

Locations: Abu Dhabi | Canada | Florida | London | Nevada | Ohio



 What can we help you find?

Search

September 4, 2020 / [Health Conditions](#) / [Mental Health](#)

How To Heal From Emotional Abuse

Regain your footing so you can move forward





Emotional abuse may not leave physical bruises, but it often leaves behind deep, lingering wounds.

Emotional abuse, also known as psychological abuse, can leave its imprint on your behavior and even your physical health. But it doesn't have to be a lasting legacy. Here's how to start the healing process.

Understanding emotional abuse

The first step to getting [help for emotional abuse](https://health.clevelandclinic.org/how-to-heal-from-emotional-abuse) can be the hardest. This step requires us to recognize the problem. Quite often, people don't realize they're experiencing emotional abuse, says social worker Jillian Williams, LISW-S.

"People often say 'That's just the way my partner or parent has always been,' " Williams says. "It's not until they start to peel back the behavior that

they realize it's unhealthy.”

Perpetrators of emotional abuse will often do the following:

- Attempt to control you.
- Dismiss your feelings or claim you're too sensitive.
- Isolate you from family and friends.
- Make you doubt yourself or feel ashamed.
- Call you names.
- Withhold affection.
- Yell, intimidate or make threats.

Gaslighting 101

“Gaslighting” is a particularly sinister type of emotional abuse. The abuser might try to make you feel like you're losing your mind. They might claim, “I never said that” or “I never did that.” They might even hide objects, so their victims feel out of control.

“The goal is to make you feel responsible for what's happening,” Williams says. “You begin to question your reality, who you are as a person and what you know to be true.”

Emotional abuse recovery tips

It can take time to heal from an emotionally abusive relationship, Williams says. A mental health professional can help you recover. But there are also strategies you can use on your own to regain your footing.

Write it all down

“I encourage people to start [journaling](#) their reality,” Williams says. A classic strategy for emotional abusers is to make you doubt yourself. So write down everything — what you did, what you said, what you’re feeling.

By keeping a record of your life, you can look back when you’re doubting yourself. Confirming that your memories match with that record will help you trust yourself more.

Stop blaming yourself

If you’ve experienced emotional abuse, you might have absorbed the (untrue) message that it’s somehow your fault or that you deserve it. Think again.

“It’s not about you. It’s about the abuser’s [need to control you](#),” Williams says. “Remind yourself — over and over, if necessary — that it isn’t your fault.”

Don’t engage

If you’re in a situation where you still need to interact with an emotional abuser, try to step back. It’s not always easy — remember, they’re *trying* to get a reaction out of you. But you don’t have to give them that satisfaction.

“See what happens if you don’t respond. Don’t argue. Don’t apologize,” Williams says. “[Choosing not to engage](#) is one of the most powerful things you can do.”

Question your “normal”

If you grew up in an emotionally volatile home, you might think yelling, intimidating and shaming are normal. “But what you’re used to isn’t necessarily what’s healthy,” Williams says. She recommends taking some time to reflect and question what you think is normal.

Learn to trust

Emotional abuse can leave its stamp on you. People who experienced emotional abuse may fall into similar behavior patterns as adults. One common reaction is to distrust others.

“Intimacy is so scary, you want to run in the opposite direction,” Williams says. But there are plenty of good, kind people out there. Once you spot your trouble with trusting, you can start to chip away at it and begin to let people into your world.

Put yourself on your to-do list

People who grew up in emotionally abusive homes often become [people-pleasers](#), Williams says. “If love was conditional when you were growing up, you might always feel the need to prove your worth,” she explains.

“But if you’re taking care of everyone around you — physically, emotionally, even financially — you can get overwhelmed. Don’t forget to take care of your needs, too.”

Ask for help

It’s a natural tendency to downplay the effects of emotional abuse. “People often think if they’re not feeling extreme pain, they should be able to deal with it on their own,” Williams says.

But asking for help is a form of self-compassion. If you're trying to move on from an emotionally [abusive relationship](#), there's no shame in seeking professional help. "Once you start to recognize emotional abuse, it can help to have someone coaching you through it," she says.



Learn more about our [editorial process](#).

