

12 Best-Practice Principles for Psychologists Working with Clients Experiencing Emotional Abuse

Main goals of psychological intervention:

- Increased safety and connection to appropriate support services
- Enhanced understanding of the abuse dynamics and ability to recognise manipulation tactics
- Strengthened trust in one's own perceptions and opinions to counteract chronic self-doubt
- Activation of self-efficacy and personal agency to support active and informed decision-making
- Improved safety and emotional wellbeing of children in the person's care
- Reduction in symptoms related to the traumatic impact of the abuse
- Rebuilding and/or reinforcing a sense of self, including one's own needs, perspectives, and lived experiences
- Decreased isolation and restoration of social connections and supportive relationships

1. Possess Knowledge of the Nature and Dynamics of Emotional Abuse

Key principle: Support services are effective when providers understand the nuanced dynamics of emotional abuse and coercive control.

- Build a solid understanding of the 3Ds framework of emotional abuse and how abuse exists on a continuum.
- Be aware of the often-subtle manipulation behaviours of emotional abuse, which the person you're supporting may struggle to identify or name as such.
- Familiarise yourself with core concepts such as coercive control, the cycle of abuse (e.g. The Duluth Model), the impact of coercive control on children, and post-separation abuse.

Avoid: Recommending couples counselling when abuse is present. This is not safe and contradicts best-practice guidelines. Couples therapy assumes equal power and emotional safety, which do not exist in abusive dynamics.

2. Screen for Partner Abuse When You Notice Possible Indicators

Key principle: Do not assume the absence of reported abuse means it is not occurring. Many people experiencing abuse are unaware or unsure if and how to speak about their experiences.

- Know the red flags and indicators that suggest further screening is necessary.
- When concern arises in one domain, ask targeted questions, exploring whether the other domains are also present. A pattern of abuse will span across all three.

Sample prompting questions to explore the domains of abuse:

“Are there things you feel you can’t do, or things you feel you have to do, because of how your partner might react if you didn’t?”

“Do you often feel dismissed, criticised, or treated as if your opinions don’t matter?” “Are you being treated as an equal in your relationship?”

“Do you find yourself frequently apologising or feeling the need to explain yourself, even when you’ve done nothing wrong?”

Avoid: Not following up when a concerning behaviour is disclosed in one area. Emotional abuse operates across multiple domains—don’t stop exploring after identifying one.

3. Evaluate Safety and Risk

Key principle: You don’t have to do it all—but you do need to recognise risk and know who to refer to.

- Assess for family violence and related risks. Nearly half of all instances where emotional abuse is present will involve some level of physical and/or sexual abuse.
- Conduct a risk assessment when necessary. This should include: your professional judgement, the person’s own perception of their risk level, and evidence-based risk factors (e.g. MARAM framework in Victoria).
- Work with the individual to create a safety plan that aligns with identified risks. Keep in mind the power imbalance in the relationship and help them consider their options.
- Refer when appropriate or outside your scope—e.g. 1800RESPECT, The Orange Door, legal aid, and local DV services.
- Educate the person on the risk of post-separation abuse (almost certain when coercive control is present) that may include legal and financial abuse. Help them plan strategically if they’re thinking about leaving.

Avoid: Treating separation as a finish line. Post-separation abuse often escalates, especially when children are involved.

4. Use Accurate and Appropriate Language

Key principle: Naming the abusive dynamic makes it visible and validates their experience.

- Recognise the importance of your role as a therapist who helps shape their understanding of reality. What you fail to name may set the tone for what other professionals ignore or what the person will expect from other services.
- Use language that avoids framing the abuse as a neutral experience or a relationship issue. E.g. Manipulation vs. disagreements; Disrespect vs. communication issues; Emotional abuse vs. relationship problems; Post-separation abuse vs. high-conflict divorce

- Place responsibility where it belongs. Be clear: abuse is always a choice made by the person using it. The person you're working with did not cause it.

Avoid: Using language that implies mutuality.

5. Validate Feelings and Experience

Key principle: The person you're supporting is already full of self-doubt—remain non-judgemental and validating.

- Acknowledge the covert nature of emotional abuse that often leaves no visible scars.
- Make it explicit that you believe them.
- Focus on what is happening—not why the abuser is doing it. The focus needs to remain on the person and the impact they're experiencing.

Avoid: Shifting the focus onto the abuser's trauma or mental health. While those may be real, they don't excuse the harm. Keep your attention on the individual's experience and options.

6. Practice with a Non-Pathologizing Approach

Key principle: The emotional, physical, and psychological consequences of abuse are expectable and normal responses to chronic harm—not disorders or personal deficits.

- Don't misdiagnose trauma responses (e.g., complex PTSD, fight/flight/freeze, chronic hyperarousal, mistrust) as mental health or personality disorders.
- Frame symptoms within the context of partner abuse: E.g. Emotional depletion and Oppression vs. Depression; Chronic hyperarousal and fear vs. Generalised Anxiety Disorder; Being subjected to verbal and psychological attacks vs. Insecurity.
- Reinforce the shift from "*What's wrong with you?*" to "*What happened to you?*"
- Recognise the cumulative impact of abuse, including identity erosion, loss of self-trust, reduced agency, impaired decision-making, cognitive decline, hopelessness, and loneliness.

