from accusation, interrogation and blame*
- *The need to live free from unhelpful criticism and judgment*
- *The need to have your work and your interests respected.*
- *The need for encouragement. *
- *The need for freedom from emotional and physical threat.*
- *The need for freedom from angry outburst and rage.*
- *The need for freedom from labels which devalue you.*
- *The need to be respectfully asked rather than ordered.*
- *The need to have your final decisions accepted.*
- *The need for privacy at times.*

**

I have the need for.....

