

Hurting Without Hitting: non-physical contact forms of abuse

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NON-PHYSICAL CONTACT ABUSE AND DOMESTIC VIOLENCE

Over the last thirty years, researchers and practitioners in the fields of couple and family therapy, social work and child protection have recognised and defined child abuse and domestic violence. Policies and practice guidelines position practitioners to take protective action when there is risk of physical harm. However, these definitions are based on, or measured by, physical harm or risk of physical harm and there is little recognition of forms of abuse that do not involve physical contact between the perpetrator and the target person (Hamarman *et al.* 2002; O'Hagan 1995). The definitional differences result in significant variations between states and countries concerning the predominance of what can be termed non-physical contact abuse (NPC abuse) (Hamarman *et al.* 2002).

This paper is written from the perspective of a practitioner working in family and relationship counselling. It is written for practitioners and policymakers concerned with the welfare of women and children. The purpose of this paper is twofold. Firstly, it aims to heighten awareness of non-physical contact abuse and highlight the seriousness of the consequences experienced by children, adults who experienced abuse during childhood, and adults currently in abusive relationships. Secondly, it aims to provide clarity in an area that is replete with confusing definitions. A model is provided, with case examples, that distinguishes between forms of NPC abuse within relationships and provides a framework that distinguishes between relationship conflict and domestic violence.

WHAT IS NON-PHYSICAL CONTACT ABUSE?

NPC abuse can be difficult to identify because it leaves no visible injury (Glaser 2002; Royse 1994) and because victims often do not seek help. Professionals find *overt* NPC abuse easiest to identify because it is openly hostile. *Covert* NPC abuse on the other hand, is more subtle and insidious and often disguised as helpful or inadvertent (Marshall 1996). The abuser may deny hostile intent while ignoring and discounting the target person's needs, feelings and opinions. The abuser negatively labels the target person in ways that convey that he or she is worthless, bad, more difficult, less attractive or less desirable than other people. Onlookers may not identify the behaviour as abusive and instead blame the target person for his or her inadequacies (Goldsmith & Freyd 2005).

In the literature, forms of NPC abuse range from hostile verbal comments to something resembling psychological torture. Researchers and authors use a plethora of different terms to label the phenomenon of NPC abuse. Terms such as *verbal abuse*, *emotional abuse*, *psychological abuse*, *psychological violence*, *verbal and symbolic violence*, *emotional or psychological maltreatment* are used interchangeably and it is often unclear as to whether there is a difference in the phenomena to which

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they refer (Black *et al.* 2001; Burnett 1993; Fortin & Chamberland 1995; O'Hagan 1995).

In practice, there is little consensus between professionals about what constitutes abuse or domestic violence when there is no physical abuse involved. Some professionals use the words domestic violence or psychological violence when they are referring to situations in which a family member intimidates through verbal aggression. Other professionals disagree with even putting the word 'abuse' after the words 'emotional' or 'verbal', believing that this somehow minimises the word 'abuse' when it should be saved for those situations in which there is serious risk to life and limb. Yelling at a child hardly equates with breaking his or her leg; injuring a partner hardly equates with calling her names.

This was, in fact, my view until I researched the area. I changed my mind for the following reasons:

- Firstly, NPC abuse works insidiously and is often much more serious than 'just yelling'. Most physical and sexual abuse encompasses forms of verbal and emotional abuse. Psychological maltreatment is a core component in most forms of child abuse (Chamberland *et al.* 2005; Hart *et al.* 1998; Trowell *et al.* 1997) and domestic violence (Schwartz *et al.* 1991; Henning & Klesges 2003).
- Secondly, research demonstrates that the long-term effects of NPC abuse can be just as devastating if not more devastating than the long-term effects of physical abuse. Physical or sexual abuse rarely occurs without some form of accompanying verbal, emotional or psychological abuse. A perpetrator may also use different forms of abuse at different times. A significant proportion of the negative impact of physical violence can be attributed to the coexistence of verbal aggression (Arias & Pape 1999; Fortin & Chamberland 1995; Iwaniec 1995; O'Leary 1999).

IS NON-PHYSICAL CONTACT ABUSE A FORM OF DOMESTIC VIOLENCE?

This leads us to the question, *is NPC abuse, in itself, a form of domestic violence?* The Australian Domestic and Family Violence Clearinghouse favours a definition of 'domestic violence' adopted by the Commonwealth Partnerships Against Domestic

Violence (PADV) program in 1997. This definition includes NPC forms of abuse as a form of domestic violence.

Domestic violence is an abuse of power perpetrated mainly (but not only) by men against women both in relationships and after separation. It occurs when one partner attempts physically or psychologically to dominate and control the other. Domestic violence takes a number of forms. The most commonly acknowledged forms are physical and sexual violence, threats and intimidation, emotional and social abuse and economic deprivation. Many forms of domestic violence are against the law. For many Indigenous people the term family violence is preferred as it encompasses all forms of violence in intimate, family and other relationships of mutual obligation and support.

Australian research indicates that domestic violence is prevalent in the population and that the issue is gendered; i.e. men are predominantly perpetrators and women predominantly victims. The *Personal Safety Survey* carried out in 2005 by the Australian Bureau of Statistics (2006) found that high levels of domestic violence remain prevalent in Australia. The survey showed that from the age of fifteen, 0.9% of men and 2.1% of women had experienced current partner violence, while 15% of women compared to 4.9% of men had experienced violence from a previous partner (p. 11).

