

Verbal Abuse

Verbal abuse refers to the use of language as a means to control or subordinate another person for either self-gratification or to impose one's view or will on another or to gain an unfair advantage in resolving a dispute. While both parties subject to a dispute may use inappropriate language with the other, verbal abuse has the distinction of one party typically causing more distress to the other party, and causing insecurities in that party typically for the purpose of exploitation. In other words, the person wielding the verbal abuse does so to gain an advantage over the abused typically to his or her own desire.

Verbal abuse takes several forms including threats, foul or demeaning language, hostile tone or volume, intensity of delivery whether loud or quiet and sarcasm.

Threats are meant to scare or intimidate a person into submission. Threats can be of bodily harm to a person or other family, friends or pets of the person. Threats can also include divulging secrets or making outright lies about a person such to either embarrass or cause to look bad in the eyes of others. Threats can also be to property as in telling a person they will destroy something and threats can be financial, thus seeking to hold a person hostage by intimating economic hardship. Even the legal system can be used against another and thus threats include telling another person they will unjustly use the legal system to gain an unfair advantage.

Foul or demeaning language refers to using swear words or words like stupid or idiot to cause a person to feel less about her or himself. Thus language is used to put the other person down and gain a psychological advantage where the abuser thus presents him or herself as superior. Here, one person belittles the other through the use of language.

Hostile tone, volume or intensity of deliver may appear as shouting, yelling or screaming or alternately, talking quietly yet intensely, so as to instill fear. Typically this form of verbal abuse causes the victim to acquiesce for fear of self-harm, particularly scaring the person that matters might escalate to include physical abuse.

Sarcasm refers to the use of humour to mask belittling or threatening language. Thus the information is delivered in such a way so as to provide two distinct messages. The superficial message is that the intention is humour or levity while the deeper message is one that belittles, demeans or threatens. Because the deliverer uses humour

to mask the message, the deliverer will try to deny the deeper message if confronted, thus leaving the receiver somewhat disarmed and unable to defend against the deeper message.

Typically the person using sarcasm denies the deeper message so as to absolve him or herself from any wrongdoing and more insidiously try to infer there is something wrong with the receiver for their misinterpretation. This obfuscation of the receiver's reality in this scenario is also a form of psychological abuse.

When the receiver gets angry enough at the sarcasm, the person who is sarcastic typically then uses the receiver's display of anger as their evidence that any problem in the relationship originates with the receiver's anger. Thus sarcasm as verbal abuse is a potent form of gaining an advantage in a dispute and is a potent means to control another to one's gain.

Underneath all forms of verbal abuse are issues of power and control. Gaining an advantage to the detriment of the other by abusive means is inherently wrong and can cause significant emotional and psychological distress.

If you are in a lop-sided relationship where your partner uses verbal abuse in any form to consistently assert their will over your own, then you may require counselling and other forms of support to end the abuse and either establish an appropriate equilibrium to the relationship or else provide you an opportunity to leave safely and heal from the wounds of the abuse.

Verbal abuse is real and is destructive to relationships and one's well-being. Support and relief can be obtained through local counselling centers. If you are unfamiliar with resources in your area, consult your physician or local child welfare agency, local YWCA/YMCA, women's shelter or police.

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Gary Direnfeld is a social worker. Courts in Ontario, Canada, consider him an expert on child development, parent-child relations, marital and family therapy, custody and access recommendations, social work and an expert for the purpose of giving a critique on a Section 112 (social work) report. Call him for your next conference and for expert opinion on family matters. Services include counselling, mediation, assessment, assessment critiques and workshops.