

Words Can Heal or They Can Hurt:
The Impact & Islamic Perspective of Emotional Abuse (Part 2)

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In Part 1 of this topic, I gave the definition of emotional abuse, provided some examples, discussed where it occurs, and talked about its prevalence in some Muslim-majority countries. In this part, the impact of emotional abuse on the abused as well as on the abuser, and the Islamic perspective on this topic will be addressed.

How Words Can Hurt: The Impact of Emotional Abuse

Emotional abuse has far-reaching impacts. Because it affects not only how people feel about themselves, but also others, it has the potential to create psychological, physical, spiritual, and social damage. It can therefore influence how people treat their intimate partners, and how they parent.

In terms of psychological damage, research shows that moderate to severe childhood emotional abuse is positively associated with clinical depression in adults in Brazilian (Martins, Baes, Tofoli & Juruena, 2014) and German samples (Schulz et al, 2017), and with an increased likelihood of experiencing emotional abuse as adults which increased risk for suicidality in a Korean sample (Lee, 2015). This phenomenon was observed in a Japanese sample of wives who had been emotionally abused by their husbands. These wives were more likely to have suicidal ideation than wives who had not experienced any abuse from their husbands (Yoshihama, Horrocks & Kamano, 2009). A sample of US college students who had experienced emotional abuse in the past year were found to more likely exhibit depressive symptoms, such as hopelessness, anxiety, loneliness, anger, thoughts of suicide, and difficulty functioning compared to those who had not (Vidourek, 2017). Shulz et al (2017) found that the reason why adults who were emotionally abused as children are more likely to feel depressed is because they are less likely to accept pleasant emotions.

In a US sample, patients diagnosed with an anxiety disorder were significantly more likely to have experienced severe childhood emotional abuse compared to people without a current psychiatric disorder (Raparia et al, 2016). In another American study, increased emotional abuse in childhood increased adults' sensitivity to stressors that they believed they had influenced (such as their relationships), and this subsequently increased their vulnerability to recurring depressive episodes following such stressors (Shapero et al, 2014). In other words, less stress was required over time to trigger a depressive episode. Childhood emotional abuse has also been found to predict vulnerability to psychotic symptoms in adulthood in a British sample (Goodall, Rush, Grünwald, Darling & Tiliopoulos, 2015).

Young adults in a US sample who had experienced moderate to extreme childhood emotional abuse were found to be at increased risk for alcohol-use problems due to difficulties controlling their impulses (Shin, Lee, Jeon & Wills, 2015). Similarly, teenage girls in a US sample who had experienced severe childhood emotional abuse were found to show the sharpest increase in their marijuana use over time compared to teenage boys and other teenage girls (Banducci, Felton, Bonn-Miller & Lejuez, 2018). A sample of college students in the US who had experienced emotional abuse in the past year demonstrated increased marijuana use, increased cigarette use, and increased tendency to drive after binge-drinking compared to their peers who had not experienced emotional abuse in the past year (Vidourek, 2017).

In the US, Canada, and Germany, adults who had been emotionally abused as children were found to have difficulties managing their emotions, and this was associated with difficulties controlling their impulses, difficulties engaging in goal-directed behaviours (Berzenski, 2018), and the presence of features of a personality disorder known as borderline personality disorder (Kuo, Khoury, Metcalfe, Fitzpatrick & Goodwill, 2014; Schulz et al, 2017).

In terms of social damage, adolescents in a Spanish sample who had been bullied by peers were more likely to experience social anxiety as a result of being overly focused on others (Calvete, 2013). Adults in US samples who had been emotionally abused as children were more likely to be a victim of, as well as perpetrator of, emotional abuse in their intimate relationships (Richards, Tillyer & Wright, 2017), and also tended to experience more problems in social relationships because of difficulties managing their emotions (Berzenski, 2018).

As for physical damage, childhood emotional abuse was found to predict disordered eating in American & Israeli samples (Feinson & Hornik-Lurie, 2016; Hymowitz, Salwen & Salis, 2017) because of suppressed anger, self-criticism, and a negative view of oneself. In a Japanese sample, wives who had been emotionally abused by their husbands were more likely to rate their health as fair to very poor, have difficulty walking, have difficulty performing usual activities, use health services more, and exhibit a variety of physical symptoms, such as headaches, poor appetite, poor sleep, shaking, poor digestion, and fatigue compared to wives who had not experienced abuse from their husbands (Yoshihama, Horrocks & Kamano, 2009). The most interesting finding from this study was that wives who had experienced emotional abuse alone showed the same poor outcomes on 8 out of 11 health indicators as wives who had experienced emotional abuse *plus* physical or sexual abuse! This finding suggests that the popular saying we heard as children needs to be changed to: "Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words can also break me." In a very large US sample consisting of young adults (aged 24-32), childhood emotional abuse significantly increased the odds of getting a migraine diagnosis in young adulthood (Tietjen, Karmakar & Amialchuk, 2017).

The physical health of emotional abusers might also be negatively affected. Medical research has shown that people's hearts pump blood less efficiently when they are mad (Goleman, 1994). Also, people who are chronically angry or hostile have been found at increased risk for a second heart-attack

if they already have heart disease, and that a subset of this group exhibited increased blood pressure (Goleman, 1994). Being prone to chronic anger can therefore be considered a risk factor, like smoking and high cholesterol, for compromised cardiac health.

