



WHEN WORDS BECOME WEAPONS: *Verbal Abuse*



Leader's Guide

Objectives

- To increase awareness and understanding of verbal abuse in couple relationships.
- To recognize when words or communication are “hurtful” to the point of being abusive.
- To identify differences in communication patterns that might “appear” to be abusive, but are actually ineffective styles that might be changed.
- To understand the dynamics of verbal abuse; why someone is verbally abusive, the impact on the victim, and the tendency for verbal abuse to evolve into physical violence.
- To help people personally identify if they are in a verbally abusive relationship and how to access help.
- To “sample” an array of communications that might be abusive and an array of coping techniques.

A message to leaders from Elaine Johannes:

Abuse, crisis, and personal pain are difficult issues to address in group educational activities, but group participation can prove to be very beneficial to victims and their families. Much like a support group, group educational interaction normalizes feelings and our common experiences—we feel less isolated and more supported by others. But remember that your lesson is **not** a support group, and that point must be made at the beginning of the lesson.

Prior to leading this lesson, you should:

1. Consider your personal perspective and attitudes toward violence and abuse. If this information “hits too close to home” maybe you shouldn’t teach this lesson alone.

2. Seek out the resources in your community that might provide you with additional insight into abuse. Maybe the local domestic violence program, mental health center, private mental health practitioner, or clergy will co-teach this lesson with you.

3. Supplement your lesson with community enrichment activities such as:

- *Sponsoring a discussion group for women and men* who have read the publication (or heard the audio cassettes for the program), participated in the program/seminar, and who have read one of the reference books.
- *Creating enthusiasm and interest in the annual FCE L.O.V.E. campaign* by blending the verbal abuse program with the April 5 annual campaign against media violence.
- *Providing weekly or monthly articles or editorials to local papers* about abuse or violence in the community.
- *Sponsoring a seminar on verbal abuse* to a domestic violence support group or women’s support programs.

4. Consider how you will deal with a participant who reveals too much personal information or “breaks down” during the lesson. Plan ahead for someone to relieve you if you need to provide personal support and a referral to the appropriate local professionals.

Finally, I commend you for choosing to teach “When Words Become Weapons.” The issue you are discussing is vitally important to the health and well-being of our children, families, and communities. emj

When Words become Weapons: Verbal Abuse

“You’re just stupid. You can’t get it. I have to keep you from doing dumb things all the time.”

“You take everything too serious—can’t you take a joke?”

“No one could love you. Without me, you’re nothing.”

“You’re fat and stupid; just be glad you’re with me—no one else would have you!”

“I can hurt you any time. One slap and you won’t be so pretty

Note: Consider supplementing this lesson with use of the twenty-minute audio cassette tape that gives examples of the dialogue.

- **Verbal abuse:** Frequent verbal conflict that destroys self-esteem and dignity. Verbal abuse is a systematic way of instilling self-doubt in the victim and building the abuser’s sense of total power.
- **Verbal conflict:** An open verbal argument that stems from anger and rage and that seeks to control a situation not an individual.

If words aren’t weapons, why do they hurt so bad? Why would someone you love say things that make you feel sick inside, so betrayed, so confused? You think, maybe it’s your fault. You think, maybe it’s all true. **But it’s not!**

We know the statistics about domestic violence, spousal battery, and wife beating. In the United States, a woman is beaten every fifteen seconds. Approximately 50 percent of all injuries suffered by women who go to emergency rooms are the direct result of physical abuse.

Moreover, the rate of child abuse in homes where domestic violence occurs is 15 times higher than the national average. We also know that power and control over someone else are the reasons behind domestic violence—physical violence is the tool used by the abuser to gain control and power in the relationship.

But do we realize that all battering begins with some kind of verbal aggression or verbal abuse? Physical abuse is easy to identify and assess—you can’t ignore a black eye or broken bone. But verbal abuse is difficult to measure.

Laws do not define verbal abuse, and they don’t require it to be reported. Verbal abuse might be misinterpreted as a bad habit, strong expression, or “just the way he or she talks.” Verbal abuse can be a weapon used by either partner in a couple. Both men and women can equally be victims of verbal abuse even though the reason for the abuse or its expression may differ.

