Recognizing abusive relationships: physical, verbal & emotional

Are you in an abusive relationship?

Does your partner...

- Embarrass you or belittle your accomplishments?
- Criticize your friends/family/coworkers constantly?
- Keep you from seeing people you care about?
- Make a lot of major decisions without consulting you?
- Get extremely jealous when you talk to other men/women?
- Physically or emotionally force you into things?
- Control the financial aspects of your life?
- Lead you to believe you are “nothing” without them?
- Grab, pinch, punch, kick or shove you?
- Threaten you—verbally or with a weapon?
- Blame his/her behavior on stress, alcohol or on you?

Do you...

- Believe that you can help your partner change their abusive behavior if only you were to change in some way?
- Spend a lot of energy making sure he/she does not get angry?
- Feel like you’re “walking on eggshells” a lot of the time?
- Find yourself doing what he/she wants rather than what you want to do?
- Stay because you’re afraid he/she might hurt you? Might hurt the kids? Might hurt themselves?

If you said “Yes” to any of the above questions, you may be in an abusive relationship. You may want to seek counseling to explore the dynamics of your relationship.

In an emergency—if you are being threatened or attacked—you should take the following action:

- Stay away from the kitchen (the abuser can find weapons there, like knives etc…)
- Stay away from bathrooms, closets or small spaces where the abuser can trap you
- Get to a room with a door or window to escape
- Get to a room with a phone to call for help; lock the abuser outside if you can
- Call 911 or your local police emergency number
- Think about a neighbor or friend you can run to for help
- If a police officer comes, tell him/her what happened; get a name and badge number

Following an incident:

- Get medical help if you are hurt
- Take pictures of bruises or injuries
- Call a domestic violence program, shelter and/or your EAP

And, there are other types of abuse: Physical abuse is easily identified. Once you’ve been hit, there’s no doubt that you’ve been abused. The bruises or scars are visible evidence that abuse has taken place. Verbal or emotional abuse is different. There is no physical evidence; the damage is internal—a wounded spirit and lowered self-esteem. Verbal and emotional abuse can include:

- Being called names. Any negative form of name calling is unacceptable. If you feel it’s a put down, then it probably is.
- Using words to shame. Critical, sarcastic, mocking words meant to put you down in public.
- Yelling, swearing and screaming.
- Using threats to intimidate.
- Blaming the victim. “If you only did/didn’t do…then I wouldn’t have to….”
- Dismissing your feelings. Refusal to discuss issues that upset you. They avoid discussion of any topic where they might have to take responsibility to their actions or words.
- Wondering why you feel so bad. You bury your feelings, walk on eggshells and work hard at keeping the peace, so that everyday becomes an emotional chore.
- Rejection. Refusing to acknowledge your presence, value or worth. Devaluing your feelings.
- Manipulating your actions. Persistent and intense use of threatening words to get you to do something or act in a way you find uncomfortable.
- Isolating from friends/family.
- Denying emotional responsiveness. Failing to care in a sensitive, responsive manner, acting detached or uninvolved, interacting only when necessary, ignoring your needs.
Alternatives to saying ‘Good job!’

Everyone knows if you say something too often, the sentiment may become devalued. Don’t let “Good Job!” be the only way you respond to your child’s accomplishments. Try these other methods of response to encourage healthy self-esteem…

Say nothing. Sorry, not every act has to be reinforced with positive praise.

Say what you saw. A simple, evaluation-free statement, such as, “You put your shoes on by yourself!”

Talk less, ask more. Even better than descriptions are questions. Why tell a child about what impressed you most about his/her drawing, when you can ask them what part they like best?

Of course, this doesn’t mean that all compliments, thank-you’s or expressions of delight should be banned. Good etiquette and appreciation should always be encouraged. Just be more aware of whether there’s another way to engage your child other than saying “Good Job!” when you want to talk with them about an accomplishment.

Tips for using positive reinforcement

Kids like praise. They like to know that they’re on track and doing the right thing. They like to know their parents are pleased and proud.

Verbal and non-verbal praise can be a powerful tool in encouraging positive behaviors. But, there are a few key things to remember when using praise as a parenting tool.

Keep praise specific: Tell your child exactly what you like. Avoid a generic statement such as “You’re such a good girl/boy.” Instead say something like, “I like the way you listened right away. That was very cooperative.”

