

The Brown's SW Florida Homeschool

**Mental Abuse is Real and a Hindrance to Society**

Senior Thesis

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Challenge IV Classical Conversations

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### Abstract

Abuse in any form can be damaging. One of the most disregarded forms of abuse is emotional/psychological abuse. In today's society we are unsure on how to identify what mental abuse really is due to the complexity and variety of each case. Many people go through life without even realizing they were a victim of abuse. Without thoroughly understanding what emotional abuse can do, it will continue to be a hindrance on society.

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### Mental Abuse is Real and a Hindrance to Society

Have you ever been emotionally or psychologically abused in a relationship, as a child, or in the workplace? Determining whether someone is experiencing mental abuse or not is difficult, but on average, 80% of Americans have experienced emotional abuse (Beheshti, 2020). Among cases reported in an *American Psychological Association* study, 61 percent of children experienced neglect, and 5 percent were emotionally and/or psychologically abused.

Mental abuse is real and a hindrance to society. Public awareness needs to be raised on this mental health issue as it affects all facets of society. Without awareness being raised, emotional abuse is easier to hide and goes unnoticed, unlike physical abuse, where there are bruises and scars on the outside. Those harmed by mental abuse suffer as if they have internal parasites.

“Defining emotional and psychological abuse is a task made difficult by uncertainty as to whether or not such terms are synonymous and, or interchangeable. There is an increased tendency in child protective literature to regard psychological and emotional abuse as synonyms, or at least, to make little distinction between them” (Kieran P. O’Hagan, pg. 1). Kieran

P. O'Hagan's research on emotional and psychological abuse shares how emotional and psychological abuse are not the same.

Diane R. Follingstad works in the Department of Psychology at the University of South Carolina. She also shared her concern for the definitions not being solidified. She said, "psychological abuse has not been adequately defined, validated, or conceptually anchored in a way which provides a sound basis for its measurement, or which allows for conclusions to be made and applied to real-life settings" (Follingstad, pg. 1). Even though we do not have an adequate definition yet, there is still meaning and ongoing studies of these words.

"Emotional abuse targets a person's feelings, it uses emotion to manipulate, punish, and achieve control rather than personal sentiment, mental abuse focuses on questioning and influencing a person's way of thinking and views on reality. Psychological abuse can cause a person to question their environment" (Wooll, 2021).

Emotional and psychological abuse happens in intimate relationships, in families, and the workplace. Can any of you respond yes or no to these thought provoking-questions? Do you feel like a failure as a partner even though you work hard to please or "get it right"? Do you feel angry, depressed, or anxious because you constantly obsess over trying to solve the problems in the relationship? Did you stop seeing friends and family because you are ashamed that you are still with them even though you have complained to your friends many times about the way they treat you? Does your partner's personality seem to go through radical changes? Are they pleasant one minute only to be furious the next? Do they become enraged with only the slightest provocation? Do they experience periods of extreme joy followed by periods of severe

depression? If you answered yes to any of these questions, you may be in a mentally abusive relationship.

Most relationships do not start with these words and actions. They start with kind gestures and compliments, but relationships can change drastically. Many people who start to hear those negative words try to rationalize saying the relationship is just going through a rough patch or saying their partners under a great deal of stress, or they try to convince themselves that it is “no big deal.” Once these words are used regularly the victim will start to feel lack of motivation, confusion, difficulty concentrating or making decisions, low self-esteem, feelings of failure or worthlessness, feelings of hopelessness, self-blame, and self-destructiveness. Most victims will ignore the signs of emotional abuse because it would require them to admit that their relationship has become destructive and would have to face the truth about how their partner feels about them.

