

**EXTENSION**

FCS-2434

Psychological abuse

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Introduction

Psychological abuse, sometimes referred to as emotional abuse, is a form of maltreatment involving repeated behaviors that diminish a person's sense of worth, safety or emotional well-being. Unlike physical abuse, psychological abuse may leave no visible injuries, yet its effects can be significant and long-lasting. The World Health Organization estimates that approximately 400 million children under age five experience physical punishment and/or psychological violence from caregivers each year (WHO, 2024).

Psychological abuse occurs across all racial, ethnic, geographic and socioeconomic groups. Like other forms of maltreatment, it is influenced by a combination of individual, family, community and societal factors. Understanding risk and protective factors can help families, professionals and communities promote healthy development and reduce the risk of maltreatment (CDC, 2024; UNICEF, 2023).

What is psychological abuse?

While no caregiver is perfect, psychological abuse involves a persistent pattern of behaviors used to control, intimidate, humiliate, reject or emotionally harm another person. Psychological abuse often involves behaviors intended to create fear, exert control or undermine a person's sense of worth. Examples of psychological abuse include:

- Making a person feel embarrassed or ashamed in front of others
- Calling a person hurtful or insulting names
- Threatening to hurt the person or someone or something they love
- Always criticizing or finding fault with them
- Using mean jokes or sarcasm to make someone feel worthless
- Controlling small choices they can make on their own, like what to wear or who they talk to
- Telling someone their feelings do not matter
- Expecting things from a child that they are not old enough or ready to do

What psychological abuse is not

Occasional parenting mistakes, frustration or isolated arguments do not automatically constitute abuse. Abuse is characterized by a repeated pattern of harmful behaviors that cause emotional harm or create fear.

Conflict vs. psychological abuse

Disagreements and conflict are a normal part of healthy relationships. Psychological abuse differs from normal conflict because it involves a repeated pattern of behaviors intended to control, intimidate, demean, threaten or emotionally harm another person. Healthy conflict focuses on resolving differences and maintaining respect, whereas psychological abuse focuses on gaining power and undermining another person's well-being.

Signs of someone being psychologically abused

Because psychological abuse often leaves no visible injuries, it can be difficult to recognize. The following signs may indicate that an individual is experiencing psychological abuse, although no single sign confirms that abuse is occurring. Signs and symptoms vary across individuals and situations.

Research consistently shows that psychological abuse is associated with increased risk for depression, anxiety, low self-esteem, difficulties with emotional regulation, behavioral problems and relationship difficulties across the lifespan (Norman et al., 2012; Spinazzola et al., 2021; WHO, 2024).

Emerging research suggests that emotional maltreatment can be as damaging to long-term mental health as some forms of physical abuse, particularly when it is chronic and occurs within close caregiving relationships (Spinazzola et al., 2021).

General signs (can appear in children or adults):

- Becoming very quiet, withdrawn or difficult to engage. Avoiding friends, family or activities they used to enjoy
- Low self-esteem or trouble standing up for themselves
- Reluctance to share feelings or concerns. Acting out or becoming angry, especially toward the person hurting them
- Changes in eating habits and noticeable weight change
- Sudden changes in how they normally act

Signs specific to young children:

- Clinging to trusted adults, especially during normal separations like daycare drop-off
- Fear of the person who is hurting them, or of anyone who reminds them of that person
- Behaving in ways that do not match their age
- Going back to behaviors they had already grown out of, like bedwetting or biting

Risk and protective factors

Psychological abuse is influenced by a combination of individual, family, community and societal factors. Understanding these factors can help families and communities reduce risk and strengthen protective supports.

Risk factors associated with psychological abuse

Child factors:

- Being under four years old
- Having a disability, chronic illness or special needs that put extra demands on caregivers

Caregiver and family factors:

- Drug or alcohol use, or untreated mental health problems like depression
- Having been abused or neglected as a child themselves
- Not knowing much about child development or what to expect at different ages
- High levels of stress from parenting or money problems
- Being isolated with little support from others
- Violence happening between adults in the home

Community factors:

- High rates of poverty or unemployment in the area
- Few resources or services available to families
- Neighborhoods where people do not know or look out for each other

Protective factors that may reduce risk include:

- Caregivers who build warm, safe and steady relationships with children
- Strong friendships and family support
- Stable housing, steady income and basic needs being met
- Trusted adults outside the family who can guide and support the child
- Access to good childcare, preschool and after-school programs
- Mental health care and parenting support available in the community

Effects of psychological abuse

Research suggests that the effects of psychological abuse can persist into adulthood and influence emotional, behavioral, social and physical well-being across the lifespan. Psychological abuse has been associated with increased risk for depression, anxiety, difficulties with emotional regulation, low self-esteem, behavioral concerns and relationship difficulties (Norman et al., 2012; Spinazzola et al., 2021).

Psychological abuse can affect emotional, behavioral, social and physical well-being across the lifespan. Children may experience difficulties with emotional regulation, relationships, school performance, self-esteem, anxiety and depression. Adults may experience depression, anxiety, substance misuse, chronic stress, sleep difficulties and challenges in interpersonal relationships.

How to help someone being psychologically abused

Family members, friends, educators, healthcare providers and community members can all play an important role in supporting individuals who may be experiencing psychological abuse. For children, people like teachers, school counselors and doctors are required by law to report suspected abuse. Supportive responses may include:

- Give them a safe, calm space to talk
- Listen without immediately offering advice or personal opinions
- Do not judge, shame or question what they are sharing
- Do not make excuses for the person causing harm
- Believe them. It often takes significant courage for someone to disclose abuse. Share your concerns in a kind and non-blaming way
- Help connect them with resources (see below)

Resources

Individuals experiencing abuse or concerned about the safety of a child or adult can contact the following resources for information, support and assistance:

- National Domestic Violence Hotline: 1-800-799-7233 (call or text)
- Safe Horizon Live Chat: <https://www.safehorizon.org/>
- Oklahoma Statewide 24-Hour Child Abuse Hotline: 1-800-522-3511

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