

BEHIND CLOSED DOORS

Emotional Abuse in Intimate Partnerships

by Support New York

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 or a sense of depression or anxiety but they can't quite identify what is causing those feelings. The very nature of emotional abuse presents difficulty in seeing a person's behavior as abusive. Unlike physical abuse, where there are visual signs that the abuse is happening, emotional abuse can leave invisible marks only seen and felt by the person experiencing it. It's super pervasive and can happen anywhere at anytime.

A whispered insult can be just as effective as a loud argument.

From our perspective, abuse is a cluster of actions meant to intimidate, degrade, punish, and control another person. Emotional abuse can include anything from verbal abuse in the form of constant criticism to more subtle tactics, such as repeated disapproval or the refusal to ever be pleased. It is designed to control and subjugate another person through the use of fear, humiliation, guilt, coercion, manipulation, and a myriad of other tactics. The effect of this abuse can wear away at the person's self-confidence, sense of self-worth and self-concept, and trust in their own thoughts.

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 its not an isolated action or occasional fight – **it's a pattern of behavior that consistently gives one person power and esteem at the expense of the other.** It's seldom a single event, though those experiences can have a great impact on someone.

Emotional abuse often intersects with a person's experience of systemic oppression. This is true for both the person who is abusing and the survivor. It is totally messed up, but very common for emotional abuse to capitalize on a survivor's experience of racism, xenophobia, homophobia, transphobia, sexism, classism, sizism, ableism, or other forms of oppression in order to further control and degrade them.



A Queer* Context for Emotional Abuse

In general, emotional abuse doesn't get a lot of attention, and the information that exists is, for the most part, incredibly heterocentric. Less attention is given queer relationships involving emotional abuse, and it's a good thing to start talking about.

Here is a list of some things that can be particular to folks in queer relationships.

1. The use of isolating folks from their family by outing OR capitalizing on someone being ostracized or isolated from their family. Non-consensual outing is a really common form of emotional abuse.
2. Using homophobic language as a form of profanity to amplify already brutal insults or abuse. Some folks feel strongly that this tactic is not considered abusive because homophobic language used by LGBTIQ folks implicates the aggressor as well. Like any action outlined in this zine, from our perspective, if it is still language being used by one person to hurt or control another, then the applicability to both parties doesn't lessen its impact. For survivors of hate violence, this form of emotional abuse can be even more triggering, 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 sexuality, particularly a person with less sexual experience than their partner, or using it to insult them. Making a person feel like they are less than, less queer, or that their queerness hinges on the partner.
4. Questioning the authenticity of a person's sexuality by using their gender expression against them or to insult them if they are often not perceived as "visibly" queer. This dynamic is particularly prevalent in situations where femme people are dismissed as a result of misogyny and transmisogyny, in which there is an explicit or implicit disrespect and mistreatment of folks deemed feminine.

5. Degrading or disrespecting bisexuality in relationships, refusing to acknowledge bi as a queer identity, controlling behaviors around who one is/has been attracted to.
6. Forcing or coercing a partner to closet their identity. For example, wanting the partner to be "stealth" if they are trans.
7. Pressuring a partner to enter into a polyamorous relationship(s) against their will.
8. Devaluing, limiting, policing or controlling the partner's body, gender or sexual expression in any way. This is not always specific to situations involving queer sexualities. Any situation in which a person is made to feel that they are too much or not enough of something- femme, feminine, masculine, butch, "normie", gender variant, skinny, fat, kinky, slutty, vanilla, etc.—can be a way to control and degrade someone.



*We use the term queer as a political term that includes a diverse range of genders and sexualities not limited to the "LGBT" framework.

