

# Verbal Abuse: What It Is and How to Cope

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**Verbal Abuse:** Words that attack or injure, that cause one to believe the false, or that speak falsely of one

**Verbal abuse constitutes psychological violence**

## Ten General Characteristics of Verbal Abuse (based on Evans, 1992)

### 1. Verbal abuse is hurtful

- Especially when it is denied
- Person's perception of the abuse is discounted
- No validation of reality
- Confusion is part of the hurt

### 2. Verbal abuse attacks the nature and abilities of the partner

- Begins to believe there is something wrong with me
- My abilities are my failings
  - I heard so often that I was lazy and a terrible housekeeper. I think I was brainwashed. Do you know what? I work full time. I have 3 children and I'm the only one who cleans the house.

### 3. Verbal abuse may be overt (angry outbursts and name calling) or covert (very subtle, like brainwashing)

- Overt Verbal Abuse – blaming and accusatory, thus confusing to the partner
- Covert Verbal Abuse – hidden aggression, even more confusing to the partner. Aims to control without one knowing it

### 4. Verbally abusive remarks may be voiced in sincerity and concern

- Hard to interpret meaning of the comment
- Remarks based in sarcasm or humor

### 5. Verbal abuse is manipulative and controlling

- Usually not aware of the control and manipulation
- Living life quite differently than planned
- Much less happy than expected to be

### 6. Verbal abuse is insidious

- Self esteem gradually diminishes
- Lose self confidence without realizing it
- May consciously or unconsciously try to change behavior so as to not upset the abuser
- May be subtly brainwashed without realizing it

**7. Verbal abuse is unpredictable**

- No logic or rationale to partner's sarcasm, angry jab, put-down or hurtful comment
- Cannot understand why the upsetting incidents occur or how to prevent them

**8. Verbal abuse is the problem in the relationship**

- There is no specific conflict
- The issue is the abuse and this issue is never resolved
- There is never any closure to the problem because the abuse continues repeatedly

**9. Verbal abuse expresses a double message**

- What is said is not what is meant
- Say one thing but means something else
  - "He says he loves me but he's always criticizing me"
  - "He says he's relaxed and easy going but he's angry and irritable every day."
  - "He says he's supportive of me, but I feel isolated and lonely with him."

**10. Verbal abuse usually escalates, increasing in intensity, frequency and variety.**

- Transition from verbal abuse to physical abuse
- Verbal abuse always precedes physical abuse
- "Accidental" shoves, pushes, bumps, etc. escalate into slapping, hitting, restraining
  - "When I left the room, he would sit in the chair that I was in for no apparent reason"
  - "He started to step in front of me on my way to the refrigerator or sink just to block my path."
  - "His hugs and pats on the back started to hurt"

**Verbal abuse is a means of maintaining power and control**

*SAD but TRUE*

- Verbal abuser feels more powerful when he subtly puts down his partner's interests
- Verbal abuser finds great pleasure in feeling power over partner
- Verbal abuse prevents loving relationships
- Verbal abusers experience many of their feelings as anger
- Verbal abuser is unwilling to accept his feelings and unwilling to reveal them to his partner
- Verbal abuser builds a wall of distance between himself and his partner

**The verbal abuser wages war with his words. His words are his weapons, his partner his victim.**

**References/Suggested Reading:**

Evans, Patricia (1996). *The Verbally Abusive Relationship*, 221 pgs. Adams Media Corp.

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