

Invisible Wounds that Scar the Soul

“Yelling at living things does tend to kill the spirit in them. Sticks and stones may break our bones, but words will break our hearts . . .”
Robert Fulghum

It is difficult for a man who punches a woman or throws her into a wall to not know that he is an abuser.

It is equally difficult for a woman who sustains a black eye and body bruises not to know she has been abused, although both of them find rationales to avoid reality.

However, the subtle manifestations of nonphysical abuse usually escape acknowledgement—at least for a long period of time.¹

Why? Because the abusers keep their hands clean by landing invisible punches and unseen jabs. “They undermine the wife’s self-esteem and break her spirit, and knock supporting pins out from under her. They know what matters most to her—her dog, her car, her friends, maybe her red suit—and destroy it.

They manipulate her into thinking she’s to blame, and as a result, into trying harder and harder to please.”¹

Friends, family, and co-workers may see the abuser as a really nice person, and that is also the way he sees himself. He attributes his loss of control to his wife’s behavior, and uses her as a scapegoat to take the blame for his words and actions.

The abuser usually does not verbally batter his partner in public, unless it is in the form of a joke or something said where the meaning is only known to her.

Nonphysical abuse is the destruction of a woman’s emotional, psychological, social, and economic well-being, a systematic undermining of her sense of self and her sanity.

Behind all abuse is the need to **control and dominate** someone else. Men who are abusive know exactly what they are doing by weakening their wives in order to strengthen themselves.

It is not always easy for the victim of verbal and emotional abuse to recognize that she is being abused. She may know that her partner is not treating her kindly, but because she trusts her partner’s perceptions, she may begin to doubt her feelings and the truth of her own perceptions.

If a woman shares her feelings with the abuser, he will either invalidate them or tell her it was a joke. More seriously, if she confronts him with his abusive behavior he may use more aggressive means to gain back control, causing the verbal and emotional abuse to escalate to physical battering.



What does verbal abuse look like? Although there are many categories of verbal abuse, the most frequent are:

- ◆ **Abusive anger**—sudden angry outbursts which are usually unexpected and irrational. After venting his wrath, the abuser usually feels a sense of relief from built-up tensions inside, and enjoys a feeling of power and superiority. His partner will look for rational reasons for his behavior, and will usually wonder what she said or did to make him angry.

No matter how well she manages to change her appearance, attitudes, or actions, she will never be good enough in the mind of her abuser, and he will continue to blame her for his unexpected fits of rage.

- ◆ **Accusing and blaming.** This usually goes along with abusive anger, where the abuser will accuse his partner of something, and then blame her for his anger or insecurity.

Many times the abuser will accuse his partner of infidelity, and blame her for his feelings of insecurity. He may blame her as well for his sexual impotence, while refusing to seek medical help. No matter how the partner tries to help him understand the truth, he will not hear it.

- ◆ **Judging and criticizing.** Here the abuser is going farther than speaking the truth in love. He is expressing his lack of acceptance in an overly critical, judgmental tone.

“The trouble with you is . . .”

“You never get anything right . . .”

- ◆ **Countering**—arguing against her thoughts, perceptions, or experiences.

Non-physical abuse— a form of domestic violence

Nan recognized Ned’s tendency to counter anything she said. So she decided to agree with any statements he made and repeat them back to him. Here is the interaction:

Ned: *That lamp shade doesn’t go with the lamp.*

Nan: *Oh yeah, the lamp shade doesn’t go with the lamp.*

Ned: *It does too go with the lamp.*

Nan: *Oh, the shade goes with the lamp.*

Ned: *You can’t say it goes with it when the color’s off.*

Nan: *Oh, I see. The color is off.*

Ned: *That’s not what’s wrong with it.*

Nan: *I’m trying to find out what you mean.*

Ned: *No you’re not. You’re twisting my words around!*²

- ◆ **Discounting**—denying and distorting her experiences and feelings as if they were worth nothing. Verbal discounting can be understood by thinking of a very expensive item in a store being “discounted” down to a ridiculously low amount until it is considered worthless.

There are many other categories of verbal abuse (name calling, threatening, ordering, etc.). Most abusers use several or all of these types to keep their partner off balance and wondering what she has done wrong.

“Emotional battering, then, runs the gamut from a steady grinding down of a woman to emotional trauma. While her bones are never broken, her flesh never bruised, her blood never spilled, she is wounded nonetheless.

With self-confidence and self-respect gone, she lives, empty, with no self left to assert. She cedes control of her life to her abuser. The emotionally battered woman loses herself.”¹

¹ *No Visible Wounds*, Mary S. Miller

² *The Verbally Abusive Relationship*, Patricia Evans