

ARE YOU IN AN  
**ABUSIVE**  
RELATIONSHIP?



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# ARE YOU IN AN **ABUSIVE** RELATIONSHIP?

*How to recognize and deal with verbal and emotional abuse.*

## **Are you in an abusive relationship?**

"I feel depressed, but my boyfriend/husband doesn't seem to care, and won't help me with it. Is it possible that my depression is being caused by my relationship?"

Abuse can be physical, sexual, emotional, verbal, or a combination of any or all of these. Abuse can also be neglect, which is when significant others don't take care of the basic needs of those who depend on them.

Many women assume that if they're not being physically abused by their partner, then they're not being abused. That's not necessarily true. You may be in a relationship which is draining something from you - you might not have recognized that your partner has eroded your self-esteem and happiness.

## **Emotional Abuse Quiz - Walking on Eggshells**

Millions of relationships walk on eggshells, with the partners in constant dread that the other will set them off – push their buttons – or make them feel disregarded, rejected, unattractive, incompetent, inadequate or afraid.

An abusive partner will railroad discussions, so that you don't have time to think about what's right and what's wrong in their behaviour. Take a moment to consider these questions. Your partner might have behaved as though these things were okay, even though it's obvious that they aren't okay:

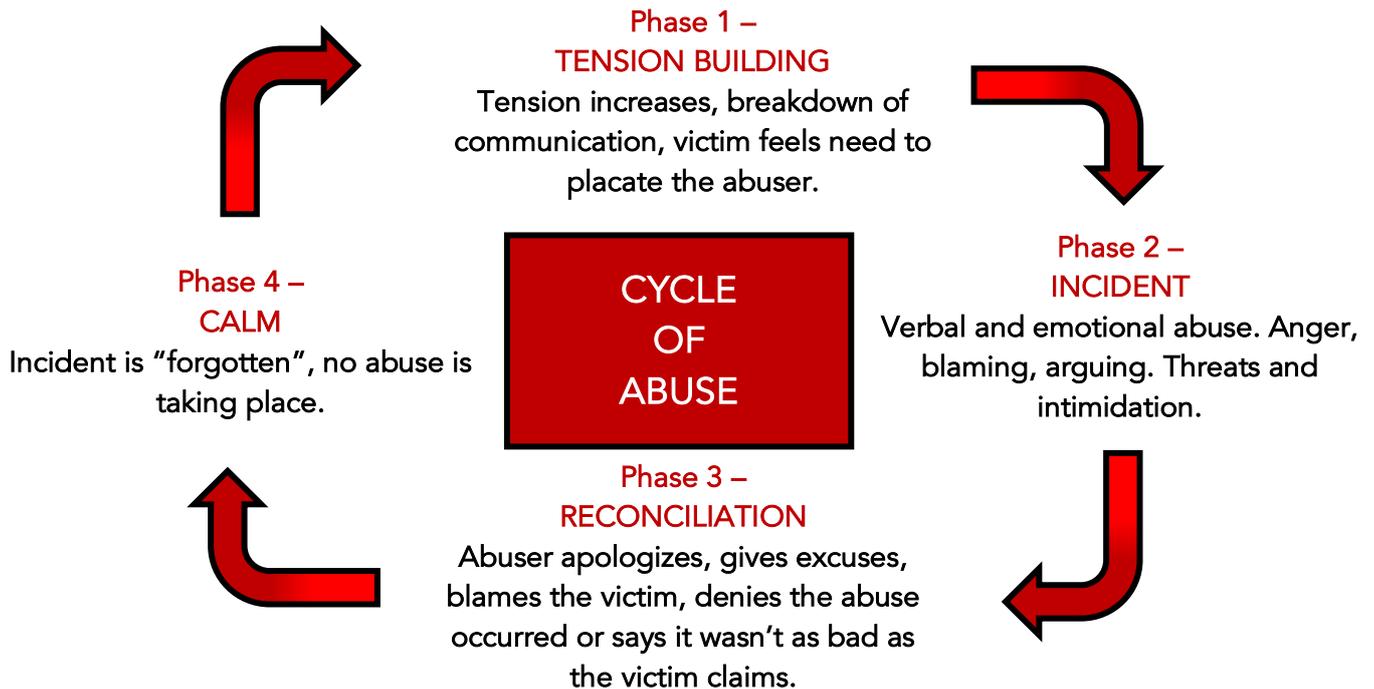
- Do you feel that you can't discuss with your partner what's bothering you?
- Does your partner frequently criticize you, humiliate you, or undermine your self-esteem?
- Does your partner ridicule you for expressing yourself?
- Does your partner isolate you from your friends, family or groups?
- Does your partner limit your access to work, money or material resources?
- Has your partner ever stolen from you? Or run up debts for you to handle?
- Does your relationship wing back and forth between a lot of emotional distance and being very close?

