

DOMESTIC ABUSE RESOURCE

EMOTIONAL & PSYCHOLOGICAL ABUSE

The harm often comes from repetition. One cruel comment can hurt; a sustained pattern of degradation, gaslighting and fear can reshape how a person sees themselves and their options.

■ WHAT IT IS

Emotional and psychological abuse is a repeated pattern that undermines a person's confidence, reality, dignity or sense of safety. It may leave no visible injury while still changing how someone thinks, feels and functions.

LOOK FOR THE PATTERN

Pay attention to what the relationship is doing to your sense of reality and self-trust. A powerful warning sign is needing to constantly check whether your memory, feelings or perceptions are “allowed” to be true.

■ THREE SIGNALS WORTH NOTICING

REPEATS

It keeps happening.

ESCALATES

The impact or consequences grow.

RESTRICTS

Freedom, safety or choice gets smaller.

A single incident can be confusing. Repetition, escalation and reduced freedom are often what make the wider pattern easier to see.

THE BIGGER PICTURE

One incident can be confusing. The pattern shows what life is becoming.

CONTINUE → WHAT IT CAN LOOK LIKE

RECOGNIZE THE BEHAVIOR

WHAT IT CAN LOOK LIKE

These examples are not a checklist or a diagnosis. The context matters: frequency, fear, consequences, escalation and whether one person is losing ordinary freedom or choice.

- Constant criticism, humiliation, insults, ridicule or deliberate embarrassment.
- Threatening abandonment, exposure, self-harm or consequences to keep you compliant.
- Gaslighting: denying events, rewriting conversations or insisting your memory cannot be trusted.
- Creating jealousy, confusion or insecurity on purpose, then criticizing your reaction.
- Blaming you for their anger, cheating, drinking, violence or other behavior.
- Attacking your parenting, intelligence, appearance, mental health or worth.
- Withholding affection, communication or basic respect as punishment.
- Using private information, vulnerabilities or past trauma to destabilize or shame you.

■ READ THE BEHAVIOR IN CONTEXT

ONE EVENT

Ask what happened in that moment and whether there was fear, force, pressure or intimidation.

THE PATTERN

Then ask what has been happening across weeks or months, especially when the other person resists or says no.

The useful question is not only “Did this happen?” It is “What does this behavior do to the other person over time?”

THE BIGGER PICTURE

Context matters. Notice what happens when a boundary is set.

CONTINUE → PATTERNS TO NOTICE

SEE THE WHOLE PICTURE

PATTERNS TO NOTICE

Patterns are often easier to recognize when you stop judging each incident separately. Look at what repeats, what escalates, what creates fear and what choices are gradually disappearing.



You increasingly second-guess your memory, judgment or emotional reactions.



Your confidence, independence or social connection steadily shrinks.



Arguments end with you apologizing for things you cannot clearly explain.



The person is charming or reasonable in public but behaves very differently in private.



You spend more energy managing the other person's moods than expressing your own needs.



You feel relief when they are away because you can think more clearly.

■ WHY IT MATTERS

Psychological abuse can contribute to anxiety, depression, trauma symptoms, sleep problems, impaired concentration and loss of self-trust. It can also make other forms of abuse harder to recognize because the person may come to doubt their own interpretation of events.

MYTH

“Words are not abuse.”

REALITY

Repeated intimidation, degradation, manipulation and reality-distortion can be powerful methods of control without physical violence.

Healthy relationships can include conflict, mistakes and disagreement. The concern is a repeated pattern that creates fear, removes autonomy or changes behavior through pressure or control.

THE BIGGER PICTURE

Look at the pattern: what repeats, escalates or changes behavior?

CONTINUE → CASE STUDY & PRACTICAL STEPS

ANONYMOUS COMPOSITE EXAMPLE

CASE STUDY

This composite combines common patterns and is written to protect privacy. It is not presented as one identifiable person or investigation.

A person said arguments with their partner rarely ended with the original issue. Their partner would deny things the person clearly remembered, call them “too sensitive,” bring up old mistakes and insist that everyone else agreed they were difficult. The person began keeping notes after conversations because they no longer trusted their own memory. When the notes were mentioned, their partner said writing things down proved the person was unstable. Over time, the person stopped raising concerns because each conversation left them more confused than when it started.

■ WHAT TO NOTICE



The pattern is not simply frequent arguments; it is the steady erosion of one partner’s confidence in their own reality.



Gaslighting can shift attention away from the behavior and onto whether the other partner can trust their own perception.



Healthy disagreement does not require one partner to surrender their memory, dignity or right to have a view.

■ IF THIS IS HAPPENING

- If it is safe, keep private notes of incidents, dates and what was said so you can identify patterns over time.
- Reality-check with a trusted person or professional who is outside the relationship.
- Notice whether conversations solve problems or repeatedly end with you confused, frightened or responsible for everything.
- Protect access to private journals, accounts or messages if monitoring is part of the pattern.
- Consider support focused on your safety and choices rather than trying to win every argument or convince the other person.

FINAL TAKEAWAY

You do not need to explain away every incident before you are allowed to take a pattern seriously. Notice what repeats, what changes your behavior, and what happens when you set a boundary.