



Emotional and Spiritual Abuse

Basic Dynamics, Definitions, and Examples

Emotional abuse can be hard to define because it can encompass a range of behaviors that often leave victims confused and stunned. Emotional abuse is not usually a single event but a pattern of controlling behavior.

Emotional abuse is a pattern whereby a person in a position of authority and/or trust uses that position to domineer and control others through behaviors such as shaming, dismissing, bullying, threatening, intimidating, humiliating, degrading, or insulting.

Healthy communities respect appropriate relational and emotional boundaries. As much as leaders are called to impart and embody wisdom and take responsibility for decisions, godly leaders do not domineer, control, or usurp agency from others. Healthy leaders focus on setting an example, equipping, listening, valuing others, and empowering others instead of making all of the decisions alone or ordering the lives of others.

All people are made in the image of God with inherent dignity and worth. There is never any justification to objectify, insult, demean, humiliate, threaten, shame, or rage at another person no matter what they have done.

When we use our power to dehumanize or insult or objectify others (especially those who are more vulnerable or downtrodden) we are ultimately insulting God:
Proverbs 14:31a, “Whoever oppresses a poor man insults his Maker...”
Proverbs 17:5a, “Whoever mocks the poor insults his Maker...”

Common categories and examples of Emotional Abuse:

1. Insults and Name Calling:

- Name-calling and put-downs
- Any language or outbursts that objectify or degrade or shame others.
- Refusing to use your name
- Using a tone of contempt and sarcasm
- Using jokes as a cover to insult.
- “You are worthless.”
- “Shouldn’t you be home with the kids making sandwiches?”
- “You sure are easily entertained.”

2. Intimidation and Threats

- Shouting, outbursts, and unpredictable behavior that keeps everyone on edge.

- Threatening body language (chest out, looks of contempt)
- Positioning themselves close to you in order to intimidate you.
- Direct threats about your job or standing in the team.
- Cornering you so you can't leave a room.
- Slamming a table, wall, or other behavior that frightens.
- Using personal information or other vulnerabilities to control or intimidate you.

3. Humiliation

- Pointing out your flaws or mistakes in front of others.
- Making fun of you (often jokes give plausible deniability for inappropriate behavior).
- Forcing you to talk about something private you don't want to talk about.
- Revealing something personal you shared in confidence.

4. Ignoring

- Acting like you are not there
- Not looking at you or listening to you when you talk.
- Meeting with other team members formally or informally without you there.
- Never following up when there is an issue to see if it is resolved.
- Ignoring your comments and contributions.
- Never asking you what you need or what you think.

5. Dismissing Your Perspective

- Always opposing your ideas or dismissing them quickly or shutting you down.
- Interrupting or talking over you.
- Telling you what you think or feel is not what you think or feel.
- Explaining your intentions to you.
- "You take everything the wrong way."
- "You're too sensitive."
- "No one asked you for your opinion."

6. Domineering

- Controlling information, decisions, and what can and cannot be discussed.
- "What I say goes."
- "You don't need to know that information." (when it is something that impacts them).
- "If you want to be on this team you have to accept my leadership."
- "I've made my decision and I'm not going to discuss it."
- "This is just my leadership style. I've been doing this so much longer than you please show a little respect."
- "This is what you signed up for. Get on board or get off."

7. Dismissing Your Agency

- Telling you what to do in your personal life - such as who to date or marry or seeking to direct your life decisions such as your career.
- Seeking a mentoring relationship where their role is to make decisions for you.

- Seeking to direct your finances or take control of your finances.

8. Denial, Minimizing, Justifying, Gaslighting, and Blame when Accountability is Pursued

- “I never said that.”
- “I don’t know where you got that.”
- “That conversation never happened.”
- “You are making that up.”
- “You are getting upset about nothing.”
- “You have got to be crazy.”
- “He would never say anything like that.”
- “If you hadn’t been so _____, I never would have...”

Spiritual Abuse is a form of emotional abuse. It is essentially emotional abuse with a spiritual dimension. It is abuse using the tools of religion to control and domineer. Like emotional abuse, spiritual abuse is typically understood as a pattern whereby a person in a position of authority and/or trust uses that position along with a variety of spiritual tactics to domineer and control others through behaviors such as shaming, dismissing, bullying, threatening, intimidating, humiliating, degrading, or insulting.

Examples include:

- Use of God, religious ideology, precepts, tradition, or sacred texts to harm or control
- Controlling others through spiritual means is often accomplished through fear, guilt, and shame
- Compelling a person to engage in religious acts against his or her will
- Abuse that occurs in a religious context or by a religious leader
- Invoking of divine authority to manipulate a person into meeting the needs of the abuser
- Using spirituality or spiritual authority to dismiss a person’s perspective, agency, or value.
- Attempts to use the divine, sacred texts, sacred tradition, theology, or spirituality to put their leadership or decisions beyond questioning or accountability (in extreme cases equating the leader’s decisions with God and opposition with opposing God)
- Attempts to spiritualize or justify harm using the divine, sacred texts, sacred tradition, theology, or spirituality.

