# HOW TO IDENTIFY VERBAL ABUSE

Victims of verbal abuse often do not "hear" their partner's words as abusive. We tend to think, "That's just how they talk" or we think nothing of it at all because verbal abuse wormed its way into our mind and heart early in life. However, not knowing what verbal abuse sounds or how someone communicates abuse through body language severely affects your mental and emotional state. When you cannot *identify* abuse, it is easy to believe

- that you do not experience abuse,
- that your partner tells the truth about you, and
- that you must be crazy to feel so alone, depressed, and confused.

Once you can identify verbal abuse as it happens, you will regain your mental balance and improve your emotional health. You will feel stronger, more like yourself, and become better able to deal with the abuse. Living with abuse and not knowing it is abuse is the hell you know. Living with abuse but being able to identify it will help you detach from your abuser and stop taking abusive *nonsense* to heart.

The categories of verbal abuse used below come from *The Verbally Abusive Relationship: How to recognize it and how to respond* by Patricia Evans (ISBN 1558505822, Adams Media Corporation).

### TYPES OF VERBAL ABUSE

# ABUSIVE ANGER

**WHY ABUSERS USE IT:** Abusers use abusive anger because it is very scary and threatens you emotionally and physically. Your abuser hopes that you will back down in fear, giving them control of you and the situation.

**MY EXAMPLES:** When my abuser is abusively angry, he is loud, obscene, and gets in my face with his face, pointed finger or hands. He hits walls or other solid surfaces to make loud noises. He yells very loudly and his face turns red with exertion. He blocks me into the room (which *is* physical violence). He rushes up to me, but does not touch me although he acts as if he will hurt me at any second.

He hears nothing I say OR he picks up two or three key words and twists them into something I did not mean to say. Similarly, he asks questions OF me and then answers them FOR me - as if he knows the correct answers and the true answers are lies. His answers insult me. Sometimes he wants me to listen silently to his abusive statements, and sometimes he desperately attempts to provoke me into arguing with him or worse.

He loves to take me to parties when he knows I am in a state of fear induced by abusive anger and past physical assault. While at the party, I feel compelled to laugh at the jokes he makes about me, fetch his beer and bring him food. He brags, saying things like, "This is how home-training works!" as I give him another drink.

When the fear effect wears off a bit, my husband says or does something to remind me of what he *could* do. He talks about the argument we had before he held my face to the stove, spoke of people involved in the conversation that turned violent, mentions banging someone's head against the wall or wanting to choke them or me, or anything else that reminds me of a violent episode.

<b>EXAMPLES OF HOW YOUR PARTNE</b>	ER USES ABUSIVE ANGER:	

THREATENING BEHAVIOR & WORDS
WHY ABUSERS USE IT: Abusers use threatening words and behaviors to regain control of you and the situation. Threatening behaviors and words explicitly communicate or imply that you must do as they say OR ELSE.
MY EXAMPLES: My abuser acts as if he is choking me from a distance or kicks a chair and punches cabinets while saying, "Do you know what I could do to you?" He also verbally threatens my pets to coerce me to do what he wants.
Many times when he is in this state, he will say things like, "Is this what you want? You wanted me to lose control, so this is what you get! You must want me to hurt you - why else would you do this to me?!" He wants me to think he is out of control and therefore more threatening - but asking that question of me tells me that he is very much in control of himself. He knows what he is doing. He is acting like this ON PURPOSE.
EXAMPLES OF HOW YOUR PARTNER SHOWS AND USES THREATENING BEHAVIOR AND WORDS:

# ORDERING & DEMANDING

WHY ABUSERS USE IT: Your abuser directly controls you when they order you around and demand compliance and/or certain behaviors. When you do exactly what they say, they feel that their control over you is absolute. Watching you follow their instructions makes them feel powerful.

MY EXAMPLES: He did not want me to

- speak to men who were not his friends,
- touch anyone's shoulder or arm while talking to them,
- wear certain clothes,
- act like anything other than a "mother" (by his ever-changing definition of mother),
- go out with friends that he didn't know (eventually I had no friends),
- and a hundred other demands I had to follow or else.

