

COVENANT KEEPERS

"Dedicated To Strengthening Marriages Through Biblical Principles"

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How to Deal with an Emotionally and Verbally Abusive Spouse!

If you have chosen to read this article, you are most likely in the midst of a nightmare in your marriage. You probably never expected to ever be in an abusive marriage, and you are wondering what you are going to do now. That question has driven you to search for some answers to your dilemma. How do you handle a spouse that is emotionally and verbally abusing you? Do you just take it, or stand up to them? Do you leave the home, or stick it out? I have counseled both men and women who have been emotionally, verbally, and physically abused by their spouse or other family members. In a recent survey 26% of teenage girls in a relationship reported enduring repeated verbal abuse (Safevoices.org). Nearly half of all women and men in the United States will experience psychological aggression by an intimate partner in their lifetime (CDC, 2010). A US study published in April 2004 by the American Journal of Public Health with over 92,000 respondents found that women in their 50's and beyond report suffering physical and verbal abuse at a rate similar to that of younger women. You must conclude that abusive relationships are more common than anyone wants to admit.

Why do I connect emotional and verbal abuse together as one topic?

These two aspects of abuse always take place together. A person will use words to emotionally assault, manipulate, or control a person. The only exception is when a person uses silence to punish and abuse. God connects emotional and verbal abuse together in Scripture. Solomon declared that, *"Reckless words pierce like a sword, but the tongue of the wise brings healing"* (Prov. 12:18 - NIV). Solomon is clearly teaching that a person's words can emotionally cut like a sword to the very heart of a person. David also taught the same. He said of his enemies that they, *"Sharpen their tongue*

like a sword, and bend their bows to shoot their arrows--bitter words" (Ps. 64:3 - NKJV). Bitter words do emotionally hurt you just as a sword or an arrow would pierce you physically. Emotional and verbal abuse do very real damage to your mind, emotions, and spirit.

How do you define emotional and verbal abuse?

Is an abuser someone who occasionally gets angry with you or says something mean to you? No. Everyone gets upset with others and says things that they later regret. This is just being human. But, emotional and verbal abuse is when your spouse verbally batters you, hatefully attacks your abilities, criticizes your looks or is continually critical of you. Abuse is when you experience angry outbursts of name-calling, or covert or subtle comments to make you feel like you are nothing and worthless. Sometimes emotional abuse is experienced when a spouse fails to care for you and neglects your needs and then blames you for why he or she has acted in this manner. Abuse is also manipulative and controlling behavior that makes you feel, and makes you begin to believe, that you are just a slave in this relationship. Verbal and emotional abuse usually escalates and increases in its intensity and frequency over time. Verbal abuse may begin with simple put-downs disguised as jokes, which you know are more than jokes. Sometimes emotional and verbal abuse may also escalate into physical abuse, beginning with "accidental" shoves, pushes, or slaps that escalate into fully clenched fists, or objects being thrown at you. According to the Centers for Disease Control, 1 in 4 women and 1 in 7 men will experience severe physical violence by an intimate partner in their lifetime. (CDC, 2010). Clearly all forms of abuse are very prevalent in our society. All these forms of abusive behavior are contrary to a loving relationship. Just read 1 Corinthians 13, and you will obviously see that none of these abusive behaviors would fit in this chapter!

Does the Bible speak about emotional and verbal abuse?

Yes it does. The Bible doesn't call it emotional or verbal abuse, it just refers to these behaviors I have described above as sinful and evil, and commands people to repent and reject these behaviors. The Bible calls these abusive behaviors, rage or fits of anger, malice, evil speaking, deceit, envy, lying, hypocrisy, and abrasive speech (Col. 3:8; Eph. 4:29-31; 1 Tim. 4:2; 1 Peter 2:1; 1 Peter 3:10).



Is this going on in your home?

