

Emotional Abuse—The Destroyer of Relationships

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“Actions are powerful, but it’s important to acknowledge that so are emotions. Emotional abuse can be the most painful thing a person can endure because it’s abuse of your soul and mind.”

—LaTasha Braxton

No matter what Tracey does, she just can’t seem to please her boyfriend. He complains constantly—about the way she dresses, the way she talks, the amount of time she spends on the phone with her friends—and even though she’s taken his concerns to heart and made changes in these areas, he always seems to find something else to complain about. “I love him and I want him to be happy, but I’m confused,” Tracey explained to me. “Sometimes it seems like no matter what I do he never seems to be satisfied, and at other times I begin to think that maybe I do things deliberately just to upset him.”

Robert’s wife isn’t speaking to him again. This time it’s been two weeks. Although it’s happened many times before, it still bothers him immensely. “I feel like a bad boy who is being punished by his mother. It’s not just the silent treatment that bothers me, it’s the dirty looks, as well.”

Over the years, Robert has learned to stay away from his wife and give her time to cool down. “It doesn’t do any good to try to apologize or explain my side of the story—she refuses to listen, and often it makes her more angry. When she’s ready to start talking to me again, she will—until then, I just have to suffer in silence.”

Jason’s lover, Mark, is extremely possessive and jealous. “He has to know where I am 24 hours a day,” Jason complained to me. “He calls me at work several times a day, and if I’m away from my desk, he gets really angry and wants to know where I was and what I was doing. There are several nice-looking men in my office, and Mark is convinced I’m going to have an affair with one of them. It does absolutely no good at all for me to try to reassure him. And he’s constantly accusing me of flirting. The worst part about it is that I’m beginning to question myself. I don’t think I flirt, but maybe I do without realizing it.”

Although Tracey, Robert, and Jason don’t realize it, they are all being emotionally abused. The same is true of thousands of other women and men like them. Slowly, systematically, their self-confidence is whittled away, their self-esteem is eroded, and their perception of themselves is distorted—and yet they don’t even know it is happening.

An individual or a couple can remain locked in a prison of conflict, shame and humiliation, fear, and anger for years without realizing that they are in an emotionally abusive relationship. They may assume that all couples fight as they do or that all women (or men) are treated as they are. Often, emotional abuse between couples is denied, made light of, or written off as simple conflicts or “love-spats” when, in fact, one or both partners are being severely damaged psychologically. Even those who realize they are being emotionally abused tend to blame themselves or make excuses for their partner’s behavior. Little do they

know that by allowing their partner to continue this kind of destructive behavior, they are actually participating in destroying their relationship. Emotional abuse is one of the prime factors in creating dysfunctional relationships and one of the major causes for separation or divorce.

WHAT IS EMOTIONAL ABUSE?

When most people think of emotional abuse, they usually think of one or both partners belittling or criticizing the other. But emotional abuse is much more than verbal abuse. Emotional abuse can be defined as any *nonphysical* behavior that is designed to control, intimidate, subjugate, demean, punish, or isolate another person through the use of degradation, humiliation, or fear.

Emotionally abusive behavior ranges from verbal abuse (belittling, berating, constant criticism) to more subtle tactics like intimidation, manipulation, and refusal to be pleased. We will take a much more in-depth look at the various types of emotional abuse in the next chapter, but for now, here are some examples of emotional abuse in intimate relationships:

- Humiliation and degradation;
- Discounting and negating;
- Domination and control;
- Judging and criticizing;
- Accusing and blaming;
- Trivial and unreasonable demands or expectations;
- Emotional distancing and the “silent treatment”; and
- Isolation.

Emotional abuse can also include more subtle forms of behavior such as:

- Withholding of attention or affection;
- Disapproving, dismissive, contemptuous, or condescending looks, comments, and behavior;
- Sulking and pouting;
- Projection and/or accusations; and
- Subtle threats of abandonment (either physical or emotional).

Emotional abuse is not only made up of negative behaviors but negative attitudes as well. Therefore, we need to include the word *attitude* in our definition of emotional abuse. People who are emotionally abusive need not take any overt action whatsoever. All they need to do is to exhibit an abusive attitude. Here are some examples:

- Believing that others should do as you say;
- Not noticing how others feel;

- Not caring how others feel;
- Believing that everyone else is inferior to you; and
- Believing that you are always right.

