

# When Words Hurt

## Verbal Abuse In Marriage

by Jeff Olson

**M**arsha's stomach tightened. She had innocently asked her husband Dan what he had planned for the afternoon. She wanted to make sure he wasn't depending on her to be at home. She was still shaken from the anger Dan had expressed the day before when he found out she had gone shopping without telling him. For several long minutes in the middle of last night's dinner he had glared and shouted, and threatened to take away the checkbook and the car if she didn't start checking with him first. So now, the next morning, Marsha was cautiously asking him about his plans for the day. Typically, Dan misread her motives: "Why do I always have to tell you what I'm going to do?" he snapped.

Marsha could feel her body beginning to tense more. "You don't," she said timidly. "I was just wondering if you might like to do something this afternoon."

“Well, I just don’t know why you expect me to tell you everything I’m doing,” Dan said, even more angrily.

“Why are you getting so upset? I never said you had to tell me everything,” Marsha replied.

“I’m not upset. You always make such a big deal out of nothing!” Dan snarled.

“I wasn’t trying to make a big deal out of anything,” Marsha reasoned. “All I did was simply ask—” Before she could finish explaining herself, Dan cut her off and in a loud voice shouted, “Don’t try to deny it. You always do that!” After a few seconds of awkward silence, Dan slammed his fist on the table and continued, “Why don’t you just shut your big mouth and drop it! You don’t have a clue what it means to be a submissive wife, and you’re probably too stupid to ever get it!”

“Okay, Dan, I’ll drop

it,” Marsha conceded.

“You’re not going to get off that easy,” Dan shouted. “You always try to get in the last word!”

Exasperated, Marsha exclaimed, “But I thought you wanted me to drop it!”

Marsha continued trying to explain herself, but there was no reasoning with Dan. He persisted to twist what she was saying and to call her more derogatory names. A phone call mercifully ended the episode. But Marsha left that conversation, as she had left many others, feeling belittled, confused, and guilty. She wondered what she had said to make Dan so mad and why she couldn’t get him to understand her.

Conversations like Marsha and Dan’s illustrate how spouses can hurt their partners by what they say. No punches were thrown. There was no slapping or

shoving (although there could have been). Instead, Dan used his words to beat up his wife.

Using words as weapons is a practice that is as old as human language, but we still don't give it the attention it deserves. While we have come a long way in understanding the damage that physical and sexual abuse can do, many of us have still not realized that we can injure others with our words perhaps even more than with our fists.

The purpose of this booklet is to call our attention to the power of words to help or to hurt. While we'll deal primarily with the misuse of words in the marriage relationship, the principles covered can be applied to other relationships. Our chief concern is for the countless husbands and wives who need help in understanding and reacting in a proper

manner to varying degrees of verbal control and harm. Together we need to think carefully about words that violate the spirit and promise of the marriage covenant.

## The Power Of Words

**W**e cannot afford to underestimate the importance and power of our words. The New Testament writer James said that even though the human tongue is a small part of the body, it has the power to make a tremendous impact (Jas. 3:1-12). The book of Proverbs reminds us that "the tongue has the power of life and death" (18:21). The language we use to communicate with one another is like a knife. In the hands of a careful and skilled surgeon, a knife can work to do good. But in the

hands of a careless or ignorant person, it can cause great harm. So it is with words.

**The Power To Do Good.** The Bible teaches that a kind word can uplift, nourish, and mend a broken heart. Proverbs 16:24 says, “Pleasant words are a honeycomb, sweet to the soul and healing to the bones.” A well-considered word can help to restore confidence, hope, and purpose to a spouse who feels dejected, lost, and confused. For example, a husband could lift the spirits of his wife by saying, “Honey, I appreciate your patience with me lately. I know I’ve been absorbed in my work. I’ve taken you for granted. You’ve been hurting, and I’ve been too preoccupied to realize it.”

**The Power To Harm.** Remember the schoolyard comeback, “Sticks and stones can

break my bones, but words can never hurt me.” It’s a lie. Unkind words *do* injure—sometimes deeply. Being yelled at or called a name like “stupid” or “idiot,” especially by a spouse, can inflict a wound that will fester for years.