Does the Bible record examples of people treating others in an emotionally and verbally abusive way? Yes! As you read these passages I want you to notice how God speaks about them, and in some cases how He dealt with the abusive individual.

The first example I want you to consider is under the Mosaic Law when a man took a wife and he did not keep his commitment to care for her, by neglecting her basic needs. God describes these basic needs by commanding that if he *"diminish her food, her clothing, and her marriage (or sexual) rights. And if he does not do these three for her, then she shall go out free, without paying money"* (Exodus 21:10-11 - NKJV). In other words, if a husband chose to starve his wife, not provide clothing for her, or refused her sexually, then she had the right to go free from the marriage. Here is God giving a woman the right to leave the marriage 3,300 years ago. Think of the justice of God in giving women this civil

"She is your companion and your wife by covenant" Mal. 2:14

right when our government only gave women that right to divorce their husband in the early 1900s. God did this because of the severe emotional and physical abuse these actions would constitute. This makes it clear that marriage, from God's perspective, has mutual obligations in this covenant relationship. If one party breaks the covenant through unfaithfulness, neglect, lack of support, refusal of sexual rights, which demonstrates their cruelty, God makes it clear that this person has broken the marriage covenant.

The second example is King Saul and David. Saul was a harsh and abusive man both verbally and emotionally. He could fly into a rage and belittle his own son, or David, in a moment. Saul was a deceitful and manipulative man. He was so vindictive that he tried to kill David several times and chased him throughout the land of Israel for approximately 10 years. David only had love for his king, but Saul only had envy and hatred for David (1 Sam. 16:21). What did God do to deal with this man and to protect David? God showed David that he must remove himself from Saul's service (1 Sam. 20:1-42). Then God miraculously protected David every time Saul had David cornered. To understand more fully the nature of abuse relating to Saul and David's life, read my article, *How to Deal with an Abusive Spouse*. But, ultimately God removed Saul from being king when he died in battle with the Philistines.

The third example is Nabal and his wife Abigail. Nabal was a successful sheep and goat herder in Israel. But, Nabal was known as a harsh and evil man (1 Sam. 25:3). The word *harsh* means Nabal was cruel, difficult, and a severe man. The word *evil* means he was a man who brought injury to others. Abigail even called her husband a *scoundrel*, which means a worthless man. She said, as his name is, so is he. The name Nabal actually meant a fool. Abigail acknowledged him to be a worthless fool that was disagreeable to everyone including her. How did God deal with this man? The Scripture declares, "*And the Lord struck Nabal and he died*" (1 Sam. 25:38). Obviously, God was not pleased with this man's behavior.

The fourth example is the husbands of Malachi's day. God sent His prophet to reprove these men for dealing treacherously (which means offensively) with their wives. They had failed to see

their wives as their companions (one with whom they are knit together) and were divorcing them for no cause (Mal. 2:14-16). God told them this was offensive to Him, and that this was the reason He was not answering their tearful prayers at His altar (Mal. 2:13).

From these few examples, you must understand that emotionally and verbally abusive individuals are not pleasing to God, and He has specific direction that He gave to free people from these destructive kinds of relationships.

Why does a person emotionally and verbally abuse another?

1. Abusers are broken inside. Abusive people have a heart problem and a spiritual problem. This is why God said to the husband's through the Prophet Malachi, "*Take heed to your spirit.*" (Mal. 2:15). Abusive people are, many times, people who have been abused themselves. But, they have failed to fully turn to the Lord and allow Him to heal their own wounded hearts. They have nothing to give others; they only take and abuse until their spouse is brought to the breaking point. The Bible is clear that you cannot give what you do not have. Paul said, "*For I delivered to you first of all that which I also received*" (1 Cor. 15:3). No one can love or give to others unless they have first received from the Lord. Jesus came to heal the brokenhearted, and that is what the abuser needs first, and what the abused must also receive (Luke 4:18).

