

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

Original Abuse is the primary source of abuse a victim experiences in an interpersonal relationship. When others respond to victims in harmful ways, we call this Double Abuse®.

COVERT ABUSE “Hidden” Original Abuse

Original Abuse in the form of Covert Emotional Abuse is one of the most destructive forms of abuse. Covert Emotional Abuse employs manipulative tactics that are hard to name and describe, making it nearly impossible to confront. Covert Emotional Abuse significantly harms one's perceptions, memories, thinking, and ultimately, sanity. It confuses and causes the victim to experience profound self-doubt. Being a recipient of this form of abuse leads to a bewildering inability to sort out one's traumatic experiences. Whereas, in overt emotional abuse, the verbal attacks or physical assaults can be much more obvious to the victim. A single covert behavior that is repeated is enough to be destructive to a relationship but when multiple covert behaviors are employed it causes exponential harm to a victim. When there are too many behaviors being utilized at once, it disables the victim's ability to identify the patterns, see the relationship dynamics, and free themselves of these insidious manipulations. 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, they become more vulnerable to disease and collapse. Immune collapse 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, below is a description of the abuser's aggressive or defensive actions in order to avoid responsibility and maintain their image and sense of control:

Blaming and blame-shifting: In blaming, issues are always one-sided with the responsibility 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. When the victim addresses how the abuser's words have been accusatory or hurtful she is blamed a second time. In blame-shifting, the abuser converts the reasonable concerns of or corrections by the victim into being the victim's problem: “If you'd stop doing.... then I wouldn't....” or “You're too critical,” or “You're too sensitive,” etc.

Broken promises: Making promises to do certain things or to change, then denying ever making them, justifying not keeping them, or saying they forgot. Broken promises are common for abusers because they want to do the opposite of what a victim desires in order to maintain power and control.

Countering: Intentionally doing the opposite when receiving a reasonable request. An abuser may make promises they don't intend to keep and/or they do the opposite when simple or important requests are made.

Cover-ups: Doing a molehill of good to cover up a mountain of bad. 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. Often, this is the behavior of an abuser who cannot come to terms with their own abusive enactments and is living a double life.

Crazy-making behaviors: Intentional distortions of reality, including passive-aggressive behaviors, for the purpose of retaliating or 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. A “cousin” of gaslighting.

Creating a cloud of confusion: Telling false and grandiose stories to third parties in order to undermine objectivity and manipulate the end result or outcome, usually at the victim's expense.

Deflection: The abuser refuses to authentically communicate and, instead establishes what can be discussed, withholds information, changes the topic, and/or invents a false argument in another area, all of which scapegoats the victim and stonewalls resolution. This enables the abuser to directly or indirectly prevent all possibilities 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 of the impact of one's abusive behavior upon another. This may include devaluing what the other person is thinking or feeling.

Entitlement: The belief that one is deserving of privileges, special treatment, or double standards at the expense of the victim. The inflation of one's value while devaluing their partner's personhood and placing unrealistic demands upon them.

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 behavior creates feelings of confusion, craziness, isolation, and hopelessness in the victim.

Weaponized 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 superficial or half apology staves off consequences and inflates 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 the 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 avoid doing 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 or communicate with their partner. They may enact the silent treatment for days or weeks at a time, and/or refuses to share themselves or their good fortune with their partner, putting themselves first in all circumstances. They are stingy with affection, respect, and energy, disregarding their partner's feelings, views, individuality, and personhood. In a group situation, the 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.

Here are a few other abuse tactics that could be used in an intimate partner violence situation:

All or nothing: Black and white judgment is one method used to divert the focus off the abuser in order to blame the victim.

Catastrophizing: Blowing things out of proportion, 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 at the expense of others for self-gain. A sense of personal superiority or entitlement.

Magical thinking: Believing an abuser's problems can be dismissed with an apology when it will take much more work than that.

Pathologizing: They use psychological terminology to mischaracterize the victim and place them in a downgraded position.

Playing the victim: The abuser causes harm and when the victim reacts the abuser plays the victim to avoid accountability and responsibility for what they did or didn't do.

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

Rationalization/Excuse making: The abuser makes many excuses to justify their harmful behavior; goes hand in hand with scapegoating and blame-shifting.

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

Sanitization: To normalize or make artificially good. For example, the abuser may often yell while saying all families yell.

The list goes on... It is important to understand that no two situations, abusers, or victims are the same.

VERBAL ABUSE Overt Original Abuse

Foul or abusive language
Undeserved accusations
Bullying
Harsh or chronic criticism

Intimidation
Judgments
Name-calling
Orders and threats

Put downs
Ridiculing
Abusive teasing