



Exploring Emotional Abuse: Recognizing Signs and Resources Available



This resource provides information to Canadian Armed Forces (CAF) members and families to help recognize and understand different forms of family violence and intimate partner violence.

Exploring this topic can be highly sensitive and may evoke a range of emotions in some individuals.

If you find yourself needing support, assistance is available to you 24/7 through the Family Information Line (English and French, free, confidential):

North America: 1-800-866-4546

International: 00-800-771-17722

Email: FIL-LIF@cfmws.com

If you are in immediate danger, contact 911 in Canada or your local authorities for OUTCAN.



Exploring emotional abuse:

Emotional abuse is sometimes referred to as psychological abuse or mental abuse. “Emotional abuse” is often used as the broadest term for this form of abuse, and is used throughout this tip sheet.

At its core, abuse is about power and control. Emotional abuse can happen when someone uses words or actions to control, frighten, isolate, or degrade someone. Emotional abuse does not have to involve physical violence to be serious or harmful. Emotional abuse includes actions like:

- Constantly criticizing, belittling, insulting, or blaming another person;
- Intentionally isolating a partner from their family and friends;
- Purposefully destroying someone’s property or belongings, or threatening to do so;
- Stalking or monitoring a current partner or ex-partner; or
- Someone threatening to harm themselves, another person, or a pet, if their partner leaves the relationship or does not do what they want.

When someone experiences emotional abuse, they may also experience other types of abuse. For example: a person who causes harm may use location trackers, hidden cameras, or other software to monitor a partner

while away during a posting without the partner’s consent. This could be viewed as both emotional abuse and digital abuse. For more information on digital abuse, see our tip sheet “Exploring Digital Abuse: Recognizing Signs and Resources Available.”

Experiencing emotional abuse may make someone feel scared and alone. This is because one tactic of emotional abuse is to isolate the survivor from their friends and family. This can make it more difficult for the isolated person to understand that their relationship is abusive and make them less likely to seek support.

Another common tactic is to blame the survivor for the abuse. A person who causes harm may claim the survivor caused the abuse by disobeying them. This may make the survivor feel responsible for the abuse. Emotional abuse can tear down a person’s self-esteem, make them feel worthless, and even make them question their own reality. No one has the right to abuse you. You deserve to feel safe in your relationship.

There is a difference between emotional abuse and healthy disagreement in a relationship. Plenty of couples have respectful disagreements and both partners should feel emotionally safe enough to openly express their feelings. Healthy communication should not involve name-calling, yelling, blaming, or threats.



Gaslighting:

Gaslighting is a form of emotional abuse and coercive control. Gaslighting can happen when someone continually undermines and distorts their partner’s version of events. The partner causing harm may do this by questioning facts, denying memories, undermining the survivor’s judgment, and pressuring them into accepting the partner’s version of reality. This can cause the survivor to question themselves and feel like they can’t trust their own perceptions. They may begin to feel they are losing their grasp on reality. This leads to the survivor having a greater dependence on their partner. An example of gaslighting could be someone constantly telling their partner: “that never happened” or “you’re being too sensitive/emotional.”

Who is most at risk?

Emotional abuse is one of the most common forms of abuse and will often accompany other forms of abuse. Emotional abuse affects people of all genders, sexual orientations, and backgrounds; however, women are more likely to experience emotional abuse, especially 2SLGBTQI+ women, Indigenous women, and women with disabilities.

Military lifestyle and heightened stress:

Emotional abuse can escalate during times of stress or major life events, such as moving for a new posting, experiencing absences or deployments, or the birth of a child. In the military context, emotional abuse might look like not allowing a partner to contact their friends and family after moving to a new posting, causing the partner to feel disconnected, isolated and alone. Another example may be someone threatening to harm their partner, family member, pet, or themselves with a military-issued weapon after a partner says they want to leave the relationship.

Understanding the impact of emotional abuse:

Emotional abuse can cause severe physical and emotional impacts, including long-term mental health and physical health problems. Experiencing emotional abuse can worsen chronic health conditions and cause some survivors to develop insomnia, eating disorders, or harmful addictions.

Experiencing emotional abuse can cause anxiety, depression, and Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). It can also lower self-esteem and create feelings of intense shame, fear, and isolation. Some forms of emotional abuse, like gaslighting, can cause a survivor to doubt their own memory and make them feel like they are losing their mind or their grasp on reality. This can make it very difficult to leave an abusive relationship as the survivor may feel overly reliant on their partner and too scared to leave.

Emotional abuse can also cause severe economic impacts. For example: a person who causes harm may persistently contact a current partner or ex-partner's workplace to keep tabs on them. They may also show up to the workplace and harass co-workers or employers. This can have a severe impact on the survivor's workplace reputation and can lead to issues at work or even loss of employment.

Seeking support:

Experiencing emotional abuse, or any type of abuse, can be a vulnerable and scary experience and you deserve to feel safe, respected, and supported in your relationships. Know that support is available. If you are experiencing abuse, you don't have to make big decisions right away. Starting small, such as having one conversation, can help too.

Steps you can take to get support:

- Talk to a trusted friend, family member, or Military Family Resource Centre (MFRC) or Military Family Services (MFS) staff.
- Call the Family Information Line (FIL) for confidential support.
- Contact the Canadian Forces Member Assistance Program (CFMAP) for 24/7 telephone counselling.
- Reach out to local crisis services or shelters.
- Explore safety planning options with a trained professional or check out our "Creating a Safety Plan" tip sheet.



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