The Australian component of the International Violence Against Women Survey (IVAWS) (Mouzos & Makkai, 2004, p. 48) collected information on what it termed psychological abuse, including insults, humiliation, put-downs, restrictions of freedom and constant surveillance. While the majority of women reported never experiencing such behaviours, between 37 and 40% of women did report experiencing some form of controlling behaviour. The IVAWS study found controlling behaviours to be one of the strongest risk factors for intimate partner physical violence.

The children of women who are abused also suffer. The *Personal Safety Survey* (ABS, 2006) found 49% of people surveyed who experienced violence from their current partner had children in their care, and 27% of these said the children had witnessed the violence (p. 11). Furthermore, of the 61% who had children in their care during previous incidents of violence, 36% said the children had witnessed the violence (p. 11). Research has also indicated high

rates of co-occurrence of domestic violence and child abuse (Edleson, 1999; Edleson, 2002).

Clearly, domestic violence is a widespread phenomenon and a significant component of domestic violence is NPC abuse.

We must, therefore, ask: *Is all NPC abuse a form of domestic violence? In some situations, is NPC abuse better understood as 'relationship conflict' than as domestic violence?* This paper will return to these questions after first examining the consequences of NPC abuse and examining more closely the different components of NPC abuse.

THE CONSEQUENCES OF NON-PHYSICAL CONTACT ABUSE

How serious are the long-term consequences of NPC abuse for victims? Research has shown that there are long-term effects of NPC abuse that include physical and mental illness, as well as behavioural and relationship consequences. In the following sections, I will outline the research examining the effects on children, adults abused as children, and adults currently experiencing abuse. (In this overview, I will use the terms verbal, emotional and psychological abuse as they are used by the authors, despite the inconsistency in use of these terms in the literature.)

Consequences for children

Even where direct abuse is not involved, witnessing the abuse of a parent or of one of their siblings has been shown to be extremely traumatic for children. A review of the empirical literature showed that children who are exposed to domestic violence had more health problems, higher levels of depression, more attention difficulties, higher rates of internalising and externalising behavioural problems and less social and cognitive competence than children who were not exposed (Diamond & Muller 2004; Onyskiw 2003).

Also of concern is research which indicates that adolescents who witness their fathers verbally abusing their mothers feel less close to their parents and less affinity towards their families (Winstok & Eisikovits 2003). Witnessing domestic violence has an additional, sometimes overlooked, negative consequence. Mothers who are physically abused (including NPC abuse) are more likely to verbally

abuse their children, thus exacerbating the child's emotional and behavioural problems. Mothers who are able to remain warm, involved and good-natured in their parenting have children with fewer symptoms of post traumatic stress disorder (Rea & Rossman 2005).

It is common for parents to abuse their children verbally. For example, Vissing and Baily's (1996), US study of over three thousand parents found 25% of parents admitted to ten or more incidents in which they verbally abused their children or teenagers in the past year. The frequency of children's behavioural problems correlates with the degree of maternal verbal abuse directed towards them (Moore & Pepler 2006). Boys and girls model verbally abusive behaviour from the same-sex parent and are more likely to become angry and aggressive when the same-sex parent is verbally abusive to them (Loos & Alexander 1997; Winstok & Eisikovits 2003).

When parents verbally abuse their children, they teach them that aggression is an acceptable and appropriate way of getting what they want. Children may fail to learn appropriate interpersonal behaviour and instead, develop a cognitive template that keeps them wary and distrustful of relationships, misinterpreting the benign intentions of others. Fonagy *et al.* (1991) and other attachment researchers refer to this as a problem with 'reflective functioning' – i.e. the inability to correctly interpret the feelings or thoughts of others. In addition, children learn aggression tactics and use these in relating to peers (Lawson 2001; Logan & Graham-Bermann 1999).

The sense of shame experienced by a child who is emotionally abused can, during adolescence, interfere with optimism and the ability to be purposeful. Consequently, they experience feelings of failure and pessimism about their future (Feiring 2005). Emotional abuse during adolescence is one of the serious risk factors for substance abuse (Moran *et al.* 2004).

Long-term consequences, for adults, of childhood non-physical contact abuse

When children who have been emotionally abused grow up, they continue to experience problems in terms of their physical health, mental health and adult relationships.

Physical health consequences

There are physical health consequences of having experienced childhood emotional abuse. Childhood emotional abuse is a predictor of trauma symptoms and negative health outcomes in adult women. In fact, it is a greater predictor of symptoms than having experienced physical abuse as a child. In other words, if you were emotionally abused in childhood, you will be sicker as an adult than if you had not been emotionally abused. It is also likely that you will be sicker than if you had been physically abused (Irving & Ferraro 2006; Taft *et al.* 2006).

Belinda, thirty-five years old, grew up in a family in which both her parents had high expectations of their children achieving academically. While she in fact did well at school, her father remained critical of her. When she was nine years old and her parents divorced, she was required to spend three days a week with her father. During these visits he would often have angry outbursts in which he disparaged her successes, called her names, and compared her unfavourably to her older sister.

Belinda was first diagnosed with clinical depression when she was seventeen and has struggled with depression ever since. When she was twenty-five, she developed fibromyalgia which left her in chronic pain and interfered with her ability to work. In her relationship with her husband, she has frequent angry outbursts, precipitated by her envy of his work success and happy disposition. He withdraws from her, sometimes leaving the house and involving himself more deeply in work.²

One can speculate that if a child's physical development is compromised by ongoing stress resulting from abuse or an abusive environment, that there will be physical health consequences in adulthood (Penza *et al.* 2003).