Avoid: Focusing exclusively on symptom management or skills building while ignoring the relationship context. For example: Don't offer mindfulness or breathing exercises to manage anxiety caused by walking on eggshells. Don't encourage assertive communication or boundary-setting when it could increase risk.

7. Support Increase in Agency, Clarity and Self-Perception

Key principle: Restore connection to the person's own values, perceptions, and inner compass.

- Recognise the erosion of identity, self-trust, and self-worth as outcomes of abuse.
- Help them challenge negative self-beliefs as internalisations of the abuser's narrative so they can rebuild their own beliefs (e.g. *"I'm too sensitive"*, *"It's my fault"*, *"Is something wrong with me?"*).
- Tease apart coercion from choice. These relationships distort reality and reduce decision-making, so that every option seems unsafe or wrong.
- Help the person assess the repercussions of staying, leaving, or setting boundaries through a realistic, safety-informed lens.
- Reinforce what's already working by identify their coping strategies, inner strengths, and the ways they've kept themselves or their children safe.

Avoid: Framing leaving the relationship as the goal. Agency must come from within, they already feel disempowered in the relationship.

8. Explore Resistance Efforts

Key principle: Self-defence is a healthy response to abuse.

- Frame resistance as a form of survival that can reduce harm and help maintain stability.
- Help the individual see daily "small acts of resistance" as meaningful expressions of agency, even in constrained circumstances.
- Acknowledge and explore their strengths and creativity in resisting the abuse.
- Useful questions include: *How do you resist? How do you recover when things go badly? What helps you keep going, even when you're scared or discouraged?*

Avoid: Misinterpreting protective behaviours (e.g., hiding information, physically pushing back) as equivalent to the abuser's tactics.

9. Assist to Address Practical Barriers

Key principle: Effective support may require flexibility and a willingness to step outside the usual counselling role.

- Be flexible, patient, and responsive to their circumstances. Keep in mind that the abuse is chronically stripping them of opportunities to access support and resources.
- Be prepared to take on a more advocacy role if necessary.
- Understand how the abuse and various systems (e.g., legal, financial) may keep them from leaving or healing.

Avoid: Interpreting inconsistent attendance as a sign of disengagement as they are navigating significant constraints.

10. Maintain Ethical and Professional Duties

- Be clear and upfront about confidentiality limits from the beginning. Be transparent about information sharing (e.g., subpoenas, child protection obligations).
- Document abuse history and patterns accurately—this can support legal processes.
- Seek supervision or refer when beyond your scope.
- Engage in regular self-reflection and supervision.
- Monitor for biases, assumptions, and dynamics related to gender and power.

11. Grief Work After Separation

Key principle: Emotional abuse is not only about what happened—it's also about what has been taken away.

- People often experience deep grief after separation: for the loss of opportunities, safety and dignity, their sense of self, important relationships, lost parenting moments, and aspirations they once had.
- Recognise this as disenfranchised grief—a loss that goes unacknowledged or unsupported socially, making the mourning process isolating.
- Expect immense sadness and hopelessness about the future as the impact becomes fully felt. Help the person move through it while holding hope.

Avoid: Expecting them to feel only relief after leaving the abusive partner.

12. Focus on Rebuilding Life after Separation

Key principle: Leaving is not the finish line—healing requires reconnection, identity repair, and meaningful engagement with life beyond survival.

- Encourage post-trauma identity development: explore values, creativity, goals, and new sources of meaning.
- Support reconnection with safe relationships and communities.
- Reinforce steps toward stability and independence: self-care routines, attending to health concerns, financial planning, career re-evaluation, and future planning.
- Suggest body-based interventions that restore a sense of physical safety, neurological regulation and strength, e.g. trauma-informed yoga, defence classes, somatic therapies, movement practices (e.g. gym or pilates), relaxation, breathwork.

Avoid: Sole focus on trauma content. Healing also happens through joy, connection, and reinhabiting the body and self.

Additional Practice Resources

The following can be easily accessed on the internet:

Risk assessment models differ slightly in each state but cover the same essential principles.
Victoria uses The MARAM Framework:

www.vic.gov.au/maram-practice-guides-and-resources

The Psychological Abuse in Relationships Scale (PAR) - developed by The Safer Families Centre, University of Melbourne:

www.saferfamilies.org.au/resources/parscale

The 2020 Guidelines for Psychologists Working with Clients Who Have Experienced Intimate Partner Abuse or Violence - developed by The Australian Psychological Society Women and Psychology Interest Group (APS WAP IG)

Safe & Together Institute's toolkits designed to help enhance domestic abuse-informed practice:
<https://safeandtogetherinstitute.com/practice-toolkits>