

The Impact of Emotional Abuse



Emotional abuse is a constellation of attitudes and behaviours that aim to maintain power and control in the relationship of one partner over the other. It involves systemic devaluation of the partner, ongoing distortion of reality, lack of empathy and reciprocity in the relationship, and ongoing attempts to stifle the autonomy of the other. This causes profound and long-lasting effects on a person's emotional, mental, and physical well-being. These impacts accumulate over time and become deeply entrenched, affecting various aspects of life.

Emotional Impact

The emotional toll of abuse is devastating, as individuals are made to feel trapped in their relationship, often experiencing extreme emotional lows. Coercive control manipulates their emotions, making them feel as though they are perpetually walking on eggshells. The continuous emotional strain can lead to deep feelings of inadequacy, worthlessness, and emotional numbness. Over time, these emotions evolve into more pervasive emotional states that are difficult to overcome.

- **Depressed and/or Emotionally Numb:** Ongoing abuse often leads to depression or a sense of emotional numbness. Survivors may feel emotionally detached, unable to feel joy or connect with their emotions.
- **Anxiety and Panic Attacks:** The constant unpredictability of an abusive relationship fuels anxiety. Survivors often feel on edge, constantly fearing the next outburst or manipulation.
- **Walking on Eggshells:** Survivors feel like they must constantly be cautious, avoiding conflict or upsetting their partner to maintain peace.
- **Inadequacy:** Feelings of inadequacy emerge as the abuser frequently undermines the survivor's abilities, leading them to believe they are not good enough.
- **Unlovable:** The emotional abuse inherent in IPV often erodes an individual's sense of self-worth, making them feel undeserving of love or care.
- **Worthlessness:** Constant criticism and devaluation lead to a pervasive belief that they have no value or worth.
- **Loss of Motivation and/or Joy:** Survivors may lose interest in things they once enjoyed, struggling to find joy or purpose in life.
- **Humiliation:** The public and private degradation that occurs in abusive relationships leads to profound feelings of humiliation.
- **Guilt and Shame:** IPV survivors often carry guilt for staying or for being unable to "fix" their abuser's behaviour. Shame is also internalised, often due to being constantly blamed for the abuse.
- **Powerlessness:** The sense of having no control over one's life and decisions is a hallmark of coercive control. This leads to an overwhelming feeling of powerlessness.

Mental and Psychological Impact

- **Loss of Confidence:** Continuous emotional manipulation erodes self-esteem, leaving survivors uncertain of their abilities and decisions.
 - **Self-Blame:** Victims will often internalise blame for the abuse, leading them to feel responsible for their abuser's actions or choices.
 - **Chronic Self-Doubt:** Constant criticism and gaslighting from the abuser lead to chronic self-doubt, leaving survivors questioning their judgment and perceptions.
 - **Loss of Trust in Own Judgment:** Survivors may begin to doubt their own reality and ability to make sound decisions due to the prolonged psychological manipulation and invalidation.
 - **Rumination and Confusion:** Survivors often become trapped in a cycle of rumination, endlessly replaying situations in their mind, trying to make sense of the abuse and their partner's behavior.
 - **Loss of Sense of Self:** Over time, the survivor's identity becomes distorted as they are forced to abandon their values, beliefs, and needs to appease the abuser.
 - **Embarrassment:** Feeling publicly humiliated, especially when the abuse is secretive, leads to profound embarrassment about one's situation.
 - **Feeling Unseen and Unheard:** Coercive control often involves silencing the survivor, making them feel invisible and as though their voice and needs do not matter.
 - **Chronically Invalidated:** The abuser's constant denials, dismissals, and undermining make the survivor feel as though their experiences and emotions are never valid or worthy of acknowledgment.
 - **Feeling Trapped:** Over time, survivors may feel mentally and emotionally trapped in the relationship, unable to escape due to fear, dependency, or manipulation.
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Relational and Social Impact

- **Social Isolation:** Becoming progressively disconnected from friends, family, and a wider social network as the abuse limits opportunities for meaningful connection and support.
 - **Deterioration of Relationships:** Coercive control frequently damages relationships with family, friends, colleagues, and others through conflict, manipulation, or interference.
 - **Loss of Belonging:** As important relationships diminish, survivors often experience a profound sense of loneliness, alienation, and disconnection from their community and support networks.
 - **Loss of Parental Authority:** An abuser will often undermine their partner's parenting, challenge their decisions, or encourage children to disrespect them, resulting in diminished confidence and authority within the family.
 - **Difficulty Trusting Others:** Following prolonged manipulation and betrayal, survivors struggle to trust others, disclose their experiences, or develop deep relationships.
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Economic Impact

- **Loss of Financial Security:** The cumulative impact of economic abuse often leaves survivors with depleted savings, increased debt, and ongoing uncertainty about meeting basic financial needs.
 - **Loss of Financial Independence:** Survivors may become increasingly dependent on the abuser or experience significant difficulty re-establishing financial autonomy after the relationship.
 - **Loss of Economic Stability:** Ongoing financial exploitation, legal costs, housing instability, and disrupted employment undermines economic security and future financial wellbeing.
 - **Loss of Career Opportunities:** The abuse may interfere with education, employment, and career progression, resulting in reduced earning capacity over time.
 - **Loss of Assets and Resources:** Partners may lose access to property, savings, superannuation, investments, or other financial resources through exploitation, unequal financial arrangements, or post-separation abuse.
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Physical Impact

- **Fatigue/Exhaustion:** The constant state of vigilance and anxiety leaves survivors physically drained, leading to chronic fatigue and exhaustion.
 - **Headaches:** Chronic stress and tension from the abuse often manifest physically, with headaches being a common symptom.
 - **Cognitive Impairment:** Psychological stress impairs cognitive function, leading to difficulties in focusing, making decisions, or processing thoughts clearly.
 - **Gastro-Intestinal Issues:** The long-term effects of stress can lead to digestive problems, including stomach pain, nausea, and irritable bowel syndrome (IBS).
 - **Sleep Difficulties:** Anxiety, hypervigilance, and trauma-related stress disrupt sleep patterns, leading to insomnia or fragmented sleep.
 - **Gynaecological Issues and Chronic Fatigue:** Research has demonstrated that these are the most common physical symptoms women experience from prolonged exposure to abuse.
 - **Neurological Hyperarousal:** Chronic stress and trauma can cause the nervous system to remain in a heightened state of alertness, leading to irritability, insomnia, and physical tension.
 - **Lowered Immunity/Chronic Conditions Exacerbated:** The long-term stress of abuse can suppress the immune system, making survivors more vulnerable to illness and exacerbating existing chronic health conditions.
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