The effects of emotional abuse

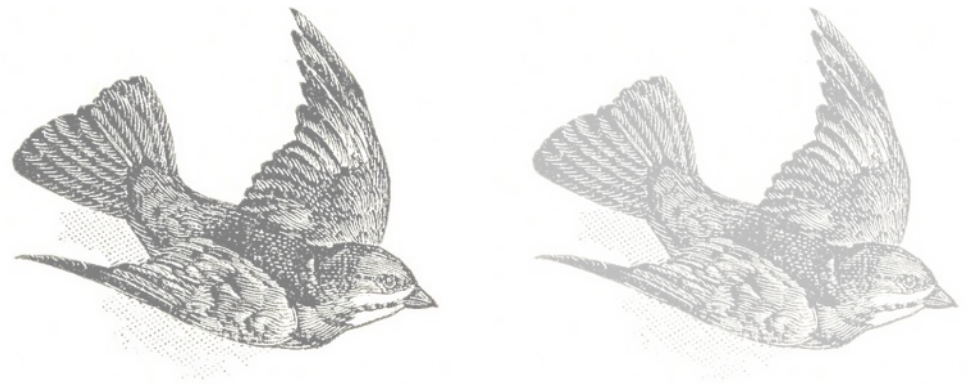
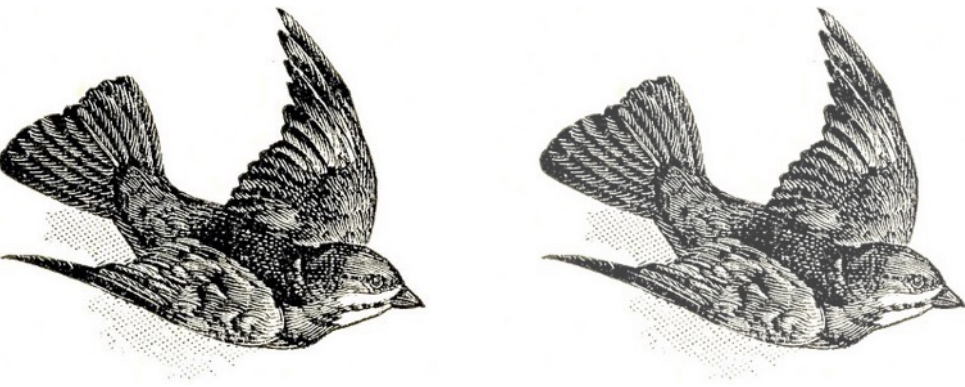
Emotional abuse isn't something that we can easily quantify. Sometimes friends or family members will notice a decline in one's social presence before the survivor does. Sometimes there is a shift in mood since entering a relationship or the survivor isn't involved in projects they once found fulfilling. Loved ones might be looking for the emblematic bruise, black eye, or scar from a dangerous relationship, but might step back because that physical component isn't there. Likewise, folks experiencing the abuse may find it difficult to notice the extent that abuse affects them or even be able to acknowledge it is happening when they are in the thick of it.

Sometimes emotional abuse will occur gradually over time and its effects become harder to gauge. Throughout this process the effects of the abuse are built upon each other day by day, and the 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 view some of those developments as influenced by their partner's actions/abuse. This conclusion is a common one. It can be dangerous when it excuses the person who creates those emotional effects and limits one partner's confidence and self-esteem to leave the relationship if they desire to.

Noticing the effects of emotional abuse is one of the first steps in changing them. There's no way we could list all of the effects of emotional abuse, but here are some common ones. Each can adapt, influence, & exacerbate each other over time.

- 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")

It's not uncommon for survivors to blame themselves for the abuse they experience – the power imbalance in the relationship often reinforces that feeling of self-doubt. Emotional abuse cuts to the very core of a person, creating scars that may be far deeper and more lasting than physical ones. Because there's no 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 fewer backlashes they have to suffer. People in abusive relationships often describe "walking on egg shells" in an attempt to not "set off" their partner. Emotional abuse is meant to cause a person to question their very thought and behavior, so much that they doubt themselves and their sense of reality.





Am I in an emotionally abusive relationship?

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

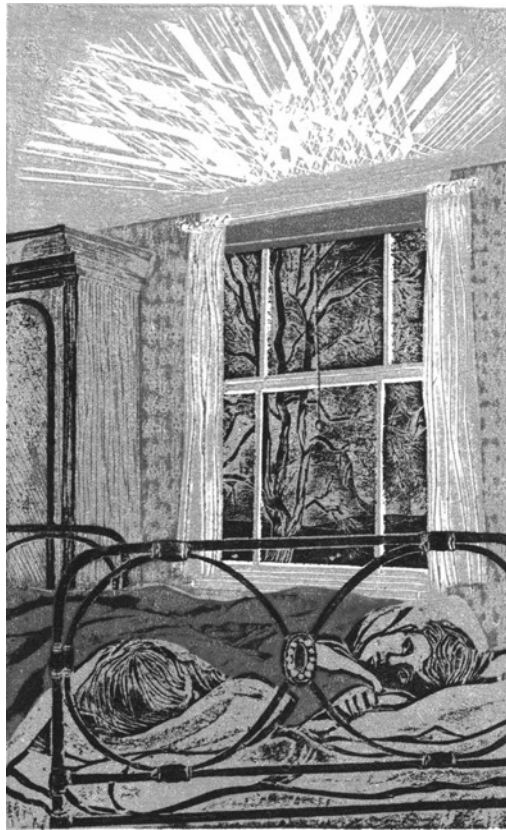
It could ALSO be a part of a larger pattern in which one person feels disrespected and put down by the other, and is consistently the recipient of that aggression. In this situation, since it is not consensual, fun(ny), and actually produces harmful effects, it can be considered abusive.

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.

You might find that it's difficult to feel confident in your decision to say someone's being abusive. Emotional abuse is designed - intentionally or not - by the abuser to be insidious and difficult to recognize. An abusive partner will often 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 weren't. Trust your gut! And the feelings and reactions from these behaviors.

- 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 STRUGGLES 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 HOW YOU DRESS, WALK, OR LOOK) 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 SOCIALLY OR POLITICALLY ACTIVE THAN THEY ARE?
- DO THEY HOLD SOCIAL CAPITAL, LIKE BEING POPULAR IN A “SCENE” OVER YOU? DO THEY PULL “SCENE CRED” SUCH AS BEING MORE QUEER/RADICAL/PUNK THAN YOU?
- DOES YOUR PARTNER DIMINISH OUTSIDE SUPPORT YOU RECEIVE BY BELITTLED



- FRIENDS/GROUPS/ACTIVITIES/ 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, SENSITIVE, OR OVERDRAMATIC WHILE THEY EXHIBIT 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?