Emotional abuse is a form of domestic violence that regularly gets dismissed. You may say why don't they “just leave,” but it is not as simple as that. As I stated before, the relationship did not start like this, but the victims tend to hold on to the memory of their partner’s past personality. They may feel responsible that the anger and disapproval their partner gives them is their fault. The abuser might also exhibit what psychologists call the honeymoon phase. Often when the abuser lashes out in anger, this honeymoon phase lures the victim into acceptance and tolerance for the narcissistic behavior. The abused will convince themselves that it wasn't that bad, and that they can do this, or they don't mean what they said. At a point, the abuser will apologize, saying they will never do that again and show affection to the abused like gift-giving, leading the victim to feel forgiving. When the abuser shows this behavior, it looks like

they are genuinely sorry; they are actually minimizing the original abusive behavior. Living in this constant cycle of abuse and telling yourself that it will not stay like this, “it’s just a rough patch everyone gets into arguments,” you start to lose your self-esteem and provide the abuser with an excuse.

As humans, our personalities are highly influenced around our surroundings. A loving and respectful environment will most likely produce a loving, respectful nature. On the contrary, a harsh, demanding, and disrespectful environment will probably cause a person to be self-conscious, anxious, and fearful. With those negative influences from their environment, they may be on the road to becoming emotionally abusive. Emotionally abusive people might tend to abuse others due to their childhood experiences. Abuse is something that is taught and adapted. No one wakes up one morning with the urge to abuse their partner, friends, or children. Bad parenting can be a cause of why someone is abusive.

A child being neglected and emotionally abused is one pathway for them to be influenced negatively to be an abuser, but giving your child whatever they want and not what they need may also hinder one’s mental status. On one occurrence, a child could grow up spoiled, believing the world owes them everything. A part of growing up is learning coping skills to understand that we can’t control everything we wish we could. A spoiled, narcissistic child will develop feelings of everyone being below them and “not worth anything.” As this child ages into adulthood, they will continue to believe this false narrative of people around them and people to whom they claim to “love.”

*Maid*, a Netflix Original, exposes the harms of emotional abuse and how little legal support is provided to its victims. The *Maid* is based on a true story of author Stephanie Land, which uncovers the dark side of domestic violence without physical abuse. The woman was both emotionally and psychologically abused by her boyfriend and suffered due to the lack of support in the legal system. The effects on the mother from mental abuse was severe, but even more concerning was the series failure to address the harmful effects on the child.

Mental abuse of a child might be one of the most destructive forms of abuse. "When it is the parents themselves, however, who are the source of trauma, children must develop cognitive techniques to cope with their environments" (Freyd, pg. 99). The hardship of dealing with being a mentally abused child is that this situation occurs more often where a parent or relative is the abuser. A parent is supposed to be a role model and a source of love and care. A parent's job is to help support you and teach you to be the healthiest and happiest possible. Children who go through abuse in their younger years learn a lot of maladaptive skills to cope. "Strategies include disassociation and denial, skills that may be so well developed that dissociative trauma survivors are able to use divided attention more effectively than others to keep threatening information from awareness" (DePrince & Freyd 1999).

Imagine, growing up in a house when wearing your shoes on your head is normal. Suppose you are a teen who grew up wearing that shoe on your head. In this situation, there might be some difficulty blending in with others or "looking the part." Now you go out and try and meet people and make connections. These people start to feel uneasy around you since you believe wearing a shoe on your head is normal, and as they get to know you more, they notice that you wear gloves on your feet. This is an example of what a child who has been through

emotional abuse feels. No one understands them, and they cannot explain the things they think and do.

Growing up in an environment that constantly puts you down and stresses you out will eventually lead you and the child to suffer from it, with the suffering lasting till death or until they reach out for help. Sadly, many children don't realize they are emotionally abused. Because the child does not see the signs for themselves that wearing a shoe on their head and gloves on their feet is abnormal, they start to feel different around people and feel like they do not belong. Those children who grow up to be adults may never realize what they went through. Even if they realize at some point, there is only so much you can undo from mental abuse. Some people are lucky to realize while others are so entrenched in denial, they cannot see for themselves, and they suffer deleterious effects long term.

In a report done by Rausch and Knutson in 1991, found that "even when participants reported similar punitive experiences for themselves and their siblings, they were more than twice as likely to identify their siblings' experiences as abusive than they were to identify their own. They also reported that participants were more likely to interpret parental behavior towards themselves, but not that directed towards their siblings, as deserved and therefore not abusive" (Freyd, pg. 100).

