

# UNDERSTANDING “WHAT IS ORIGINAL ABUSE?” IS THE FIRST STEP TO HEALING.

## COVERT ABUSE Hidden Original Abuse

Covert Original Abuse is considered one of the most destructive forms of abuse, second only to life-threatening battery. The reason this is so is because it significantly harms one's perceptions, memories, thinking, and ultimately, sanity. Covert Emotional Abuse is difficult to identify and difficult to confront. In overt emotional abuse, the verbal assaults or concrete manipulations are much more obvious to the victim, but covert abuse confuses, causes profound self-doubt, and questions reality. Covert abuse is intended to exert control of another. Being alone as a recipient of the abuse causes a bewildering inability to sort out one's traumatic experience.

Even a single covert behavior in a repeated pattern is enough to be destructive to an individual or relationship, but multiple patterns are exponentially harmful to a victim in terms of their ability to understand what is happening: the victim becomes unable to identify their experience, find support, confront the abuser, or free themselves of these insidious manipulations. Even worse, prolonged confusion and stress states not only compromise the victim's ability to think and function but have greater consequences to their physical health through adrenaline and stress hormone spikes and a severely weakened immune system, both of which make them much more vulnerable to disease and collapse. These patterns can look different from person to person and situation to situation: one individual may break out in rashes, another may begin fainting, another may end up in the ER with a dangerously low white blood count. These symptoms are expressions of the impact upon one's endocrine, immunological, and biochemical systems. If these symptoms are not taken seriously or are minimized by the medical community (see Double Abuse®) the consequences can be life-threatening. This is why when persons of authority over-confront the victim and minimize the truth and severity of their experience, they are contributing to an escalation of the victim's decline. To begin to understand Covert Emotional Abuse, let's first describe the characteristics of the abuser's aggressive or defensive actions whose motives are to avoid responsibility and maintain control and their sense of stature:

**Blaming and reverse blaming:** In blaming, issues are always one-sided with the problem being laid at the victim's feet. "This is your fault" is a common phrase. If there is a persistent pattern of blaming, domestic violence is present. In reverse blaming, the abuser converts the concerns or corrections of the victim into being their problem: "If you'd stop doing ....., then I wouldn't" ....., or "you're too critical", etc.

**Broken promises:** Making promises to do certain things or to change, then denying ever making them, or justify not keeping them, or saying they forgot.

**Cover-ups:** Doing a molehill of good to cover up a mountain of bad: Often the behavior of an abuser living a double-life and who cannot come to terms with their own abusive enactments. Abusers may seek opportunities to serve the community or church through volunteerism or service leadership to cover their truth that plays out behind closed doors.

**Crazy making behaviors:** A "cousin" of gaslighting (see below). Intentional distortions of reality for the purpose of making the victim feel confused or "crazy". Naming crazy-making behaviors of the abusers will always be met with their feigned disbelief, piling on distractions, or concrete denial.

**Creating a cloud of confusion:** Telling false and grandiose stories to third parties in order to undermine objectively and manipulate the end result or outcome.

**Deflection:** The abuser refuses to authentically communicate, instead establishes what can be discussed, withholds information, changes the topic, invents a false argument in another area, all of which scapegoats the victim and stonewalls resolution. They can directly or indirectly prevent all possibility of resolving conflicts through blocking and diverting.

**Denial:** Fundamentally, a refusal to accept responsibility by living in a false reality. "Don't Even Know I'm A Liar (to myself)" (Dr. David Hawkins). While denial can be a dissociative defense, when covert abuse is involved, the abuser uses manipulation to dismiss that the abuse is happening.

**Disavowal:** The belittling and devaluing of the importance of one's abusive behavior upon another as well as of what the other person is thinking or feeling, both for the purpose of avoiding responsibility.

**Entitlement:** Unrealistic demands upon the victim based on the belief that one is deserving of privileges, special treatment, or double standards at the expense of the victim. They do not value their partner's personhood, while they inflate their own value.

**Faux confusion/Abusive forgetting:** A form of manipulation that allows abusers not to remember their actions or any remedies they promised. They appear confused or angry about any concept of abuse or the details of their actions. If it is convenient to forget, they forget.

**False accusations:** A negative lie told to or about the partner. These are unexpected attacks based on fictional conversations, problems, or arguments. The accusations may have a thread of truth, but are completely distorted. They seem to come out of the blue for the purpose of shifting responsibility to the other person and making the abuser innocent. False accusations often lead to scapegoating and gaslighting.