2. Abusers are good blame-shifters. Abusers are usually very verbally adept and savvy individuals. They know how to turn a conversation around to make their spouse think that they are always the one at fault. Abusers are in total denial about the problems they have and are only too willing to charge their spouse with the problem. Blame-shifting was the first visible sign of sin after the fall of man, revealing the lack of truth in the inward parts of Adam and Eve. When God came to Adam and asked him what he had done, he said in effect, "It is the woman that you gave me." Adam blamed his wife and God all in one breath. The woman also blamed her sin upon the devil (Gen. 3:12-13). Consequently, a person who abuses another does so simply because they are in denial of the truth. God must reveal His truth to the abuser so that they may be saved and transformed. But, this requires sincere honesty and brokenness for the sin they have and are committing.

3. Abusers are controlling and want power over another person. The abuser uses deceitful words and blame-shifting to control their spouse. This is their intent and desire. They want control over others. This is how this very insecure person thinks that they will have some kind of security. They must control you! This was King Saul's problem with David. Saul only felt secure when he had the admiration of the people and he could control David.

4. The tools of the abuser's trade. Abusers use a variety of nonviolent means to keep their partners under their control. They may chip away at their partner's self-worth through constant criticism and name-calling, or they intimidate them by yelling, using threatening body language, or displaying weapons. They also may isolate their spouse from their friends and family members, insist on knowing their every move, or keep them dependent by denying them access to any of the family finances. They will isolate their mate by preventing them from having a job. They may also humiliate their spouse by making fun of them in front of friends or family. Sometimes they manipulate their spouse into performing degrading sexual acts that violate their mate's conscience. They may even try to control their mate by threatening to hurt them or their loved ones, or even their pets. In extreme cases I have known people to even threaten to kill themselves if you leave or tell others about their actions. If your abuser is a professed Christian they are also usually very adept at twisting Scripture to get you to submit to their sinful behavior. This is the worst thing, because they turn God and His Word into a weapon against you. You must not submit to any of these tactics!

Answering some tough questions.

1. Does the abused person have any fault in the matter? If you allow the emotional and verbal abuse to continue, then yes, you do have fault in this matter. If you remain silent by making excuses for your spouse, you must take partial blame for what happens to you and your children. God has commanded you to confront people who offend you, and if they don't repent you are to get others involved, even the church to bring about repentance (Matt. 18:15-17). God *has not* called you to submit to this kind of treatment. He has called you to be in a

safe place, and He will guide you to that safe place (Ps. 12:5).

1. Should an abused person just submit to abusive treatment? When I make this statement sometimes people say to me, “But, doesn’t the Bible teach that Jesus suffered wrongly, and He took it patiently and endured it, so why shouldn’t we also take it patiently?” Yes, it does teach this in 1 Peter 2:18-25. But, the problem is that when people try and make this comparison, they are comparing apples and oranges! Peter is talking to slaves who have no opportunity to change their circumstances. This passage cannot be taught in reference to marriage because marriage partners have entered into a mutually responsible covenant with one another in the marital relationship. They have both promised to love, honor and cherish each other. This is why God condemns the husbands in Malachi chapter two, because they have dealt treacherously with their wives. 1 Peter 2 would best be referring to someone who is in prison today, not a marital relationship.

What should you do if you are being abused?

1. Don’t remain silent. After speaking to your spouse privately and there is no response, you must then go to your pastor or one of the elders of your church and explain to them what is going on. Ask your spiritual leaders to get involved (Matt. 18:15-17).

2. Encourage your spouse to get personal counseling with someone who is familiar with emotional and verbal abuse. Your spouse has the problem. Make sure you have access to this counselor so that you can check on the progress of the counseling and to give full information of the experience you have been living with (Prov. 15:22).

