

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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