So emotional abuse is any nonphysical behavior or *attitude* that is designed to control, intimidate, subjugate, demean, punish, or isolate another person. But there are also some types of physical behavior that can be considered emotional abuse. These behaviors have a name: *symbolic violence*. This includes intimidating behavior such as slamming doors, kicking a wall, throwing dishes, furniture, or other objects, driving recklessly while the victim is in the car, and destroying or threatening to destroy objects the victim values. Even milder forms of violence such as shaking a fist or finger at the victim, making threatening gestures or faces, or acting like he or she wants to kill the victim carry symbolic threats of violence.

HOW EMOTIONAL ABUSE DOES DAMAGE

Emotional abuse is extremely damaging, more damaging, in fact, than physical abuse. Emotional abuse is considered by many to be the most painful form of violence and the most detrimental to self-esteem. Emotional abuse cuts to the very core of a person, creating scars that may be longer lasting than physical ones. With emotional abuse, the insults, insinuations, criticisms, and accusations slowly eat away at victims' self-esteem until they are incapable of judging a situation realistically. They may begin to believe that there is something wrong with them or even fear that they are losing their mind. Victims can become so beaten down emotionally that they blame themselves for the abuse.

The primary effects of emotional abuse are depression, lack of motivation, confusion, difficulty concentrating or making decisions, low self-esteem, feelings of failure or worthlessness, feelings of hopelessness, self-blame, and self-destructiveness. Emotional abuse is like brainwashing in that it systematically wears away at the victim's self-confidence, sense of self-worth, trust in his or her perceptions, and self-concept. Whether it is by constant berating and belittling, by intimidation, or under the guise of "guidance" or teaching, the results are similar. Eventually, the recipient loses all sense of self and all remnants of personal value.

Abused partners tend to take on the criticism and rejection of their partner or to be in constant turmoil, wondering things like: *Am I as bad as he makes me out to be or is he just impossible to please? Should I stay in this relationship or should I go? If I'm as incompetent as he says I am, maybe I can't make it on my own. Maybe no one will ever love me again.* Ultimately, given enough time, most victims of emotional abuse come to not only blame themselves for all the problems in the relationship but also to believe that they are inadequate, contemptuous, and even unlovable.

In addition to damaging the victim, emotional abuse poisons a relationship and infuses it with hostility, contempt, and hatred. No matter how much a couple once loved each other, once emotional abuse becomes a consistent aspect of the relationship, that love is overshadowed by fear, anger, guilt, and shame. Whether it is one or both partners who are

being emotionally abusive, the relationship becomes increasingly more toxic as time goes by. In this polluted environment it is difficult for love to grow or even to survive.

At the very least, emotional abuse causes both the abuser and the victim to lose sight of any redeeming qualities his or her partner once had. The more a partner is allowed to degrade, criticize, or dominate his partner, the less he will respect his partner. And the more a partner is emotionally abused, the more she will slowly build up an intense hatred toward her abuser. The disrespect and hatred each partner begins to feel leads to more and more emotional abuse and to each partner justifying inappropriate, even destructive, behavior. Over time, anger can build up on the part of both abuser and victim, and emotional abuse can turn to physical violence.

When emotional abuse is mutual, it becomes a matter of survival, as each partner has to constantly fend off the criticism, verbal attacks, or rejection and shore up enough strength to go on with daily tasks.

As the emotional abuse takes its toll and each partner becomes less and less self-assured, each clings to the relationship even more. A destructive cycle is created—even as the relationship becomes more and more abusive each person may become more dependent on his or her partner. And as the relationship continues to deteriorate, each partner feels further justified in becoming even more abusive.

Whether you suspect you are being emotionally abused, fear that you might be emotionally abusing your partner, or think that both you and your partner are emotionally abusing each other, this book will help you. If you are uncertain as to whether you are being emotionally abused, you will learn important information that will help you decide once and for all. If you fear that you might be emotionally abusing your partner, you will learn exactly what constitutes emotionally abusive behavior as well as what causes it. And if you think you and your partner are emotionally abusing each other, you'll learn how to stop triggering one another, how to stop bringing out the worst in one another, and how to develop healthier ways of relating to each other.