and considered his demands to be the things on which I should compromise. Later, I obeyed his orders and demands because I felt terrified that he would physically assault me if I did not do as he said. His past verbal and physical violence scared the resistance out of me. I was in "shell-shock" much of the time, and it was easier to do as he said than to expose myself to another round of abusive anger, threatening behavior or physical abuse.
EXAMPLES OF HOW YOUR PARTNER USES ORDERING AND DEMANDING:
NAME CALLING
WHY ABUSERS USE IT: Abusers call you names for two reasons: either to humiliate you or to deny that you exist. One of the best ways to stay in complete control is to pretend that you - the one questioning his authority - are meaningless. Patricia Evans says it best when she explains that abusers engage in name-calling to say, "You do not exist. I annihilated you. Now that you are defeated, I am in control" - just as if you were their enemy instead of their lover just like in a war.
MY EXAMPLES: He calls me a whore and a cunt. He says that I am irrational, a bad mother/wife, disloyal, etc. My husband attacks whatever I WANT to be (a rational thinker, a great mother and wife, a loyal partner). If there is not an obscene name for it, he simply tells me I am the opposite of what I want to be.
When we experience a string of arguments or abusive conversations (aka "bad days"), my husband refuses to use my name. He will not call me "Kellie" for days. He refers to me as "your daughter-in-law" "your mother" "you" or any other way he thinks of EXCEPT using my name. By doing this, he lets me know that I may be important to someone else, but I am NOTHING to him.
EXAMPLES OF HOW YOUR PARTNER USES NAME-CALLING:
VERBAL ABUSE DISGUISED AS A JOKE

Ordering and demanding worked well for my abuser at first because I was eager to make our marriage work

WHY ABUSERS USE IT: When abusers disguise abuse as a joke, they prove that they put you down make themselves laugh and feel good. Your abuser can avoid responsibility for hurting your feelings by claiming, "It was just a joke!" even though you know it was an insult, nothing more.

MY EXAMPLES: My husband tells anyone who will listen that he wants to run me through a wood chipper and feed pieces of me to the fish. Of course, the "joke" comes out at parties when he feels like making fun of my sorry ability to be the wife he wants. Everyone laughs, thinking he made the joke in good fun. If I get upset, he says that I do not know how to take a joke and am too damn sensitive. He retains control.

What no one else knows is that in private, he tells me exactly what he will do to make sure the wood chipper and my DNA left on it disappears after he chops up my body. He plans to choke me to death first so my blood is not spurting fresh as he feeds me into the wood chipper. He tells me that he will bag my parts and carry them to a dozen lakes for use as catfish bait. He says all of this as if he knows what he is talking about.

EXAMPLES OF HOW YOUR PARTNER USES "JOKES" TO ABUSE YOU:			
DISCOUNTING			

WHY ABUSERS USE IT: Abusers discount (take away from, make small) your ideas and perceptions in hope that you will believe that you are stupid or ignorant and therefore unable to contribute to your family or community. If your abuser can take away your self-esteem, then you will shut up and do as they say. Discounting is another way of annihilating you so they feel powerful over you.

MY EXAMPLES: My husband loves to tell me that I don't understand how the real world works because if he is the only person in our house who knows about the "real world" then he can cast aside anything I say as naive or worthless.

When I have a creative or entrepreneurial idea, he finds every reason possible why "it" could never work. He says that by being critical he is only trying to help me avoid problems. If he decides to help me out of the goodness of his heart, he will say things like, "I'll tell my friends about your web design thing, but your integrity is going to get me in trouble at work!" It's a long convoluted story about how that could happen, but here he's telling me that something he "admires" in me is going to be my downfall. He wants me to doubt that my integrity is good for me.

<b>EXAMPLES OF HOW YOUR PARTNER DISCOUNTS YOU:</b>	

ACCUSING & BLAMING
WHY ABUSERS USE IT: Abusers constantly turn your pain around on you by accusing and blaming you when they behave in hurtful ways. If you had not (done, felt, said) X, then they would not be forced to do Y. If it is your fault that your abuser hurt you in any way, then they do not need to take responsibility for their abusive behavior. Many abusers accuse their victims of being abusive to add guilt to their victim's list of negative self-talk and feelings.
MY EXAMPLES: I cannot remember the last time my husband took my emotional pain seriously or validated any feeling I claimed. He consistently says that I over-react and therefore cause the pain any "normal" person would not experience. In short, he believes that my every sad or angry emotion in response to his abuse is irrational and a result of my imagination.
For example, he said, "I'd be pissed too if you were late for no reason, but I have a good reason! I leave for class at Fort Lee tomorrow and I had to go to the farewell party." Bull. Leaving for class tomorrow is a good reason to be home with his children and me, not for staying out until 2 AM without so much as a phone call.
EXAMPLES OF HOW YOUR PARTNER ACCUSES AND BLAMES YOU:
COUNTERING
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WHY ABUSERS USE IT: If your abuser can make you consistently doubt yourself, then you are easier to control. If you are unsure of yourself, you naturally look to your partner for answers.
MY EXAMPLES: It does not really matter what I say. I could call a color peach and he would insist it was red. I could agree with him that the light was too bright, and suddenly it stops bothering him. Here's an example of one of our conversations:
Me: I think I will work by word of mouth until I earn some money and can afford to advertise.
Him: No, word of mouth is overrated. You will need to put money into advertising.
Me: Well, we could afford a small newspaper ad or two.
<b>Him:</b> No, no one reads the newspaper anymore, but I could talk to some people I know and tell them you are available if they need web design services. (Isn't word of mouth what I initially suggested?)
EXAMPLES OF HOW YOUR PARTNER COUNTERS YOU:

