

The Continuum of Emotional Abuse

Emotional abuse exists on a spectrum - from subtle, hard-to-name behaviours to overt and chronic patterns of control. At the lower end of the continuum, emotionally harmful behaviours are often driven by selfishness and a sense of entitlement. The goal here is not always explicit control, but rather the preservation of a self-serving status quo. In these cases, control may be used incidentally as a way to maintain comfort, superiority, and avoid accountability. As the emotional abuse progresses toward the middle and severe end of the spectrum, the intention to control becomes central. The dynamic shifts from entitlement to strategic coercion, and ultimately, to total domination. At this point, control is no longer a means to an end—it becomes the end itself.

Understanding the continuum of emotional abuse helps to identify harmful dynamics that may fall below formal definitions of coercive control or family violence. What makes emotional abuse so damaging is not just the severity of individual incidents, but its cumulative effect over time, regardless at which end of the spectrum it happens.

Recognising emotional abuse as a pattern, not a one-off event, is essential to understanding its true impact.

