



Emotional Abuse

Information from...

The National Clearinghouse on Family Violence

What is Emotional Abuse?

There is no universally accepted definition of emotional abuse. Like other forms of violence in relationships, emotional abuse is based on power and control. The following are widely recognized as forms of emotional abuse:

Rejecting – refusing to acknowledge a person's presence, value or worth; communicating to a person that she or he is useless or inferior; devaluing her/his thoughts and feelings. Example: repeatedly treating a child differently from siblings in a way that suggests resentment, rejection or dislike for the child.

Degrading – insulting, ridiculing, name calling, imitating and infantilizing; behaviour which diminishes the identity, dignity and self-worth of the person. Examples:

yelling, swearing, publicly humiliating or labelling a person as stupid; mimicking a person's disability; treating a senior as if she or he cannot make decisions.

Terrorizing – inducing terror or extreme fear in a person; coercing by intimidation; placing or threatening to place a person in an unfit or dangerous environment. Examples: forcing a child to watch violent acts toward other family members or pets; threatening to leave, physically hurt or kill a person, pets or people she/he cares about; threatening to destroy a person's possessions; threatening to have a person deported or put in an institution; stalking.

Isolating – physical confinement; restricting normal contact with others; limiting freedom within a person's own environment. Examples: excluding a

senior from participating in decisions about her or his own life; locking a child in a closet or room alone; refusing a female partner or senior access to her or his own money and financial affairs; withholding contact with grandchildren; depriving a person of mobility aids or transportation.

Corrupting/Exploiting – socializing a person into accepting ideas or behaviour which oppose legal standards; using a person for advantage or profit; training a child to serve the interests of the abuser and not of the child. Examples: child sexual abuse; permitting a child to use alcohol or drugs; enticing a person into the sex trade.

Denying Emotional Responsiveness – failing to provide care in a sensitive and responsive manner; being detached and uninvolved; interacting only when necessary; ignoring a person’s mental health needs. Examples: ignoring a child’s attempt to interact; failing to show affection, caring and/or love for a child; treating a senior who lives in an institution as though she/he is an object or “a job to be done.”¹

- Emotional abuse accompanies other forms of abuse, but also may occur on its own.
- No abuse – neglect, physical, sexual or financial – can occur without psychological consequences. Therefore all abuse contains elements of emotional abuse.²

- Emotional abuse follows a pattern; it is repeated and sustained.³ If left unchecked, abuse does not get better over time. It only gets worse.
- Like other forms of violence in relationships, those who hold the least power and resources in society, for example, women and children, are most often emotionally abused.
- Emotional abuse can severely damage a person’s sense of self-worth and perception.⁴
- In children, emotional abuse can impair psychological development, including: intelligence, memory, recognition, perception, attention, imagination and moral development. Emotional abuse can also affect a child’s social development and may result in an impaired ability to perceive, feel, understand and express emotions.⁵

How Widespread Is Emotional Abuse?

Only a few studies provide insight about the prevalence of emotional abuse in Canada. Emotional abuse is difficult to research because:

- in comparison to other forms of abuse, its effects have only recently been recognized;
- there are no consistent definitions and it is hard to define;
- it is difficult to detect, assess and substantiate; and

- many cases of emotional abuse go unreported.

A recent study of Ontario investigations into child maltreatment found that, in 1993, 10 percent of investigations alleged emotional abuse.⁶

In 1993, 39 percent of women in abusive relationships reported that their children saw them being assaulted.⁷

In 1995, the Canadian Women's Health Test found that of 1000 women 15 years of age or over:

- 36 percent had experienced emotional abuse while growing up; 43 percent had experienced some form of abuse as children or teenagers; and
- 39 percent reported experiencing verbal/emotional abuse in a relationship within the last five years.⁸

Statistics Canada's 1993 Violence Against Women Survey showed that among ever-married or common-law Canadian women aged 18 to 65 years, emotional abuse is widespread. The study found that:

- 35 percent of all women surveyed reported that their spouse was emotionally abusive.
- 18 percent of women reported experiencing emotional abuse but not physical abuse in a relationship.