QUESTIONNAIRE: Are You Being Emotionally Abused?

Answer the following questions to help determine whether or not you are being emotionally abused in your relationship.

1. Do you feel as if your partner treats you like a child? Does your partner constantly correct you or chastise you because your behavior is “inappropriate”? Do you feel you must “get permission” before going somewhere or before making even the smallest decisions? Do you have to account for any money you spend or do they attempt to control your spending (even though they have no problem spending on themselves)?
2. Does your partner treat you as if you are “less than” or inferior to them? Does your partner make a point of reminding you that you are less educated or that you make less money or that you aren’t as attractive as they are?

3. Does your partner routinely ridicule, dismiss, or disregard your opinions, thoughts, suggestions, and feelings?
4. Does your partner constantly belittle your accomplishments, your aspirations, or your plans for the future?
5. Do you find yourself “walking on eggshells”? Do you spend a lot of time monitoring your behavior and/or watching for your partner’s bad moods before bringing up a subject?
6. Have you stopped seeing many or all of your friends and/or family since being in this relationship? Did you do this because your partner dislikes them, because your partner feels jealous of the time you spent with them, or because you are ashamed of the way your partner treats you in front of them? Did you stop seeing friends and family because you are ashamed of the fact that you’re still with your partner, even though you’ve complained to them many times about the way your partner treats you?
7. Does your partner usually insist on getting their own way? Do they want to be the one to decide where you will go, what you will do, and with whom you will do it?
8. Does your partner punish you by pouting, by withdrawing from you, by giving you the silent treatment, or by withholding affection or sex if you don’t do things their way?
9. Does your partner frequently threaten to end the relationship if you don’t do things their way?
10. Does your partner constantly accuse you of flirting or of having affairs even though it isn’t true?
11. Does your partner feel they are always right?
12. Does your partner seem impossible to please? Do they constantly complain to you about some aspect of your personality, your looks, or the way you choose to run your life?
13. Does your partner frequently put you down or make fun of you in front of others?
14. Does your partner blame you for their problems? For example, does your partner claim it is your fault if they fly off the handle and start screaming? Do they tell you they wouldn’t do it if you didn’t make them so mad? Are you to blame for their problem with compulsive overeating? Because they have a drinking problem? Do they blame you for not being able to finish college or fulfill his dream of becoming an actor (author, musician, singer, etc.)?
15. Does your partner feel you are the one who is responsible for all the problems in the relationship?
16. Does your partner’s personality seem to go through radical changes? Is your partner pleasant one minute only to be furious the next? Does your partner become enraged with only the slightest provocation? Do they experience periods of extreme elation followed by periods of severe depression? Does their personality seem to change when they drink alcohol?

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17. Does your partner tease you, make fun of you, or use sarcasm as a way to put you down or degrade you? When you complain, do they tell you it was just a joke and that you are too sensitive or don't have a sense of humor?
18. Is your partner unable to laugh at themselves? Are they extremely sensitive when it comes to others making fun of them or making any kind of comment that they feel shows a lack of respect?
19. Does your partner find it difficult or impossible to apologize or admit when they are wrong? Do they make excuses for their behavior or tend to blame others for their mistakes?
20. Does your partner constantly pressure you for sex or try to persuade you to engage in sexual acts that you find disgusting? Have they ever threatened to find someone else who will have sex with them or who will engage in the activities they are interested in?

If you answered half or more of these questions with a yes, you are definitely being emotionally abused. But a yes answer to even a few of the preceding questions can also indicate emotional abuse. More than anything else, what characterizes an emotionally abusive relationship is a consistent pattern of hurtful, humiliating, and condescending behavior.

