

Emotional Manipulation: What It Is and How to Cope



Medically reviewed by [Lori Lawrenz, PsyD](#) — Written by [Hope Gillette](#) — Updated on October 5, 2022

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When someone uses your emotions to get what they want, steer your behavior, or influence your ideals, that's known as emotional manipulation.

Manipulation is the act of trying to control something or someone. For example, when you manipulate something with your hands, you're positioning it to your intent, such as an artist turning a lump of clay into a piece of pottery.

Humans, as creatures with their own thought processes, aren't so easy to control. You have your own set of wants, needs, and interests that guide you through life.

When someone else wants to control your journey and can't do so physically, they might turn to tactics of emotional manipulation.

What is emotional manipulation?

"Emotional manipulation is a form of psychological manipulation in which a person seeks to control another person's emotions," explains [Dr. Harold Hong](#), a psychiatrist from Raleigh, North Carolina. "It is often done through persuasion, coercion, or even emotional blackmail."

As malicious as it sounds, emotional manipulation isn't always the product of conscious thought.

According to [Kara Nassour](#), a licensed professional counselor from Austin, Texas, emotional manipulation can be ingrained, habitual, or second nature as the result of trauma or adverse experiences during childhood.

“Some people who experience abuse develop manipulative behaviors because their abusers punished them for trying to express their needs in healthy, direct ways,” she points out. “Other people act manipulative because they grew up in households where that was routine behavior, and they didn’t get the chance to learn other ways to communicate.”

What does it look like?

Emotional manipulation can wear many faces. For example, it can come in waves of anger, expressed disappointment, ridicule, or guilt.

Hong indicates gaslighting and love bombing are two common forms of emotional manipulation.

[Gaslighting](#) can occur when someone tries to make you doubt your perceptions or memories. “It didn’t happen that way, you were just over-tired” is an example of a gaslighting comment.

[Love bombing](#) is when someone showers you with affection and praise to draw you in at the start of a relationship.

“This can be used to manipulate you into thinking that they are the perfect partner for you,” he says. “But once they have you hooked, they may start withdrawing this attention and making you feel needy and dependent on them.”

Here are other common emotional manipulation tactics and what they may sound like.

- **Guilt:** “If you loved me, you wouldn’t do that.”
- **Criticism:** “You never do anything right.”
- **Isolation:** “You’re picking your friends and family over me.”
- **Humiliation:** “I’ll take you out to dinner when you lose some

weight.”

- **Threatening:** “If you ever do that again, you’ll be sorry.”
- **Blaming:** “Look what you made me do.”
- **Accusing:** “I know you’re being unfaithful.”
- **Infidelity:** “I could do better than you anytime I want.”

Emotional vulnerability vs. emotional manipulation

Expressing your emotions isn’t emotional manipulation. You’re allowed to cry, stomp your feet, or indicate how you’re feeling at a given moment.

Crying to express vulnerability, for example, doesn’t mean you’re necessarily trying to sway someone to your cause or gain their support.

Sometimes you just need to cry.

[Ileana Arganda-Stevens](#), a marriage and family therapist from Sacramento, explains, “It’s important that we be aware of the ways in which our society devalues [vulnerability](#) and how that affects our perceptions.”

How does emotional manipulation affect relationships?

Emotional manipulation can have a major impact on your relationships. It can damage trust, cause resentment, and affect your mental health and well-being.

Overall, Arganda-Stevens indicates it can create a lack of emotional safety.

“Emotional manipulation in relationships can create stress, resentment, and fear around being manipulated,” she says.

Nassour notes that emotional manipulation can create an environment of competition, where partners try to out-maneuver one another rather than finding compromises or solutions to relationship challenges.

Emotional manipulation can even lead to chronic conditions associated with abuse, such as:

- [low self-esteem](#)
- [depression](#)
- [anxiety](#)
- [substance use](#)
- [post-traumatic stress disorder \(PTSD\)](#)

Is it a form of abuse?

Yes, emotional manipulation can be a form of [emotional abuse](#).

Abuse is defined as a pattern of behaviors used to control or maintain power in a relationship.

A guilt trip once in a while might not meet abuse criteria, but consistent guilt-tripping or guilt-tripping paired regularly with other forms of emotional manipulation could.