3. Determine if you should leave. How should you make this decision? It is very simple. If your spouse does not admit there is a problem and personally seeks help, then you must seek a safe place. In Genesis 16:6, Hagar fled from Sarah’s cruel behavior. Hagar and Sarah’s conflict is an interesting one because in their first conflict God had her return and reconcile, but when the conflict continued to grow worse, He removed her permanently from the home (Gen. 16:5-9; Gen. 21:10). In addition, we have already seen how David wisely fled from Saul at God’s direction when Saul tried to kill

him (1 Sam. 19:10). Even Jesus protected Himself by refusing to walk openly among the Jews when they wanted to kill Him (John 11:53-54).

4. Find the support and safety you need. God wants to support you and heal your broken heart (Luke 4:18). He wants you and your children in a safe place. The Lord promised the children of Israel that He was giving them the land of Israel so they could “ *dwell in safety*” (Deut. 12:10). Notice what God promised those who were oppressed by others: “*For the oppression of the poor, for the sighing of the needy, Now I will arise,*” says the LORD; “*I will set him in the safety for which he yearns*” (Ps. 12:5). Let the Lord set you in that safe place for which you yearn.

Can an abuser change?

Yes, but it requires several things to happen for this to occur.

1. There must be a complete acceptance by the abuser that he or she has been living in an abusive way. There must be an honest acknowledgement of specifically what abusive behavior has occurred. This needs to be done with his or her counselor and to you personally. The Scripture teaches that a person must “*confess their trespasses with one another*” (James 5:16).

The best Biblical example of a changed abuser is Paul the Apostle. He honestly acknowledged that he was formerly an abusive person. He said, “*I was formerly a blasphemer, a persecutor, and an insolent man; but I obtained mercy because I did it ignorantly in unbelief. And the grace of our Lord was exceedingly abundant, with faith and love which are in Christ Jesus. This is a faithful saying and worthy of all acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am chief. However, for this reason I obtained mercy, that in me first Jesus Christ might show all longsuffering, as a pattern to those who are going to believe on Him for everlasting life*” (1 Tim. 1:13-16 (NKJV)). The word *insolent* in the original language means an arrogantly violent or abusive person. Note that Paul here confesses the facts of his former lifestyle and that he had obviously changed. So, it can happen! But, it required Paul’s conversion from his life of self-seeking to one that had Christ on the throne of his heart. It required humility, honesty, and confession of his sin.

2. Total repentance before God. The abuser can’t make a quick statement, “*I’m sorry, I won’t do it again, now let’s go home.*” This is not repentance. Repentance requires visible actions to prove that repentance has occurred. Paul made this very clear when he spoke to King Agrippa and said that men ought to “*repent, turn to God, and do works befitting repentance*” (Acts 26:20 NKJV). A quick “I’m sorry” doesn’t cut it.

Remember, King Saul said “*I’m sorry*” several times with David only to do the same things all over again. There is a big difference between godly sorrow and worldly sorrow (2 Cor. 7:9-10). Paul dealt with this same problem with the Corinthian church. This was the reason why there was so little change that occurred with them. There was no godly sorrow that lead to real repentance.

This godly sorrow will require the abuser to fully understand why the abusive behavior was occurring in the first place. What brokenness needs to be healed by God in his or her life? How does someone put off the old nature with its deeds and be renewed in the spirit of their mind (Eph. 4:20-23)? Learning how to overcome their sinful nature and walk in the power of the Spirit is essential (Romans 6:14). To help with this understanding, I would suggest my video series *Winning Your Personal Battles* found on Calvary Chapel Arroyo Grande’s YouTube channel. Or, type in the following Internet address https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=P_LdBZX8AQZyF2GvF0JRGxpGmFqgAqS6yCe If you want a more in-depth look at this topic, get my book *Winning Your Personal Battles* at Amazon.com. There are many issues that this series touches on that will greatly help you in your personal growth and maturity.