If you answered yes to any of these questions, a good first step is to talk about it with your partner. Your partner might dismiss the conversation because at one point these behaviors didn’t feel abusive, but now they make you feel bad or shitty. Trust yourself. Anything that makes you feel crummy is worth discussing in all relationships.

Someone who is unwilling to discuss these things and their behavior is also way more likely to keep doing those things.



Dodging or dismissing your feelings and justifying their actions is sometimes referred to as a “red flag” for abusive tendencies.

Types of emotional abuse and "red flags"

What follows is a list of types and examples of emotional abuse that some may find triggering to read. Be sure to take care of yourself - for example, by finding a safe space and safe people to engage with around these issues.

It is also worth noting that these examples will not always apply precisely as they are listed here. They vary in their effect and their manifestations. Emotional abuse is likely to advance in severity and frequency over time, so identifying actions as abusive or dangerous earlier in a relationship may be difficult when the abuse is subtle. It may also seem unwarranted to call something out if it's "not that bad" (yet) or is dismissed as a "personality quirk" (ie: "That's just how they are."). It's OK to simply note and observe these behaviors as "red flags" so you can inform later action should shit escalate. Keeping track in this way might help someone who is being abusive to check their shit early on and hopefully stop. 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. Identifying these actions can also aid someone in leaving an abusive relationship before the abuse escalates further.

For folks who are not experiencing the abuse themselves, but see it in someone else's relationship, check out the section on "how to help a friend in an emotionally abusive relationship" section of this zine for more of a discussion about ways to navigate identifying and ob-

serving abusive dynamics. It is really important to remember that **what is abusive for one person is not abusive for everyone.**

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 attention, devotion of all free time, doing things their way etc - but no matter how much you give, it's never enough. A partner may use guilt tripping, moral arguments and lofty principles that sound convincing and valid, but are really part of their agenda - the big red flag is if they act as though they are never satisfied with you or your actions. They may constantly argue that their way is better than how you do things and 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.

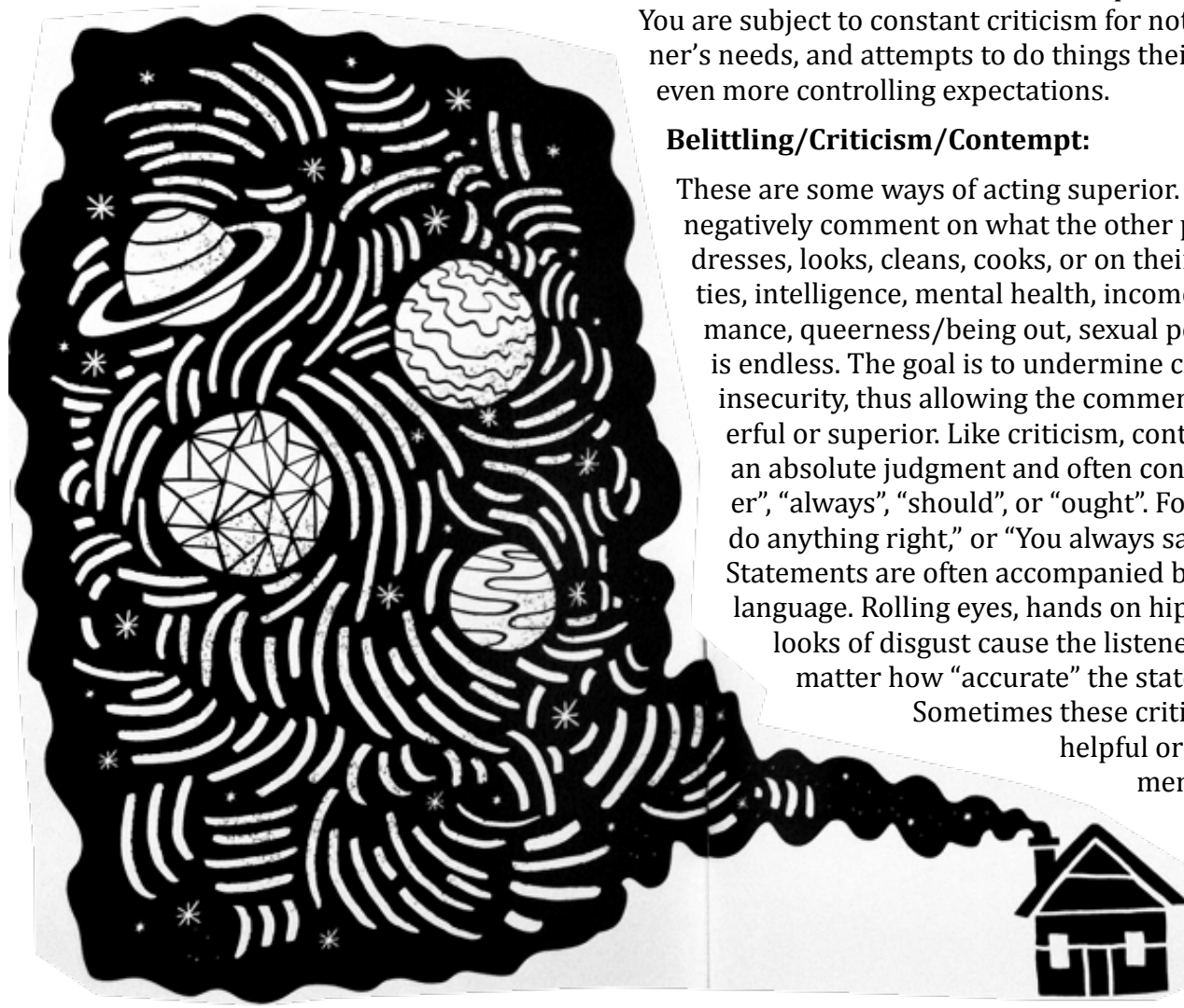
You are subject to constant criticism for not fulfilling your partner's needs, and attempts to do things their way often leads to even more controlling expectations.

