

Guest Column: 7 Steps to free yourself from emotional abuse

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You saddle up next to your honey in the car. You're off to a much-needed romantic night out dancing. You look fabulous. You feel excited and ready to get moving on the floor. You smile at the possibility of a good evening.

On the ride to the club, your partner chides you on your appearance, just a little, but enough to make you wonder if you really do look so fabulous. You're used to this, though, so you let a small thing go. You really want to have a good time tonight.

At the club, you're both enjoying yourselves. Laughing, having a couple of drinks, enjoying the music, and then—everything changes. Your partner stomps off the dance floor angrily and gives you the silent treatment. Your heart sinks. You try to appease them and apologize for whatever you might've done wrong. You try to figure out what is going on. You cajole and encourage without luck. You're blindsided again.

Your partner walks out. You follow, still trying to fix the situation. On the ride home, they accuse you of flirting with someone on the dance floor. You deny it. It isn't true. Then the insults come, one after another and completely unrelated to the evening.

You feel devastated. You feel defeated. You're exhausted, but you can't sleep.

The next day, your partner brings you coffee in bed and says, “good morning, sweetheart,” as though nothing had happened the night before. You breathe a sigh of relief, but a shiver runs down your spine.

1. Understand the problem

You are experiencing emotional abuse, which is a non-physical form of power and control. Emotional abuse occurs when a significant other, parent, or other close person uses your thoughts and feelings against you. Belittling, twisting words, contempt, and passive aggression are all forms of emotional abuse.

Not all emotional abuse is created equal, and that’s one reason why it is often denied, explained away or minimized. Don’t compare what is happening to you to someone else’s abuse. Don’t explain it away. Any abuse is unacceptable! No one deserves it. You do not deserve to be treated badly, regardless of anything you may or may not have done.

All forms of emotional abuse take a huge toll on the mental health of the victim. Playing mind games and using the good nature of a person to manipulate them is deeply insidious and destructive.

It’s sometimes difficult to acknowledge when you’re being emotionally abused. It happens slowly over a period of time and is always interspersed with the “good times” and positive behavior. You can’t easily put your finger on it. Emotional abuse doesn’t leave visible scars, but its impact upon the mind, body and spirit are still immense.

If you think that you are experiencing emotional abuse, seek assistance from a domestic and sexual violence advocate or a counselor. Learn as much as you can about emotional abuse and arm yourself with tools of knowledge.

2. Know thyself

The second step to overcoming the impact of emotional abuse in your life is to understand your history. Knowing your susceptibility to manipulation and control will help you gain awareness of yourself. Change is only possible with self-awareness.

What in your past has left you susceptible to emotional abuse? The stage for any type of abuse is most often set in childhood. Childhood factors include:

Bullying; name-calling and being the subject of jokes by peers or adults

Narcissistic or addicted parents

Abuse of any type in the home

Sexual abuse or exploitation in or outside of the home

Children who learn that it is necessary to be responsive to the needs of others in order to be loved are ripe to become targets of abuse. Children who are scapegoated or victims of covert abuse by caregivers, teachers or peers struggle emotionally and doubt the validity of their feelings.

A note to the wise: Knowing your past and susceptibility is not about blaming others in your past. Knowing yourself is like reading a book and gaining information. You need the information in order to create a different outcome. Look at the facts objectively. Feel the feels, but don't waste time with blame or shame. Keep moving forward with a clearer understanding of where you came from and where you want to go.

Celebrate that you're still here. Celebrate your resilience.

3. Examine your agenda with power

At the root of all abuse is a need for power and control. Years of research on domestic and sexual violence have taught us that abuse is a pattern of coercive control used by one person against another. The Duluth Abuse Intervention Project's Power and Control Wheel first demonstrated this fact almost 40 years ago.

The wheel shows different strategies used by abusers to gain control over potential victims. Emotional abuse is one spoke of the wheel.

Look at the ways power and control have affected your life. Additionally, look at the ways in which you may have used power and control against others. As humans, we often use control tactics as a means of trying to protect ourselves or others.

It's always tempting to focus on the abuse and the abuser, but we can't fix anyone but ourselves. Overcoming abuse is about focusing on you and your response.

Knowing your agenda with power is an important step in overcoming the abuse you may inflict upon yourself, as well as the abuse inflicted upon you by another.

4. Observe the emotional games

When you become the observer, rather than the reactive person in a situation, you allow yourself to gain more insight.