Keep praise pure: Don’t mix praise with negative statements. Avoid using “but” as in: “I like the way you’re using a fork, but I don’t like the way you’re talking with food in your mouth.” The word “but” is like an eraser, wiping out anything positive you may have said. Instead, keep the statements separate, such as: “I like the way you’re using a fork! That’s the way to eat! I really want to hear what you have to say, too. If you wait until you’re finished chewing, we’ll be able to have a better conversation.”

Also remember that not all positive attention should be a result of your child doing something praiseworthy. Unconditional positive attention, given freely with no strings attached and no qualifying conditions, really makes your child feel loved. Give your child a hug, a kiss, a gift or kind words just because of their presence in your life.

Additional examples of positive statements:

- “Thank you for feeding the dog. That was very helpful of you.”
- “Wow! You figured out how to put your own shoes on. That was very clever of you.”
- “You’re ready for school already? You are really organized this morning!”
- “I see you gave your sister your toy. She looks really happy.”

Is your child a perfectionist?

How often have you maybe said something similar to, or heard another parent say to their child, “Wow, you got a ‘B’ in Math—that’s great! How about an ‘A’ next time?”

While we all want our children to do their best in school or whatever challenges they take on, a message such as the one above can actually undermine a child’s self-esteem and healthy feelings of accomplishment. In essence, what this statement says is “I’m not happy with what you did. Why didn’t you do better?”

Some children display innate tendencies toward perfectionism, but often what we say or do as parents also influences whether these tendencies grow or not.

Children who lean toward being perfectionists may exhibit the following traits:

- Procrastination
- Excessive thoroughness
- Social inhibitions
- Overt perfectionism (clearly displays anxiety over being sure everything they do is “perfect”)

If your child is a perfectionist, according to “Children and Perfectionism,” by Virginia Smith Harvey, a National Association of School Psychologist, they may, “…try to protect themselves from embarrassment, criticism, anger and the withdrawal of love and approval by controlling themselves and the reactions of others. Perfectionists tend to become highly anxious when they make mistakes, have a chronic fear of embarrassment or humiliation, and have self-esteem based upon performance. They often have strong feelings of inadequacy and see themselves as failures due to their or adults’ high expectations. This results in fear of making errors or wrong decisions, desire to avoid criticism, emotional guardedness, inclination to worry, cautiousness, need to know and follow rules, and tendency to work hard. While these traits can be positive, when excessive they become rigid and result in substantial pain.” If you recognize these signs of perfectionism in your child, as a parent you may want to encourage different ways of thinking. Some suggestions might include the following:

- “Conference” with your child to talk about strengths and successful accomplishments
- Help them develop realistic goals by identifying tasks that are more important than others and explaining that not all tasks will require the same amount of effort or focus
- Emphasize that no one is superior in all areas – people “specialize” or become “experts” in particular areas
- Encourage your child to become comfortable with uncertainty and “mistakes” as learning tools
- Model graceful acceptance of your own mistakes
- Have your child spend energy learning to care about and help others – this takes the focus off of them

Of course, there are a number of other tools for helping a child who is placing unrealistic expectations on themselves. If you’d like more information, or would like to consult with a specialist regarding perfectionist tendencies in your child, call EASE@Work. We can help!
Maintaining healthy relationships during transition

Anyone who has cared for an aging loved one will tell you how difficult the transition is from being “the child” to being “the caregiver.” The shift in the relationship dynamic can be hard for the caregiver, in that they see the reality of their loved one experiencing difficulty in living independently or losing physical or cognitive functions. For the elderly loved one, it often frustrating to have to ask for help or rely on someone else for things that they used to be able to do for themselves.

Maintaining a healthy and respectful relationship during this difficult transition is essential, especially considering the stresses that all those involved are sure to experience at one time or another.

Looking at change realistically

For most seniors, retirement and the following years are anticipated with the expectation of more leisure time and a lessening of demands and responsibilities. And many seniors do experience a long and positive life after retirement and as they age. However, for others, many of the aspects of their life may change—things like physical abilities, social connections and their financial situation. As with anything in life, there may be a discrepancy between what one expects and what actually happens.

The aging process brings physical change. Older adults may not look or feel as well as they once did. They may experience a general “slowing down” in activity levels and cognitive function. They may suffer losses in hearing, vision, movement and memory. Many can still do everything they used to do, but it may take longer to accomplish tasks. These changes can also impact independence in terms of going places, driving and pursuing activities and friendships.