Turning to the spiritual impact, cases exist where some people have left the fold of Islam because they were repeatedly emotionally abused by one or more important person in their life who identified as practicing Muslim.

Islam's View of Emotional Abuse

In a hadith according to Abu Hurairah (r.a.), the Prophet (s.a.w.) stated that, "The strong is not the one who overcomes the people by his strength, but the strong is the one who controls himself while in anger" [Sahih Al-Bukhari, 8/6114]. Mu`adh b. Jabal (r.a.) once asked the Prophet (s.a.w.) to inform him of some good work that would admit him into Paradise, and distance him from the Hellfire. The Prophet (s.a.w.) took hold of Mu`adh's tongue and said, "Restrain yourself from this." Mu`adh'(r.a.) asked, "O Prophet of God! Are we held to task for the things that we say?" The Prophet replied, "May your mother be bereaved of you, O Mu`adh! Does anything topple people headlong into the Hellfire save the harvests of their tongues?" [Sunan al-Tirmidhi & Sunan Ibn Majah].

Allah (s.w.t.) reminds us, "Those who repress anger, and who pardon men; verily, Allah loves Al-Muhsinun" (Qu'ran 3:134, Al-Hilali & Khan translation). "And say to My slaves, that they should say those words that are the best. Shaitan verily sows a state of conflict and disagreements among them" (Qu'ran 17:53, Al-Hilali & Khan translation). "O you who believe! Let not a group scoff at another group; it may be that the latter are better than the former. Nor let women scoff at other women; it may be that the latter are better than the former. Nor defame one another, nor insult one another by nicknames. How bad is it to insult one's brother after having Faith" (Qu'ran 49:11, Al-Hilali & Khan translation). "And give not unto the foolish your property which Allah has made a means of support for you, but feed and

clothe them therewith, and speak to them words of kindness and justice” (Qu’ran 4:5, Al-Hilali & Khan translation). “The slaves of the Most Gracious are those who walk on the earth in humility and sedateness, and when the foolish address them, they reply back with mild words of gentleness” (Qu’ran 25:63, Al-Hilali & Khan translation).

After 70 Muslims were killed in the Battle of Uhud, the elders of Medina tried to blame the casualties on the Prophet (s.a.w.)’s decision to take advice from the youngsters prior to the battle. The following verse was then revealed (Qu’ran, 3:159, Al-Hilali & Khan translation), “And by the Mercy of Allah, you dealt with them gently. And had you been severe and harsh-hearted, they would have broken away from about you, so pass over (their faults), and ask forgiveness for them, and consult them in the affairs.” Repeatedly in the Qu’ran, Allah (s.w.t.) encourages us to show “mercy” (mentioned 200 times in the Qu’ran according to Gokal (2015)), and to “not transgress the limits.”

Furthermore, in Surah Al-Nur, Allah (s.w.t.) warns us of the grave sin associated with wrongly accusing innocent women, outlines the punishment for doing this (Qu’ran, 24: 4-18, Al-Hilali & Khan translation), and urges us, “O you who believe! Avoid much suspicion; indeed, some suspicions are sins” (Qu’ran, 49:12, Al-Hilali & Khan translation) “lest you should harm people in ignorance, and afterwards you become regretful for what you have done” (Qu’ran, 49:6, Al-Hilali & Khan translation). Allah (s.w.t.) cautions, “Had it not been for the Grace of Allah and His Mercy onto you in this world and in the Hereafter, a great torment would have touched you for that whereof you had spoken. When you were propagating it with your tongues, and uttering with your mouths that whereof you had no knowledge, you counted it a little thing while with Allah, it was very great” (Qu’ran, 24:14-15, Al-Hilali & Khan translation).

In terms of dawah, Allah (s.w.t.) prescribes, “Invite to the way of your Lord with wisdom and fair preaching, and argue with them in a way that is better. Truly your Lord knows best who has gone astray

from His path, and He is the Best Aware of those who are guided” (Qu’ran, 16:125, Al-Hilali & Khan translation).

In his last sermon, however, the Prophet (s.a.w.) did say, “You can chastise [women], but not severely.” Research shows that the relationship between the frequency of emotional abuse and migraine follows a U-shaped curve, meaning that those who experienced emotional abuse once or more than 6 times were most likely to report migraine compared to those who had experienced emotional abuse 2 – 5 times (Tietjen, Karmakar & Amialchuk, 2017). The theory behind this observation is that exposure to stressors, such as emotional abuse, can lead to resiliency when exposure to those stressors is *limited* and recovery can occur, but poor coping occurs after the first exposure to the stressor, and after a certain threshold is reached. Although further research is needed to corroborate this hypothesis, Tietjen, Karmakar & Amialchuk’s (2017) study empirically supports the Prophet’s (s.a.w.) admonition against chastising severely.

As human beings, we often resort to speaking hurtfully when we feel frustrated, hurt, and powerless. In essence, speaking hurtfully is one way to regain back our power by hurting back the person we feel hurt by. In doing this, we acknowledge that words do have power. Our challenge is to figure out how to use that power because speaking hurtfully, as outlined in this article, has the potential to hurt our physical and spiritual health. It also has the potential to hurt others’ mental, physical, social, interpersonal, and spiritual health. Not to mention, it can also hurt our relationship with the person we are speaking hurtfully to. However, if words have the power to hurt, they also have the power to heal. If you would like to learn how to transform the hurting potential of words so that they heal not only others, but yourself, please see Part 3.

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