² This paper has drawn from the author's experiences in conducting therapeutic situations. In order to protect identities, each case example is a compilation of information from several cases. Any similarity to a real person or family is coincidental. The examples are Anglocentric for the most part. Further discussion is necessary to understand how NPC abuse is enacted within Indigenous families and within other cultures, particularly those whose 'psychological family' extends beyond the nuclear family.

Mental health consequences

There are also mental health consequences of having experienced childhood emotional abuse. One of the most frequently documented outcomes of childhood emotional abuse, particularly for women, is a vulnerability to clinical depression and anxiety in adulthood (Taft *et al.* 2006). Internalised criticism, along with a fear of criticism and rejection from others, appears to be at the core of the depressed or anxious symptoms they experience in adulthood (Sachs-Ericsson *et al.* 2006). Adults who are chronically or recurrently depressed frequently have a history of childhood psychological abuse, and this appears to be related to severity – the more severe the abuse, the more severe the depression (Bifulco *et al.* 2002). Childhood emotional abuse within the family, then, is a clear precipitant for later adult depression.

Recent research has demonstrated that traumatic events, particularly during the first decade in life while the brain is still rapidly developing, appear to leave the neuroendocrine stress response systems permanently supersensitive. Individuals are therefore at risk for the development of psychopathology when they encounter additional stressful events in adult life (Penza *et al.* 2003).

Emotional abuse during childhood may contribute to the development of eating disorders (Hund & Espelage 2006; Kent & Waller 2000) and personality disorders. For example, Johnson *et al.*, (2001) found that children who had experienced maternal verbal abuse during childhood were more than three times as likely to experience borderline, narcissistic, paranoid, or schizoid symptoms during adolescence and early adulthood.

Emotional abuse leaves children with a sense of shame and worthlessness that is carried forward into adulthood (Brown 1994; Feiring 2005). For many, shame is the most pervasive and debilitating dimension of their lives as adults. Shame seems to derive from three sources. Firstly there is the feeling of rejection by an important other. Secondly, there is the sense of helplessness and loss of efficacy that results from repeated experiences of failing when attempting to please a parent or authority figure. Thirdly, in some funny quirk of emotional makeup (possibly as a way of not having to face the defects of their parents), children who are emotionally abused grow up thinking that their maltreatment is due to defects of their character (Feiring, 2005). Low self-esteem is intimately linked to this shame,

the feelings of inadequacy and resulting self blame (Feiring 2005; Groen 2003).

Finally, children who have been emotionally abused may grow up to be adults with *alexithymia*, which is the inability to identify one's own feelings. Research is not clear as to the cause of alexithymia. It may be that growing up in an emotionally abusive environment means that children never have their emotional experience reflected back to them in an empathic way and in a manner that gives them words for their feelings. On the other hand, it is also likely that growing up in an abusive environment requires one to repress feelings, develop a false front to present to the world and in the process lose touch with one's own thoughts and feelings. It could also be that the range of expressed emotions in an abusive environment is very limited. The consequence is that these individuals have shallow and labile affect and act out feelings in behaviours (Goldsmith & Freyd 2005). This is clearly problematic for effective adult relationships. Alexithymia has another curious consequence: while individuals report abusive experiences, few identified as having been 'abused' (Goldsmith & Freyd 2005).

James consulted his general practitioner (GP) when he was having difficulties concentrating at work. He said he felt empty and unhappy and that, although he knew that his wife loved him deeply, he could not feel her love. In fact, he said, he could not feel anything. He was successful at work but took no joy in his success. The GP prescribed antidepressants and referred him to therapy. For many months in therapy, James told of the daily events of his present life but did not bring forward any emotional issues. He confided that from time to time, without his wife's knowledge, he would feel compelled to go into venues where he could gamble.

While he knew that he was unhappy, he could not identify any other feelings or identify the source of his unhappiness. When the therapist asked him to recall events from his childhood, he described growing up in a large family, the eldest of several children and the only one from his mother's first marriage. When the therapist pressed for more information, James described episodes that led the therapist to conclude that he had been rejected by his mother and overlooked by his stepfather. Possibly because he was a reminder of his mother's ex-husband, his mother treated him with contempt, verbally

denigrated him and for weeks at a time, and locked him alone in his room each day after school until the next morning. He left home when he was sixteen years old.

Relationship consequences

There are relationship consequences of childhood emotional abuse. One of the most damaging is that the experience of rejection and subsequent shame sensitises the person to rejection in adult relationships and, thereby, to re-experiencing shame again in the future. In fact, it may be the desire to avoid re-experiencing shame that precipitates some men to hide any vulnerability and become controlling or violent in relationships (Goldner *et al.* 1990). Adults who experienced verbal abuse in childhood are more likely to have problems with anger and emotional reactivity in adult intimate relationships (Kennedy *et al.* 2002) and those who were emotionally neglected are more likely to experience loneliness in adulthood (Loos & Alexander, 1997). Aggression from the same-sex parent correlates with the highest incidence of aggression when in an adult intimate relationship and this is particularly true for men.

Protective factors

Why is it that some children who experience emotional abuse do better than others as adults? The duration and the intensity of the abuse explain some of the differences. What also matters is the degree of emotional support available to the child. Where one parent is emotionally abusive and the other parent is emotionally available, the child is likely to do better than when both parents are emotionally neglectful or when the parents have joined together against the child. Similarly, children do better in families where there is greater emotional bonding between family members. A high degree of family cohesion correlates with emotionally abused children having a decreased risk of depression, low self-esteem, aggressive behaviours and unsatisfying personal relationships and a greater likelihood of a better self-concept (Morimoto & Sharma 2004).