Belittling/Criticism/Contempt:

These are some ways of acting superior. One partner might negatively comment 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. The goal is to undermine confidence and create insecurity, thus allowing the commenter to feel more powerful or superior. Like criticism, contempt is delivered as an absolute judgment 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.

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."



Denial/Gaslighting:

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. A partner might deny having done anything wrong, minimize the events or accuse you of initiating or instigating the abuse. It can also be referred to as “gaslighting” and at heart means denying your reality for their own agenda. Relentlessness, firmness of insistence, charm or anger and subtlety are employed to incite self-doubt of your memories, feelings, perceptions and opinions. For example, a partner might make a hurtful remark and then accuse you of being too sensitive, unable to take a joke, misunderstanding the remark, or they may flat out deny the comment was ever made. Sometimes a partner will project their



actions on you, accusing you of the very thing they are doing, as a way to deflect. Or they might rage at you for not believing their lies, and shame you for being mistrustful. 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 partner’s abuse and not necessarily because you have done anything wrong. “Crazymaking” is slang for this pattern of behavior, summing up the stress, confusion and frustration one feels in a relationship with someone who is emotionally abusive.

Isolation:

Isolation is forbidding or strongly discouraging any contact with the outside world. Jealousy and insecurity can fuel this punishing and controlling behavior. Some examples might be a partner purposely undermining relationships, through character assassination of your friends and family, subtly attempting to turn others against you, or simply acting mooney and disagreeable around your friends. Or, a partner might guilt-trip you into canceling plans, “forbid” certain friendships they find threatening or start a fight right when you are about to leave for something, forcing you to miss it. Sometimes actions are actually 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 a ride. If they control your money they may not give you any or allow you access to a phone so that you can’t call friends or family. The less one has access to their support system, the more dependent they are on the abuser and the more control the partner has over the relationship. And it means one’s support system has even less opportunity to notice the abuse.

Negative Consequences:

This is a powerful yet often subtle method of control, dominating by making it consistently unpleasant for you to assert yourself. For example, a partner might agree to go to a restaurant you like only to incessantly complain. They may agree to spend time with your friends but then be passive aggressive. Often an abuser will consistently bring up one time they did things “your way” and it didn’t work out, using this as “evidence” that they know better. This wears down the resistance of the other person over time, making them feel that standing up for their wants and needs is simply not worth it.

Privacy Invasion:

Examples include a partner monitoring your phone calls, checking your email or texts without permission, reading your journal, or monitoring your time and whereabouts. Often there is a pattern in which the abuser demands privacy or is extremely secretive while expecting access into every part of your world.

Profanity/Name calling:

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" maybe more potent due to the vulgarity.

Threats:

Threats and intimidation are designed to control and create fear. Some examples include angry stares, slamming doors, throwing things, punching walls, standing over someone yelling, clenching fists, getting in your face, destroying your favorite things, and hurting or threatening to hurt pets, children, friends. Sometimes partners will threaten to hurt or kill themselves if you don't do what they want. Or there might be verbal/social threats, such as threatening to tell others something you don't want to share, out you to family, or to turn others against you. More subtle verbal threats include "hidden daggers" - a partner making a seemingly harmless or humorous statement in public that actually refers to something painful and private between the two of you. The intention underlying all of these actions is often to intimidate you so deeply that you will do what they want, or simply to ensure that they are the person who holds the power and control in the relationship.

