

MY SIGNIFICANT OTHER **DOES NOT TREAT ME KINDLY.**

“Does my partner treat me unkindly?”

“What does that really look like?”

“Is it an occasional slight? Or does it feel like they do that almost everyday, or multiple times a day?”

“Are there themes to the unkindness?”

“Is it my fault, as my partner insists it is?”

Day by day, you live in a world that carries the feeling of “This is the norm.” You may feel that everything seems to be going along as it should. But then, in a moment, your partner takes a swipe at you. But, you’re not sure. Or, your partner, fairly often, makes jokes that seem at your expense. But, you’re not sure. Or, your partner seems to minimize experiences or feelings that are meaningful to you. But, you’re not sure. Or, your partner seems to put the damper on your excitement. But, you’re not sure. It seems like your partner treats you unkindly. You’re not sure.

We have found that the first step to healing is clarity. Before you can take the next steps, it is essential to identify the behaviors you are grappling with and to understand what they mean.

THE BASICS

We have found that the first step to healing is clarity. Before you can take the next steps, it is essential to identify the behaviors you are grappling with and to understand what they mean.

What does unkindly mean?

Unkind treatment is made up of put downs, lack of excitement, undermining, or belittling. In covert ways you will see the abuser laughing things off, making you doubt yourself, confusing you, not giving you straight answers, turning things against you, then being overly nice, requiring behaviors that you can never get right, or giving to you that comes with increased requirements. The overt versions include outright anger, name calling, criticism, ridicule, accusations, demands that cannot be met. The battlegrounds where these vicious psychological manipulations take place are in choice or decision making, systematic set-ups (encouraging you, followed by criticizing or ridiculing you), poor sportsmanship, upmanship, showing off

(lavish spending), followed by punishment and denial of your rightful challenge or criticism, threats or spoiling, giving then accusing you of selfishness. The list is seemingly endless. But the basic accusation in any unkindness is: You are wrong.

How can you name what is happening to you?

To begin, everyone has a, or several, point(s) of vulnerability. No one is exempt. Some people may act as though they don’t have any vulnerabilities, but that is a defense called denial. If you are in a relationship where your partner claims that they love you, the most basic litmus test of that love is, does your partner protect and shelter your vulnerabilities, or do they expose, exploit, or roll over your vulnerabilities? What would those behaviors look like?

Exposing your vulnerabilities means that your partner brings them to light in ways that are used against you, either by your abuser or by others

- Examples of exposing your vulnerabilities run the gamut from very minor slights, like a sarcastic remark about a vulnerability, to outright shaming you for them either to your yourself or in front of others: “you’re too sensitive,” “you should lose ten pounds,” “you can’t do anything right,” “you can be so stupid!”

Exploiting your vulnerabilities means that your partner makes use of them for their advantage

- Examples of exploiting your vulnerabilities include deliberately putting you in situations where they know you will be uncomfortable and then using your discomfort to “puff” up their own importance, or using your vulnerability or insecurity

to increase their own power, as often happens in financial exploitation, or rewriting history, reverse blaming, using personal knowledge of you against you in order to make you even more insecure and uncertain, and more dependent.

Rolling over your vulnerabilities means to minimize, belittle, or deny your vulnerabilities so they don't have to be responsible for caring for them

- Examples of rolling over your vulnerabilities is seen when they make fun of your vulnerabilities, accusing you of exaggerating them, while they minimize them, disclaims any responsibility for hurting you, puts you down for them, name calling like "you're such a coward," "you're so weak," "where's your backbone?" "you're such a sucker."

What makes a pattern?

Usually, these behaviors repeat into cycles of manipulation: such a cycle could express itself as 1) The abuser encourages you (make a lovely dinner, sign up for a class, try something new at work, express a desire or need), 2) They spoil it one way or another (with ridicule, teasing, criticism, negative judgment), 3) when you react, as you inevitably will, they accuse you of being the problem (you're sooooo sensitive, you've misunderstood them), or they project onto you the very things they have been doing, which they then deny doing (you're the one who wanted to make dinner and were judgmental of me because I didn't like it, I would have been fine going out for pizza), and 4) you are the one who is forced to make amends, try to change your behavior, and help your abuser feel better.

In any of these scenarios, you are left being the only one to fix it. There is no one else to go to. You carry the guilt. Your partner knows what you "hide" from the world, and by using it against you, fulfills your worst internal belief systems, which is crippling psychologically. Whether minor or major, passively aggressive or aggressive, this is active sadism, not merely unkindness.

Are you experiencing patterns of unkindness?

Unkindness that occurs as a singular thoughtlessness, or a momentary defensive reaction, is understood by the other and apologized for, is NOT abuse. It is a misstep that the other is only too happy to correct and NOT repeat. The rest that these descriptions above depict is either a subtle form of psychological abuse or a serious level of emotional abuse.

A nutshell version of "What is Original Abuse?"

Our pages on Original Abuse give detailed information about over thirty forms and examples of emotional abuse. Please read this information to understand what comprises emotional abuse. For now, here is a nutshell version to help guide your steps.