The research also shows that another important factor is whether children grow up to develop a problem-solving style in dealing with difficulties they face in life. Having this style helps them feel in control over difficult situations and results in them feeling less depressed and behaving less aggressively (Morimoto & Sharma 2004).

Non-physical contact abuse in adulthood

Adults who are abused in a current relationship may experience both physical and mental health consequences.

Women who are emotionally abused are more likely to experience ill health. When Gottman and his team of researchers observed couples interacting and counted the number of times husbands showed contempt in their facial expressions, they accurately predicted how often the wives would get infectious illnesses over the next four years. Interestingly, the prediction did not work the other way around; they could not predict the number of illnesses in husbands by counting the number of times that wives showed contempt (Gottman 1999).

Psychological abuse is a significant predictor of posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) in adult women (Arias & Pape 1999). Women who are psychologically abused report anxiety, nightmares, intrusive thoughts, and persistent, painful memories. When emotionally flooded with these memories, the women may have impaired judgment and be at increased risk for motor vehicle accidents. Interestingly, physical abuse alone does not predict PTSD symptomatology (Arias & Pape 1999).

Women who are emotionally abused experience reduced self-esteem, decreased confidence and a sense of shame (Lammers *et al.* 2005). They are even more likely to report feelings of despair and loneliness than women who are physically abused (Loring 1994). They may not recognise that they are being emotionally abused and when they seek help, it is often for symptoms of anxiety and depression.

Some months after Jane quit work and was at home full-time, she visited her GP complaining about heart palpitations and difficulty breathing. She said she felt ill and was afraid she was going to have a heart attack. Diagnosing anxiety attacks, the GP prescribed antidepressants and referred her to therapy. Initially, Jane could not understand what to talk about in therapy because she believed her problems were only physical. She could not identify any problems in her life – her adult children were doing well and she said she had a good marriage. The only problem that she had, she said, was that she frequently became mixed up and confused, feeling like she had ‘cotton wool’ in her brain.

Her husband had said that maybe she was developing early dementia.

It eventually became clear, however, that she became most confused when speaking with her husband and since he had retired from work, she had been seeing much more of him and much less of other people. Her husband had worked in a high status profession and the important decisions in their married life had been based on what he wanted, including the decision to move from Perth to Sydney, leaving behind her mother and sisters.

Eventually, Jane was able to identify that the source of her anxiety was related to years of criticism and putdowns from her husband. She became less anxious as she realised that for years she had been treated like an incompetent child and that this had eroded her self-confidence to the point that ‘I don’t know who I am or what I think’. When she experimented with speaking up, her husband became angry and threatening. She then confided to the therapist that when they had first moved to the city, her husband had several episodes of angry rages and had pushed her several times. Jane had wanted to confide in her sisters but had felt too ashamed and had told no one. Thereafter, she lived in fear that his anger could escalate into violence and was therefore afraid to disagree or assert her opinion with him. In a subsequent session, she returned to tell the therapist that she was plagued by guilt and felt disloyal for having disclosed her husband’s behaviour.

Even women who have not experienced prior abuse, and enter a relationship with their confidence intact, will experience severe physical and psychological effects if they remain in the relationship with a partner who is psychologically abusive.

A MODEL FOR IDENTIFYING NON-PHYSICAL CONTACT ABUSE

Clearly, there are serious long-term consequences for victims of non-physical contact use. What specifically are the core components of non-physical contact abuse that make it so damaging? For the purpose of bringing clarity to this discussion, this paper will distinguish between different forms and levels of abuse by categorising them according to:

- the sequence of time over which the abuse occurs – e.g. an event or a recurring pattern
- the enduring effects of the abuse on the victim and whether these are transient, emotionally debilitating or psychologically debilitating.

Non-physical contact abuse as an event

At its most basic level NPC abuse occurs as an event that is minutes to hours in duration and is identifiable in language that communicates hostility. In the literature it has been most frequently referred to as *verbal abuse*.

Employing a linguistic analysis, Elgin (1993; 1995) broke down verbal abuse into two components: tone and personalised language. In ordinary conversations, our tone is neutral in that it does not inflect certain words and does not use personalised language such as ‘you’, ‘yours’ and ‘mine’.

When a person uses non neutral tone and personalised language in non alarm situations, native speakers interpret hostility (Elgin 1993; 1995). Native speakers of the language can differentiate between alarm and hostility. If a parent says to a teenager ‘YOU have NOT done your homework, AGAIN’ (where capital letters indicate the words that are spoken with emphasis), the teenager would rightly experience the parent as hostile. In contrast, the teenager would not experience the parent as hostile if saying ‘The homework is not done’.

By Elgin’s definition, it is the hostility in the tone rather than the content of the message which makes the communication abusive. Clearly, however, much of what we perceive as verbal abuse in daily life also has negative content embedded in the hostility. Straus and Sweet (1990) defined verbal/symbolic abuse as a communication, either verbal or nonverbal, intended to cause psychological pain to another person, or perceived as having that intent. The content of the message in verbal abuse often degrades, insults, humiliates, ridicules or in some other ways diminishes the dignity of the other person. Everyday examples include name-calling, attacking the character of the other person and the use of profanity directed at the target person.

The verbal abuse may either be in one direction, from the perpetrator to the target person, or it may involve both parties in an escalating argument as the following example illustrates.

Whenever his father told him what to do, Mark, aged sixteen, and his father would argue. These arguments were angry escalations of mutual shouting, name-calling and the use of profanity directed at each other. After these episodes, Mark and then his father, in turn, went to the mother and complained about the other. Mark said that his father hurt his feelings and the father said that Mark was insolent and disrespectful. The mother blamed the father for reacting to Mark and not controlling himself. Despite the conflictual nature of the relationship with his father, Mark was progressing well academically and socially and, importantly, Mark reported that, although he hated the arguments, he still felt close to his father.