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We often don’t take seriously the power of the tongue to assault and its ability to devastate. A few inconsiderate words can kill the spirit of a spouse or a friend. Proverbs 12:18 states that “reckless words pierce like a sword.” James

described the tongue as being “full of deadly poison” (3:8). Psalm 52:2 speaks of the tongue as a “sharpened razor” that works to bring about the destruction of another.

Does this mean that we should never cause pain with our words? No. There is a time for “verbal surgery.” Some situations require the compassionate and skillful use of incisive words that may cause pain (Prov. 27:6). All of us need admonition, correction, and constructive criticism at times. Even though they are necessary, such words still hurt. But this is not the kind of pain that *harms* (2 Cor. 7:8-10). It is pain intended to help us grow.

Far too often, however, a loving motive is missing in the pain we cause with our words. It is more likely that we will use hurtful words in the process of attacking one another. Unfortunately, such

instances of verbal warfare are all too common in most of our marriages. As regrettable as it is, almost all marriages experience the conflict and discord that occurs when both partners use their words to control and hurt each other.

## Marital Conflict

**C**onflict is unavoidable in marriage. Because each partner brings his or her own perspective into the relationship, which is influenced by gender, family background, and life experiences, most marriages encounter frequent disagreements and profound differences of opinions.

In healthy relationships, most of these disagreements are resolved in a nondestructive manner. Although married couples may strongly disagree, many learn to work through

their conflicts in a way that allows them to disagree with each other in a controlled and respectful manner.

It is just as true, however, that most couples go through periodic moments or seasons when they misuse their words in the midst of conflict. Occasionally, communication breaks down and turns ugly even in the best of relationships. All of us have been guilty to some extent of fighting unfairly and not trying to resolve differences as much as we are trying to manipulate, win, or at least “even the score.”

**How Are Words Used To Control And Attack?** Knowingly or unknowingly, all of us who are married have used our words to control and hurt our mates. Although the ways we do this can vary in intensity from

one relationship to the next, the following is a brief description of the most common tactics couples use to control and attack each other.

**1. *Guilt trips*** are an effective means of controlling people or punishing people. When spouses are able to make their partners feel guilty for disagreeing with them or challenging them, they gain power over their mates. The guilt-trip vocabulary can be as straightforward as “I hope you’re happy now” or “What took you so long?” Or it can be more subtle: “It’s always *my* fault.” For instance, one wife got this response from her husband whenever she pointed out one of his mistakes. He was experienced at making her feel guilty for mentioning anything negative about him.

**2. *Faultfinding*** puts spouses under a barrage of

criticism. From how they take care of their things, to how they manage money, to how they look, to how they drive the car, spouses can pick apart and lecture their mates. Whether it's occasional or ongoing, faultfinding allows spouses who are dishing it out to feel superior and makes their partners feel inferior.

**3. Name-calling** is applying a negative word or phrase to a spouse's deficiency. Derogatory names like stupid, lazy, idiot, jerk, dumb, or cry baby are used to make a partner feel small and worthless. Spouses may also resort to character assassinations like "You've never been much of a wife" or "You'll never amount to anything."

**4. Yelling** occasionally occurs in many marriages. Shouting or blowing up and screaming statements like "What's your problem!" or

"Just shut up and leave me alone!" intimidates a partner. It allows the spouse who is yelling to feel strong and makes the other feel weak, defeated, and terrified of doing or saying anything that might provoke another attack.

**5. Sarcasm** is another method of control, and it is often a thinly veiled attack. Sarcastic responses such as "whatever" or "sure" (especially accompanied by rolled eyes) discounts and condemns a partner's point of view. Sarcasm obviously doesn't set the mood for honest discussion. Instead, it frustrates partners and sabotages the conversation in a way that leaves the offending spouse in charge and on top.

**6. Blaming** allows one spouse to be exonerated and imposes guilt on the other. When something goes wrong, it's the other partner's fault. For example,

one wife asked her husband to make a phone call for her and then later scolded him for doing it when the phone call created a problem with another family member. One husband blew up at his wife but then blamed her for causing his outburst. Blame-shifting leaves the innocent partner feeling confused and punished.

**7. Put-downs**, whether subtle or overt, are also used by some spouses to gain power over their mates. In a very calm yet condescending tone, one husband would talk down to his wife by telling her not to worry about the finances because they were over her head. Other spouses may mock their partners in public for something they did or said. In a public display of power they might say, “Why did you wear *that* outfit?” or “That wasn’t too bright!” to make their spouses feel foolish and small.