How should you respond to emotional abuse?

Anytime emotions are involved, it can be challenging to know what to do in the moment. Here are some strategies you can try.

Stepping away

If you feel as though someone is manipulating your emotions, it's OK to step away from the situation to re-gather your thoughts.

“Calmly notify your partner that you're going to step out for 20 minutes to gather your thoughts and that when you return, you'll try again to discuss

the issue at hand,” suggests Arganda-Stevens.

Developing your communication skills

“Practice stating your own needs, desires, and [boundaries](#) clearly and without apology,” Nassour recommends. “The more comfortable you are with direct communication, the easier it is to spot manipulation from others.”

Exiting the relationship

It’s OK to [have to leave](#) an emotionally manipulative relationship behind. In fact, Hong suggests the sooner you leave, the better.

“As early as possible, try to remove yourself from the situation and reach out for help from a trusted friend, family member, therapist, or hotline,” he says. “Don’t wait for the emotional abuse to escalate before seeking help.”

What should you not do?

Sometimes knowing what you “should do” includes knowing what might not be effective when someone is using emotional manipulation. Here are some things you can try to avoid.

Don’t feel responsible

Guilt can be a powerful tool of emotional manipulation. Hong asserts that no one is responsible for someone else’s feelings.

“This is what they want you to believe, but it’s simply not true,” he says. “You are not responsible for their happiness or well-being, only your own. They can easily manipulate you if you believe you are responsible for their feelings.”

Don’t give out information

Not all emotional abuse comes through intimate relationships. To help prevent emotional abuse, Hong suggests limiting the information you give out about yourself, such as fears, insecurities, or vulnerabilities.

Don't try to reason

“You'll never win an argument because they will only twist your words and use them against you,” Hong says. “The more you try to reason, the more they will gaslight you and make you doubt yourself.”

Along these same lines, bringing up the other person's shortcomings may not prove any points, either. They may turn the blame on you before they take on any responsibility.

Don't give into demands

Hong recommends not giving in to the demands of someone using emotional manipulation, no matter how small.

He indicates doing so only reinforces their behaviors and makes them think they're effective.

What if someone threatens to hurt themselves?

“Some people who use manipulation will threaten to hurt themselves or others to force you to respond, but in these situations, it's better to leave the conversation, then call mental health emergency services or have the police do a wellness check,” says Nassour.

When to seek help

When emotional manipulation starts to negatively impact your daily life, consider seeking support and guidance from a mental health professional.

[Couples therapy](#) may help partners who find communication challenging or who are experiencing emotional manipulation as an ingrained coping mechanism from past experiences.

Routine emotional manipulation that pushes you past your boundaries, makes you feel threatened, or is negatively impacting your mental health may be a form of abuse. Couples therapy is not often effective for abusive relationships.

If you need to remove yourself from an abusive relationship, help is available. You can call the [National Domestic Violence Hotline](#) at **800-799-7233** or by texting “START” to **88788**.

If you need immediate assistance or feel unsafe, emergency services are available by dialing **911**.

Let’s recap

Emotional manipulation is the misuse of your feelings to push you toward behaviors or thoughts you wouldn’t otherwise align with.

While emotional manipulation can occur naturally throughout life, patterns of gaslighting, love-bombing, guilt, or humiliating can be a part of emotional abuse.

Last medically reviewed on October 5, 2022



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FEEDBACK:  

6 Signs Someone Is Manipulating You



Medically reviewed by [Jacquelyn Johnson, PsyD.](#) — Written by [Sandra Silva](#) and [Kimberly Drake](#) — Updated on September 29, 2021

[What's manipulation?](#) [Signs](#) [Manipulation tactics](#) [Causes](#)

[Can they change?](#) [Recap](#)

Are you feeling confused or guilty and not sure why? You could be sensing manipulation. Identifying the signs can help.

Emotional manipulation in relationships can be difficult to recognize.

Some manipulation tactics can be so subtle that you may end up constantly examining your own behavior rather than the other person's.

Being on the receiving end of manipulation tactics in a relationship can have an impact on your mental health. But by learning to identify the signs, you can protect yourself and act on the situation.

What's manipulation in relationships?