As this example shows, verbal abuse may occur within the context of what is experienced as an otherwise close relationship. Because he had the support of his mother, (which simultaneously lessened the father’s power over him), the father’s verbal abuse, while painful and upsetting to him, did not have devastating emotional consequences for Mark or for his functioning as a person outside the family. Therapy in this instance helped family members commit to speaking respectfully to each other and helped the parents agree about age-appropriate ways to interact with their son.

Non-physical contact abuse as emotional abuse

At the next level, NPC abuse can be viewed as an ongoing *process of hostile verbal and nonverbal behaviour* that is likely to have an adverse effect on the target person’s emotional development and behaviour. The perpetrator aims to gain compliance from the other person through acts of both commission and omission (Keashly 1998; Lachkar 2000; Loring 1994). I will refer to this, as is common in the literature, as *emotional abuse*.

Acts of commission include:

- ongoing verbal abuse including explosive outbursts of anger
- discrediting the other person's reputation – spreading negative rumours
- threats of abandonment (or actual periods of abandonment)
- threats to harm the target person or their family members or pets

- inducing terror or fear by threatening to place the target person in a dangerous environment or forcing them to watch violence towards another person or animal (Loring 1994)
- inducing terror or fear in a child by harming or threatening to harm the child's parent (domestic violence)
- corrupting or exploiting the target person by inducing them (often as a result of threatening to harm their children or pets) to commit a crime or, in the case of a children, permitting them to use alcohol, drugs or see pornography (Loring & Beaudoin 2000; Loring & Bolden-Hines 2004) and
- restricting the target person from normal contact with other people (Sable 1999).

Acts of omission include:

- refusing to acknowledge the other person's presence
- withholding of necessary information
- 'the silent treatment' – refusing to communicate for extended periods
- ignoring the other person's attempts to interact
- failure to confirm the other person's needs or feelings
- failure to show appropriate affection or love.

While relationships outside of the family, particularly within the work context, have the potential to be emotionally abusive, emotional abuse is most destructive when it occurs within an attachment relationship – between a parent and child or between intimate partners – because the target person is unable or unwilling to end the relationship. In fact, the paradox is that the distressed target person often seeks comfort and closeness from the abuser, the very person who is the source of the threat.

In the previous example of Mark and his father, the verbal abuse does not qualify as emotional abuse in this model because it was apparently not having a serious detrimental effect on either person's emotional development or well-being. Contrast that with this recollection of events from Maria's childhood with her single-parent mother.

Arguments with Maria's depressed mother often resulted in the mother screaming 'I wish you were dead. I wish you had never been born', after which her mother would withdraw in stony silence, ignoring Maria for up to two weeks. Maria felt desolate and she feared that her mother might commit suicide or leave the family. After a few weeks of this distance, Maria and her mother made up and they enjoyed days or weeks of calm before the cycle began again. Maria said she was upset and depressed during most of her adolescence. She had trouble concentrating and fell behind in her school work.

The mother's behaviour was emotionally abusive because it severely impeded Maria's emotional development and wellbeing. The mother's behaviour was *emotionally abusive* for the following reasons:

- it was directed by a more powerful person towards a dependent target
- emotional abandonment increases loneliness and isolation in the target person.

As the next case study demonstrates, emotional abuse, while more damaging than verbal abuse because of its ongoing nature, does not necessarily destroy the target person's sense of self.

Beatrice and Dan argued every night since their son was born over five years ago. Dan criticised Beatrice for not keeping the house clean, not cooking good enough meals and for not keeping the baby quiet. He called her hopeless and a failure and accused her of having secret relationships with men while he was at work during the day. Beatrice defended herself initially, pointing out the irrationality of his arguments. She said that he never helped with housework or the baby and was often out late at night himself. She felt very lonely in the relationship and over time since their son was born, she struggled with depression. Beatrice always wanted the relationship to work and she didn't believe that Dan was ill-intentioned towards her. She was devastated when Dan revealed that he had been having an affair for five years.

The nature of emotional abuse is such that it increases the target person's loneliness and insecurity, impeding their developmental tasks. The perpetrator's attempts to intimidate or psychologically control, however, are not so great that the target person loses their sense of self.

Non-physical contact abuse as psychological abuse

At the next level, NPC abuse can be viewed as an ongoing *process of hostile verbal and nonverbal behaviour* which, over time, has the effect of eroding or destroying the target person's psychological sense of self.

In the literature, the terms emotional abuse and psychological abuse are often used interchangeably. For the purpose of this discussion, however, I distinguish between the two, defining psychological abuse as behaviour that involves intimidation, threats, manipulation, trickery and a relentless effort to impose the perpetrator's definition on to the victim. The effect on the target person's sense of self and social competence is more than that experienced in the case studies described above. The difference in outcome could be attributed to a range of factors including that:

- the abuser has greater power within the relationship and uses this power to isolate the target person or reinforce the target person's isolation
- the abuser has a social network outside of the relationship that offers a definition of him/herself as competent, knowledgeable or likeable, whereas the target person is isolated and dependent upon the partner's support and validation
- the perpetrator denies, minimises or justifies the psychological injury he or she inflicts in such a way that the target person becomes distraught, confused and distrustful of their own perceptions. As a result, the target person blames him or herself, internalising the abuser's accusations as 'bad', 'mad' or 'inadequate'
- the perpetrator labels any emotional reaction to the abuse as further evidence of the target person's weakness, pathology, deviance or illness
- the target person experiences the abuser as having greater power within the

relationship. This power may be in the form of greater control over financial resources (as when one partner is employed and the other is not, and the employed person maintains control over the family finances). The power may also be interpersonal power wherein one or more family members join together against the target person

- the target person is isolated because of personal circumstances, or because the abuser has intentionally created the isolation
- when the target person reacts emotionally to this situation, the perpetrator labels the reaction as further evidence of the target person's weakness, pathology, deviance or illness.

