What about emotional abuse? [1]

Dear Alice,

I notice in your mental health section, you only have info on sexual abuse. What is emotional abuse? I've heard a lot about it lately, but it doesn't seem very real to me. How can simply being called names, or whatever, be as devastating as people say? Short of being threatened with murder, what people say is just words. I can't seem to find very good articles about emotional abuse on the web.

Thank you,
Confused-by-media

Answer

Dear Confused-by-media,

Although emotional abuse is often not as easy to define as sexual or physical violence, it's quite serious, and it can be just as devastating as other types of abuse. Emotional abuse includes a wide variety of destructive behaviors, ranging from name calling to financial deprivation, from verbal threats to manipulation. Some of these characteristics are listed in Healthy vs. unhealthy relationships [2]. According to SafeHouse [3], emotional abuse is frequently used to break down the victim's will and bring her or him under control. Often in emotionally abusive relationships, the abuser uses derogatory names, continual put-downs, sexual harassment, withholding of money or child support, or other forms of destructive behavior to gain power over the other person.

Emotional abuse is often continual, consistent, and, over time, can work to destroy someone's self-esteem. Abusers may say things like:

- "You're stupid (or ugly, fat, greedy, or ________)."
- "No one will ever love you but me."
- "No one would ever believe you if you told them I was abusive."
- "If you leave, I'll take the kids (money, pets, or other things of value to the person)."
- "You're the one who needs help. You're crazy."

Abusers can also sabotage their partner's support network by forbidding contact with others or by acting jealously and threatening punishment. This increases feelings of isolation, vulnerability, and separation. Emotional abuse, like other forms of abuse, uses fear, humiliation, and verbal attacks to control and assert power over another person. While the
damage may not be visible, emotional abuse can leave very real scars and may lead a person who is abused to feelings of worthlessness and self-destructive behaviors.

For a person who has not experienced abuse, it can be hard to understand why words can be so damaging and why a person would stay in a harmful relationship. While emotional abuse is damaging, there are often aspects of the relationship that are comfortable, secure, or even happy, that compell people to stay with an abusive person. There may also be practical issues of money, children, housing, and others, that keep people in an abusive relationship. For some, abuse may have been a regular feature of family and other relationships throughout their life, including in childhood. While everybody deserves to be in respectful, healthy relationships, it can be difficult for anybody to admit or identify that a relationship is abusive.

For more information on emotional abuse, you can check out American Humane [4]. The following archived Go Ask Alice! Q&As might also help you learn more about emotional abuse:

- Teasing, poking, prodding ? abusive? [7] is from a reader whose partner is emotionally abusive

Columbia and Barnard resources:

- Columbia Counseling and Psychological Services (CPS) [8]
  x4-2878 (to make an appointment to speak with a counselor)
- Barnard Counseling Services [9]
  First floor, Hewitt Hall
  x4-2092 (to make an appointment to speak with a counselor)
- Barnard-Columbia Rape Crisis/Anti-Violence Support Center (RC/AVSC) [10]
  100 Brooks Hall
  x4-WALK (24/7, Peer Advocates)
  x4-HELP (7 - 11 PM, 7 days a week, Peer Counselors)

Off-campus resources:

  800.799.SAFE (24/7, bilingual; interpreters for over 140 languages)
- Safe Horizon [12] (in New York City)
  800.621.HOPE (24/7)
- The Safety Zone [13]
  Information on available abuse and domestic violence resources, particularly those in New York State. National resources are listed under "Web links."
- New York City Gay and Lesbian Anti-Violence Project [14]
  212.714.1141 (24/7, bilingual)
Many people would echo your sentiment that emotional abuse doesn't seem very real because there is no physical evidence of harm. This is exactly why emotional abuse is such an insidious form of abuse; parsing what is abusive and what is not abusive can be difficult. However, the damage to a person's psyche, self-worth, and ability to participate productively in relationships is a reality for many victims and survivors of emotional abuse. Thanks for asking and helping to spread the word about this often overlooked form of abuse. Take care,

Alice!

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