**Why Are Words Used To Control And Attack?** In one way or another, most husbands and wives have resorted to at least some of the above verbal tactics. And the problem is not just about words. It’s about personal selfishness, anger, or insecurity, compelling us to use words for any of the following purposes:

**1. To Get Our Own Way.** There’s a selfish streak in all of us. To some degree, we all struggle with wanting to get our own way. One of the things that made Jesus’ life here on earth so remarkable is that He wasn’t selfish. He always put the best interests of others and the purposes of God the Father before His own, even though it caused Him to suffer more than anyone else in history. As the people of Christ, we are called to follow His example of unselfishness wherever



that may lead (Phil. 2:3-5). But all of us fall short. At a point of marital disagreement, even mature spouses can act childish and demand to have their own way. Controlling our mates through intimidation or guilt is an effective way to get what we selfishly want and to avoid personal loss.

### **2. To Get Even.**

Retaliation is a major reason many spouses turn to tactics such as name-calling or sarcasm. Right or wrong, some spouses feel personally attacked or let down, so they seek to punish their mates. They forget or ignore that vengeance is God's business (Rom. 12:19). They react out of anger with the intention of "getting even." Other spouses simply take out personal frustrations on their partners. They're angry about certain circumstances or at other people, and they want

someone—anyone—to suffer for the fact that things aren't going their way.

**3. To Hide.** Openness and personal responsibility are fundamental to a marriage. Without them there can be no maturing of the relationship. It may be difficult for us to admit, but sometimes we use words to hide and protect ourselves. Like the first married couple, Adam and Eve, we get scared and try to conceal our failures from our mates and from God (Gen. 3:7-13).

When confronted with the truth of our harmful behavior toward others, we don't want to own up. We're often too angry over being hurt ourselves. We're afraid that if we do own up, we will be attacked or abandoned. Like an accused criminal, we vigorously declare our innocence (Prov. 16:2). Following in the footsteps of Adam, we

often become defensive and blame our spouses, and even God, for our self-centered behavior (Gen. 3:12). For example, rather than taking responsibility for how his anger had made it difficult for his wife to speak up in their relationship, one husband responded, “How can you say that about me after all I’ve done for you!”

To some degree, all of us have spoken manipulative and intimidating words to get our own way. All of us have used unkind words to “punish” our spouses. And we all have blamed our spouses to protect ourselves. When we see this in ourselves, we need to be more willing to own up to it and feel sorrow over the specific harm we do to our spouses and the problems we’ve created.

It is our ownership and brokenness that begin to repair the damage we’ve caused. Words of open and

honest confession and remorse can begin to rebuild trust, and in time may lead to reconciliation and a return to intimacy.

## Verbal Oppression In Marriage

**W**hile we know that verbal battles happen in every marriage, reasonable and fair-minded people realize that there is a line between normal marital conflict and severe verbal and emotional abuse. It doesn’t take great wisdom to see that when a dominant spouse begins using words to habitually control and attack, a critical line has been crossed. The marriage has become a one-sided, verbally abusive relationship where love and respect have been replaced by self-centered power and control.

When the line between

normal marital conflict and severe verbal abuse is increasingly crossed, the relationship becomes oppressive. Partners stand less and less on equal ground. One spouse doesn't have the freedom to say no or to express his or her views and opinions. The other has most, if not all, of the power, and almost everything must happen on the controlling spouse's terms—or else.

The Bible doesn't take any kind of selfish domination lightly. Seeing the tears of the oppressed and observing that power was on the side of their oppressors, the writer of Ecclesiastes concluded that it can seem better to be dead than to be alive and oppressed (Eccl. 4:1-2).

Oppression is a terrible experience in any context, but especially in marriage. It's certainly not the mutual love and respect that God

intended between a husband and a wife (Eph. 5:21-28). Instead, it's more like a dictatorship, one spouse lording authority over the other. To reinforce control, spouses with the most power may try to isolate their mates from family and friends. Behind closed doors they may also use a pattern of physical, emotional, financial, and even sexual control.

### **Who Are The Abusive Oppressors?**

Experience and research tell us that husbands are usually the ones who are verbally controlling, but many wives are guilty as well. While husbands commit most of the physical abuse that occurs in marriage, both husbands and wives have the potential to dominate their spouses with their words.