In family relationships, one spouse or partner may psychologically abuse the other or a parent may psychologically abuse a child. An often unrecognised form of psychological abuse can also occur between siblings (Whipple & Finton 1995).

Psychological abuse between siblings

Some degree of sibling rivalry or conflict will be apparent in all families with two or more children. However, when an older sibling verbally abuses a younger one over a significant period of time, the target sibling loses confidence and fails to develop social competence and a solid sense of self.

After she had taken a near fatal dose of paracetamol, Jessica, aged nineteen, was hospitalised for two weeks. She was diagnosed with depression, prescribed antidepressants and then referred to an outpatient family therapy centre. In the first session, Jessica described how she felt inadequate in her job, had few friends, and although she had wanted one, had never had a boyfriend. She believed that no boy would ever find her attractive and that she had nothing to offer in a relationship. Her parents were concerned, but could offer no explanation for Jessica's difficulties.

The therapist learned that Jessica was the youngest of three children. Her brother, Jason, aged twenty-one, was still living at home and her sister had left home three years ago. The parents had always given Jason special privileges because he was the only boy. For many years,

Jason had treated Jessica with contempt, calling her ‘an ugly dog’, and saying things like ‘no man will ever want you’, ‘you might as well quit your job because they will find out what you are really like anyway’, and ‘my friends think you are disgusting’. He made pig like noises when she entered the room. On one occasion a few years ago, the mother had confronted Jason about his treatment of Jessica. Jason flew into an angry tirade and since then the parents have largely ignored his behaviour. The father had told Jessica that she was too sensitive and that she should ‘get a life’. In therapy sessions, the parents were shocked when the full extent of Jason’s mistreatment was unveiled.

Abuse from a more powerful sibling to a less powerful sibling occurs in a context in which parents either ignore the abuse, privilege or take the side of the abusive sibling or fail to take appropriate action to curtail the abusive behaviour, due to neglect or inattentiveness. As the targeted sibling becomes symptomatic, it becomes easier for both the abuser and other family members to blame the victim.

Psychological abuse in parent-child relationships: the scapegoat

When psychological abuse occurs in parent-child relationships, one or both parents single out a child within the family, a process known as scapegoating (Rushton & Dance 2005). These children are continually defined by the parents as ‘bad’, ‘sick’ or inadequate in some way. The child’s emotions are invalidated in the sense that the parent minimises the child’s distress and interprets the child’s emotional reaction to the hostile treatment as further evidence of something being wrong with the child. Children in these circumstances learn to restrict emotional expression, resulting in chronic emotional inhibition. This is a significant predictor of psychological distress including depression and anxiety symptoms (Krause *et al.* 2003).

Gagnac and Bouchard (2004) developed a typology of family types in which this type of psychological abuse was likely to occur. It was characterised by a scapegoated child, a domineering and intolerant father and a rigid and manipulative mother. There is evidence that the scapegoating pattern is related to covert inter-parental conflict, which was evident in the example of Susan (Bradford & Barber 2005).

Susan, aged twelve, was adopted at birth. Her parents, now in their fifties, had one other daughter, aged fourteen, who was their biological child. The parents were referred to therapy from the school where Susan was failing academically and had difficulty keeping friends. Susan was also stealing money from the parents which she had been using to buy sweets for other children.

Overtly preferring their oldest daughter to Susan, the parents joined together in their rejection of Susan. Sitting closely, side by side, the parents urged each other on in their criticisms of Susan’s behaviour and negative interpretation of her intentions. In this way, they were able to convey to the therapist their strong alliance with each other. Towards Susan, they showed frequent facial signals of contempt and disgust. If Susan tried to explain her behaviour, the parents accused her of manipulating and lying. When the therapist attempted to reframe some of Susan’s behaviour in a more positive light, for example, as ‘seeking closeness’ from them, the parents joined together to attack the therapist for ‘taking Susan’s side’.

In this example, the parents joined together to reject Susan, leaving her no ally to provide a positive definition of herself. Furthermore, Susan’s attempts to define herself differently fed back into her parents’ negative view of her (as manipulative and lying). Not surprisingly, after several therapists had failed to help this family, Susan ran away from home.

Although the author’s experience has been primarily with families with children, it is worth noting that as children grow up, and particularly as parents age and become frail, adult sons or daughters can become psychologically abusive to a dependent parent.

Psychological abuse in marriage or intimate partner relationships

Psychological abuse in intimate partner relationships is characterised by an ongoing pattern of domination, oppression, unrealistic expectations, verbal attacking or silent withdrawal. Typically, there is little sense of emotional connection (Chang 1996). Through repeated episodes over time, the perpetrator undermines the target person’s sense of self through emotional abuse strategies:

- attacks their personhood by ignoring, demeaning, belittling, undermining self-worth, ridiculing traits and criticising behaviour (Sackett & Saunders 1999)
- defines their reality by making them question their own perceptions and judgment
- isolates them by controlling their contact with outside world and support systems (Follinstad & DeHarg 2000).