BLOCKING AND DIVERTING
WHY ABUSERS USE IT: Blocking and diverting is a way to change a conversation to gain control of it. When abusers switch topics or refuse to discuss your concern, they reveal that they believe disrespecting you is okay and they can converse with you as they please. They do not have to answer your question or acknowledge your statement. They will change the topic or refuse to respond to you because you do not deserve their attention or the respect it requires to hold a meaningful conversation.
MY EXAMPLES: Sometimes my husband succeeds with the blocking/diverting tactic. He changes the conversation so artfully that he fools me into following the diversion. Sometimes I forget what I wanted to know! Later, when I remember my question and bring up the topic again, he will insist we already talked about it or tell me that I am flighty because I cannot remember his answer.
Me: "I'd really like for us to go to dinner with my sister and her husband tomorrow."
<b>Him:</b> "Will you feed the kids? Did you even think about them? I can go hungry, but you shouldn't let the kids starve."
I think: WHAT? When in the hell did I ever let my children starve? When did I neglect them like that? How dare you say I'm a horrible mother! [and this tactic was successful because I forgot about dinner with my sister]
EXAMPLES OF HOW YOUR PARTNER BLOCKS OR DIVERTS YOU:

# JUDGING AND CRITICIZING

WHY ABUSERS USE IT: Abusers judge and criticize you to put you on the defensive and thereby gain control over the situation or conversation. The abuser wants you to believe that you must submit to his demands or adopt his opinion because your desires come from faulty reasoning, lack of morals, emotions, etc. - or at least that's what they tell you.

MY EXAMPLES: My husband wants me to believe that he knows everything and I know nothing. He wants me to think that I have no clue how to do much of anything and that I should believe he always knows better. He wants me to think that my flaws prohibit me from making good decisions or seeing things as they truly are.

**Me:** "Will, despite what you say, some bills do change from month to month. If we rent movies on cable, the cable bill changes. Sometimes the electric bill isn't what we expect, and - "

**Him:** "You're just trying to avoid answering my questions. You're hiding money or something. When I paid the bills, they never changed. Those people are taking advantage of you because you won't stay on their ass! Do I have to take over? You just don't know how the real world works!"

EXAMPLES OF HOW YOUR PARTNER JUDGES AND CRITICIZES YOU:			

# **TRIVIALIZING**

**WHY ABUSERS USE IT**: The smaller your abuser makes you think you are, the smaller you become. The smaller you are, the easier it is to control you.

MY EXAMPLES: My husband likes to pretend that my accomplishments are worthless. For quite some time, I believed he was right. I felt very insignificant and diminished - very trivial in comparison to all the "important" people around me. He had a lot of control over me at that time - I thought I was worthless and he was king.

One time my husband trivialized my financial skills after returning home from a deployment. You see, after my husband deployed, our son totaled our van. I had to find a way for us to afford a second car payment because my husband wanted us to have two vehicles. It turned out that the extra money he earned during his deployment enabled me to pay off three credit cards with high interest rates. The cards' total minimum payments equaled the amount of the new car payment, which of course carried a much lower interest rate than the credit cards.

When my husband returned, we could afford the new car and had no credit card debt. Even so, money was as tight as the day he left. He said that we should have more money because he made extra while deployed! For some reason, he thought that I should be able to purchase a new car with the amount of debt we carried and save money on top of it. He carried on angrily about how I wasted all the money he had earned and had nothing to show for his hard work instead of feeling grateful for the solution I had found.