However, if verbal combat leads to physical assault, men have the distinct physical advantage. Because men are usually stronger than women, a blow from a man’s fist can cause more physical harm than an assault by a woman. Women are primarily the victims of physical abuse; 95 percent of reported abuse survivors are female.

Given physical differences and the fact that verbal abuse nearly always precedes physical assault, this publication focuses on the frequent attack of words some women experience from their male partners.

Exercise 1: Ask participants to provide examples of abusive talk. Write the examples on newsprint and hang the newsprint pages on the wall. These examples will help you illustrate the categories of “verbal weapons” provided by Pat Evans.

What is verbal abuse?

Verbal abuse is sometimes disguised as “good-natured humor” or “pet names.” But the victim of these verbal assaults knows exactly what they are. By his tone of voice

“He disagrees with everything I say. If I said the sky was blue, he’d say it was red.”

“He tells personal stories about me to our friends; he introduces me to strangers as the old witch.”

and his words, she cannot mistake the hurt and embarrassment she experiences. If a woman feels confused, frustrated, rejected, sad, disappointed, shocked, or fearful after her partner has said something to her—then verbal abuse has likely occurred. The victim frequently tries harder to explain herself and to understand what he said (or meant to say). She tries to be understood and to figure out what she did wrong in the conversation.

The end result is a victim who tries to communicate with and understand her partner, but whose attempts are useless because the assailant works at keeping the victim confused and “unbalanced.” He maintains power and control over the situation and her.

Along with other forms of domestic violence, verbal abuse is used to gain power over someone. Keeping a victim uncertain and on edge gives the abuser great control. Often the victim will think, “If only I would try harder, understand, and be more patient—then he would be kind and caring to me. No one can be cruel to someone they love.” What she may not understand is that the verbal abuser often lacks the skills to effectively communicate his true feelings and beliefs.

The abuser often demonstrates feelings of uncertainty, fear, insecurity, and anxiety as anger. He is unwilling (and often unable) to share his feelings with his partner. He distances himself by using verbal weapons that confuse and hurt.

Regardless of his real or perceived inadequacies, verbal or physical abuse is **unacceptable** and should be stopped.

Author Patricia Evans, author of *The Verbally Abusive Relationship*, offers examples of verbal weapons that control:

- *Withholding*: Refusing to share any ideas, feelings, intimacy, thoughts, and dreams.
- *Countering*: Disputing the partner’s thoughts, feelings, perceptions, and experiences; arguing any point or idea.
- *Discounting*: Minimizing the partner’s accomplishments or experiences.
- *Verbal abuse disguised as jokes*: Telling jokes about the partner that humiliate and embarrass.
- *Blocking and diverting*: Verbally creating barriers to the partner’s efforts to communicate; changing the conversation to gain control.
- *Accusing and blaming*: Blaming the partner for the abuse which excuses the abuser’s actions.
- *Judging and criticizing*: Putting down the partner’s thoughts, actions, or feelings.
- *Trivializing*: Pretending that the partner’s opinions,

actions, thoughts, or concerns don't count or are trivial.

- *Undermining*: Eroding the self-confidence and self-esteem of the partner.
- *Threatening*: Implying harm to the partner's well-being. ("I'll take the children away and you will never see them again.")
- *Name calling*: Stripping away the partner's identity and replacing it with a foul name. ("You're a hag.")
- *Chronic forgetting*: Regularly "forgets" appointments, agreements, or incidents.
- *Ordering and commanding*: Obvious displays of power and control.
- *Denial of anger and abuse*: Denying the partner's reality and the abuser's fault.
- *Abusive anger*: Aggressive outbursts that threaten and may escalate to physical violence.

Exercise 2: Draw your participants' attention to the newspaper examples of abusive talk done in Exercise 1. Ask if they notice if any of their examples correspond with the categories provided by Pat Evans. Add to the examples they give or develop your own.

Any of these verbal weapons used regularly, separately, or together erode self-esteem and the capacity to act independently. They are methods to manipulate, weaken, and control the victim. They create shame and humiliation.