Because of the abuser's power and domination, the target person eventually believes that they have a serious problem coping with life. They believe the abuse is warranted and hide the situation from others for fear of being labelled. Eventually they become clinically depressed and often, more dependent and attached to the abuser.

Referring to his research with married couples, Tolman *et al.* (1992) grouped psychologically abusive behaviours into the following categories: creation of fear, isolation, monopolisation, economic abuse, degradation, rigid sex role expectations, psychological destabilisation, emotional or interpersonal withholding and contingent expressions of love.

When we talk about psychological abuse in intimate partner relationships we have to talk about gender because here gender is significant. Although there may be no difference in the frequency with which husbands and wives each use verbal abuse (Straus & Sweet 1990), there are gender differences not only in the degree of verbal aggression but also in the degree of distress including fear experienced by the target person. Generally, it is the case that males are more verbally aggressive than females, regardless of whether or not they have a history of psychological or other abuse (Loos & Alexander 1997). When faced with verbal abuse, women experience both greater emotional distress and greater vulnerability to the long-term negative consequences of verbal abuse compared to men (Loos & Alexander 1997; Moore & Pepler 2006). In other words, even in relationships where men and women are both verbally abusive to each other, women suffer greater long-term negative consequences than do men.

While both men and women can be emotionally abusive to each other, psychological abuse is more likely to involve a man as the perpetrator and a woman as the target person (Bancroft 2002; Evans 1992; Tolman *et al.* 1992). We can speculate that this may be the case because:

- Men are more often in a position of greater social power:
 - they earn their own separate income, usually more than the woman
 - they often have greater resources and freedom outside of the relationship in their work context and are less reliant on their partner's definition of them for informing their identity
 - they are less likely to have a rupture in their social definition of themselves by stopping work to have children.
- Stereotypic gender roles prescribe it as natural for men to be dominant. Women may perceive their husbands as having the authority to set rules and standards. Men may perceive themselves as having the right to expect special privileges such as always being seen to be right (Lammers *et al.* 2005).
- Evidence shows that men are more likely to be violent than women and women are more likely to be victims of domestic and family violence than men (ABS 2006).
- Women are more afraid of men's anger and its potential to escalate into physical violence.
- Even a one-off instance early on in the relationship in which the man hits, pushes or shoves his partner is enough to establish his ability to intimidate her thereafter.
- Women are more vulnerable to the effects of emotional abuse.

It is rare for women to present in therapy defining the problem as emotional or psychological abuse from their partner. Instead, the problem is more likely to be anxiety or depression or a relationship problem between the mother and one of the children, as in the following example.

When her teenage daughter became rebellious and defiant, Mary consulted her GP who referred the family to an outpatient family therapy centre. Both parents attended with their son and daughter for the first few sessions. Both parents told the therapist that they were Christians, committed to their church and to their marriage. They said they were in agreement about most things and rarely conflicted. As her relationship with her daughter improved, Mary asked to be

seen alone. In that session, she revealed that she felt unsettled, that her son and daughter were growing up and needing her less and that she felt deeply unhappy but did not know why. She said she had no sense of who she was; she felt like a 'shell of a person'. When administered a standardised test for depression, she scored in the severely depressed category.

Mary gradually revealed that early in their marriage, her husband had been violent several times. When the children were young, she had considered leaving him and moving back to the United Kingdom to live closer to her family but believed that it was wrong to separate the children from their father. Gradually, over several months in therapy, while she struggled with her own feelings of guilt and disloyalty, she began to identify how her husband criticised, demeaned and humiliated her, leaving her feeling anxious and inadequate. In her shame, and because of her husband's demands that she not see any friends without him present, Mary had grown progressively more isolated over the years and now clung to the children.

Psychological abuse erodes identity and sense of self, often resulting in the target person's severe depression and under-functioning. Frequently, target persons, who are usually women or children, do not readily disclose the abuse to others, and frequently cannot admit it to themselves as they feel intense shame and responsibility for the abuse.

IS NON-PHYSICAL CONTACT ABUSE A FORM OF DOMESTIC VIOLENCE?

Using the definition of domestic violence provided earlier, NPC abuse should be regarded as a form of domestic violence when it can also be said that firstly, one partner is attempting to dominate and control the other and secondly, that there is a power differential between the two partners and/or one partner fears the other. Psychological abuse, and in some cases emotional abuse, as defined in this paper, clearly fit the criteria.

As this paper has defined them, and as is clear in the case examples provided, there is significant overlap between the categories of verbal, emotional

and psychological abuse. Emotional abuse almost always incorporates verbal abuse and psychological abuse almost always incorporates emotional abuse (Figure 1).

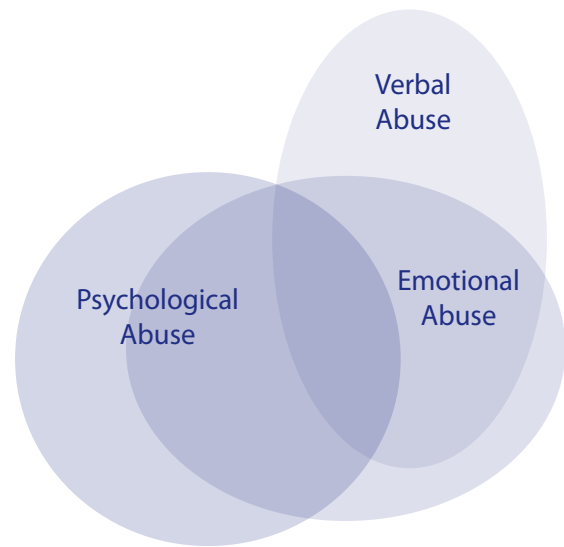


Figure 1

Verbal abuse becomes emotional abuse when it continues over time and has the potential to negatively affect the target person's emotional development and behaviour. Emotional abuse becomes psychological abuse when it continues over a prolonged period, incorporates a power differential and has the potential to erode the target person's sense of self and social competence.

