

# When Words Are Used As Weapons: Verbal Abuse

## *(Part 1 of a 4-part series)*

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Statistics show that domestic violence often begins with emotional abuse, which includes verbal abuse. The following summarizes what is known about verbal abuse and the impact it has on women, men, children, families, and communities.

*(NOTE: The majority of abused adults are women, and most abusers are male; therefore, respective pronouns will be used in this material. It is important to note, however, that men also may be abused.)*

*“Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words can never hurt me.”*

Do you remember hearing or saying this when you were a child? How much wiser we become as we mature into adulthood and realize that words can indeed be weapons; words can hurt very much!

Those who are verbally abused often think they are at fault and may have caused the abuse — they haven’t! Some even believe the terrible things said about them. Why would someone who supposedly loves another say things to make their partner feel sick inside, betrayed, and confused?

### Why Domestic Violence Occurs

Gaining dominance and control over someone are two of the driving forces behind domestic violence.

Physical and sexual violence are tools used by the abuser to gain control and dominance in the relationship. There are other types of partner abuse that are often less obvious to outsiders, such as economic abuse, spiritual abuse, manipulation, threats, using children, and emotional abuse, which includes verbal abuse (*Figure 1*). Verbal abuse can be used by either partner in a couple.

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Most physical and sexual abuse begins with verbal aggression or abuse. In a study conducted with rural women, emotional abuse, which includes verbal abuse, was endured by 100 percent of women living with a physically abusive partner (Bosch & Bergen, 2006). One woman who was verbally abused reported that “the soul dies a slow death.”

When verbal combat leads to physical assault, men have the distinct advantage because men are usually stronger than women and often inflict physical harm. Those abused through physical violence are primarily women; in fact, 95 percent of reported abuse survivors are female.

Although abusers are canny and use tactics to hurt their partners where clothing often hides the marks, physical abuse is relatively easy to identify and assess — you can see a black eye or broken bone. But verbal abuse is difficult to measure and may be interpreted by some as a bad habit, strong expression, or “just the way the person talks.” Most laws do not define verbal abuse, and most instances of verbal abuse go unreported.

Given the physical differences between men and women and the fact that verbal abuse nearly always precedes physical assault, it is necessary to be aware of the frequent attack of words some women experience. Women and men, whether they are parents, advocates, professionals, teachers, neighbors or family members must work together to stop verbal abuse.

### What is verbal abuse?

Verbal abuse is sometimes disguised as good-natured humor or pet names; however, the receiver knows differently by the tone of the voice and the hurt and embarrassment she experiences. If someone feels confused, frustrated, rejected, humiliated, sad, disappointed, shocked, or fearful after something is said, verbal abuse has likely occurred. Verbally assaulted women frequently try harder to explain themselves and to understand what was said or was meant to be said. They try to be understood and to figure out what they did wrong in the conversation.



Adapted with permission by Kathy Bosch, University of Nebraska–Lincoln: Domestic Abuse Intervention Project, Duluth, Minnesota, 1998.

Figure 1. Abusers rely on a variety of threatening behavior to gain dominance and control over another person.

The result is an assaulted person who tries to communicate with and understand their partner, but whose attempts are useless because the assailant works at keeping his partner confused and unbalanced. The abuser tries to maintain dominance and control over the situation and his partner. Often the assaulted individual will think, "If only I would try harder, be more understanding and patient, he would be kind and caring to me. No one can be cruel to someone they love." What the assaulted person may not understand is that the verbal abuser often lacks skills to effectively communicate his true feelings and beliefs. However, this is no excuse for abuse.

The abuser often demonstrates feelings of uncertainty, fear, insecurity, and anxiety as anger. He is unwilling to share his feelings with his partner. He distances himself by using verbal weapons that confuse and hurt. Regardless of his real or perceived inadequacies, verbal and/or physical abuse is unacceptable and should be stopped. Abuse of any form is a learned behavior. It is the abuser's choice to use abusive behaviors. He may also choose to end the abuse.

Verbal abuse might end if the abuser makes a personal commitment and willingness to change behavior with counseling and therapy. Those suffering verbal abuse may attempt to seek help through counseling, treatment, and

support from an extended network. However, they rarely call for assistance.

It is often difficult for professionals to validate verbal abuse and for assaulted persons to get appropriate help. Understanding the types of verbal abuse and knowing about available resources are two ways individuals might arm themselves. It is also a way for professionals and other advocates to better teach abusers who want to change alternative ways of communicating.

### **Teen Dating Violence**

Research conducted at University of Nebraska (Xia & Bosch, 2006) on teen dating violence found that both rural and urban females tended to be as verbally aggressive as males, although males were more physically aggressive. In many cases, there wasn't much safety net or advocacy for young women needing assistance. In rural areas rumors spread more easily and confidentiality was broken more easily than in urban areas. Education regarding dating abuse was very limited to the teenagers in the school system who perhaps received it in some health classes; although, some teens felt that teachers were helpful if specifically asked for help. For the most part, teens felt their school and communities were lacking in response to dating violence education. Parents

generally provided little sex education and little education regarding dating violence and verbal abuse.

### **References**

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**Index: Families  
Relationships**

Issued November 2007

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