**Gaslighting:** Abusers alter or deny a shared reality so that victims feel they are wrong in their perceptions and wrong in their experience. They are told that their reality is imaginary or inaccurate, that no one will believe them or give any credence to their stories. This activity inspires in the victim feelings of confusion, craziness, isolation, and hopelessness.

**Joking:** "That was just a joke" can be the first sign of an abusive relationship. This abuse takes the shape of backhanded compliments, or making fun of you, your appearance, or something you say. They may "joke" about your intelligence or talents or accomplishments in front of your friends or family, then put their arm around you, saying, "Just teasing, honey." Disparaging comments disguised as jokes often refer to the feminine nature of the partner, to their intellectual abilities, or to their competency. This type of hostile joking is always at the other person's expense.

**Lying:** This type of abuse can be either conscious or unconscious. It is the withholding or alteration of truth with a blatant disregard for shared reality.

**Minimization:** Abusive belittling of the victim's perspective. The result is making what the victim values unimportant, and therefore, kills confidence, creativity, and individuality.

**Partial confessions to distract from the real issue:** A way to gain undeserved favor from the victim or from an accountability partner

by protecting themselves from actual consequences. This partial or false acknowledgment and apology stave off consequences and inflate an empty promise to change. "I know that I do that sometimes, but it's not that bad," or "If I did that, I probably had too much to drink."

**Retaliation:** Emotional abuse that occurs when, instead of problem solving, the abuser deliberately harms another as "payback" for imagined harm. Namely, this concerns image management: the abuser's narcissistic sense of self has been offended in some way, so the victim must now pay for the abuser's pain. This can be expressed in aggressive or passive-aggressive behaviors.

**Refusal to take responsibility:** Almost all abusive tactics are a measure to avoid responsibility for alleged abuser's actions and to allow them to continue the abusive behavior. To negate any responsibility for one's actions is a way to divert accountability and do the hard work of changing.

**Scapegoating:** Offering scenarios, arranging situations, or turning consequences against another so the other is viewed as at fault or forced to take on the responsibility for the problem; the other serves as a victim twice, first by being made the brunt of the situation and second by then being made to bear resulting shame or punishment.

**Withholding:** In one of the most toxic and habitual forms of abuse, the abuser refuses to listen to their partner, denies their experience, and refuses to share themselves or their good fortune with them, putting themselves first in all circumstances. They are stingy with affection, respect, and energy, disregarding their feelings, views, individuality, and personhood. In a group situation, the painful exercise of withdrawing or shunning may be used as a method of enforcing ultimatums or manipulating compliance.

**Undermining:** Withholding emotional support, which erodes confidence and determination. Undermining is a sneaky way to squelch joy, effort, creativity, or ideas, reducing the value of anything that could bring their partner positive attention. This can be done through verbal condemnation and criticism, or more subtly through a lack of acknowledgment or enthusiasm.

**As you may begin to see, the list can go on and on. It is important to understand that no two situations, abusers, or victims are the same. Here are a few other forms of abuse that could arise in a domestic violence situation:**

**All or nothing:** Black and white thinking is one method used to divert the focus in order to disarm the victim.

**Catastrophizing:** Creating fear and negative dependence in the victim.

**Dismissivism:** With a wave of the hand, getting rid of the other's value and what they hold dear.

**Grandiosity:** Inflating one's value to diminish the other's or blowing things out of proportion.

**Magical thinking:** Believing an abuser's problems will go away with an apology when it will take much more work than that.

**Pathologizing:** Making the victim the problem by inflating their expression of a problem, which is actually caused by the abuser in the first place.

**Playing the victim:** To avoid accountability and responsibility.

**Powerplay/power over:** To make the other emotionally impotent and powerless.

**Rationalization/excuse making:** Goes hand in hand with scapegoating and reverse blaming.

**Reductionism:** To strip the other's ideas, expressions, or actions of value. This may also take the form of minimizing the abuser's culpability.

**Sanitization:** To normalize or make artificially good.

## VERBAL ABUSE Overt Original Abuse

Abusive language  
Undeserved accusations  
Bullying  
Harsh or chronic criticism

Intimidation  
Judgments  
Name calling  
Orders and threats

Put downs  
Ridiculing  
Teasing