- Have you ever felt obligated to have sex, just to avoid an argument about it?
- Do you sometimes feel trapped in the relationship?
- Has your partner ever thrown away your belongings, destroyed objects or threatened pets?
- Are you afraid of your partner?

## The Process of Brainwashing – Mind Control

One aspect of emotional abuse is that it eventually brainwashes the victim.

1. The brainwasher keeps the victim unaware of what is going on and what changes are taking place. Your partner might control your finances, make plans for you, or not tell you what his plans are until the last minute. He may talk about you to others behind your back to isolate you from them.
2. The brainwasher controls the victim's time and physical environment and works to suppress much of the victim's old behaviour. The victim is slowly, or abruptly, isolated from all supportive persons except the brainwasher. Your partner might have insisted that you stop certain social, hobby, or work activities. You might have gotten moved to a new location, farther away from your family and friends. Or you may have been asked (or told) to reduce or stop contact with specific supportive people in your life.
3. The brainwasher creates in the victim a sense of powerlessness, fear and dependency. Verbal and emotional abuse creates these emotions, and they become stronger and stronger over time.
4. The brainwasher works to install new behaviour and attitudes in the victim. Your partner trains you to behave in ways that he wants you to behave. He gradually makes you feel differently about yourself and erodes your confidence in yourself.
5. The brainwasher puts forth a closed system of logic and allows no real input or criticism. In other words – what he says, goes.



### Common Characteristics of Abusers

Please note that abuse is by no means limited to men. Women can also abuse their male partners, and children (especially out of control teenagers), are equally able of abusing their parents. The elderly, employees and the disabled are often victims of abuse. To consider whether your partner emotionally abuses you, look at the information available on male physical abusers. The patterns are similar.

- He was verbally abused as a child or witnessed it in his own family.
- He has an explosive temper, triggered by minor frustrations and arguments.
- Abusers are often extremely possessive and jealous. They experience an intense desire to control their partners.
- His sense of masculinity depends on the woman's dependency upon him. He feels like a man only if his partner is totally submissive and dependent on him.
- Abusers often have superficial relationships with other people. Their primary, if not exclusive, relationship is with their partner.
- Abusers often have low self-esteem.
- He has rigid expectations of marriage (a partnership) and will not compromise. He expects her to behave according to his expectations of what a wife should be like, often the way his parents' marriage was, or it's opposite. He demands that she changes to accommodate his expectations.

- He has a great capacity for self-deception. He projects the blame for his relationship difficulties onto his partner. He would not be drunk if she didn't nag him so much. He wouldn't get angry if only she would do what she's supposed to do. He denies the need for counselling because there's nothing wrong with him. Or he agrees to get counselling and then avoids it or makes excuses to not follow through. He might not want her to get counselling because, he reasons, she wouldn't have any problems if she only turned to him.
- He may be described as having a dual personality - he is either charming or exceptionally cruel. He is selfish or generous depending on his mood.
- A major characteristic of abusers is their capacity to deceive others. He can be cool, calm, charming and convincing: a con man?
- The mate is usually a symbol. The abuser doesn't relate to his partner as a person in her own right, but as a symbol of a significant other. This is especially true when he's angry. He assumes that she is thinking, feeling, or acting like that significant other – often his mother.