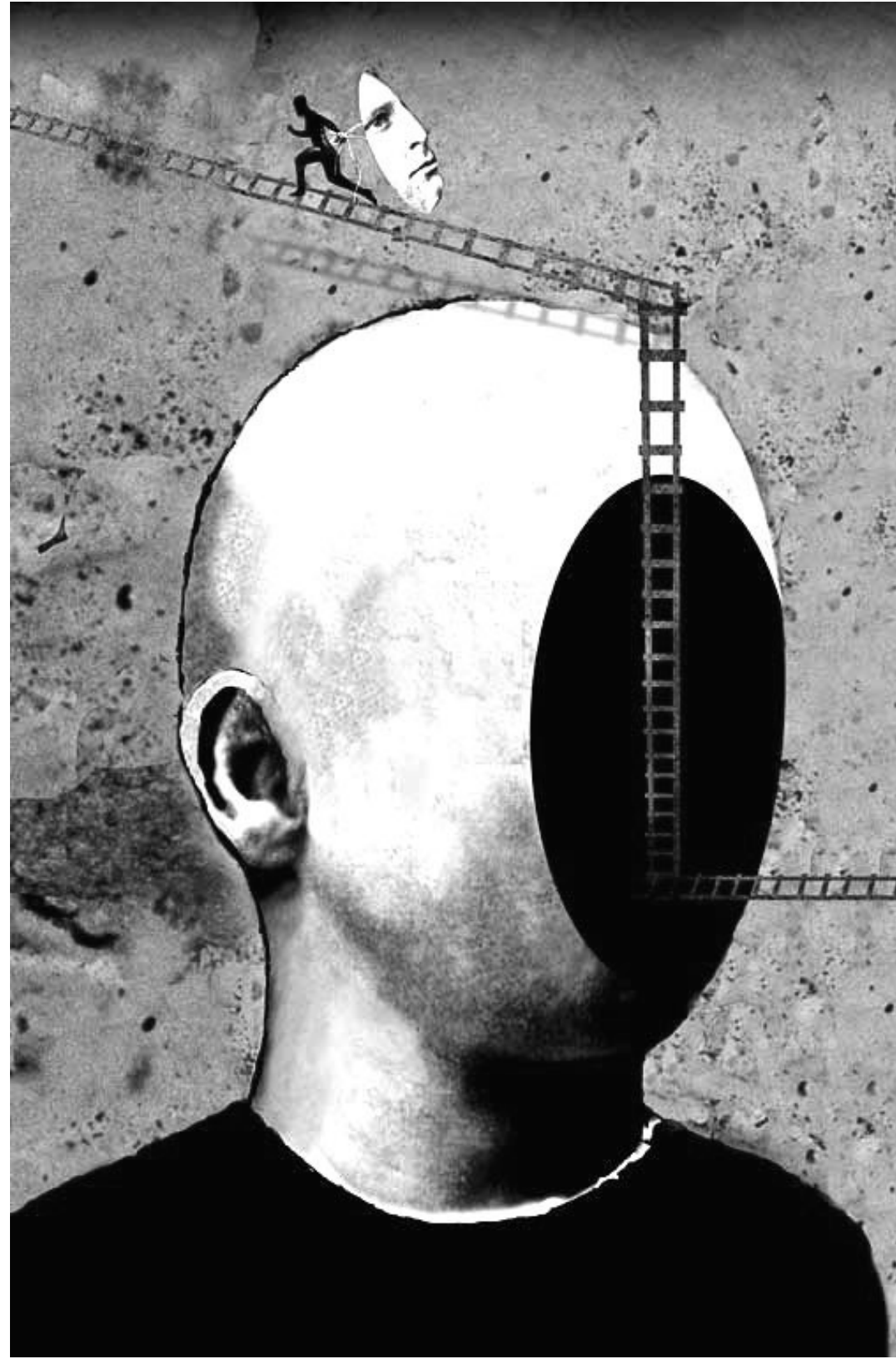


Stonewalling:

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.

Withholding:

A partner may withhold relevant information, withhold resources such as money or withhold affections as a way to punish, demean, or otherwise hurt the other person. As a result your partner remains in the power position and can use this tactic to control the relationship further.



I think I'm being emotionally abused!

Recognizing abusive patterns can be really scary. People often feel like a light turned on and suddenly everything makes sense—why they've felt so shitty all the time, why they haven't seen any of their friends, and loads of other realizations. Sometimes it feels safer to immediately doubt yourself and shut it down for a bit. That's normal too. Try to remember that you are the driver in your life. Think about the needs and desires you have and know that everyone has a right to be in a relationship that doesn't bring down and hurt them.

Sooner or later after this realization, you might conclude that your partner is not who you thought they were, like, you don't even recognize them and you live in different realities. As scary as this moment can be, sometimes breaking out of the illusion of a shared reality can be liberating. It's a moment when you see clearly that the perpetrator acts to dominate and control. That issue is totally their shit, and does not mean there is anything wrong with you.

If you bring this stuff up with a partner and they remain abusive, it is neither your fault nor responsibility. Your job is not to change or fix anyone or to ensure your partner

doesn't hurt anyone else - ***Your job is simply what you want it to be. It's a time for you 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 trusting their validity. Seek the support you need. Take care of your body, mind, and spirit. Allow yourself to feel grief, rage, hurt, frustration, or whatever comes up for you. Know that it will get easier. By realizing what happened was wrong, you can start gaining back parts of yourself you've lost. Grieving the lack of love and support from your partner can help bring understanding of how much love and deserve.