Women who are verbally or emotionally abused might feel more submissive, confused, and self-blaming than women who have been physically beaten. A woman with a swollen lip or bruised stomach knows that she has been abused.

Emotional or verbal abuse is sometimes so complex and bewildering it is difficult to name and to take action against it. If it can't be clearly identified, the person victimized may believe she's imagining it—or worse, causing it.

Abuse victims suffer many losses:

- The loss of freedom, of peace, and of life free of fear.
- The personal loss of self-confidence and self-esteem.
- The loss of independence.

Verbal abuse compounds these losses because it affects the victim's sense of self, usually without the victim recognizing it.

Recovery from abuse begins with its recognition. With the support of others and counseling when needed, victims can set limits and ask for change.

For abusers to change, they must be willing to give up their denial of abuse. To change and develop empathy and understanding, abusers must explore their desire to have

total power and control over someone else. The more severe the verbal abuse, the more difficult it will be for the abuser to change and for the victim to set limits.

Severity of verbal abuse is often indicated by the frequency of abusive episodes, the variety of abusive techniques (such as name calling, countering, abusive anger), and the tolerance the victim has for the abuse. Past abuses tolerated may now be accepted as part of the relationship.

When is verbal conflict not verbal abuse?

In the heat of verbal conflict, it is often difficult to determine if the argument is hostile or actually a misunderstanding. However, if the conflict purposely humiliates, belittles, or degrades, there is no confusion whether or not the conflict stems from conversational style differences; it's obviously abuse.

Dr. Deborah Tannen, linguistics professor at Georgetown University, states that lack of understanding between men and women is sometimes due to different conversational styles. Tannen says that there are gender differences in the ways we speak.

Danger exists when couples ignore these differences. Differences need to be identified and investigated so they do not harm relationships. Once gender differences are recognized, it becomes possible to understand one another better.

Research on conversation style differences between genders is relatively new. **Differences are neither good nor bad**, but differences taken to extremes can be hurtful and lead to misunderstanding for both people.

With this caution in mind, some of the key differences between typical male and female conversation styles include:

- **Women tend to focus on connections in and between relationships.** Men more often focus on independence and status. Intimacy and sharing are concepts that most women find comfortable. Men are often more comfortable with competition or some conflict.

For example, some men view mutual conflict as a valued sign of involvement and trust. Women are also concerned with status and avoiding failure, but balancing it with "connection and intimacy." Men are also concerned with achieving involvement and avoiding isolation, but in light of "maintaining independence."

Women who go to extremes to avoid competition and conflict can easily be used or exploited. Men who avoid intimacy and involvement become isolated and risk a decline in their status.

In videotapes of girls and boys and women and men talking to friends, Tannen observed that girls and women tried to create a community of connections and bonded with others by talking about troubles. They struggled to maintain their individuality when there was pressure to agree. Boys and men worked just as hard to preserve their independence. They attempted to achieve intimacy in an environment where status and competition thrived.

■ **Men talk more in public settings while women speak more in private.** The assumption that women speak more than men is true, but only in private conversations. In the public arena (such as in groups or businesses), men speak much more than women.

Men use conversation to command attention, convey information, and insist on agreement. Tannen claims “Men use talk as a weapon. When men retreat from the battle of public life to the safety of their homes, they no longer feel compelled to talk to protect their status. They lay their weapons down and retreat into a peaceful silence.”

Dr. John Gray, author of *Men Are From Mars, Women Are From Venus*, calls this peaceful silence “men going into their caves.” Not understanding this retreat from conversation might lead to misunderstanding, false assumptions, and hurtful conflict. Verbal abuse may be viewed as an extension of men’s public talk taken to the extreme.

■ **Women tend to use “powerless language” and submissive nonverbal responses to men’s dominant cues.** Given the different ways that men and women are socialized, differences are seen in verbal and nonverbal responses. Women tend to use more “hedge” words (“It seems to me. . .”), tag questions (“Don’t you think. . .”), and disclaimers (“I might be wrong, but. . .”).

Men usually use language with clear intentions and few irrelevant words. Men will also tend to interrupt women more than women interrupt men.

One study noted that 96 percent of all interruptions in male-female adult conversations were by men. Interruption gives men more control over conversation and its outcome.