Related Articles



March 25, 2025 / [Mental Health](#)

How To Recognize Bullying and Act Against It

Encourage your child to ignore the bully, seek help from an authority figure and stay with a trusted group of friends



October 24, 2024 / [Sex & Relationships](#)

Understanding Gaslighting: What It Means, How To Recognize It and What To Do

If someone is making you doubt your sense of self and overriding your needs or ignoring your emotions, that someone may be gaslighting you



October 21, 2024 / [Sex & Relationships](#)

Am I Being Gaslighted? Take This Quiz

This 15-question quiz is designed to help you recognize signs of gaslighting tactics and behaviors



October 21, 2024 / [Mental Health](#)

Recognizing the Symptoms of Being Roofied

Sudden changes in mood, behavior, alertness and intoxication level are red flags



October 11, 2024 / [Sex & Relationships](#)

The Power and Control Wheel: A Domestic Violence Model

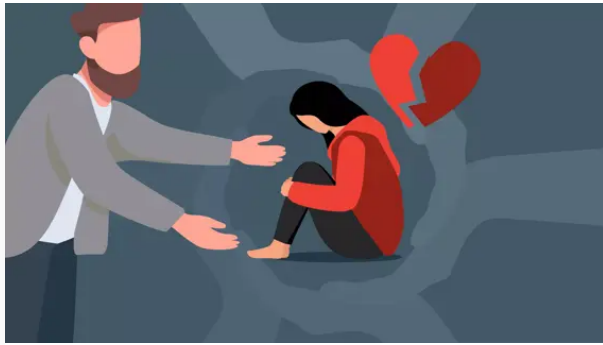
Physical and sexual violence reinforce behaviors that create a power imbalance in an abusive relationship



August 1, 2024 / [Sex & Relationships](#)

Verbal Abuse: What It Is, What It Sounds Like and How To Address It

From depression and disordered eating to headaches and high blood pressure, words can hurt us in all kinds of ways



June 10, 2024 / [Sex & Relationships](#)

What Is the Cycle of Abuse and How Do You Break It?

The cycle of abuse is a simple theory for understanding relationship violence — but the model might not fit everyone's situation

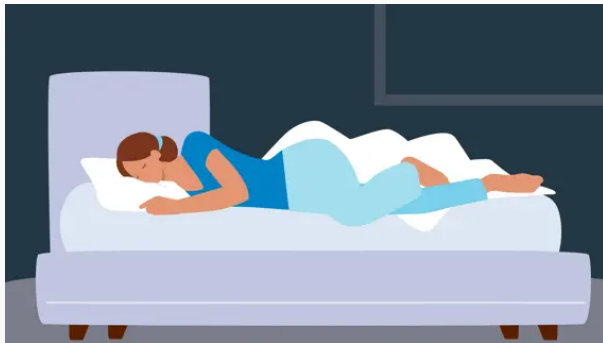


January 19, 2024 / [Sex & Relationships](#)

The Silent Treatment: Causes and Coping

Whether this behavior is abusive depends on the person doing it and their motivation

Trending Topics



[Sleep](#)

Breathing Problems? Try These Sleep Positions

If you're feeling short of breath, sleep can be tough — propping yourself up or sleeping on your side may help



[Mental Health](#)

What Is Anxious Attachment Style — and Do You Have It?

If you fear the unknown or find yourself needing reassurance often,

you may identify with this attachment style



Nutrition

Are Prebiotic Sodas Good for You?

If you're looking to boost your gut health, it's better to get fiber from whole foods

Health Categories to Explore



[Brain & Nervous System](#)



[Children's Health](#)



[Exercise & Fitness](#)



[Heart Health](#)[Men's Health](#)[Mental Health](#)[Nutrition](#)[Orthopaedics](#)[Primary Care](#)[Skin Care & Beauty](#)[Wellness](#)[Women's Health](#)

Other Popular Categories

[Aging Well](#)[Allergies](#)[Cancer Care & Prevention](#)[Chronic Pain](#)[Cold, Flu & Respiratory Illnesses](#)[Diabetes & Endocrinology](#)[Digestive](#)[Ear, Nose & Throat](#)[Eye Care](#)[Infectious Disease](#)[Lung](#)[Oral Health](#)[Parenting](#)[Pregnancy & Childbirth](#)[Recipes](#)[Rheumatology & Immunology](#)[Senior Health](#)[Sex & Relationships](#)[Sleep](#)[Urinary & Kidney Health](#)[Weight Loss](#)

Cleveland Clinic

Home
About Cleveland Clinic
Careers at Cleveland Clinic
Giving
Community Outreach
Research & Innovations
Health Library
Free Health eNewsletters
Resources for Medical Professionals
Media Relations

Site Information & Policies

Send Us Feedback
About this Website
Advertising Policy
Social Media Policy
Copyright, Reprints & Licensing
Website Terms of Use
Website Privacy Policy
Notice of Privacy Practices
Non-Discrimination Notice

Resources

Mobile Apps
Podcasts

9500 Euclid Avenue, Cleveland, Ohio 44195 | [800.223.2273](tel:800.223.2273) | © 2025 Cleveland Clinic. All Rights Reserved.