



Verbal Abuse

18 April 2024

Today we hear the term verbal abuse mentioned quite a lot. When it comes to physical and sexual abuse, most of us know what this means because the words describe the type of abuse. Verbal abuse is something that is not so well understood. And quite a number of people perpetrate verbal abuse without even realising they are doing it.

So, what is verbal abuse? Usually there is no physical contact with verbal abuse. If there is then it can include physical abuse. However, just because there is no physical contact does not mean no harm is done. Words, gestures, and written language directed at someone, can be used very effectively to manipulate, intimidate, maintain power, and attempt to control someone.

The purpose of verbal abuse is to make someone else feel bad. Insults, humiliation, ridicule, belittling, labelling, and scolding someone can all be verbal abuse. So, can yelling at someone. Verbal abuse is intended to frighten people. It is intended to denigrate them. It is meant to make them feel inferior to the perpetrator and to ensure compliance to the perpetrator's wishes.

Although perhaps seen by some as not as serious as physical or sexual abuse, verbal abuse is very damaging. And because the abuse does not leave easily observable physical signs, it can be hard to even know when verbal abuse has taken place. Victims may often, as a result, find themselves wondering what is really happening. Verbal abuse is very prevalent and does result in a lot of damage to the victim. Sometimes, people who experience verbal abuse will feel that this is a normal way to behave and go on to become perpetrators of verbal abuse themselves.

The consequences of verbal abuse can be far-reaching and damaging. They can last a lifetime if the abuse is not recognised and dealt with. Some of the common effects of verbal abuse are:

1. Confusion, distress, feeling disoriented, and uncertain. Because verbal abuse is not always clearly understood, and perpetrators often find ways to explain it away, the victim is left feeling very unsure of what happened, and often that there is something wrong with them.
2. Whether we like it or not we take in what is said to us. It takes conscious effort to not take in the words we hear. If we are frequently hearing belittling or humiliating statements about ourselves, we will come to believe them. We will lose our self-esteem. Most people who are verbally abused for some length of time, and don't get help, will suffer low self-esteem. They are likely to believe they are worth nothing, they are useless, and no one will ever want them.
3. Anxiety is a common consequence of verbal abuse. People who are verbally abused are so scared of what may be said to them next that they are continually thinking about how they

need to act and what they need to say in order that the perpetrator doesn't lash out at them. They cannot just be themselves. They have to continually be on alert. They are often in a permanent state of fight or flight around the perpetrator, on their guard, never knowing when the next round of abuse will come.

4. Depression also is frequently found together with verbal abuse. Depression is a sense of hopelessness and helplessness. A sense of emptiness and darkness and feeling unable to do much. When you are frequently verbally abused, no matter what you say or do, you start to think, there is nothing but abuse. So you stop caring because whatever you say or do could trigger abuse. You have no control over it, and it becomes normal to not care, to give up, and to feel helpless and hopeless because nothing will stop the abuse.
5. Friendships often suffer when someone is experiencing verbal abuse. The person who is being verbally abused will feel so bad about themselves they will believe no one wants to be with them. They will feel inferior to everyone else and tend to isolate themselves. This is probably the worst thing you can do if you are being abused, but it is a way victims try to protect themselves. If you are experiencing abuse then friendships, where you are not being abused, are very important, so you get rebuild your sense of self as a worthwhile person, and understand that you are liked and wanted by others.
6. Health is also affected by verbal abuse. If you are constantly in a state of fight or flight, the physiological changes in the body will affect you. Your immune systems starts to break down. Your sleep is affected. Your digestive system and eating habits may be affected. Eventually your endocrine system can go out of whack and even further medical problems may result.
7. Shame and guilt often accompany victims of verbal abuse. We feel guilty when we have done something bad. Victims of verbal abuse need to learn to recognise when they have done something wrong, or others are in fact blaming them for what they, the perpetrator did wrong. With verbal abuse the perpetrator will try to make the victim continually feel guilty for doing wrong, when in fact the victim has done nothing wrong. Shame is when we feel we are wrong as people. Shame is a terribly debilitating state to be in and will affect all aspects of your life. The verbal abuse gets the victim to feel they are defective as people and they, perhaps, should never have been born. This is one of the worst effects of abuse of any form. Human beings are born equally valuable. That is enshrined in the constitution and in law. It is also part of our political system. Each person gets one vote. The underlying belief is that each person is equal to another at a fundamentally human level. Shame gets you to believe you are less than everyone else. You are inferior. And when you believe that, you act like that, and end up having a small and horrible life.
8. People learn about relationships from being in relationships. If you experience verbal abuse that leaves you feeling small, and stupid, and insecure, you are going to avoid other people in case they do the same to you. You learn to mistrust human beings and it is very difficult to open up and trust again.

If you have experienced verbal abuse, and most probably at some stage everyone has experienced some form of verbal abuse, and it has happened in close relationships and/or for a long time you most likely will need to get some help. You will need to learn what is respect and decency in a relationship with others, and you will need to learn to set and stick to boundaries. You also may need to pay special attention for some time to rebuilding your physical health.

Be careful of verbal abuse. It is not okay. You can't say, "Well at least I am not being beaten up". In many instances people who started out perpetrating verbal abuse have gone on to become physical

abusers. Verbal abuse is a violation of you as a person. Someone who can violate you in one way, is not necessarily going to have a problem violating you in other ways. The minute you recognise abuse, then do everything you can to leave the situation.