DETERMINING WHETHER YOU ARE BEING EMOTIONALLY ABUSIVE

As difficult as it is to admit you are being emotionally abused, it is even harder to face the possibility that you might be guilty of emotionally abusing your partner. No one wants to have to face the fact that he or she has lost control in this way and that his or her actions and/or words have caused his or her partner emotional damage. It is much easier to continue trying to justify or rationalize your behavior by telling yourself that your partner pushes you too far or that your partner deserves the treatment you give her. But if you are emotionally abusing your partner, the only way you are going to save your relationship and save yourself is to stop making excuses and admit the truth—first to yourself and eventually to your partner. The first step in admitting this truth is to answer the following questions as honestly as possible.

QUESTIONNAIRE: *Are You Being Emotionally Abusive?*

1. Do you believe you have a right to make most of the decisions in the relationship?
2. Do you insist that your partner do as you say?
3. Do you perceive yourself as being superior to or “better than” your partner (e.g., smarter, more competent, more powerful)? Do you feel you have a right to special treatment or consideration in the relationship because of this?

4. Do you secretly disrespect or even despise your partner because you feel they are weak, inadequate, stupid, or a pushover?
5. Did you deliberately get involved with a partner who would allow you to maintain the dominant role in the relationship?
6. Do you give your partner the silent treatment or withhold approval, affection, sex, or money when they don't do as you wish?
7. Do you threaten to leave the house or to end the relationship whenever you don't get your way?
8. In addition to your partner, do you often have disagreements or arguments with others? Do you often feel misunderstood by others?
9. Do you often feel victimized or targeted by others?
10. Do you think your partner and others are just too sensitive and that is why they get their feelings hurt so often by the things you say and do? Do you think your partner should just learn how to laugh at themselves instead of taking offense when you tease them?
11. Have you insisted that your partner drop all or most of their friends and outside activities?
12. Have you ever denied doing or saying something just to make your partner doubt their perceptions or sanity?
13. Do you believe your partner should be willing to have sex with you whenever you are in the mood and that they should be willing to engage in any sexual activity you are interested in exploring?
14. Have you ever threatened to find someone who would have sex with you or who would engage in the sexual activities you want to engage in if your partner doesn't comply?
15. Do you experience frequent mood shifts, sometimes going from loving to rejecting in only a matter of a few minutes? Do you frequently become enraged? Are you often unaware of what causes your moods to change, but assume it is something your partner did or didn't do?
16. Do you believe your partner should put other things aside in order to tend to your needs? Do you believe your partner should want to spend all their free time with you, and when they don't, do you accuse them of being unloving or failing as a partner?
17. Do you telephone or text your partner at work or at home wanting reassurance that they are still there and still love you? If your partner isn't available or doesn't respond immediately do you become enraged?
18. Do you question your partner incessantly about their activities when you are apart? Do you want your partner to account for every minute of their day? Do you assume they are hiding something if they can't account for what they were doing at any given time? Do you insist your partner carry a cell phone so you can always get hold

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of them? Have you ever listened in on your partner's phone conversations without their permission, read their text messages, or emails, or made visits to their work or the place where they said they'd be just to make sure they are there?

19. Do you insist on being in control of the money in the relationship? Do you insist that your partner ask your permission before spending any money, or have you imposed a budget or an allowance on them? Do you require your partner to account for every penny they spend?
20. Do you expect your partner to always have the same opinions as you? To vote the same way? To like the same activities?
21. Have you ever threatened to hurt or destroy something of your partner's? Have you ever threatened to hurt your partner? Have you ever threatened to hurt your partner's children, family, or friends?
22. Have you ever thrown or broken objects while in a rage at your partner or in an attempt to scare them? Have you ever refused to let your partner leave a room or your home? Have you ever pushed or shoved your partner?

If you answered yes to several of these questions, it means that you have been guilty of emotionally abusing your partner. This doesn't mean you are a horrible person or even that you should be referred to as an "abuser." We are all guilty of using emotionally abusive tactics on our partners from time to time. This certainly doesn't make it right, however, and you should make a concerted effort to stop this behavior now that you know it is abusive.

If you answered more than five questions with a yes, you have exhibited a pattern of emotional abuse, and this is far more serious. If you want to regain your self-respect and your partner's trust, you will need to become totally honest with yourself and to your partner about your behavior and your attitude toward them. Later on in the book, you'll discover the reasons why you have become abusive, and you'll discover other ways of dealing with stress and with the feelings of shame, guilt, envy, and anger that have caused you to be abusive.