### Designed to Control

Emotional abuse is any behaviour that is designed to control another person using fear, humiliation and verbal or physical assaults. It can include verbal abuse and constant criticism to more subtle tactics like intimidation, manipulation and refusal to ever be pleased.

Emotional abuse is like brainwashing in that it systematically wears away at the victim's self-confidence, sense of self-worth, trust in her perceptions, and self-concept. Whether it be 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.

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, criticism and accusations slowly eat away at the victim's self-esteem until she is incapable of judging the situation realistically. She has become so beaten down emotionally that she blames herself.

## You're Not Crazy

For many of us, struggling to live with this kind of abusive partner, the first handhold we need to grasp is that we are not crazy. Abusive behaviour isn't normal. It is caused by an underlying disorder. Most often, the disorders are Borderline Personality Disorder, Narcissistic Personality Disorder, or Sociopathy - technically called Antisocial Personality Disorder. People who suffer from these disorders have extreme emotions, which lead them to actions that can range from puzzling to brutal. Living with them is painful and confusing. Personality disorders are aptly named, because the minds of people who suffer from these disorders work differently than healthy people.

## Effects of Long-Term Emotional & Verbal Abuse on the Victim

- Isolation from others
- Low self-esteem
- Depression
- Emotional problems
- Illness
- Increased alcohol and drug usage
- Withdrawal from real life into an alternative reality
- Extreme dependence on the abuser
- Unfounded feelings of guilt and shame

## Walking on Eggshells – Emotional Abuse Checklist

No = 10 points / Yes = 0 points

1. I am anxious, worried or nervous about my partners attitude. \_\_\_\_
2. I feel guilty about my partners resentment. \_\_\_\_
3. I am anxious, worried or nervous about my partners anger. \_\_\_\_
4. I am anxious, worried or nervous about my partners sarcasm, criticism, frowns, glares or gestures like finger-pointing or making a fist. \_\_\_\_
5. I am anxious, worried or nervous about my partners cold shoulder. \_\_\_\_
6. I edit my thoughts before I speak and second guess my behaviour before I do anything in fear that I might "set him/her off". \_\_\_\_

7. My partner is fine one minute and into a tirade the next, all seemingly over nothing or about the same thing over and over. \_\_\_\_
8. I feel tense when I hear the door open or when my partner comes into the room. \_\_\_\_
9. When I walk by my partner, my shoulders tense, until we pass each other. \_\_\_\_
10. I think that if I just tried harder, things might be all right. \_\_\_\_
11. I feel that nothing I do is good enough. \_\_\_\_
12. Our relationship is a cold stand-off (disagreements are minimal, but there's a chilly wall between us). \_\_\_\_
13. My defensiveness and reactions to my partner are on "automatic pilot", like they just happen on their own. \_\_\_\_
14. I feel distress or a "pit in my stomach" or muscles aching that have little to do with physical exertion. \_\_\_\_

### **Walking on Eggshells – Score Interpretations**

Low score indicate abuse.

**120-140:** Congratulations, you are not walking on eggshells. The problems in your relationship do not seem to produce the chronic tension and self-doubt that can lead to poor emotional and physical health.

**90-110:** You are beginning to second guess yourself and worry about your future.

**Below 90:** In your efforts to tiptoe around someone else's moods, in the hope of avoiding blow-ups, put-downs, criticism, disgusted looks, sighs of disapproval, or cold shoulders, you unconsciously edit what you say. To some extent, you second-guess your judgment, ideas, and preferences about how to live. You might even begin to question what you think is right and wrong. You probably have a vague feeling, at least now and then, that you are losing yourself. Your perceptions of reality and your sense of self are changing for the worse. You may experience physical symptoms such as headaches, muscle aches, or stomach aches.