- 77 percent of women reported emotional abuse in combination with physical abuse.⁹

In one Canadian study on abuse in university and college dating relationships, 81 percent of male respondents reported that they had psychologically abused a female partner.¹⁰

In 1995, a study of seniors' client records from various agencies across Canada found that psychological abuse was the most prevalent form of abuse.¹¹

The 1990 National Survey on Abuse of the Elderly in Canada examined the prevalence of abuse among seniors across Canada. The results of the study, while significant, are considered by many to be an underestimation of the prevalence of senior abuse and neglect in Canada:

- 4 percent of seniors residing in private homes reported experiencing abuse and/or neglect.
- Questions about insults, swearing and threats were asked as a measure of chronic verbal aggression. The study showed that 1.4 percent of seniors experienced these forms of emotional abuse in the year prior to the study.
- Chronic verbal aggression ranked as the second most prevalent form of mistreatment following material abuse.¹²

Facts to Consider

Emotional abuse of children can result in serious emotional and/or behavioural problems, including depression, lack of attachment or emotional bond to a parent or guardian, low cognitive ability and educational achievement, and poor social skills.¹³

One study which looked at emotionally abused children in infancy and then again during their preschool years consistently found them to be angry, uncooperative and unattached to their primary caregiver. The children also lacked creativity, persistence and enthusiasm.¹⁴

Children who experience rejection are more likely than accepted children to exhibit hostility, aggressive or passive-aggressive behaviour, to be extremely dependent, to have negative opinions of themselves and their abilities, to be emotionally unstable or unresponsive, and to have a negative perception of the world around them.¹⁵

Parental verbal aggression (e.g., yelling, insulting) or symbolic aggression (e.g., slamming a door, giving the silent treatment) toward children can have serious consequences. Children who experience these forms of abuse demonstrate higher rates of physical aggressiveness, delinquency and interpersonal problems than other children.

Children whose parents are additionally physically abusive are even more likely to experience such difficulties.¹⁶

Children who see or hear their mothers being abused are victims of emotional abuse. Growing up in such an environment is terrifying and severely affects a child's psychological and social development. Male children may learn to model violent behaviour while female children may learn that being abused is a normal part of relationships. This contributes to the intergenerational cycle of violence.¹⁷

Many women in physically abusive relationships feel that the emotional abuse is more severely debilitating than the physical abuse in the relationship.¹⁸

Repeated verbal abuse, such as blaming, ridiculing, insulting, swearing, yelling and humiliating, has long-term negative effects on a woman's self-esteem and contributes to feelings of uselessness, worthlessness and self-blame.

Threatening to kill or physically harm a female partner, her children, other family members or pets establishes dominance and coercive power on the part of the abuser. The female partner feels extreme terror, vulnerability and powerlessness within the relationship. This type of emotional abuse can make an abused woman feel helpless and isolated.

Jealousy, possessiveness and interrogation about whereabouts and activities are controlling behaviours which can severely restrict a female partner's independence and freedom. Social and financial isolation may leave her dependent upon the abuser for social contact, money and the necessities of life.

Emotional abuse can have serious physical and psychological consequences for women, including severe depression, anxiety, persistent headaches, back and limb problems, and stomach problems.¹⁹

Women who are psychologically abused but not physically abused are five times more likely to misuse alcohol than women who have not experienced abuse.²⁰

Senior abuse is still a new issue and there is little research in this field on emotional abuse.

We do know that senior emotional abuse and neglect can be personal or systemic and that it occurs in a variety of relationships and settings, including abuse by:

- a partner,
- adult children or other relatives,

- unrelated, formal or informal caregivers, or
- someone in a position of trust.

Seniors who are emotionally abused may experience feelings of extreme inadequacy, guilt, low self-esteem, symptoms of depression, fear of failure, powerlessness or hopelessness.²¹ These signs may be easily confused with loss of mental capability so that a senior may be labelled as "senile" or "incapable" when in fact she or he may be experiencing emotional abuse.

Abusers may often outwardly display anger and resentment toward the senior in the company of others. They may also display a complete lack of respect or concern for the senior by repeatedly interrupting or publicly humiliating her or him. Not taking into account a senior's wishes concerning decisions about her or his own life is an outward sign of abuse.²²

Detecting Emotional Abuse

Emotional abuse may be difficult to detect. However, personal awareness and understanding of the issue is key to recognizing it. The following indicators may assist in detecting emotional abuse.

