

Abusive Relationships

Persons raised in an abusive family or have a history of abusive relationships may have an extremely high tolerance for abusive behavior. In addition, there may be difficulty recognizing inappropriate behavior or understanding what abuse really is. If this is the case, you may want to read *Boundaries* by Henry Cloud and John Townsend. If your unresolved family issues are being played out in an abusive or unhealthy way, it may be helpful to discuss this with a counselor.

What is Abuse?

One doesn't have to be physically battered to be a victim of abuse. Abusive behavior involves any action designed to control another person through the use of fear, humiliation, and verbal, physical or sexual assault. Sometimes the controlling behavior is subtle but very damaging even if it does not become physical.

Emotional abuse can involve:

- *domination, manipulation and control*: dictating where a partner can go, who he or she can be with, how time is spent, what clothes to wear
- *verbal assaults*: constant criticism, put downs, sarcasm, foul language, yelling, character assassination
- *unrealistic expectations*: expecting a partner to anticipate and meet all his or her needs; constantly changing relationship expectations
- *emotional blackmail*: withholding affection or acceptance contingent on meeting certain demands
- *unpredictable responses*: never knowing how a partner will react to situations; mood swings
- *humiliation of any kind*: using sarcasm, put-downs, shaming or belittling
- *unfaithfulness - sexual or emotional*: putting excessive energy into work; engaging in addictive behavior (alcoholism, drug abuse, eating disorders, etc.); affairs; becoming overly involved in any activity or with another person to the degree that the relationship suffers
- *refusal to take responsibility for one's own actions*: continually blaming the partner for relationship, financial and work related problems
- *lack of respect for the personal boundaries and rights of others*: Violation of relationship rights as outlined in the Relationship Bill of Rights
- *excessive jealousy*: Interpreting any contact with someone of the opposite sex as unfaithfulness; demanding that partner account for whereabouts and/or time; violating partner's privacy by opening mail, listening to phone conversations, following him or her

- *dishonesty*: not being honest about feelings; lying
- *threats of physical harm*: threatening partner with a gun, fist, knife or any other means of physical force
- *dependent behavior*: holding others responsible for his or her happiness; playing victim to get attention or manipulate

Physical abuse can involve:

- shoving, pushing, kicking, hitting
- slapping, scratching
- pinching, pulling hair
- choking, twisting limbs
- use of a weapon
- burning, cutting
- inflicting pain of any kind

Sexual abuse can involve:

- treating a person as a sex object
- unwanted sexual contact
- making another person perform sexual acts against his or her will
- forcing a person to watch sexually explicit behavior against his or her will
- making unwanted sexually suggestive remarks
- exploitation and use of power or a position of power to pressure a person sexually.
- sexual disloyalty

How do I know when to leave or refuse to engage in a relationship?

Consider terminating or minimizing contact in a relationship if the other party is not willing to work on or is unable to change the following behaviors:

The other party is . . .

- emotionally, physically, or sexually abusive.
- unable to establish and maintain emotional intimacy.
- dishonest or unfaithful.
- involved in compulsive or addictive behavior such as alcoholism, sex addiction, gambling, workaholism, drug abuse, etc.

- emotionally dependent, wanting you to meet all of his or her needs and/or can't function without you.
- insisting you violate your values and personal rights to please him or her.
- holding you responsible for everything that goes wrong in the relationship.

It may be time to avoid or exit a relationship for your own emotional health if you find yourself engaging in the following behaviors. If there is a history of these behaviors in relationships, it is wise to address the causes and ways to embrace healthier strategies.

You are . . .

- doing all the work in the relationship.
- enabling your partner's irresponsible, abusive, or addictive behavior through caretaking and rescue.
- disabled by the relationship, having physical symptoms, crying spells, unable to concentrate, depression to the point of not being able to function well at home, school or work.
- aware that the relationship is detrimental to your children.
- letting your partner define you by describing your reality and controlling your life.
- being sexually active with your partner in order to keep him or her in the relationship.
- violating personal values and rights to please your partner.
- preoccupied with your partner to the point that you always put his or her needs before your own.
- using the relationship to avoid emotional pain or personal issues.