Covert Primary Abuse is considered one of the most destructive forms of abuse, second only to life-threatening battery. The reason for this is because covert abuse significantly harms the victim's perceptions, memories, and thinking, and ultimately, can lead to feelings of insanity. Covert Emotional Abuse is difficult to identify and difficult to confront because of its subtleties,

the confusion and self-doubt it promotes, and the denial that is easy to come by for the abuser who manages, as part of the abuse, to make the victim feel responsible instead. 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.

Overt Original Abuse, on the other hand, consists of verbal assaults or concrete manipulations that are far more obvious to the victim. The assaults are intended to be one-sided, always placing the blame for the abuse on a victim who the abuser claims deserves it. Behaviors, such as concrete criticism, fault-finding, verbal abuse, blaming, all are examples of overt emotional abuse. For more information, please visit our Original Abuse page.

A nutshell version of "What is Double Abuse@?"

Double Abuse® occurs when a victim of abuse reaches out for help to family, friends, a therapist, a pastor, or their community and meets judgment, disbelief, blame, punishment, shunning, or any number of other negative responses. This Secondary Abuse is responsible for escalating Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) into Complex Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (C-PTSD), a more damaging, intractable, and difficult to heal from consequence of abuse. Please read the comprehensive page on Double Abuse® on this site for helpful information.

Is this my fault?

This poignant question is the inevitable response to being abused. The main reason for this is that abuse victims have had instilled in them by the abuse self-doubt, confusion, a compromised ability to think, feelings of being crazy, and a profound need to accommodate to the abuser in a repeatedly failed effort to stop the abuse. The less obvious reason is that the victim (especially children) need to keep the abuser "good" and make themselves responsible for the abuse in order a) to maintain a needed relationship and b) to feel some level of control that the victim can do something, since they have been made to feel they are at fault, to make things better. These attempts, even if they momentarily seem to improve the relationship actually contribute to making things worse. As a result, the abuse will escalate.

THE COMPLEXITIES

If the unkindness I am experiencing is emotional abuse, what is my next step?

Your second step after gaining even a small degree of clarity is to start noticing.

Keep a diary, or log, or journal, which you need to keep safe from prying eyes, and begin documenting all the interactions that feel abusive to you, in their varied forms. While you may need this data for future legal reasons, the main purpose right now is to see on the page what is happening, as moment -by - moment as possible. This document will help you get out of the swirl of your mind and give you important feedback. You will also

begin to notice the patterns that are occurring as you see how the abuse is repeated and the cycles within it.

What would be my next steps after that?

There are some binds here in these steps, so we will demonstrate them to you with an “one the one hand,” “on the other hand,” approach. Your next steps are not in a fixed order, and the ones we offer are not exhaustive. There may be others that you will need, but we hope to spur your solution making. On the one hand, be careful whom you choose to confide in, because you need to be mindful of the potential for Secondary or Double Abuse®. You might begin with one truly trustworthy family member or friend, who will listen, listen without judgment or easy solutions, and who will offer validation and support.

On the other hand, it is essential that you find your voice and as you become more and more aware of what is happening become able to speak your experience to others who can offer you help.

Next, on the one hand, see if there are those in a larger circle than only your friend or family member to whom you could turn to for validation and guidance: a trustworthy church, study group, your larger family, or small social circle.

On the other hand, if you become confronted with doubt, blame, or harsh requirements to “fix” your situation, you’ve found the wrong circle. Look elsewhere, taking as your guide that who you turn to has to be those who are aware, informed, and hopefully, educated about emotional abuse in Domestic Violence settings.

What kind of intervention might I need?

If those you approach are unable to listen, validate, and support you, thank them for their time, and do not turn to them again. This is the time when your voice and your words need to help you hold onto the truth you have learned. You will have the opportunity later

when you are much stronger to confront those who have engaged in Double Abuse® against you, and hopefully, if they are open at all to learning, help illuminate them on a crucially important issue.

On the one hand, if an intervention is needed with the abuser, find either an informed and educated group, or a professional who knows how to conduct interventions, so that you are not alone attempting to intervene in the situation.

On the other hand, do not try to do an intervention on your own, with your children (even adult children), with the abuser’s friends or family, or small group in which he is a participant.

Should I involve myself in Couple’s Therapy?

On the one hand, Couple’s therapy is contra-indicated in these early or middle phases of recovery. Most therapists are not professionally trained to diagnose emotional and physical forms of domestic violence. We find it typical for therapeutic educators to believe that specialized training beyond the few hours therapists receive in school should only be required of those therapists who serve domestic violence victims and abuser. Understanding that active abuse cannot be healed in therapy as a couple is of crucial importance for you understand. If there is abuse, then abuse is the ONLY key issue that needs to be addressed.

On the other hand, once the abuser has undergone at least a two-year Domestic Violence training program, has faced and is actively dealing with and changing their abusive attitudes, hierarchical belief systems, and patterns of harmful behavior, AND you decide that you want to reunite and work on your partnership, Couple’s Therapy with a trained, skilled therapist can be invaluable.

Finally, if you are in critical situation that you must extricate yourself from as soon as possible, follow these four steps for immediate help:

- Call the national hotline (1-800-799-SAFE) or find a local shelter
- Create an exit plan
- Have a separate, private cell phone
- Have cash and a bag packed