Possible Indicators of Emotional Abuse and Neglect

| Children ²³ | Adults |
|---|---|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - depression - withdrawal - low self-esteem - severe anxiety - fearfulness - failure to thrive in infancy - aggression - emotional instability - sleep disturbances - physical complaints with no medical basis - inappropriate behaviour for age or development - overly passive/compliant - suicide attempts or discussion - extreme dependence - underachievement - inability to trust - stealing - other forms of abuse present or suspected | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - depression - withdrawal - low self-esteem - severe anxiety - fearfulness - feelings of shame and guilt - frequent crying - self-blame/self-depreciation - overly passive/compliant - social isolation - delay or refusal of medical treatment - discomfort or nervousness around caregiver or relative - suicide attempts or discussion - substance abuse - avoidance of eye contact - other forms of abuse present or suspected |

Legal Interventions

Legal intervention in cases of child emotional abuse and neglect is governed by provincial and territorial child protection legislation. Most jurisdictions require that alleged or suspected child emotional abuse or neglect be reported to child protection authorities or the police. In some

jurisdictions, failure to report child emotional abuse or neglect may result in a fine or imprisonment.²⁴

Emotionally abusive behaviour such as repeatedly following the other person or someone known to her or him; intimidating or attempting to intimidate; repeatedly communicating, directly or indirectly, with the other person or someone known to her or

him; harassing the other person with telephone calls; besetting or watching the other person's house or place of work; and/or engaging in threatening conduct directed at the other person or a member of her or his family is criminal harassment. These behaviours must cause a person to fear for her or his safety or the safety of someone she or he knows. Other forms of emotional abuse such as insulting, isolating, infantilizing, humiliating, and ignoring, although serious, are not criminal behaviours and cannot be prosecuted under the Criminal Code of Canada.

What Can You Do?

IF YOU ARE BEING ABUSED:

Remember:

- You are not alone
- It is not your fault
- No one ever deserves to be abused
- Help is available

IF YOU SUSPECT OR KNOW THAT SOMEONE IS BEING ABUSED:

- Listen
- Believe
- Support
- Let the person know about available support services
- Report suspected or known child abuse or neglect to a child welfare agency or the police

IF YOU ARE A SERVICE PROVIDER:

Work with other organizations to:

- Increase awareness of emotional abuse
- Address the needs of those who have been or are being emotionally abused
- Keep informed of resources and materials relating to intervention and prevention of abuse

Where to Go for Support Services

- 24 hour help-line or distress line
- transition house or shelter
- social service agency
- child welfare or family services agency
- police
- legal aid service
- health professional (e.g., nurse, doctor, dentist)
- community health centre
- public health department
- community counselling centre
- home support agency
- seniors' centre
- community living association
- friendship centre
- religious organization

Suggested Resources

Canadian Panel on Violence Against Women. ***Changing the Landscape: Ending Violence – Achieving Equality.*** Ottawa: Minister of Supply and Services, 1993.

Health Canada, **Fact Sheets** on Parent-Teen Relationships; Parent-Child Relationships; Wife Abuse – The Impact on Children; Family Violence Against Women with Disabilities; Family Violence Against People with a Mental Handicap; Wife Abuse; Dating Violence; and Elder Abuse. Ottawa: National Clearinghouse on Family Violence.

The Mental Health Division of Health Canada has produced a number of publications on senior abuse and neglect which are available through the National Clearinghouse on Family Violence:

Community Awareness and Response: Abuse and Neglect of Older Adults, 1993, is a guide to community approaches for service providers, seniors' organizations and interested community members.

Publications on the abuse and neglect of older adults in institutional settings include: **Abuse and Neglect of Older Adults in Institutional Settings: A Discussion Paper Building from English Language Resources**; **Abuse and Neglect of Older Adults in Institutional Settings: A Discussion Paper Building from French Language Resources**; **Abuse and Neglect of Older Adults in Institutional Settings: Annotated Bibliography**; and **Resource and Training Kit for Service Providers: Abuse and Neglect of Older Adults**.

Child Sexual Abuse Prevention: A Resource Kit developed by the Caring Communities Project includes "how to" handbooks, tools and activities, 20 case studies of prevention initiatives and resource lists of books, programs and videos. The kit is available in both English and French. Contact: Canadian Institute of Child Health, 885 Meadowlands Drive East, Suite 512, Ottawa, Ontario K2C 3N2. Tel: (613) 224-4144; Fax: (613) 224-4145.

Nobody's Perfect is a support and educational program for parents of children from birth to age five. This program, which was developed by Health Canada, is available in both English and French. Contact: Canadian Association of Family Resource Programs, 205-120 Holland Avenue, Ottawa, Ontario K1Y 0X6. Tel: (613) 728-3307; Fax: (613) 729-5421.