Many acts of abuse in a religious environment will have a spiritual dimension. Spiritual abuse is often connected to other forms of abuse.

Escaping a Maze of Spiritual Abuse by Lisa Oakley and Justin Humphreys (SPCK Publishing, 2019) has helpful language and categories on spiritual abuse:

Spiritual abuse is a form of emotional and psychological abuse. It is characterised by a systematic pattern of coercive and controlling behaviour in a religious context. Spiritual abuse can have a deeply damaging impact on those who experience it and can be experienced in a variety of different relationships. This abuse may include:

- *Manipulation and exploitation*
- *Enforced accountability*
- *Requirements for secrecy and silence*

- *Coercion to conform, for example, seeking to enforce rather than encourage behavioural changes; failing to allow an individual autonomy to make their own choices*
- *Exercising control through using sacred texts or teaching to coerce behaviour*
- *Requirement of obedience to the abuser*
- *The suggestion that the abuser has a 'divine' position*
- *Isolation as a means of punishment*
- *Superiority and elitism*

A person can cause emotional and spiritual harm without “emotionally abusing” or being an “emotionally or spiritually abusive person.” A pastor tells a woman she needs to have faith and move on from her sexual assault. He doesn’t understand how this causes her deep pain because she would love to heal and move forward. He doesn’t have the tools to help her heal or understand trauma. She suffered a deep wound to her person and the resulting trauma keeps her stuck. He is a caring pastor. He wants to help her. He is not controlling or domineering. He is not spiritually abusive. But he has caused spiritual harm.

Sadly, spiritually and emotionally abusive environments are not easy to change because the leaders hold so much power and actually maintain power through these tactics. Often the only option for lay persons is to seek out a healthier community.

Common Impacts of Emotional and Spiritual Abuse

The impacts of emotional and spiritual abuse can be as severe or more severe than physical and sexual abuse, including experiencing PTSD.

Common impacts include:

1. Common Emotional Impacts

- Anger
- Confusion
- Betrayal
- Grief
- Guilt
- Shame
- Humiliation
- Violation
- Fear
- Powerlessness

2. Common Physical Impacts

- Loss of Sleep
- Loss of Appetite
- Loss of Focus
- Increased Stress Levels
- Headaches
- Fatigue

3. Common Mental Health Impacts

- Anxiety (e.g. Panic Attacks)
- Depression
- PTSD
- Substance abuse
- Self-harm
- Loss of Motivation

4. Common Spiritual Impacts

- Loss of Safety in Church
- Feeling Betrayal by God, the Church, and Spiritual Leaders
- Feeling Distance from God
- Former spiritual places and practices can be triggering.
- Feeling Spirituality is Tainted

Victims of abuse should be treated with great compassion and never blamed for the abuse.

We should all be prepared to respond with empathy:

- “I’m so sorry.”
- “This is not your fault.”
- “How can I support you?”

Seek trauma informed care when you experience symptoms of trauma if possible from professionals who are licensed. Symptoms may include:

- Nightmares and Sleep Trouble
- Hyper-vigilance
- Intrusive Thoughts, Terror (such as flashbacks or panic attacks)
- Sharp Changes in Behavior
- Depression and Anxiety
- Shutting Down, Numbing, Lack of Focus
- Self-harm (e.g. cutting, eating disorders, suicide)

Trauma can lead to an over-active stress response. Attention to our overall health can help manage this better:

1. Sleep
2. Exercise
3. Nutrition
4. Healthy Relationships
5. Mental Health

Trauma-informed communities can support healing by encourage practices such as:

- Prioritizing the importance of safety
- Affirming our God-given agency
- Focusing on validating dignity rather than trying to “fix” someone in pain
- Giving survivors agency over when and to whom to open up to and tell their story.
- Encouraging lament and expressing negative emotions rather than suppressing them (emotions such as anger, betrayal, grief, confusion are all normal in the wake of abuse)

- Avoiding spiritual platitudes to minimize or move on quick from pain
- Avoiding any form of minimizing abuse or blaming victims
- Encouraging the setting of boundaries

Key Spiritual Abuse Resources

- *Escaping the Maze of Spiritual Abuse: Creating Healthy Christian Cultures* by Lisa Oakley and Justin Humphreys
- *Redeeming Power: Understanding Authority and Abuse in the Church* by Diane Langberg
- *The Cry of Tamar: Violence against Women and the Church's Response* by Pamela Cooper-White
- *Something's Not Right* by Wade Mullen
- *When Narcissism Comes to Church: Healing Your Community from Emotional and Spiritual Abuse* by Chuck DeGroat
- *This Little Light: Beyond a Baptist Preacher Predator and His Gang* by Christa Brown
- "Toward a More Trauma-Informed Church: Equipping Faith Communities to Prevent and Respond to Abuse" by Pete Singer