### **Is He / She Abusive? – Learn the Disease. Stop the Abuse.**

Are you being abused? You may not know how to tell, but even worse, you may be thinking that you are the crazy one. Abusers work hard to distort our reality to make their reality feel safer.

So, what is abuse? Is it someone who hits you to get what they want? Sometimes, mostly not! Ask yourself this: does your partner hurt you repeatedly? Does he or she do it to satisfy their own emotional needs, or because they're out of control? Does she or he use the situation to lock you in, so you have to tolerate it, or make a huge sacrifice to get away? If you see this dynamic in your relationship, you are being abused.

The hurt of abuse can come in many ways, including physical attacks, verbal attacks, sexual attacks, withholding things we need including affection, sex, money, or contact with friends and family.

She has become so beaten down emotionally that she blames herself for the abuse. Her self-esteem is so low that she clings to the abuser. Emotional abuse victims can become so convinced that they are worthless that they believe that no one else could want them. They stay in abusive situations because they believe they have nowhere else to go. Their ultimate fear is being all alone.

The following are types of emotional abuse:

- **Domination:** Someone wants to control your every action. They must have their own way and will resort to threats to get it. When you allow someone else to dominate you, you can lose respect for yourself.
- **Verbal Assaults:** Berating, belittling, criticizing, name calling, screaming, threatening, excessive blaming and using sarcasm and humiliation. Blowing your flaws out of proportion and making fun of you in front of others. Over time, this type of abuse erodes your sense of self confidence and self-worth.
- **Abusive Expectations:** The other person places unreasonable demands on you and wants you to put everything else aside to tend to their needs. It could be a demand for constant attentions, frequent sex or a requirement that you spend all your free time with the person. But no matter how much you give, it's never enough. You are subjected to constant criticism, and you are constantly berated because you don't fulfil all this person's needs.
- **Emotional Blackmail:** The other person plays on your fear, guilt, compassion, values or other "hot buttons" to get what they want. This could include threats to end the relationship, the "cold shoulder" or other fear tactics to control you.

- **Unpredictable Responses:** Drastic mood changes or sudden emotional outbursts (this is part of the definition of Borderline Personality Disorder). Whenever someone in your life reacts very differently at different times to the same behaviour from you, tells you one thing one day and the opposite the next or likes something you do one day and hates it the next, you are being abused with unpredictable responses. This behaviour is damaging because it always puts you on edge. You're always waiting for the other shoe to drop, and you can never know what's expected of you. You must remain hypervigilant, waiting for the other person's next outburst or change of mood. An alcoholic or drug abuser is likely to act this way. Living with someone like this is tremendously demanding and anxiety provoking, causing the abused person to feel constantly frightened, unsettled and off balance.
- **Gaslighting:** The other person may deny that certain events occurred or that certain things were said. You know differently. The other person may deny your perceptions, memory and very sanity. (If a Borderline has been disassociating, they may indeed remember reality different than you do.)
- **Constant Chaos:** The other person may deliberately start arguments and be in constant conflict with others. The person may be "addicted to drama" since it creates excitement. (Many non-Borderline Personalities also are addicted to drama.)

### What is this Disease?

Abuse is a behaviour, not a disease. But abuse is caused by an underlying disease. Healthy people might occasionally lose their temper, leading to an outburst, but a consistent pattern of hurtful abuse can only be the result of a deeper problem.

Abusive behaviour isn't normal. It is caused by an underlying disorder. Most often, the disorders are Borderline Personality Disorder, Narcissistic Personality Disorder, or Sociopathy - technically called Antisocial Personality Disorder. Understanding what is going on in an abusive situation requires understanding these disorders. This connection leads to what we sometimes call the "light bulb effect", where long-standing confusion and hurt suddenly opens to an insight - and the first steps to protecting ourselves and to healing.