Not all verbally abusive spouses look alike. Some are overtly intimidating

and demanding—similar to the sort of person described in Psalm 10:7 whose “mouth is full of curses and lies and threats; trouble and evil are under his tongue.” Others are not so obviously offensive and demanding, but are extremely manipulative. They are like both of Samson’s wives who manipulated and pestered him with their words for days on end until they wore him down to the point that he finally gave them what they wanted (Jud. 14:16-17; 16:15-17).

**How Do Spouses Use Words To Oppress?** Spouses who regularly oppress and control their partners employ the same verbal tactics used by all spouses—they just use them more frequently and with greater intensity and malice. The names they use are generally more demeaning. The guilt trips are more

subtle and confusing. The sarcasm is more biting, and the blaming is more intense. They also add a few tactics such as threatening, demanding, and invalidating.

**Threatening.** Threats are used to scare and intimidate their mates. They may threaten to divorce, quit a job, spread vicious rumors, take away the children, or even commit murder or suicide if they don’t get what they want.

**Demanding.** Ordering their spouses around and speaking to them like servants is a more obvious way to control and oppress. They don’t make a request like “Please?” or “Could you do this for me?” They make demands. They restrict and boss their partners around with statements like, “You’re not doing that!” or “We’re leaving now!”

**Invalidating.** Invalidation of thoughts

or feelings can play havoc with a person's mind. Controlling spouses often do this by outrightly denying what they have just said or done. They distort reality in an effort to confuse their spouses and make themselves appear superior. Such mind-games cause their partners to second-guess themselves. By negating what their partners think, they can make them doubt themselves. For instance, when a husband attempts to tell his wife that he feels disparaged by the way she lectures him, she may try to invalidate his point by accusing him of being too sensitive or by totally denying that she "lectures." An extremely controlling husband might say to his wife, "I just don't know what's wrong with you. Do you really think anyone is going to take you seriously?"

## **How Do Verbally Abused And Oppressed Spouses Respond?**

An abused spouse's outward response is based on what is taking place *inside*. Inwardly, most feel extremely guilty for the problems in their relationship. Not only do their controlling spouses regularly imply that they are to blame, they have a tendency to take the hit for anything that goes wrong or to feel guilty for having opinions or desires that are contrary to or that upset their spouses.

An emotion they normally *don't* feel or allow themselves to feel is anger. Being relentlessly manipulated, belittled, and bossed around is wrong. Such mistreatment should cause them to feel a righteous sense of anger. Not all anger is wrong (Eph. 4:26-27). But oppressed spouses often don't even

admit their own anger to themselves. If they let themselves feel their anger, they are afraid they might say or do something that would further enrage their mates. Many live in the constant terror of being abandoned by the one they need and love.

In addition to living with fear, verbally abused women often feel that it is their spiritual responsibility to be submissive even to abusive husbands. They fail to understand that the Bible does not give husbands the right to lord their authority over their wives. Nor does the Bible tell wives that they are never to question their husbands' abuse of authority. Fearful submission does not honor the covenant of marriage. Nor does mindless submission honor the purpose for which the Scriptures tell husbands and wives to love and respect each other.

On the outside, many verbally abused spouses wilt in the face of verbal attacks. Some will comply with their spouse's demands and others will apologize for upsetting them. One abused wife, for instance, would always withdraw in fear when her husband blew up at her. Eventually, she would apologize for asking him a question or making a statement that he didn't agree with. He would then tell her that she should be grateful to have a husband like him who would forgive her for putting him through so much.

In most cases, verbally abused spouses don't fully realize the oppression and control they are pinned beneath. It's as though they have a sense that something isn't right, but they can't put their finger on it. Out of frustration, they often try to reason with their abusive spouses and attempt to

explain what their abusive mates have misunderstood. They may even ask them to explain why they are so upset. But attempts to clarify are mostly useless.

Abusive spouses don't want to be reasonable. They don't want honest dialogue. They want to play mind-games by invalidating their spouses' opinions or by exaggerating the truth. They pursue a strategy of verbal abuse because it works to control their mates.