3. Time to see the fruit of repentance. But, how do you know that true repentance has occurred? This requires time. God told the church of Thyatira that He would give her “*time to repent*” of her sexual immorality, but she did not repent (Rev. 2:21). God must see the fruits of repentance over time to prove that the repentance is real. This is exactly what God said through John the Baptist when he sought repentance from the religious leaders of his day. He told them, “*Therefore bear fruits worthy of repentance*” (Matt. 3:8). True repentance

will be verified by the fruit of your spouse's life.

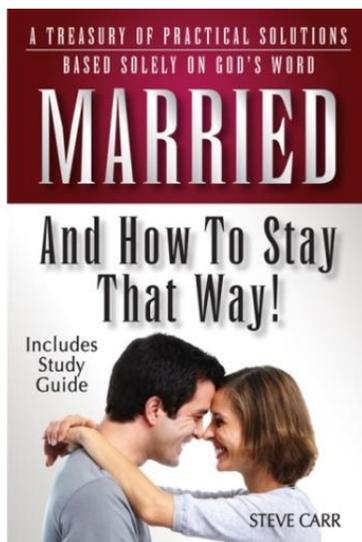
4. If all goes well, slow reunification. I would recommend that you first allow your spouse to have plenty of counseling over a significant period of time to fully deal with all the issues. Once you are convinced by your counselor and your personal interaction with your mate that true change has occurred, then I would proceed to have plenty of dates with your spouse to have that one-on-one time together. Next, I would proceed to counseling together with your pastor or elder in your church. This allows you time to deal with your spouse, in a mutually accountable counseling setting, to address any issues you still have with your mate's abusive behavior. Then proceed to time together in family outings with your children, so you can observe and see the changes in all the interpersonal relationships.

Always remember one of the most powerful promises Jesus ever made. He was asked by His disciples, "Who then can be saved" (Matt. 19:25)? Jesus looked at them and said, "With men this is impossible, but with God all things are possible" (Matt. 19:26). Apart from the Lord, you have little hope of any possibility of seeing real change happen in your spouse and the reconciliation of your marriage. But, with God anything is possible! God just needs two willing participants. You need the power of the living God to work in and through both of you. This is the only way this horrible marital situation can be changed. Don't be impatient with the process. Transformation takes time to be worked out in both of your hearts. Let God do the work!

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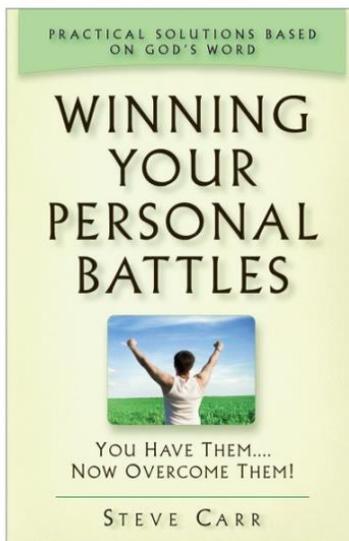
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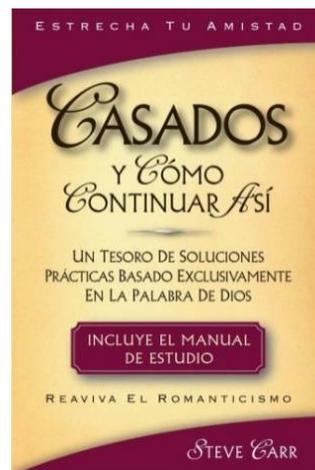


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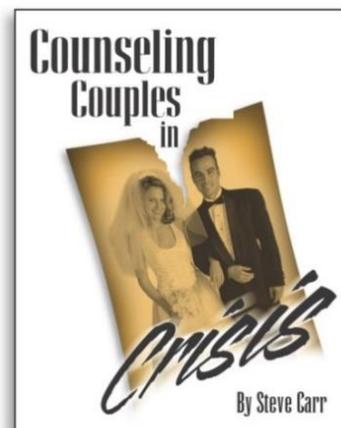
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