The difficulty in the practice context is that we can only directly observe the tip of the iceberg – verbal abuse and nonverbal signs of contempt. What we cannot directly observe (but which is responsible for the most negative consequences) is a pattern of abusive behaviour that recurs over a prolonged period of time (see Figure 2). The longer the duration, the more vulnerable the victim's developmental stage and the more the victim is dependent upon or afraid of the abuser, then the worse the long-term consequences will be for the victim. To compound the difficulty, the victim may not view her partner's behaviour as problematic or, if she does, she may blame herself and agree with his negative view of her. The victim and her partner may present for help, defining the problem as a 'communication difficulty', or her 'depression and anxiety'.

NPC abuse is like an iceberg where only the tip of the iceberg is visible and the rest is submerged. Practitioners can err in two ways. Firstly, they can

err by assuming that the tip of an iceberg (verbal abuse) indicates a very large submerged iceberg (psychological abuse) when it in fact is only the tip of a small iceberg (See Figure 3). This would be the case, for example, where both parties use name-calling, swearing and putdowns in loud or non-neutral tones, but neither party feels silenced, afraid or has the power to enforce a negative definition of self on the other and have that definition erode the partner's psychological sense of self. Secondly, practitioners can err by assuming that what they can see (verbal abuse) is all there is, overlooking signs of psychological abuse and mistakenly working with the couple on 'communication'.

Figure 2: The Iceberg of psychological abuse

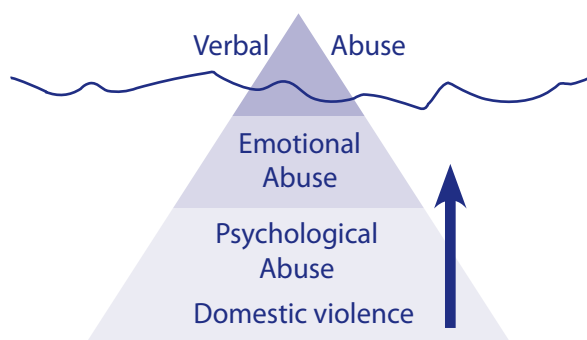


Figure 3: The Iceberg of verbal abuse



IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

Although the victims of NPC abuse rarely identify themselves as abused, the effects of abuse are *writ large* in their distress and despair. Those who work directly with clients need to be alert to the signs and symptoms of emotional and psychological abuse and be able to investigate these further. Depression, anxiety, confusion, low self-esteem, PTSD (flashbacks, intrusive thoughts, painful memories, nightmares) and chronic health problems may all be symptoms of emotional or psychological abuse.

Assessment can be difficult because, firstly, symptoms may result from either *current or past* abuse or *both* and secondly, because clients with these symptoms may not *perceive* themselves as being emotionally or psychologically abused. If these clients are only seen alone and not within the context of their current important relationships, their psychiatric and physical symptoms may be misdiagnosed as illness, rather than as symptomatic of their relationship context. Even when seen in this context, however, practitioners might only see the tip of the iceberg; i.e. verbal abuse, nonverbal signs of contempt or rigid stereotyped gender relations. These signs should be a signal to investigate the frequency and intensity of the episodes of verbal abuse and to note whether they occur in a relationship in which there is an imbalance of power.

A clearer assessment can be made by:

- directing a couple or family members to talk together in the room and attempt to resolve an issue, while the clinician observes
- obtaining from the couple or family members a detailed description of the sequence of behaviours involved in an upsetting episode or conflict
- interviewing the symptomatic client separately to see whether she has a clearer understanding of the partner's behaviour and appears less intimidated. This also gives the opportunity to ask her direct questions.

Using these two sources of information, the clinician is alert to:

- hostility in tone
- the use of criticism and verbal and nonverbal signs of contempt
- the use of threats of abandonment

- invalidation of the other's feelings, thoughts and perspectives rather than an expression of difference, assertion of self and complaints about the other
- withdrawal, confusion, and the inability of the symptomatic person to express a different point of view or to stand up to the other's implicit or explicit putdowns
- the differential effects of the upsetting or conflictual episode on the functioning of those involved
- the need, where appropriate, to refer victims to domestic violence services and male perpetrators to treatment groups for violent and controlling men.

By keeping the above factors in mind, practitioners can ensure that they are not dismissing abuse as simply relationship conflict. In fact, it will become clear that, in some cases, relationship conflict appeared when the target person began to resist the perpetrator, and therefore, in those cases conflict is a sign of increasing health.

NPC abuse is a serious issue. Victims of emotional and psychological abuse experience debilitating long term consequences. Even long after the abuse ceases, the victimised person's health, mental health and social and psychological functioning can be compromised. In some cases these effects can be even greater than the effects of physical abuse and some of the effects attributed to physical abuse may be due to effects of simultaneous psychological abuse.

This paper has presented a model that distinguishes verbal, emotional and psychological abuse in order to both clarify confusion in the use of these terms and to establish the significant differences between each type of abuse in relation to severity and effects. When we are willing to distinguish NPC abuse from relationship conflict, and willing to consider NPC abuse a form of domestic violence, we will be better placed to develop interventions that address the most destructive aspects of relationships.

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