Options for next steps:

1. Get counseling support. Find a supportive counselor who is experienced with issues of emotional abuse and with whom you feel safe and comfortable. Check out the resources at the end of the zine for tips on screening therapists.
2. 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 learn 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. But this is how things can start to change: You get to decide what is harmful and what is nourishing for you. Make a list of what you need that you're not getting and what you need to stop. For example, "I will not accept comments or 'jokes' that are disrespectful or put me down." It will take practice feeling comfortable sticking to the limits you set, and it might feel uncomfortable or "bossy." But setting your limits is a part of healthy communication. It is not manipulative and should not be a threat. Setting a limit is simply stating a fact.
4. Stay in the present, trying to not dwell in the past or with an unknowable future. Take note, 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 that ineffective. Your goal now is to call out the abuse on every offense. Don't engage, get caught up in their argument, defend or explain your feelings - simply state what you observe and that you will no longer accept it.
5. Be aware that you can leave any abusive situation. Many physically abusive relationships start with emotional abuse. And even if an emotional abusive relationship doesn't get physically abusive, the abuse tends to increase in severity as time goes on. Be prepared and keep yourself safe. Be ready to walk out at any time, from a party, hotel, house, wherever. If stating your limit has not stopped the put downs, yelling, etc., even taking a break to go to the bathroom can give you breathing room to take control.
6. Ask for things 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 for now. This is a hard realization to make. But it is vital to get the support you need. Choose your safety and happiness over a destructive relationship. If your partner wants to change, they will make meaningful steps to do so. You may want to ask for some logistical changes, such as negotiating exactly how much time you need by yourself, and with friends, family, and each other. You may want to set aside times to discuss issues in the relationship on a regular basis amongst yourself, with a counselor, or a mutual party.



If you choose to stay in a relationship that's emotionally abusive, here are some things that may help change dynamics:

- *Identify what helped your self-esteem in the past. Recall activities and interests from before the relationship. Make a note if you don't do those things any more, try to build that part of your self back up.
- *Find a community outside of the relationship and friends that value you.
- *Take steps to ask your partner to transform and clearly commit 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.
- *Don't get caught up in trying to explain, defend, or argue for your feelings. They are yours and they need to be accepted regardless.
- *Beware of slipping back into old patterns. Designate a person to check in with on a regular basis or create an arrangement with them to always check in with you at an agreed upon time.
- *Setting firm boundaries with your partner(s) can help you gauge when your limits are crossed. Below are some examples of expectations you can begin to set in your relationship(s):

Possible list of needs from partner(s)

- Does their best to be available when I ask for emotional support.
- Responds to what I say with relative respect and acceptance.
- Appreciates my own view and opinion, even if theirs is different.
- Offers a sincere apology when their words or actions are hurtful.
- Provides clear, honest and informative answers to questions I ask about things that affect me.
- Refrains from unhelpful criticism and judgment.
- Respects my work and interests.
- Encourages me.
- Respectfully asks, as opposed to demands or orders, me to do things.
- Respects my privacy.



Am I being emotionally abusive?

Anyone can be abusive. It can be easy to miss when we are simultaneously experiencing oppression from the state and systems of violence, like racism, transphobia, and poverty (to name a few). But emotional abuse dips into our lives regardless of these experiences. Sometimes survivors internalize violence and believe that they are immune to perpetrating harm, which simply isn't true. It's always good to check yourself & your behavior. Reading the questions on page 8 can be a good first step, asking your partner if they've ever felt any of those things can be a second. ***Often the best way to determine whether you're being abusive or not is to gauge the effects your behavior has on your partner.***



Communication is vital in stopping bad patterns before they start.

- Do I listen to my partner? *Really* listen, without interrupting, composing counterarguments, 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 to 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? And 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?

Remember: context is everything

Something that may be abusive in one relationship may not in another. One way to sort out what's happening is to look at the impact of the actions. Even when a person who causes harm is unaware of the negative impact of their action, they can often see the benefits. Maybe they didn't realize they were being vague and manipulative in discussions 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 always get their way in an argument. Maybe they don't feel like they belittle their partner but they would be embarrassed for anyone to overhear they communicate to them.

Keep in mind that it's often harder to see a problem when you're benefiting from it, so it's vitally important to notice what you are getting out of your relationships.

Ask yourself: How one sided are those benefits, and how does that effect my partner? Do I accept feedback from my partner(s) when they voice their concerns?

One way to categorize the difference between an abusive act and an accidental boundary crossing is to accept feedback from your partner about a harm you may have committed. A person can demonstrate their intention for a healthy, non-abusive relationship 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 and emotional care 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 been raised in a hierarchical capitalist culture in which one-upmanship, competition, countering, and intimidating are the norm and encouraged. Pulling apart the threads of emotional abuse from those of mistakes born of programming takes time and context.

The most important thing you can do is to reach out and get help. 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 is critical to find people who know about power and control issues and will hold you accountable without blame or judgment. This is a time to look to friends who are honest with you and will call you on your shit. Venting to friends who corroborate your "side of things" or are making you feel like a victim will not help you grow or change. It can actually make things a whole lot worse for you, them, and everyone you have relationships with in the future.