Psychological manipulation often refers to words, omissions, and actions that [attempt to control](#) how another person feels, thinks, and behaves. This may affect their perspective of themselves, the relationship, and the world in general.

Persistent manipulation in relationships can affect your self-esteem and may cause you to experience [symptoms of anxiety](#) or depression.

Manipulation isn't exclusive to family and romantic relationships. It can also turn up in friendships and even work-related relationships.

Manipulation can also happen on a large scale through media coverage, advertising, or political campaigns.

6 Signs of manipulation in a relationship

There are several signs to look out for that may indicate you're experiencing manipulation in your relationship.

1. You try to ignore your gut

The first red flag may be that gut feeling that something isn't right or that you persistently end up doing things you don't want to. You may ignore this feeling and try to convince yourself that everything's OK.

The phrase "trust your gut" is particularly useful when you think you might be experiencing manipulation.

For example, say you're upset because it seems that your partner is always on their phone during your dates. You bring it up with them, but you notice that they get really mad, really quick.

The conversation then turns to how you seem to have ruined your special date by causing an argument. So, you forget about what you wanted to say and try to appease them instead. Meanwhile, your partner checks their phone again.

“What just happened?” you ask yourself, but brush it off because you don’t want to create more friction.

2. You wonder: Is it you?

If you’re starting to doubt yourself and your own motives, you may be on the receiving end of a manipulation tactic.

Maybe you were once confident in your ability to handle a particular situation, and now you’re beginning to question your capabilities. You may even question whether you’re “the problem” in the relationship.

For example, you try telling your partner again how you feel about them spending so much time on their phone. But they say that you do it too and that you’re always trying to find a reason to fight.

You don’t feel this is actually the case, but after the third time you hear this argument, you wonder if the problem is you’re not letting go of the small things. Maybe you could just “chill” and enjoy the evening.

3. You feel guilty

A common sign that someone may be emotionally manipulating you may be that you’ve started to feel guilty or embarrassed for acting in certain ways in the relationship.

For example, you work two jobs and hardly have time for yourself. Then comes your first day off in months, and you decide to spend it at home, in your PJs, watching TV.

When you tell this to your mother, you notice she seems upset. When you ask her what’s wrong, she tells you she can’t believe you’re not coming to visit her on your day off. You suddenly feel so guilty that you end up spending your day helping her around her home.

Although this scenario can play this way for many different reasons, it’s a red flag if you persistently feel guilty for not saying or doing what you want to.

The manipulator is expressing displeasure about something you say or do, particularly when you attempt to establish boundaries. Then, you end up giving in to make the other person happy and relieve your guilt.

4. Your sense of self is blurred

A common sign of manipulation in relationships is when you start losing a sense of who you are after following someone else's overt or covert demands to give up your opinions and interests.

In some romantic couples, one partner may adopt the other person's lifestyle and interests to avoid conflict, for example.

It may be that your partner persistently avoids spending time with your friends and family or doing things that you enjoy. If you want to spend time with them, you seem to have to do what *they* want.

In family relationships, it may be that you don't feel you can fully express who you are as a person as well as your life choices, and you may act differently when you're around them.

5. You walk on eggshells

Perhaps you think of fear as an intense emotion or reaction to a threat. But fear can also manifest as a hesitation to act or say certain things in order to avoid conflict or friction.

You may not even be aware of how you feel — you just automatically avoid certain topics or actions.

Some people may use anger as a manipulation tactic. Their outbursts can get other people to back off or change their behavior to avoid the reaction.

You may see this dynamic when a parent warns their child not to do something or else the other parent may get mad.

As an adult, you may also become hyperaware of your behaviors or

experience signs of anxiety without a clear trigger. You could think about every decision in terms of, “What will the other person do?”

For example, you may want to go to your friend’s birthday party, but you know your partner doesn’t like them. Last time you spent time with your friend, your partner didn’t speak to you for hours.

This time, you think about it twice before accepting the invitation, anticipating that you may have to deal with your partner’s displeasure if you do.

6. You begin to question your mental health

Not only can manipulation cause stress and anxiety, but it can also make you feel confused and insecure about your behaviors and emotions.

You may begin to wonder if your reactions are symptoms of mental health conditions.