Abuse, especially childhood abuse, is tough to diagnose as time goes on. A helpful model is Freyd's 1996 betrayal trauma theory, which explains how children may isolate abuse experiences from memory and consciousness to maintain a necessary relationship with the caregiver (Freyd, pg. 100). Why would anyone want to push the abuse out of their mind and

forgive their caregiver? They do this to survive. Since the abused employ mechanisms to escape, they lose consciousness of their reality. With this continued life, their mind and relationships will suffer.

Many factors go into the damage one might take out of maltreatment and abuse. Freyd would say that the quality of emotional abuse has a direct impact on the victim's emotional awareness. In such maltreating environments, children will learn that it is unacceptable to express emotions, especially the negative ones. Bowbly (1988) describes one pathway to deficits in emotional awareness as a parenting style that requires the denial of specific feelings, such as environments where parents instruct their children not to cry or express negative emotions, children learn that they must distance themselves from their own needs and feelings to obtain love and care.

Neuroanatomical and neuropsychological empirical research provides physical evidence of connections between psychological abuse, neglect, and capacities for emotional awareness (Linehan, pg. 100). Emotional abuse and neglect can alter otherwise healthy children's brain structure, function, and organization. Children's brains are especially vulnerable during periods of rapid creation or modification of neuronal connections. Emotional and psychological abuse on anyone is harmful, but as a child grows up with this mindset it might be one of the worst aspects of abuse (Cicchetti, pg. 101).

Growing up mentally abused is one circumstance of abuse, but having a career in a workplace with an emotionally abusive superior is another. Emotional/psychological abuse in the workplace is a phenomenon that affects many workers around the globe.

Emotional/psychological abuse can go unnoticed by the victim or be as apparent as whispering to yelling. The abuse afflicted by a coworker or superiors is just as unnoticeable as a parent not noticing their child is being bullied at school. What exactly would be considered emotional abuse in the workplace?

Examples of emotional abuse in the workplace include when someone insults or humiliates you. This may happen once or twice. It's not a favorable thing to do, but it will not have long-lasting effects on you. But a pattern of manipulative behaviors can be considered emotional abuse. The reason why the abuser attacks are to control you through fear. The idea of emotional abuse in the workplace was first created by Dr. Heinz Leymann in Sweden. He made the concept of "mobbing," which is the collective bullying of a person at work. He said that "the behavior is often molecules because it can continue undetected, as it can be hidden and feedback to employees and unnoticed by superiors" (Leymann, 2021).

He also identified at least forty-five behaviors that can be considered abuse or mopping. "This terror inflicted on the individuals will affect their productivity, their mental health, and their physical health. It is most often found among teams of people where one member is the odd one out" (ADR Times 2021).

Six of the forty-five behaviors that Dr. Leymann was talking about are 1 ignoring, 2 Rejection, 3 Isolation, 4 Corruption, 5 Exploitation, 6 terror. Many actions lying within these six examples may be considered emotional abuse if happening throughout your daily life.

The unawareness of mental abuse is a severe hindrance to society. Without societal recognition, these harms will go unnoticed. The mental health community needs to develop a

consensus on the definition of emotional abuse. As explored in my research study, there are distinct differences between psychological and emotional abuse. These forms of abuse affect the abused as much, if not more than those who are physically abused. Kent, Waller, and Dagnan (1999) found emotional abuse to be the only type of abuse that predicted unhealthy eating attitudes among adult women. Kent and Waller (1998) discovered that emotional abuse predicted more depression and anxiety than other forms of abuse.

More than ever, awareness of mental abuse, both psychological and emotional, needs to be raised as this behavior affects all facets of society. Before the 1980s, mental illness went undefined and untreated. Now today, through awareness and research, mentally ill persons have been recognized and provided with support and treatment services that significantly improves their quality of life and contribution to society. In the same vein, mental abuse is actual and needs to be uncovered and exposed, raising awareness. With increasing awareness, affected persons can receive adequate treatment and care to bring about healing for both the abuser and the abused. If you or someone you know is experiencing relationship abuse in any form. Contact the National Domestic violence Hotline.

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