Getting Our Message Out, developed by the YWCA of Canada, 1995, is a handbook to help communities raise awareness and take action on violence against women with particular focus on the media. **Fresh Start** by Joan LeFeuvre, 1992, is a practical guide for women in abusive relationships. The YWCA has also produced a kit **There's No Excuse for Abuse** which provides basic information, ideas and actions on woman abuse and is especially applicable for rural and remote communities. All are available in both English and French. Contact: YWCA of Canada, 80 Gerrard Street East,

Toronto, Ontario M5B 1G6. Tel: (416) 593-9886; Fax: (416) 971-8084.

A. S. A. P.: A School-Based Anti-Violence Program by Marlies Suderman, Peter Jaffe and Elaine Hastings, 1993, is an evaluated, community-based program which addresses topics applicable to elementary and secondary school communities. The program includes sections on professional development, handling disclosures, intervention strategies, overcoming roadblocks, developing an action plan as well as many additional resources. Contact: London Family Court Clinic, 254 Pall Mall Street, London, Ontario N6A 5P6. Tel: (519) 679-7250; Fax: (519) 675-7772.

Interdisciplinary Perspectives: Interventions for Older Victims of Abuse, by Nova House, 1995, is a manual for service providers which proposes an interdisciplinary approach to intervention strategies for seniors who are abused or neglected. The manual also refers readers to resources and sources of support. This document is also available in both English and French. Contact: Nova House Women's Shelter, Box 337, Selkirk, Manitoba R1A 2B2. Tel: (204) 482-7882; Fax (204) 482-8483.

A Handbook for the Prevention of Family Violence, developed by the Community Child Abuse Council Hamilton-Wentworth, 1991, is a resource text for school personnel, community agencies, health care professionals, parents and volunteers. The handbook addresses child abuse, dating violence, wife abuse, children who witness wife abuse, and elder abuse. Contact: Community Child Abuse Council of Hamilton/Wentworth, 75 MacNab Street South, 2nd Floor, Hamilton, Ontario L8P 3C1. Tel: (905) 523-1020; Fax: (905) 523-1877.

Research Centres on Family Violence and Violence Against Women: The five Research Centres form a national network to achieve academic/community collaboration. Contacts:

BC/Yukon Feminist Research, Education, Development and Action Centre (FREDA), Simon Fraser University, 515 Hastings Street, Vancouver, British Columbia V6B 5K3. Tel: (604) 291-5197; Fax: (604) 291-5189.

Research Centre on Family Violence and Violence Against Women, 413 Tier Building, University of Manitoba, Winnipeg, Manitoba R3T 2N2. Tel: (204) 474-8965; Fax: (204) 261-3283.

Centre for Research on Violence Against Women and Children, 100 Collip Circle, Suite 240, UWO Research Park, London, Ontario N6G 4X8. Tel: (519) 858-5033, Fax: (519) 858-5034.

Centre de recherche interdisciplinaire sur la violence familiale et la violence faite aux femmes (CRI-VIFF), École de service social, Université de Montréal, CP 6128, succursale A, Montréal, PQ H3C 3J7. Tel: (514) 343-6111; Fax: (514) 343-2493 or Université Laval, 2336 Chemin Ste-Foy, Local 0830, Pavillon Jean Durand, Québec, PQ G1K 7P4. Tel: (418) 656-3286; Fax: (418) 656-3309.

Muriel McQueen Fergusson Centre for Family Violence Research, P.O. Box 4400, 676 Windsor Street, Fredericton, N.B. E3B 5A3. Tel: (506) 453-3595; Fax: (506) 453-4788.

Audio/Visual Resources Available through the National Film Board of Canada²⁵

Put the Child First (Child Abuse Prevention)

Seen...But not Heard: A Docu-drama about the Serious Emotional and Physical Effects on Children Who Witness Their Mothers Being Abused

What About Us: A Group Counselling Tool to Help Children Cope with the Experience of Having Witnessed Their Mothers Being Abused

Right from the Start: Dating Violence Prevention for Teens

One Hit Leads to Another (Violence Against Women)

Auguste and Blanche (Senior Abuse)

References and Notes

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25. The National Clearinghouse on Family Violence maintains a film and video collection which is distributed through the National Film Board of Canada. Contact the Clearinghouse for a free descriptive listing of these films and videos.

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For further information on family violence issues, contact:

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