Manipulation tactics like [gaslighting](#) are most often the cause of these feelings.

For example, you’re discussing your next vacation with your partner, and they ask why you’re not considering Cancun.

You remind them that when they visited last time, they say they had a terrible time. They reply, “I never said such a thing! You imagined it.”

You’re convinced they did complain several times and said they wouldn’t return to this place. But maybe you did imagine it? After all, according to your partner, it seems to happen to you often.

When someone constantly gaslights you, you start to question your memory and well-being to the point that you’re not sure whether certain things happened at all. “Curiously” enough, it only seems to happen to you around this person.

What are manipulation tactics?

There are different types of manipulation. Three of the most common ones are:

- **Guilt induction.** The person manipulating you may imply something negative has happened to you because of someone else, or they may play on your insecurities to make you feel guilty. This includes [playing the victim](#).
- **Ingratiation.** They may deliberately establish themselves in your good graces to get something from you or to get ahead.
- **Deceit.** They may be dishonest by misrepresenting or hiding the truth.

But manipulation in relationships can also come in other packages that may not be as straightforward or easy to identify.

Other [manipulation techniques](#) may include:

- **Love-bombing.** They may give you intense and persistent attention and affection to quickly create emotional interest and dependency.
- **Gaslighting.** They may dismiss you to make you doubt and [question yourself](#).
- **Passive-aggressive behavior.** They might make sarcastic comments or jokes that can be later dismissed with “I was just joking” or “You take everything too personally.”
- **Triangulation.** They might bring another person into the mix to justify an opinion or make you feel insecure.
- **Covert or overt threats.** They may want to instill fear in you with certain comments or behaviors.
- **Silent treatment.** They may ignore you or cease talking to you as a form of emotional punishment.

Why do some people use manipulation tactics?

Not everyone who manipulates is actually aware they do. They may think

that's how relationships work or even believe you manipulate them too and they need to respond.

In some instances, they may be aware of their actions but not of how they affect you.

Then, there are those who play [manipulation games](#), knowing full well what they're doing and what impact these actions have on others.

This doesn't necessarily make them the "bad guy." Instead, it may indicate that they're living with a mental health condition that could require professional support.

Although [research](#) suggests that most people engage in some form of manipulation from time to time, people who use manipulative tactics regularly may have complex reasons for their need for control.

These reasons may include:

- having a [cluster B personality disorder](#), such as narcissistic personality disorder (NPD) or histrionic personality disorder
- having been raised in a household where manipulation tactics were typically used
- fearing losing control or being judged
- having poor communication skills that hamper the ability to communicate needs effectively
- engaging in defense mechanisms
- having an [anxious attachment style](#)

How to protect yourself

Identifying the signs of manipulation in relationships is the first step to protecting yourself. Here are some other precautions you can take:

Be aware of your emotions as you interact with someone

Try to pay attention to how you feel around this person.

If you experience uncomfortable emotions like self-doubt, fear, or guilt, consider taking some time away from them to think clearly about what's happening.

Keep the conversation on topic

People who use manipulation tactics often divert conversations off subject. This could be to either distract you from the real issue or to further their goal of leading the interaction.

Remaining laser-focused on the topic can help prevent the conversation from going in the direction they desire.

Establish boundaries

Unclear boundaries in relationships can make it easier for manipulation to occur. It can be helpful to identify the [boundaries you'd like to establish](#) in this relationship and work towards implementing them.

Although it's easier to establish boundaries early in a relationship, it's never too late to consider gently yet firmly communicating what you will or won't tolerate.

Can someone who uses manipulation tactics change?

Most people can change when they decide to do so and get the support they require for this. However, when someone's not aware of their behaviors or they don't have the desire to change, this transition is less likely.

This is why it's important to focus on yourself and what you want out of the relationship. The rest may not be up to you.

Let's recap

Although everyone occasionally uses manipulation tactics, some people use them persistently in relationships.

Some manipulation techniques may be harder to spot, but identifying them may help you stay protected and make decisions about your relationship.

Staying in a relationship where manipulation tactics are constantly used may have a great impact on your confidence and mental health.

Change is possible, but it's up to the other person to initiate it. This is why it's important to focus on yourself first and come up with ways to establish clear boundaries.

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