Please note: Questions 1–5 reflect an emotionally abusive *attitude*. If you answered yes to half or more of these questions, you have an emotionally abusive attitude, and this in itself is experienced as emotional abuse. Even if you answered yes to only a few of the remaining questions, you still have reason to be concerned because an emotionally abusive attitude often leads to emotionally abusive behavior.

NO MONSTERS HERE

Unlike many other books on the subject of abuse, this book is not going to characterize those who emotionally abuse their partners as horrible monsters. First of all, those who become emotionally abusive often do so unintentionally and unconsciously instead of deliberately

and maliciously. Their unconscious motivations often come from the same source as partners who put up with emotionally abusive behavior—an abusive or neglectful childhood. This was the case with my client Don.

DON: LIKE MOTHER, LIKE SON

I didn't mean to emotionally abuse my wife. Hell, I didn't even know I was doing it for a long time. I was just treating my wife the way my mother treated me. When I was growing up, my mother smothered me emotionally. She said she loved me so much that she couldn't bear to have me out of her sight. When I got older and insisted on going out to play with the other kids, she acted wounded and told me I didn't love her—otherwise I wouldn't want to leave her all alone. My dad died when I was five, and from that time on, my mom always said I had to be the man of the house. That meant taking care of her needs.

When I decided to get married, I looked for a woman who was very different from my mother—someone who wouldn't try to smother me, someone who had her own life and didn't need me to be there for her all the time. Sherry was just that kind of woman. She was independent and had lots of friends and was involved in lots of activities. But shortly after we got married, I suddenly started feeling threatened by her friends, and I felt abandoned if she decided to do something with them instead of staying home with me. I complained to her that she didn't love me, that if she did, she'd prefer to be with me.

As time went on, I became more and more possessive of her and accused her of having an affair. I even started following her when she went out. I began stalking my own wife! It wasn't until she insisted that we get counseling that I became aware that I was being abusive, and I was treating her the way my mother treated me.

Sometimes a person can be aware that he is being abusive and feel horrible about it and yet still be unable to stop. When this person gains some insights as to why he is being abusive, he is often able to begin making significant changes. This was the case with my client Alex.

ALEX: GETTING TO THE REAL REASON FOR HIS ANGER

Alex came to me because he realized his treatment of his wife was becoming more and more abusive, yet even though he tried, he just couldn't stop himself. "I don't like it that I'm so critical of Carol all the time. I hate what comes out of my mouth. I can't believe the things I've said to her—horrible things. I always feel so angry with her, and I don't always know why."

Alex often told himself he was angry with Carol because she couldn't seem to keep a job, and he had to support their family all by himself. He told himself it was because she didn't believe in birth control and so she kept having more and more kids. But while it was true that the financial pressure played a factor, it didn't really explain Alex's need to chastise and degrade Carol all the time. As it turned out, we were both to discover that it went back much further.

Alex's family was very poor when he was growing up. His father used to have to go out of town to find work, and he'd send money home to Alex's mother that was intended to last the entire month. But his mother was an extravagant woman who spent almost the entire amount in the first week on luxury items like chocolate, expensive meats, and alcohol for parties she'd give for her friends. By the end of the month they were always down to potatoes, and sometimes they didn't even have that and they'd go hungry for a few days. Alex had vowed he'd never let his kids go hungry.

During one of our sessions, Alex was talking about his mother when he turned to me and said, "Do you think that's why I feel so angry at my wife? Am I really angry at my mother?" That was, in fact, exactly what I was thinking. Alex and I began working on helping him to release his anger toward his mother.

Another common reason for becoming emotionally abusive is an attempt to avoid becoming a victim.

KAREN: TURNING THE TABLES

Karen was emotionally abused as a child and in her first two marriages. Her second husband became so abusive that Karen almost committed suicide. This brought her into therapy. For two years Karen and I worked on repairing the damage caused by her husbands' and her father's domination and constant criticism. She worked on releasing the repressed anger that she had turned on herself and on being more assertive. Karen left therapy when she became involved with another man, a man who was different from her usual pattern. "This guy is so great. He lets me decide what we are going to do instead of telling me. And he never puts me down. He thinks I'm wonderful just the way I am."

