



Characteristics of Verbal Abuse



Verbal abuse is hurtful and usually attacks the nature and abilities of the partner. Over time, the partner may begin to believe that there is something wrong with her or her abilities. She may come to feel that she is the problem, rather than her partner.

Verbal abuse may be overt (through angry outbursts and name-calling) or covert (involving very subtle comments, even something that approaches brainwashing). Overt verbal abuse is usually blaming and accusatory, and consequently confusing to the partner. Covert verbal abuse, which is hidden aggression, is even more confusing to the partner. Its aim is to control her without her knowing.

Verbal abuse is manipulative and controlling. Even disparaging comments may be voiced in an extremely sincere and concerned way. But the goal is to control and manipulate.

Verbal abuse is insidious. The partner's self-esteem gradually diminishes, usually without her realizing it. She may consciously or unconsciously try to change her behavior so as not to upset the abuser.



Verbal abuse is unpredictable. In fact, unpredictability is one of the most significant characteristics of verbal abuse. The partner is stunned, shocked, and thrown off balance by her mate's sarcasm, angry jab, put-down, or hurtful comment.

Verbal abuse is not a side issue. It is *the* issue in the relationship. When a couple is having an argument about a real issue, the issue can be resolved. In a verbally abusive relationship, there is no specific conflict. The issue is the abuse, and this issue is not resolved. There is no closure.

Verbal abuse expresses a double message. There is incongruence between the way the abuser speaks and his real feelings. For example, he may sound very sincere and honest while he is telling his partner what is wrong with her.

Verbal abuse usually escalates, increasing in intensity, frequency, and variety. The verbal abuse may begin with put-downs disguised as jokes. Later other forms might surface. Sometimes the verbal abuse may escalate into physical abuse, starting with "accidental" shoves, pushes, and bumps.

<http://www.probe.org/docs/falguilt.html>

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