Emotional games are exhausting! Pull yourself out of the game and watch it unfold as you would a movie. Observe, but don't engage in the scenario. Like an actor in improvisational theater, you decide what your next input will be based on what is going on around you. This strategy allows you to see choices of response that you miss when your mind is in a reactive state.

Gaslighting is a technique often used by abusers to control and frighten their victims. Gaslighting is a mind game that twists your emotional response into a pretzel, if you fall prey to it. It can only be overcome when it is observed and understood. The term comes from a 1944 movie, of the same name. Gaslight, the movie, captures the essence of emotional abuse perfectly.

Abuse is cyclical and inconsistent. Relationships are never all good or all bad. The reasons people stay in harmful relationships are due to this cyclical quality. It's easy to question your version of reality. "Did this really happen or is it my imagination?"

Chronic disrespect and cruelty start out slowly. If you throw a frog into a pot of boiling water, it will jump out immediately. If you put a frog into a pot of water and turn the temperature up slowly until it boils, you will kill the frog.

Recognize the temperature of the water around you. Give yourself permission to acknowledge what you see and feel. Trust yourself.

When you take the heat out of the moment and watch it unfold, you will gain insights into how the game works. From that vantage point, you can make new decisions.

For safety reasons, it's important not to announce what you are doing to the abuser. Become the observer quietly. Become an actor in the improvisation, putting all reactivity aside.

Taking charge of your reactions is a potent way to gain a sense of power over the situation. Once you fully comprehend that you can change your relationship by changing your response, you will gain your first foothold into removing yourself from people that disrespect and disempower you.

5. Engage your inner sleuth

Knowing how the abuse has affected you will help you focus on your own healing. It might not be readily apparent at first, so it's necessary to pay attention to the clues. Like an old-fashioned detective with a magnifying glass in hand, learn about the ways that emotional abuse has impacted your wellbeing.

Are you taking responsibility for the behavior of others?

Do you find yourself numbing out with alcohol or drugs?

Do you have issues with attachment—are you needy or avoidant?

Are you challenged by decision-making tasks?

Do you find yourself walking on eggshells, always paying more attention to the needs of others over your needs?

Do you say yes when you want to say no?

Are you struggling with anxiety and/or depression?

Do you find yourself engaging in critical self-talk?

These are just a few of the clues that you might explore in your in-depth inquiry. The goal is not to blame or focus outward, but to focus inward at what you can control and what you can do to improve your wellbeing.

Knowing how you are impacted by abusive behavior you can choose to get assistance to help you make changes in your life.

6. Practice empathy toward yourself

Face your fear with a little kindness. Honestly, this will go a long way. Overcoming bondage to emotional abuse and moving on with your life begins with learning to be kind to you. All of these strategies at some point converge on the necessity to be patient and kind with yourself as you practice them.

If you're in a marriage or a long-term abusive relationship, you are working to overcome years of patterned responses. You can do this. Treat yourself as a friend or family member you're helping. Show yourself the same love and care as you would a stranger you agreed to help. Go out of your way to find answers as you would for another.

Honoring yourself re-affirms your dignity and right to live free from abuse. Before you know it, you'll wonder why you ever stayed in a relationship that didn't treat you with the respect you deserve. Allow yourself to become authentically and wholly you, imperfect, but without apologies.

7. Forge a new path

Where do you want to go from here? Do you want to stay in the relationship or do you want to leave? Whatever your choice, choose consciously. If you're planning on staying, have a safety plan for both emotional and physical safety. Decide how you will make changes. If at any point you choose to leave, do it deliberately.

Envision the path ahead of you. Know who you are and who you want to become. Embody and celebrate your good character traits. Work on mending your broken places. Get clear about your strengths and intentions. It isn't necessary to know five steps ahead, just plan the first step and take it.

This path is unique to you and your journey. Acknowledge what you're going through, journal, note your progress and victories. You might try some positive reframing of old negative thinking. Reframe the thought, "I'll never get better. He/she is not going to let me change," with "I'm working on changing my responses. I'm not responsible for other people's behavior."

Messing up, making mistakes, and forgetting are all part of the healing process. Healing is a spiral journey to be embraced.

Plan ahead, but let your path unfold as you move forward. Notice all of the diligence you've exhibited. Notice the resilience that you have built. Pretty quickly, you'll be well on your way. Keep moving forward and don't look back.

By the way, you're looking fabulous.

SAFE of Columbia County offers a 24-hour crisis line, advocacy and shelter to those seeking an assistance. Call 503-397-6161. Ellyn Bell is the Executive Director of SAFE of Columbia County.