XAMPLES OF HOW YOUR PARTNER TRIVIALIZES YOU:

UNDERMINING
WHY ABUSERS USE IT: Abusers undermine you by attempting to make your children, family, friends and community believe that you are unworthy of their respect. Your abuser wants everyone in your life to think as poorly of you as they do, and will lie about you behind your back. If everyone in your life begins to doubt your abilities or authority and lose respect for you, then you will believe that your abuser was right about you all along. You guessed it - abusers undermine you because the more you doubt yourself, the easier you are to control.
MY EXAMPLES: My husband can dash my self-confidence while sounding like he really truly cares. He uses snippets of overheard conversations to "prove" that a friend agrees with him that I am incompetent, have no common sense, or did something wrong. He tells me in front of my children that I do not know how to discipline them (so when I do discipline them, they are less likely to comply). He tells my family that he worries for my mental health so they are less likely to believe me when I tell them the crazy things he does. These sneaky tactics are what he calls helping and protecting me, but they really undermine me instead.
EXAMPLES OF HOW YOUR PARTNER UNDERMINES YOU:
FORGETTING
WHY ABUSERS USE IT: Abusers purposely and regularly forget things that are important to you so you will know that your time, energy and health are unimportant to your partner. By repeatedly "forgetting" important conversations, events, anniversaries, holidays and the like, your abuser convinces you that your needs are not worth remembering; you have no value at all. When you believe you have no value, you feel depressed and are easier for your partner to control.
MY EXAMPLES: My husband forgot doctor appointments when I was pregnant and never heard the in utero heartbeat of our first baby. He forgets plans to go out with my friends and dinners with my family. He forgets when I plan "family time" with our children. He forgets when I have plans that do not include him and throws a fit that I must leave as I try to walk out the door. Writing our schedules on the family calendar does not help because he says it isn't his job to read the calendar.
He forgets entire conversations - important ones. He schedules routine auto or household maintenance over my birthdays. He forgot how he beat my head against the wall and held my face to a hot stove.
EYAMDI ES OF HOW VOLID DARTNER "FORCETS" THINGS IMPORTANT TO VOLI-

DENIAL
WHY ABUSERS USE IT: Your abuser can pretend that everything is under their control by flat-out denying anything to the contrary. Abusers may deny any sort of challenge to their power or change in their environment You don't change, the situation doesn't change nothing changes unless the abuser changes it. There are no surprises for them, only for you. The abuser must believe they are in control at all times and denial helps keep them sane.
MY EXAMPLES: I told my husband that he verbally abused our boys and me. I listed many examples of the abuse we experienced. He looked at me blankly, and then used the Internet to find and print a list of the effects of rape. He said, "Here. This is YOU. This is your problem" and then walked away as if denying I'd said a word would make me believe I hadn't confronted him at all.
EXAMPLES OF HOW YOUR PARTNER USES DENIAL:
WITHHOLDING OR DEPRIVATION
WHY ABUSERS USE IT: By withholding emotions and depriving you of attention, abusers say, "Nyah nyah! I've got something you want and you can't have it! I'm in control and you can't do anything about it!" Abusers will deny you sexual and emotional attention, mental stimulation, and their presence. They will deny that they feel sad when they cry or angry when they rage. Abusers deny you the things you want most so you will know that you do not control them (as if you wanted to!). By depriving you of what you want or offering to give it to you in exchange for your favors, they can better control your emotions and behaviors.

MY EXAMPLES: Sometimes my husband will not talk to me for hours or days. He pushes me away when I make a sexual advance and then complains that I do not act as if I want him. He gets drunk when I tell him I want to talk. He goes to his friend's house instead of spending time with his family. He works on projects that could wait a couple of hours (or months!) when I want to do something together or as a family. Usually, his periods of withdrawal culminate with his outburst of abusive anger or threatening behaviors.

EXAMPLES OF HOW YOUR PARTNER WITHHOLDS FROM YOU OR DEPRIVES YOU: \_\_\_\_\_\_

# WHAT TO DO WITH THIS INFORMATION

Now that you plainly see how your partner abuses you, you are more likely to recognize abuse as it happens. You can respond appropriately instead of arguing or taking those hurtful words to heart. No longer must you absorb the pain your abuser attempts to inflict; you can deflect it and learn how to detach from the pain.

For more information on how to react to verbal abuse, detach from your abuser, set personal boundaries and more, visit Verbal Abuse Journal's page <u>First Steps for Abuse Victims</u>. I also recommend reading any book about verbal abuse written by Patricia Evans, especially *The Verbally Abusive Relationship: How to recognize it and how to respond*.

If you want to know more about finding the courage to confront the abuse in your relationship, <u>read My Abusive</u> <u>Marriage...and what i'm doing in it</u> by Kellie Jo Holly.

