

# Relationship Abuse, and the *Mentality* of the Abuser

**What is relationship abuse?** Relationship abuse is about the use of threat and coercion to exact compliance from, and/or the subjection of, the other. It is about the exploitation of power for selfish, often narcissistically-driven purposes; whether blatant or subtle, its result is to leave the other feeling, among other things, controlled, intimidated, scared, insecure, confused, angry, ashamed, bullied, threatened and/or helpless.

**Who is the abuser?** The abuser is anyone who, in a particular relationship, utilizes this pattern of relating.

**What is emotional abuse?** Emotional abuse is abuse (as defined above) that hasn't taken (yet) a physical form. It may be verbal abuse, or non-verbal, passive-aggressive abuse. Emotional abuse is a serious, destructive, *insidiously demeaning* and toxic form of hostility and disrespect. Because it doesn't leave the tangible evidence that battering sometimes does, its presence is thus easier to dismiss, trivialize, or deny. Many sufferers of emotional abuse do not recognize or conceptualize their suffering as stemming from abuse.

**What is battering?** Battering is relationship abuse in a physical form. It involves the physical use of force, or the *threat of force*, to intimidate, terrify, subjugate, and/or avenge the other. Batterers may batter once, rarely, or frequently. Batterers, in their self-righteous rage, can kill a partner and/or those close to her. Even if they don't kill their victims, they leave them in relative states of terror.

**Are men or women more abusive?** Because abuse is, above all, an exploitation of another's vulnerability, men, if only by virtue of their relative physical size and strength advantage over women (not to mention other culturally embedded power advantages men still enjoy over women), generally are in more conducive positions to be abusive than women. That's to say, it's easier, generally, for a man to leave a woman's sense of safety threatened than for a woman to leave a man's. There are many exceptions to this rule, of course. Women can be abusive, too, and the abused man is to be taken very seriously. In fact, it is important that clinicians not, from prejudice and bias, dismiss the reality that female abuse of men, especially emotional abuse, exists (and not rarely). But women feel the impact of abuse in relationships in far greater numbers, typically more deeply and, usually, more dangerously, than men.

**Abuse is in the eye of the victim:** If you feel abused, or think you're being abused, there's a pretty good chance you are right. But keep this in mind: the abusive personality, tellingly, will have very little genuine interest in your perceptions in the first place; he (or she) will probably dismiss, trivialize, minimize, and/ or deny them. Such a contemptuous attitude can be confirming of abuse. In contrast, a non-abusive individual,

even if mystified by your allegations of abuse, will probably feel some concern that you experience him/her that way.

**What if the individual alleging abuse is outright paranoid and irrational?** It is true that allegations of abuse don't automatically equal guilt. But, as noted above, if the accusation comes seemingly out of left field, the *non-abusive* individual will feel some sensitivity to his partner's experience of him as abusive. Her experience of him as tormenting, as a tormenter, even if it seems a gross distortion of his behavior, will trouble him to some extent. The abusive personality, in contrast, is likely to be dismissive and contemptuous of his partner, unless he's manipulatively trying to weasel his way back into her good graces.

**Abuse is contextual:** When Jerry, a boss, hits on a female subordinate, saying, "You wouldn't want to disappoint me, would you?," this is abusive. He is exploiting his power, brandishing it over her ominously. However, if Jerry, hitting on a stranger later that night, in a bar, says, "Sweetie, you wouldn't want to disappoint me, would you?," she'll probably experience him more as a jerk than abusive. That's because, in the second context, Jerry lacks the power to threaten his bar-stool neighbor's sense of security. What was abusive in the first context, in the second is merely obnoxious (maybe even pathetic).

**Abusers are controlling:** But aren't most of us controlling at times? Sometimes even *very*? What, then, separates your garden variety controlling personality from an *abusively controlling* personality? A couple things: first, motive. Where the motive is to coerce cooperation, to demand cooperation, to remind one's partner who's in charge, this smacks of the abusive mentality. Second: context again. If the person "being controlled" *doesn't feel controlled*, doesn't experience her autonomy and integrity as threatened, then we are probably looking at a less abusive form of control.

**Cooperate with me...or else!** Often a lurking threat accompanies the abuser's requests, or agenda. That threat is, "Cooperate with me...*or else!*" It can be an explicit, but just as often *implicit*, threat. The idea is, "You don't want to disappoint me. Consequences will result from your disappointing me." I find this to be very common among abusers—that is, their communicating of a coercive, perhaps hidden, threat. Seemingly reasonable appeals on the surface may, under the surface, be less appeals than *warnings*, demands.

**Don't defy me!** The abuser expects his demands to be met. In the abusive personality's eyes, when you frustrate his demands, you are defying him. You aren't merely exercising your choice to decide how accommodating you want to be. Either you are totally accommodating, or else you are defying him. Defiance is unacceptable; what is unacceptable is punishable. I can't stress this enough. Here's the formula, with all the euphemistic meanings laid out (the = sign means "*really means*"):

I'm asking that you stop hanging out with that guy=I demand that you stop hanging out with that guy=I expect you to meet my demand=less than your full compliance with my demand=you are defying me=your defiance of me is punishable.

**“I want”=“I must have”=“I’m entitled to have what I want!”:** This is about entitlement. Probably the driving attitudinal engine of the abusive individual’s sensibility is his sense of entitlement. He feels entitled to what he wants, how he wants it, when and where he wants it. He feels entitled to your cooperation, your compliance, your undivided attention, your compassion, your tolerance, your respect, your subserviance, your admiration, etc. Because he feels entitled to these things, he feels he *doesn’t have to earn any of them*. This, of course, is the very nature of entitlement. His are unearned privileges, but their unearned status in no way diminishes his perceived right to these privileges nor his expectation that you will see them not as his requests, but entitlements. Further, the abuser’s rage feeds off his sense of entitlement. Here’s the formula: I’m entitled to your cooperation=you owe me what I’m entitled to (namely, your cooperation)=if you withhold it, I’m entitled to be enraged=in my entitled rage, I’m not responsible for the destructiveness I may cause!

This sets up a whole constellation of rationalizations and justifications the abuser uses to evade responsibility for his immature worldview, and his abusive, destructive imposition of his worldview.