

DOMESTIC ABUSE RESOURCE

VERBAL ABUSE & THREATS

A threat does not have to be carried out to change behavior. If someone learns that disagreement may lead to rage, humiliation or threats, the threat is already influencing their choices.

■ WHAT IT IS

Verbal abuse and threats use language, tone or threatened consequences to frighten, degrade or control another person. The words may be spoken, written, sent digitally or delivered through other people.

LOOK FOR THE PATTERN

Do not judge threats only by whether the exact words were literal. Look at the effect: are they creating fear, forcing compliance, changing where you go, who you see, what you say or whether you feel safe disagreeing?

■ 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.

- Yelling, screaming, name-calling, mocking or repeated personal attacks.
- Graphic descriptions of what they could do to you without directly saying they will do it.
- Threats to hurt you, themselves, children, pets, family members or a new partner.
- Intimidating messages, repeated hostile calls or threatening voice notes.
- Threatening to destroy property, expose private information or ruin your reputation.
- Public humiliation followed by claims that it was “just a joke.”
- Using immigration, employment, housing, finances or custody fears as leverage.
- Sudden shifts from affection to rage that keep you focused on preventing the next explosion.

■ 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 rehearse conversations because you are trying to avoid provoking a verbal explosion.



Threats become more specific, more frequent or involve weapons, children, pets or other loved ones.



Threats appear whenever you set a boundary, question behavior or discuss leaving.



You stop doing normal things because the anticipated reaction feels too costly.



The person later minimizes the threat, says you misunderstood, or blames you for making them angry.



Other people hear a very different version of events from the one you experience privately.

■ WHY IT MATTERS

Threats can create chronic fear even when physical violence has not occurred. Specific threats, access to weapons, stalking, escalating violence and threats connected to separation can be important risk factors. Written or recorded threats may also be relevant if a person later seeks legal protection.

MYTH

“They were only angry. They did not mean it.”

REALITY

Intent is not the only issue. Repeated threats that create fear and compliance can be a form of control even when followed by apologies.

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 their partner had never directly stated an intention to kill them. Instead, during arguments their partner talked about how easy it would be to make someone disappear, reminded them that family members could be found, and said they would “regret it” if they ever caused embarrassment. Afterwards, the comments were dismissed as dark humor. The person began changing their behavior anyway: avoiding conflict in public, seeing certain friends less often and delaying plans to leave because they were unsure which threats were serious. The uncertainty itself became part of the control.

■ WHAT TO NOTICE



A threat does not have to be phrased as a direct promise of violence to create fear and control.



Watch what the language causes the other partner to change: where they go, who they see, what they say and whether they feel safe leaving.



Dismissing threats as jokes afterwards does not undo their impact when the pattern keeps shaping behavior.

■ IF THIS IS HAPPENING

- Take threats seriously enough to think about safety, especially if they are escalating or linked to separation.
- If safe, preserve threatening messages, voicemails, screenshots or notes with dates and context.
- Tell someone the exact language used rather than reducing it to “we had an argument.”
- Avoid confronting the person about saved evidence if that could increase danger.
- Consider a qualified advocate or attorney for local options because threat-related laws vary by state.

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.