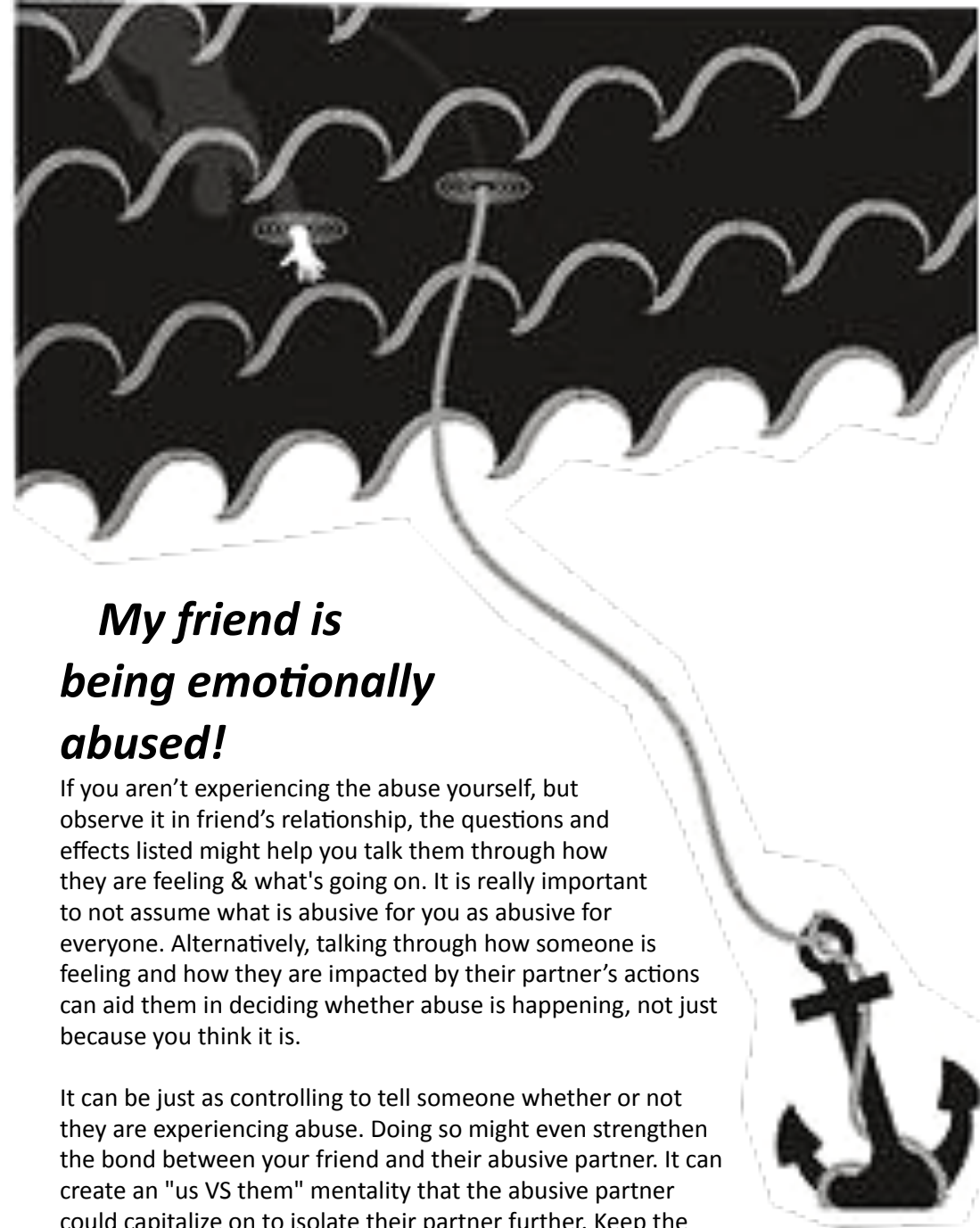


Recognize that defensiveness isn't in order to protect you from others; it's to protect you from stuff you don't want to feel.

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 are 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 felt 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! The truth is that your partner is feeling criticized and disrespected and you both need to figure out how to make it better now so it doesn't 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.



Ask (or ask someone else to ask) the survivor, what you can do to make amends, then follow through with what you say you will do. Regardless of whether or not you think you're being abusive or not, it can be super helpful to read up on Non-Violent Communication and tips for being called out. We think the article "Taking the First Step" by Wispy Cockles is an awesome resource. You can find it here: <http://fruitiondesign.com/dealwithit/02wispy.php>



My friend is being emotionally abused!

If you aren't experiencing the abuse yourself, but observe it in friend's relationship, the questions and effects listed might help you talk them through how they are feeling & what's going on. It is really important to not assume what is abusive for you as abusive for everyone. Alternatively, talking through how someone is feeling and how they are impacted by their partner's actions can aid them in deciding whether abuse is happening, not just because you think it is.

It can be just as controlling to tell someone whether or not they are experiencing abuse. Doing so might even strengthen the bond between your friend and their abusive partner. It can create an "us VS them" mentality that the abusive partner could capitalize on 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!