In nonverbal interactions, women are likely to lower their eyes or blink when men stare. If men crowd women, women are likely to move away or give men extra space. If a man frowns, a woman will often smile in response. Researcher N.M. Henley believes that a woman’s nonverbal responses to male dominance perpetuate her powerlessness.

It may be difficult to recognize these communication differences in relationships. Men and women may express similar feelings in very different ways. A recognition of gender differences is necessary to identify whether or not words have become weapons.

Because the nature of conflict (and how it’s expressed) is fundamentally different for women and men, it’s reasonable that misunderstandings and arguments will arise.

An awareness and understanding of differences will help a woman determine whether an argument is about real conflicts or conversational “fighting” styles. Victims of

“I felt like a physically battered wife. I thought there was something wrong with me.”

“I began to feel crazy—he said I made things up, that what I knew was true was false. It was affecting my ability to function, to work, and to be a good parent.”

“I had to draw a limit—a bottom line; to stand firm and say no—you won’t treat me like this anymore!”

verbal abuse will find it especially difficult to acknowledge that a conflict is not just a conversational style difference, but a way to degrade and control.

Discussion point: Point out that the additional handout is an Emotional Abuse Checklist adapted from Ginny NiCarthy’s book, *Getting Free*. At this time in the lesson, participants may be wondering if they are victims of verbal abuse, mistake verbal style differences as abuse, or are abusers themselves.

Ask the participants to take a few moments and personally review the checklist. After five to seven minutes, ask if anyone has any questions, does anyone recognize these signs in their friends or people they know. It is unlikely that anyone will reveal personal information, but they might create a fictitious friend as a representative for themselves.

The next question participants will have, after they have recognized verbal abuse and understand how it differs from verbal conflict, is “What can be done about it?”

What can be done about verbal abuse?

Suzette Elgin, a psycholinguist at San Diego State University, believes that victims of verbal abuse must master four principles before they can defend themselves against it.

The principles are:

- **Know that you are under attack.** You must be able to recognize when you’re being verbally abused before you do anything about it.

- **Know what kind of attack you are facing.** You must learn to recognize your opponent’s skill, strength, “weapon.” You must also recognize when the verbal conflict is not abuse (see page 5).

- **Know how to make your defense fit the attack.** Your response should match your opponent’s attack. Avoid becoming abusive yourself and know when “enough is enough.”

- **Know how to follow through.** You must be able to carry out your response once you have chosen it. Many women are uncomfortable with confrontation and demonstrating verbal strength. Keep in mind that verbal self-defense is a gentle art to prevent violence, not to escalate it.

To accomplish these principles and to realistically weigh the risk of verbal abuse evolving into physical violence, a victim should:

1. **Start setting limits.** What will or won’t you accept? What are you willing to live with? What benefits are you getting from the relationship, even if it is an abusive one? When you communicate to your partner that a change must occur, what are the risks? What’s your “bottom line?”

A bottom line begins with self-awareness and understanding your limits of tolerance. A bottom line preserves your dignity, integrity, and well-being.

Dr. Harriet Goldhor Lerner of the Menninger Clinic recom-

mends these points when setting limits or bottom lines:

- *Don't strike while the iron is hot.* Anger blocks clear thinking and intensifies emotion. Set and communicate limits at times that are calm and abuse-free.

- *Use "I" language.* Without criticism and blaming, express your feelings and desire for change. Be responsible for your own reactions, behavior, and feelings.

- *Move slowly and think small.* The abuse probably began in small steps (a harsh word, a rude joke, a pet name used inappropriately). Expect changes in stages. Expect to regain emotional strength and self-confidence gradually.

Elgin reminds abusers that their abuse did not occur overnight. It was learned over a number of years. The goal for improvement should be one step at a time. Progress should be slow and steady.

- *Don't threaten to leave the relationship.* Threats are barriers to problem solving. The abuser may expect you to act on it or the threat might even escalate the abuse. If you do choose to leave, do it for the right reasons, not to hurt and gain revenge.

- *Develop a sense of "response-ability" in your key relationships.* Be proactive, not reactive, in your relationships. If you believe there are problems, address them. Try to be a problem-solver, not a victim.

