

Words Can Heal or They Can Hurt: What is Emotional Abuse?

By Natasha M. Ali, Ph.D. C. Psych.

Emotional abuse is considered a major public health concern (Grossman, Spinazzola, Zucker & Hopper, 2017), yet it is often overlooked in treatment and research because of its intangible and covert nature. To complicate matters, many families and cultures are socialized to accept emotional abuse as normal (Couture-Carron, 2017) which makes identifying it subjective and difficult.

Do you think emotional abuse is present in the following scenarios?

An employee arrives late for the 4th time this week. Frustrated, her boss exclaims, "You're the worst employee! Do this again, and you're fired!"

Two young kids are fighting with each other—for the 10th time that day. Flustered, their mother shouts, "You children are driving me crazy! I'm going to go to the looney bin because of you! Selfish, ridiculous children! You never listen to me! Wait till your father gets home!"

A student hasn't submitted his homework, even after his teacher has given him a few chances to do so. His teacher remarks, "You're so lazy! Keep this up, and you'll never graduate from school!"

One child taunts another, "You ugly, fat girl! No one wants to be your friend."

A husband yells at his wife,

"Look at this house! It's a stinking mess. And, your cooking sucks! Why did I marry you? You're a terrible wife & useless! I'm going to get another wife. Or a divorce!"

One spouse to another, "I know you're talking to other men/women online! I know you are, you liar!"

A father confronts his teenage child, "I know what you're up to, and you're going to go to Hell for it! You're an outright sinner, putting shame on this family! I'm going to send you away!"

A mother to her young adult child, "All you do is sit on the couch, playing those stupid videogames! You never offer to help around here! I'm sick and tired of your crap!"

A divorced husband threatens his ex-wife, "Get off my back, you annoying @*&#! All you ever ask for is money! I divorced you for a reason. So, go figure it out by yourself. This discussion is over!"

A driver honks loudly at another who cut him off. He rolls down his window, and shouts, "Look where you're going, you idiot!"

Definition of Emotional Abuse

"Emotional abuse is any kind of abuse that is emotional rather than physical in nature" (University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, 2005). It's called abuse because it systematically erodes the abused person's self-confi-

dence, sense of self-worth, trust in him/herself, and essentially, spirit.

The stage for emotional abuse is set when people become stressed, frustrated, or angry because someone has not behaved in an expected way or something has not happened in an expected way (as in each of the above scenarios). To regain the control they perceive to have lost, they resort to using verbal and emotional power to try to get what they expect. But the reality is that emotional abuse rarely leads to the desired, or desirable, results in the long-term. Rather, tension fills the environment as people learn to walk-on-eggshells, and hide.

Ironically, both emotional abusers and the emotionally abused feel self-righteous, guilty, hurt, defensive, confused, angry, afraid, indignant, powerless, and ashamed. While emotional abusers might experience a short-term release of these emotions in the short-term, in the long-term, these emotions actually worsen in both the abuser and abused as the situation, for the most part, remains unchanged.

Where Does Emotional Abuse Occur?

Emotional abuse can occur in any human relationship, for example, between spouses, parents and children, employers and employees, colleagues, peers, siblings,

in-laws, other family members, teachers and students, service providers and customers, any two groups of people (e.g. Winnipeg Jets fans and Las Vegas fans), leaders and followers, and two automobile drivers. Those who have drastically different worldviews from us, or the very vulnerable, such as children or the elderly with special needs, are at higher risk for emotional abuse. Emotional abuse can even be directed at oneself! It can occur face-to-face, online, over text, email, on paper, over the telephone—wherever the written or spoken word exists.

Examples of Emotional Abuse (Evans, 1992)

- Screaming, yelling, swearing, raging
- Labeling/Name Calling & Bullying (“fat, dumb, ugly, idiot, lazy, no-good, slow, stupid, useless, loser”)
- Judging & Criticizing (“You’re a weak Muslim” “You’re going to Hell”)
- Accusing & Blaming (“You’re doing this to make me jealous/sick.” “You stole/ lied/cheated/are dating/not praying/using drugs” “It’s all your fault.”)
- Threatening (“If you don’t do what I want, I’ll get another wife or divorce you.”)
- Joking & sarcasm (“What else can you expect from a woman?”)
- Discounting the abused person’s feelings (“You’re too sensitive.” “You blow everything out of proportion.” “You can’t take a joke.”)
- Blocking & diverting the issue (“You’re just trying to have the last word.” “You think you know it all.”)

“That’s a load of crap.”)

- Trivializing a person’s accomplishments (“Anybody could have done that”)
- Dismissing & Undermining someone’s ideas (“You wouldn’t understand. It’s over your head.” “Your idea will never work.”)
- Withholding & silent treatment (“There’s nothing to talk about.” “This discussion is over.”)
- Forgetting/Denial of the abuse (“I never said that.” “You’re making things up.” “I don’t know what you’re talking about.” “I never agreed to that.”)

Prevalence of Emotional Abuse

Emotional abuse is a global phenomenon—likely spanning all countries and cultures. Some researchers examining its prevalence in married couples in Muslim-majority countries found it to be: 40%-57% in samples in Baghdad & Erbil, Iraq (Ghanim Al-Tawil, 2012), 43% in a sample in Eastern Indonesia (Bennett, Andajani-Sutjahjo & Idrus, 2011), 44% in a sample of married men in Ibadan, Nigeria (Fawole, Salawu & Olarinmoye, 2010), 69% in a sample of older couples in Shiraz, Iran (Hazrati et al, 2017), 74%-77% in a sample in Karachi, Pakistan (Ali, Asad, Mogren & Krantz, 2011), and in all 6 Muslim women interviewed in South Africa (Nordien, Alpaslan & Pretorius, 2003). In another study, 69% of Qatari mothers & 93% of Palestinian mothers reported shouting and yelling, and 29% of Qatari mothers & 45% of Palestinian mothers reported insulting their children as forms of discipline in the past year (Kamal et al, 2018).

Life is frequently stressful—

many parents are raising children with little support, in conflict-torn areas (such as Palestine), or in areas where access to employment is quite limited. Even for folks who are employed, stressors at work exist, and striking the family-work-fun-self-care balance can be difficult. Adjusting to a new culture, a new language, and loneliness also present significant challenges as does practicing Islam in a predominantly non-Islamic world with daily pressures to fit in. People often don’t act their best under these conditions as they grapple with negative emotions, like sadness, guilt, hurt, confusion, anger, fear, shame, and helplessness. Personally, I can think of situations in my life where I was emotionally abusive which I deeply regretted, have since apologized for, but gratefully learned from. For more information on what Islam has to say about this topic, and suggestions on ways to communicate when dealing with negative emotions, please go to <http://www.miaonline.org/mental-health/>, under the Articles section. ■

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