Children (Caregivers) may begin to take over responsibilities for finances, physical well-being, getting places etc. This role reversal is not comfortable for either the caregiver or the elderly adult. For seniors, giving up independence and managing decisions is an assault on their self-esteem. For the caregiver, it may be embarrassing or cause anxiety to see their loved one as dependent or vulnerable.

This transition is sensitive—knowing what to take over and what to leave in the elderly loved one’s realm of responsibilities. And, in addition to treading carefully through this transition, the caregiver usually has to also be sensitive to the needs of their own family—balancing their own lives in regard to other family responsibilities, their career and personal social needs. If not handled well, these changes can lead to tension, frustration and conflict between the caregiver, aging loved one and even other members of the family.

Empowerment

Throughout the caregiving process, it’s important to keep in mind that the goal is that the senior maintain a sense of well-being, purpose and self-esteem—empowerment! It’s important that your loved one feels they have the ability and opportunity to make choices and have input about their life.

Some key areas to think about include the following:

Where your loved one lives. Most seniors prefer to stay in their homes, however this may not be realistic in all cases. It’s important that families discuss future living arrangements while the senior is still capable of making choices. If this does not happen, or if there’s a sudden change in your loved one’s abilities, having to make a decision about where your loved one lives may affect your relationship with them; they may be upset with your decision, abandoned, misunderstood—they may feel like they’re being “put” in a home, which can lead to depression.

Keeping your loved one engaged and active. Staying mentally and physically active extends the health and longevity of your senior. Staying socially connected is important because isolation has been associated with poor health and depression. Set up transportation to get your loved one out and about if they are living in their own home; for those in care facilities, be sure they participate in activities, and perhaps join them to get them acclimated to these new friends and experiences.

Express your appreciation for what your loved one knows. Seniors possess a wealth of information, having lived a long time and learned a lot. Let them know what they have to say is valued. Listen to their concerns and ideas. Understand their transition issues are real, their observations valid…they’re not just complaining.

EASE@Work has Eldercare Specialists who can help you navigate through the frustrations, concerns and uncertainty of caring for an aging loved one. We can help…Call EASE@Work at 216/241-3273 or 800/521-3273, or go to www.easeatwork.com/EASEy with your organization’s user name and password.
Better communication starts with you

Poor communication is a key factor in conflict. Accusatory statements, defensive or inflammatory language, and unwillingness to listen can provoke conflicts and fuel them once they are underway.

On the other hand, when there is good communication, conflicts can be resolved peacefully, collaboratively, and without rancor. Like other social skills, communication skills can be taught and learned, and they improve with practice.

Communication skills encompass a variety of strategies and techniques that foster interpersonal interaction. Good communication is not simply a matter of being “nice.” Instead, communicating well facilitates information-sharing, understanding and communicating perspective, and genuine understanding.

Begin practicing the following skills for better communication:

Active listening
- Encourage the speaker with non-verbal cues, such as facial expressions, gestures and verbalizations.
- Check for understanding by asking questions such as “What did you mean…” or “Could you tell me more?”
- “Reflect back” the speaker’s feelings, saying things like “It sounds like you’re really upset.” Only when feelings are acknowledged will the speaker feel heard and understood.

‘I’ messages
“‘I’ messages are a way of saying how you feel without attacking or blaming. “I” messages help to de-escalate conflicts and facilitate constructive dialogue and problem solving. Here is an example of the difference between a “you” message and an “I” message:

“You” message: “You selfish jerk! You think the TV belongs to your. Well, it’s my turn now!”

“I” message: “I feel annoyed when you switch the channel without asking. I want to be able to watch my show all the way through.”

An “I” message has three basic parts:

“I feel…”
Tell how you feel. Follow “I feel” with a feeling word: “I feel disappointed.”

“When you…”
Tell what caused the feeling. “I feel disappointed when you cancel our plans at the last minute.”

“I want…”
Tell what you want to happen: “I feel disappointed when you cancel our plans at the last minute. I want you to let me know earlier if you can’t make it.”

“I” messages can include a fourth part—a “because” section: “I feel disappointed when you cancel our plans at the last minute because then I’m left on my own, and it’s too late to plan something else. I want you to let me know earlier if you can’t make it.” (Caution: It’s easy to add blame to the “because” statement. For example, “I feel disappointed when you cancel our plans at the last minute because that’s really a rotten thing to do.”)