## Abusers Spin our Reality

Disordered people can't deal with the reality of their behaviours. On some level they realize how hurtful they are yet accepting this major flaw in themselves is just too painful. So disordered abusers spin our reality to make theirs less painful. One of the most common defence mechanisms they use is projection. In projection, a characteristic of themselves that they find just too painful to accept is projected onto us. And the most frequently projected characteristic is mental illness. "I'm not a narcissist. You're the crazy one." Another common and difficult defence mechanism is blame shifting. It's your fault this happened because blah, blah blah blah....

After a while it becomes hard to distinguish what is real from what is being projected and what is being distorted. We begin to doubt our reality and question whether we're the crazy ones, or whether our disordered SO's (significant others) are right about what they say.

The truth is, THEY'RE NOT RIGHT. But they feel better when they can get us to carry the burden of their illness and their behaviour.

What's more, disordered people hide their problems very effectively. People with personality disorders have serious maladjustments in coping with life. Thus, they live in emotional turmoil. They seek to present a very together appearance, hiding their disease from most people. It is only when we get into a close and private relationship with someone with these personality disorders that the abusive behaviour comes out. And because their lives are wracked with emotional turmoil, there is a lot of pent-up emotion that can be focused on us. Yet those around us don't see it, causing us further confusion.

Though the actions of abusers make no sense from the perspective of a healthy person, there is something inside them that motivates them. Most abusers live with intense and terrifying fears. Events which are insignificant to normal people might trigger these fears in abusers, unleashing powerful and brutal actions on their part, unconsciously intended to reduce their fear. The intent may be to control another person, to discredit someone who seems to be criticizing the abuser, or to keep someone from leaving (abandoning) the abuser.

What makes abusive people act as they do, are the psychological defence mechanisms they use which cause them to see a different reality than we see. Often alcohol and drug use – so painfully common among abusers - compounds these disordered patterns.

It takes courage for non-disordered partners to understand and take responsibility for their own role in the patterns, and even more courage to reclaim your sanity in an insane interaction with a disordered partner.

### **How to Handle Emotional Abuse**

All relationships are difficult at times and despite the most valiant efforts, no one can be perfect all the time. However, emotional abuse is far different from normal ups and downs. When there's a gradual tearing down of one person in the relationship, it could be a sign of emotional abuse. Here are guidelines on how to handle emotional abuse.

**Understand What's Behind Emotional Abuse and Its Effects:** Understand that emotional abuse is rooted on one person trying to have power and control over another and often results in the abused person feeling unworthy of things like love, affection and respect from anyone. It's by far the most prevalent of all types of abuse and is tolerated for longer periods of time because hurt emotions are easier to hide than bruises.

**Know What Constitutes Emotional Abuse:** Often the abuser will refuse to acknowledge the other's value or worth. They degrade, insult, ridicule, yell, swear or publicly humiliate the other person. The abuser also has a desire to put fear into the other by coercing, intimidation, threatening or stalking. A person can also be emotionally abused if someone is trying to force them to accept their ideas or behaviours.

**Recognize That Emotional Abuse Is Not Just Between Partners:** It can also be found in other relationships like elderly and a caretaker, parent and child and in other family dynamics or situations where one person is in control over another.

**Spot Indicators That Someone is Suffering from Emotional Abuse:** Depression, withdrawal, low self-esteem, anxiety, complaints of physical conditions with no medical basis, inappropriate behaviour for age, extreme dependence on the abuser, unfounded feelings of guilt or shame and avoiding eye contact.

## How to Handle an Emotionally Abusive Relationship

**Take Responsibility for Allowing the Situation to Happen to Yourself:** It's not your fault, but you are the only one who can change it. By staying in an emotionally abusive relationship, it's telling the abuser that it's OK. For those who don't want to speak up because they fear causing waves, peace at any price is simply enabling the abuser to continue a destructive path. Speak up, tell the abuser that what they are doing is not OK and make changes in your life to handle the abuse and show that it will no longer be tolerated.

**Set New and Healthy Boundaries for the Relationship:** Work together with the abuser if possible, to discuss what has happened in the relationship and how respect for each person and their boundaries can work to fix the relationship. If the abuser is non-receptive to discussion, figure these out for yourself and calmly and rationally let the abuser know of your decision to make the relationship better and how you intend to have your new boundaries respected.