Even though I felt Karen had left therapy prematurely, things were indeed looking good for her. Two months later I received a wedding invitation in the mail. While it seemed a bit too soon, I hoped she was marrying a man who would be good to her.

I received a call from Karen only four months later. She was in tears. Her new husband was threatening to leave her, and she wanted to know if I could see them in couples therapy to help her understand what was going on.

Her new husband, Brett, explained that he loved Karen, but he simply couldn't tolerate the way she treated him. "She orders me around like I'm a child, and she insists on having her way. I'm a very easy-going guy, and I don't have to have things my way all the time, but I would like her to consider my needs sometimes. I know other men in her life treated her badly, but I'm not like those men. I treat her with respect, and I expect her to do the same. I just can't stand her belittling comments any longer."

Karen admitted that she often criticized Brett, but she didn't realize she had become emotionally abusive. "I guess I mistook Brett's tendency to be easy-going for weakness, and for some reason, this made me feel like I could get away with treating him badly. My God, I've become my father and my ex-husbands."

Women and men like Karen often go from one extreme to the other—from victim to abuser—in their attempts to achieve some balance in their lives. While many become healthy enough to thwart their attraction to abusive partners, they often choose a person

who is unassertive or passive in order to guarantee they will never be abused again. Unfortunately, their own abusiveness is then activated, as it was with Karen.

With a few months of couples therapy, Karen and Brett were able to turn around their relationship. Karen learned to balance her need to not be dominated with consideration for Brett's needs, and Brett learned that he could be assertive with Karen without becoming an abuser himself.

Instead of blaming and shaming those who have become abusive, I believe it is far more important to encourage people to take responsibility for their behavior and for changing their behavior. This involves exploring your childhood for clues to your present behavior, releasing repressed and suppressed emotions toward what I call your "original abusers," and learning strategies for dealing with anger and stress in more constructive ways.

ENDING EMOTIONAL ABUSE

Sometimes stopping the abuse means walking away from an emotionally abusive relationship. Other times it means that the victim needs to gain enough strength and learn appropriate strategies so that she or he can become more assertive in the relationship. It always means that the abusive partner needs to discover and work on those core issues that cause the abusive behavior, and often it means working together as a couple to change the destructive patterns both have created.

Some of you reading this book will, for the first time, discover that you are being emotionally abused. This may lead you to come to the conclusion that you need to end your relationship, and you may, in fact, be emotionally prepared to do so. But many of you will not be prepared to leave the relationship now. It may be that you fear being alone or you may be afraid you won't be able to make it on your own—you may feel you need to become more financially stable before you can leave. Reading the book in its entirety and completing all the exercises, especially those in the chapters dedicated to victims of emotional abuse, will help you emotionally prepare to leave.

Some of you may feel there is still a chance to turn around things in your relationship. By following the strategies offered in Part Two of the book, especially those about standing up to an abusive partner whenever he or she becomes abusive, I believe you have a good chance of salvaging your relationship. This is especially true if you and your partner are both willing to do your part in changing your negative patterns.

Each partner needs to understand why they are being abusive and/or why they are putting up with abuse from their partner. Part Two will explain in detail how we develop patterns of behavior based on our childhood experiences—the way our parents treated us and each other—and how we unconsciously repeat these patterns of behavior as a way of trying to resolve early childhood conflicts.

Once you understand the root of your behavior, the next step will be to learn guidelines for how you can go about completing the unfinished business that has created your patterns of unhealthy behavior. Those of you who emotionally abuse your partner need help in working through your feelings of pain, rage, shame, fear, and guilt concerning your own

abuse or neglect so you do not continue to repeat the behavior with your partner. If you are being emotionally abused, you need help recognizing the fact that you do not deserve such treatment and understanding why you have tolerated the abuse in the first place. Sometimes it becomes clear that a couple should not stay together, either because they continue to bring out the worst in one another or because the abusive partner refuses to work on changing. When this is the case, partners need to know when it is time to end the relationship and how to do so without destroying each other. The information in Part Three will help with this process.