Your relationship with $$

Money can often be a source of conflict in families. Spouses, partners (and even children) can have differing impacts and influences on how money is spent, saved and managed in a family.

Discussions about money can be difficult because we bring our past experiences with money management/non-management to our personal relationships…and these views can be very different from those of a spouse or partner. But it’s important to talk about values and feelings about money.

Try these exercises as individuals and then discuss the answers with your partner. And, if you are living independently, answering these questions can still provide you with valuable insight regarding your personal relationship with money.

1. You’ve just won $100,000 in the lottery. What will you do with your money? (Break down in dollars allotted to each item/use.)
2. You’ve just been laid off from your job. You have to make cuts in spending. What do you cut first? Second? Third?
3. I’d like to spend more money on ________.
   I’d like to spend less money on ________.
4. What money problem is the most frequent cause of arguments?
5. What is the most foolish thing you’ve spent money on?
6. What is the most sensible thing you’ve spent money on?
7. How do you feel about buying on credit?
8. Do you know how much money is spent monthly on: Rent/Mortgage? Groceries? Utilities? Car payment(s)? Entertainment? Clothing?
9. Do you think you are too tight/too loose with money? (Answer honestly!)
10. My feelings about money are ________.

Do you need help with budgeting, credit repair, saving for the future, or do you have other “money” concerns? Call EASE@Work for a confidential consultation with a financial expert at 216/241-3273 or 800/521-3273, or go to www.easeatwork.com/EASEy with your organization’s user name and password.
**Putting positive affirmations into practice**

Affirmations are positive statements that describe a desired situation and program the mind, triggering it into positive action. In order to be effective, affirmations must be repeated consciously, with attention, conviction, interest and desire.

*See if one of these affirmations fit your desire—or create one for yourself!*

- I am healthy and happy.
- Wealth is pouring into my life.
- My body is healthy and functioning in a very good way.
- I have a lot of energy.
- I study and comprehend fast.
- My mind is calm.
- I am calm and relaxed in every situation.
- My thoughts are under my control.
- I radiate love and happiness.
- I am surrounded by love.
- I have the perfect job for me.
- I am living in the house of my dreams.
- I have good and loving relations with my wife/husband/partner.
- I am successful in whatever I do.
- Everything is getting better every day.

Keep affirmations short and repeat them anytime your mind is not engaged in something in particular, such as while waiting in traffic or riding the bus, walking, waiting in line—or set aside five-to-10 minutes several times each day to specifically focus on your affirmations.

Always affirm in the present tense, not in the future—"I am," not "I will."

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**Letting go**

It has been said that in life, pain is inevitable, but misery is optional.

Misery can be addictive. It often results from our holding on tightly to how we have been wronged. It can often feel like there are no other alternatives but to feel that way.

Actually, we can hold our resentments, or we can work on letting them go. Letting go does not affirm the wrong or the person who committed the wrong. Unless the offending party is someone very close to you, misery rarely hurts anyone besides you!

Letting go often takes time, along with effort. It usually helps to repeat statements like “Today, I’ll do my best to take back my power from the offending party.” Some find it helpful to write down the offense and/or offender and then tear the paper up, burn it or even flush it down the toilet.

It is rightly said that forgiveness is a gift to yourself.

*Article offered by Karin Palmer, RD, LD, CDE, and contracted dietitian with EASE@Work, from “Life Notes,” a quarterly publication of her practice, Solon Partners in Psychotherapy & Nutritional Counseling.*

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**EASEy Homefry Potato Soup**

*Ingredients:*
- 5 sliced potatoes
- Celery
- Onion
- 4-cups low-fat/skim milk
- Bouillon cube (beef, chicken or vegetable)
- Ground pepper to taste
- Cooking spray

*Directions:*
- Coat griddle with cooking spray and cook sliced potatoes until they are almost cooked through.
- Next, add diced celery and onion (amount to your liking) to the griddle and continue cooking until potatoes are browned and getting crisp.
- Add cooked potato and vegetable mixture to about 4 cups of milk in a stock pot.
- Add the bouillon cube flavor of your choice, ground pepper to taste and heat soup thoroughly.

*Recipe contributed by Stephanie Patek, EASE@Work Account Manager and Fitness Coaching Supervisor*