**Seek Professional Help for Yourself and the Abuser Through a Qualified Counsellor:** A professional can help if the situation becomes threatening or dangerous for either party.

## Handling Verbal Abuse

Verbal abuse is hostile language directed toward others that is purposely meant to hurt the recipient. Verbal abuse can be injurious, humiliating and degrading. It occurs amongst co-workers, friends and family. It can be difficult to identify because verbal abuse is not physical and cannot be reported to authorities, like other types of abuse. Nonetheless, verbal abuse can be damaging and have negative effects on both the abuser and the abused.

**Identify and Admit that Verbal Abuse is Occurring:** The first step to ending verbal abuse is realizing that it is abuse and that it needs to stop. Verbal abuse comes in many different forms, ranging from name-calling, provoking, degrading, controlling and/or condescending language.

**Recognize That the Verbal Abuse is Not True:** Whatever the abuser may be saying has no basis and is only a manifestation of the abuser's own insecurities and lack of anger management.

**Speak Up:** When verbal abuse is happening, the victim needs to recognize the abuse and say that it is happening. The abuser must have the opportunity to explain himself for the abuse to stop.

**Set Boundaries:** If the verbal abuser is unable to momentarily stop attacking the abuser, then the victim needs to stop the conversation. Walking away, hanging up the phone or not responding are examples of ending the conversation. Two-way communication cannot occur if the verbal abuse continues.

**Communicate with the Abuser Only After the Abuse has Stopped:** The verbal abuser must recognize that she is in fact abusing the victim. The victim should communicate how the abuse makes him feel.

**Identify Triggers:** Most people verbally abuse others when they feel insecure, threatened or angry. The abuser needs to articulate his verbal abuse triggers and make a conscious effort to avoid verbally abusing the victim in the future. The abuser may need to walk away or not communicate at all when he experiences a verbal abuse trigger.

**Stop the Verbal Abuse as Soon as it Begins to Occur:** If the verbal abuser cannot change, the victim may be forced to stop communicating with the abuser altogether, whether it is a significant other, family member, friend or co-worker. Remember, no one can force a verbal abuser to stop. She must want to change. If she does not want to change, the victim must end the abuse even if it means ending the relationship.

**Consider Leaving the Relationship:** Setting boundaries will not always prove effective and separating from the person may be the only way to maintain your self-worth. Counselling is an option if you feel the situation is not hopeless but keep a plan in the back of your mind to get out. Share your sufferings with a friend or family member - verbal abuse is a tough battle to fight, and it is almost impossible to do so alone.

## Stop Enabling Verbal Abuse

It can be difficult to identify and stop enabling verbal abuse because it often occurs within an emotionally abusive environment. Abuse is secretive by nature. Verbal abusers attack most often in private. This creates an environment of fear for the abused. In this type of relationship, it is common for the abuse to intensify over time. Abusers often use avoidance techniques to discount the abuse, such as avoiding talking about an issue or dismissing past abusive episodes. It is also common for an abuser to deny specific things were said. All of this can make it difficult to communicate with the abuser.

The essence of enabling thinking is the desire to supply someone with the means or opportunity to do something. However, when you enable someone who is verbally abusive to you, you put yourself in a dangerous and vulnerable position. Over time, it is possible to stop enabling verbal abuse with the right mind-set and strategies.

**Monitor Thoughts of Fixing and Rescuing:** Every time you have thoughts about helping the abuser, remind yourself of all the negative effects that the verbal abuse has had in your life. Redirect thoughts of fixing or rescuing the other person to thinking about helping yourself. You can do this just through the process of being mindful of all your thoughts, especially those connected to the abusive relationship, throughout your day.

**Emotionally Detach from the Abuser as Much as Possible:** You can do this by becoming responsible for your own happiness. When you find yourself thinking, "Why couldn't he do..." or "I wish he would...", you are giving power to your abuser. Take your power back by orchestrating your life so that you oversee creating happiness in every aspect of your daily routine. Stop depending in any way on your abuser. Find others to help you in areas where you need assistance.