- *Gather perspectives and experiences from other women and survivors:* Communicate with women you respect and from whom you can learn. Read books by authors who will strengthen your self-esteem. Join support or discussion groups that will give you encouragement and confidence.

- *Review your voice intonation and body posture when you speak.* Tannen and Elgin both propose that some characteristics of women's speech might lead some abusers to believe that women are weak, insincere, or inferior. Real or imagined weakness on the victim's part will make it more difficult to firmly hold the bottom line. When you set limits, be prepared to say "NO! You can't talk to me like that," or "I won't tolerate this anymore; I won't accept jokes that put me down." Many abusers will be surprised by your assertive manner. Some abusers will reconsider what has just taken place.

Much like a young child who has never matured, an abuser is behaving in an immature manner. You may need to function in an "adult role," giving clear, short directions as to what's acceptable and unacceptable behavior.

2. Ask for changes you want in the relationship. Intimacy in a relationship requires mutual communication, understanding, appropriate responses, and emotional support. Setting limits means asking for changes. Discuss

the needed changes and issues with your partner, and make plans together.

3. Stay in the present. Dwelling on the past or concerns for the future detracts from your assertive message that you won't tolerate verbal abuse. Mentally rehearsing old abuses is actually re-abusive to the victim. Staying in the present forces the abuser (and the victim) to identify every offense and deal with it.

4. Get professional counseling and support. Find support from a counselor who has had experience in the issues of abuse.

5. Ask your partner to go to counseling too. If your partner agrees to counseling, going together to the same counselor may not be advisable. If abuse is likely to escalate after personal issues are revealed during counseling sessions, be sure to consult your counselor about this concern.

6. Be aware that you can leave an abusive situation. If positive changes do not occur, if you or your children risk more abuse, if the abuse escalates into physical violence, the alternative might be to leave. Prepare for this possibility by packing a bag and discussing your plan with a trusted friend. A call to a domestic violence program can help you find resources in your community.

Even though you begin responding to verbal abuse by speaking firmly and clearly, standing tall, and looking the abuser straight in the eyes, there may be abusers who consider this behavior a threat. In some cases, perceived threat might move the abuser to physical violence.

Dr. Neil Jacobson, professor of psychology at the University of Washington, has done research in domestic violence. His recent research has revealed that some abusers feel so much power from being abusive that it is virtually impossible to change the behavior. Jacobson says, "Battering is more appropriately dealt with by arrest and imprisonment than therapy. . . the long-term solution lies in the culture—in terms of attitudes, in terms of getting rid of violence as a social problem."

Recovery from verbal abuse requires step-by-step action toward personal goals and building confidence and self-esteem. If you're an abuser, don't waste time with feeling guilty. Do something positive about your behavior.

For the victim, consider the following to strengthen your personal reserve to confront the situation.

- *Keep a journal or diary.* A journal or diary can help you focus on a specific incident, what the abuser said, what you said, and what you should have said. Logging incidents helps to put them into perspective, and to make the incidents and your emotions more manageable.

"I didn't know how good life could be until I began saying no to abuse. . . I can be myself once again."

"My children look at me now with respect and pride. . . I look at myself now and know that I can survive."

■ *Write a letter to the abuser but not mail it.* Letter writing helps to clarify thoughts about what happened. It's the perfect way to safely say everything you wanted to say and to express everything you felt during the abuse. You can even write a paragraph about how you will change so the situation will change. After writing the letter, you can tear it up, mail it to yourself (be sure the abuser doesn't open your mail), or share it with a trusted friend or professional. In any case, you have gotten your thoughts (and feelings) well organized so you're better prepared to confront the abuser's behavior.

■ *Try role-playing.* Role-play the incident and your confrontation with a trusted friend. Develop a fantasy dialogue in your mind or draw or illustrate the abusive exchange. These techniques give you a safe place to try out different ways of setting limits, confronting the abuser, and dealing with the aftermath.

Ultimately, the first step to recovery from verbal abuse requires identifying the abuse and believing that no one has the right to humiliate, degrade or wound someone else—even when the weapons are words.

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