Some quick tips on the next page for supporting a friend in an abusive relationship:

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 maybe 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 their relationship. Allow compassion for the hurt, fear, guilt, and anger they might be feeling.

Counter some of the messages they've been receiving, preferably with examples. If they tell you, "My partner calls me lazy" you could respond, "That's not how I see you. Many people appreciated all that work you did for the benefit." Because the abuser has defined their reality, it can be a huge help to give them some objective, supportive information about how things look to you.

Show through your words and actions that you are on their side. Emotional abuse can be incredibly isolating. Even worse, many emotionally abusive partners can be good at getting mutual friends "on their team." 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 do to hold the person who caused harm accountable for their hurtful actions in the relationship.

Give the survivor autonomy and power in every way you can. Tell them (sometimes more than once) 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.

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 with them. An example of this would be to make a written agreement with your friend: "If my partner: criticizes me, hits a wall, threatens to hurt themselves when we argue, etc, then I will call these friends, take a walk, document it," etc . Doing this allows your friend to have options in their situation. It also prepares them to combat the 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 the abusive partner.

I think a relationship I know of is emotionally abusive

It can be really complicated to suspect someone is being abusive and not know that person or the survivor personally, or even know how to reach out to them. For one thing, emotional abuse is incredibly well-hidden and private, so the only people who really know what's going on in a relationship are the people in it. Abusers often have a very different private and public face. You might have really pleasant interactions with them and little to no interactions with the survivor. That gray area can make people feel like no action is appropriate, and they should mind their own business. It can feel rude or invasive to pry or ask questions when you see potentially problematic behaviors. For example, when a person repeatedly cuts off their partner when they speak or



shoots down / belittles any contribution they make to a conversation you are a part of, It can be hard to know how to intervene without making it a big deal. All the while, there is someone who is becoming more and more isolated from their community, viewed as a passive recipient of disrespect, and not given the space to reach out for support.

Taking a moment as a bystander to reach out to survivors is one of the few ways we can challenge a culture that condones abuse by ignoring it.

Bystanders might have a harder time calling something out in one common dynamic in which one person is more visible or holds more “social capital” than the person getting treated poorly. This dynamic can play out in all sorts of groups: families, colleges, religious communities, workplaces, at home with roommates, and many more. Regardless of the power or respect a person has, we have a responsibility to call out abusive behaviors and hold people accountable for their actions, while always respecting survivor autonomy in how they’d like this action to look.

Survivor autonomy can be hard to honor because some people might view the survivor as the one who caused the problem, as they are the one who was hurt and often the person leading a reaction/call-out. Be compassionate with survivors who will sometimes become vocal about emotional abuse after a break-up. Keep in mind that emotional abuse is often sustained by denying and ignoring it, which can make validating the experience super important for a survivor’s recovery. It might be difficult to know what’s happening with them, because the effects of emotional abuse – reduced self-esteem and distrusting one’s perceptions – make it hard to name emotional abuse while experiencing it and when trying to understand it later. Sometimes this can lead to some people doubting the intentions of the survivor, believing they are simply ‘bitter about the breakup’ or ‘getting even.’ Challenge these misconceptions by remembering how deliberately confusing emotional abuse is for the survivor, and how having ones intimate relationship and experience displayed publicly is traumatic and has so many varied consequences beyond simply “getting even” for a breakup.

Below is a list of a few more tips of what to do when observing emotional abuse as a bystander. You may also find many of useful tips outlined in the section “I think my friend is being abused.” As always, take what works for your particular situation.

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.

Talk with your community about interrelationship dynamics all the time, not just when it’s a problem. Help educate community member about what different forms of abuse are and how they might manifest.

People have a hard time viewing the “good guys” as capable of harm. Perpetuators can be some of the most charming and sweet people in public, but can be a nightmare in private. This definitely makes it hard for others to see them as being hurtful.

Perpetuators may not be completely aware of the impact of their actions, but they most likely know that the same behavior towards someone else in public might get called out.

Everyone has different private and public faces. And having a unique relationship with each friend and partner can be normal and healthy. But a drastic contrast between the ways a person acts with friends and when alone with their partner can be a red flag that something isn’t right.

Resist the impulse to demonize either the perpetrator or survivor of emotional abuse. 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 survivor’s 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 the abuser more power and weakens trust. We all want to feel like people have our backs.

Hold the perpetrator 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 judgment or blame, check in with them often to see how they are working on their shit.

Give the survivor control and autonomy. Counteract messages you know they've received, give them props for their bravery and work. Try to connect with them to lessen the isolation they might have felt in the relationship. Reinforce the power they have to make decisions that affect them.

Encourage the communities you're a part of to have each other backs -- when shit is strong *and* when it's falling apart. To do so is impossible without challenging the impulse to look the other way and assume that a violent relationship is "none of your business."



Work on the many -ism's that allow abuse to thrive. Don't make the common mistake of letting your work or theory overshadow the very real people being affected by that violence.

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, PhD
- * 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 NiCarthy, Naomi Gottlieb, Sarah 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://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.safe-horizon.org/index/what-we-do-2.html>