**Set Healthy Boundaries:** Healthy communication boundaries are limits you set in communication that dictate the integrity of your day. Acknowledge the type of communication you want to have. Make the request in a simple statement to yourself. An example would be, "I will leave the room when any abusive language begins." Rehearse this boundary until you feel comfortable, and then communicate this boundary to the abuser during a neutral time.

**Identify Inconsistencies in Words and Actions:** Make a daily affirmation: "I like to keep consistent what I think, say and do, and will change to ensure this is so." Focus on your own consistency for a period. This will help you to identify inconsistencies in your abuser's words and actions. When you are caught in the fearful environment caused by verbal abuse, communication is often confusing. Clearing your own thinking processes will allow you to begin to see the verbally abusive relationship with more clarity.

**Stay Calm When Being Verbally Abused:** This sounds simple, but it is quite difficult as you may feel you want to argue or fight back. By reacting, you reward the abuser. If the perpetrator is lashing out by calling you names and generally demeaning you, remain calm until the abuser gets it out of his system. Later, approach him and try to discuss it, saying how uncomfortable it made you feel and ask if he really feels that way about you. Note whether you receive an apology.

**Understand that Verbal Abusers Often Don't Realize the Impact They are Having:** They blame the person they are abusing. Sometimes they have been brought up with verbal abuse in their household and think that is how you treat people. The constant criticizing and undermining are insidious in its effect on you. If you let it continue, you begin to feel you are going mad and that perhaps everything she says is true. Before this happens, approach her and ask why she keeps saying the things she does; tell her how it makes you feel. Establish boundaries, and let the person know what will happen the next time this occurs.

**Watch for Blaming:** If the abuser says it is all your fault and that you encourage it by your behaviour, that's another example of verbal abuse. He keeps on and on, so that you eventually believe what he says and your self-esteem plummets. Stop this in its tracks telling him you do not wish to participate in this type of conversation. Tell him if he wishes to try again without accusation or blame, you will listen. If he persists, then leave the room. Refuse to give in to his manipulations or accusations.

**Note if the Abuse is Being Done "For Your Own Good":** Professional counselling would help but persuading her to go can be a difficult task since she won't feel she has done anything wrong. Try your best and say you will go with her if she would like it.

**Do Not Respond to Abusive Texts Sent to You or Abusive Phone Calls:** An abuser often tries to get at you whenever and however he can. You could change your phone number, but if you want to continue the relationship, he needs to stop the behaviour. Set up good boundaries and stick with them, even if it means ending the relationship.

### **How to Move on After a Verbally Abusive Relationship**

Verbal abuse is toxic to both the mind and body. It seeps into every aspect of your life and leaves your spirit broken. Verbal abuse scars run deep and stay with you long after the relationship has ended. It is important to take the necessary steps in order to heal and move on to have positive and healthy relationships.

**Confront the Abuse:** Looking at the abuse for what it was will help you to move past it and on to healthy relationships.

**Understand the Abuser:** It seems intuitively counterproductive but understanding the abuser will help you accept that the abuse was not your fault.

**Seek Counselling:** The damage from verbal abuse can last for years if you let it. Seek a professional therapist in order to work through your pain and move on with your life.

**Read Books about Verbal Abuse:** This will help you gain a more in depth understanding of verbal abuse and the healing process after the abuse has ended. Try "The Verbally Abusive Relationship" by Patricia Evans or "No Visible Wounds" by Mary Susan Miller.

**Surround Yourself by People Who Care About You:** This will serve as a constant reminder that you are loved.

**Celebrate the Small Victories:** Celebrating small victories like the day you didn't flinch when you heard someone yelling will help you remain positive and focused on your goal of becoming a healthy, happy and whole person again.

**Believe in Your Self-Worth:** Remind yourself daily that you are worthy of unconditional love and happiness.

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