Regrettably, verbally oppressed spouses may sometimes become like their partners and respond with physical violence. After years of constant manipulation, irrationality, and put-downs, a verbally cornered spouse may snap and lash out physically. But violence never resolves marital conflict. God hates violence (Mal. 2:16). In this case, however, the physical

violence is *not* characteristic of the spouse's reaction nor is a part of a larger system of control and oppression. The intent isn't to reverse dominance roles. It's usually a desperate, immature way to stop years of oppression and mistreatment.

## The Damage Of Extreme Verbal Abuse

**V**erbally abusive words can hurt at any level. But we are left with damage that is more extensive when the abuse becomes extreme. You can't see the bruises, as you can with physical abuse, but the injury is there and is just as great. In fact, most extremely abused spouses say they would prefer physical abuse over another torrent of guilt-trips, put-downs, and angry words. The misery they experience is seen in the details of the

mental, emotional, and physical harm they incur.

**Mental Damage.** The long-term effect of living with an irrational, belittling spouse is that those who are being abused feel as if they're going crazy. They feel as if they're going to explode inside because they know something is seriously wrong but their partners continue to deny it. Their partners insist that nothing is wrong, and that if there is a problem it's not with them.

One abused wife said that she would get so frustrated and confused that she felt like pulling the hair out of her head. She never knew what to expect. What wasn't a big deal one day to her husband would upset him the next. And no matter how hard she tried to explain herself, her husband wouldn't even consider her point of view. She knew what the truth

was, but her husband was so clever and persuasive at making her think that everything was her fault or that he didn't say what he said, that she felt compelled to believe him. But she always suspected she was betraying her own sense of good judgment.

Spouses who are married to mates who regularly abuse them with their words also struggle with extreme self-doubt. They doubt their own feelings, judgments, abilities, and perceptions. When their point of view is constantly discounted, they begin to second-guess themselves. After being so disparaged and demeaned, they lack confidence in themselves and in their ability to stand up for what they believe.

Perhaps the worst damage caused by severe verbal abuse in marriage is a loss of selfhood. This is when a spouse begins to



believe that he or she has no value or voice. No one can ever truly take away an individual's sense of being a person of unique value, but a verbally oppressive spouse can come very close. To have one's opinions, feelings, accomplishments, and dreams regularly mocked and discounted can lead a person into thinking that he or she is nothing as an individual. Such cruel mistreatment smothers the glory and honor God has given each of us as creatures made in His image (Ps. 8:4-5).

### **Emotional Damage.**

Extreme verbal abuse makes its victims feel small and powerless. They feel weak and helpless as individuals to change their circumstances. After living in a situation where nothing changes no matter what they do, they slowly give up. They begin to stop caring and start to lose heart.

Many of us who know someone who has been verbally abused notice this shift in the person's countenance. The person who used to be happy, outgoing, and full of energy and hope is now unhappy, withdrawn, lethargic, and depressed.

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Spouses who experience extreme verbal abuse also feel the penetrating knife of betrayal. Before marriage, their partners led them to believe they were kind, thoughtful, reasonable, and flexible. Some put on quite

an elaborate show of kindness and respect. Shortly after marriage, however, the dark side began to show itself. When marriage partners turn out to be completely different from what they pretended to be, feelings of betrayal can become overwhelming.

The sense of betrayal and abandonment deepens for many because they also feel let down by their church. Many women who have been victimized by extreme verbal abuse haven't found their churches to be a place of help. Many church leaders don't believe the Scriptures give them a basis for considering verbal and emotional abuse as serious as physical and sexual abuse. Some believe the problem will go away if the "offended" partner goes home and tries to be more submissive and loving.

The Scriptures, however,

teach that while words may seem insignificant, they can do great damage. Words can degrade. Words are like fire (Jas. 3:5-6). Words can be hellish in their destructive effect (v.6). Words can be a deadly poison (v.8). Words can cripple. Words can kill. The sinful use of words can put us in danger of eternal punishment (Mt. 5:22).

Sadly, the truthfulness of these Scriptures is borne out in the lives of many who have found that the pain of demeaning words can be worse and more lasting than a physical assault. Having their marriage partner call them ugly, stupid, or good-for-nothing is a worse betrayal of companionship than a slap in the face.

### **Physical Damage.**

Eventually, what affects the soul will take its toll on the body. It's not uncommon for spouses who have experienced

extreme verbal abuse to suffer with a host of stress-related symptoms such as migraine headaches, nervous twitches, or severe stomachaches. Victims also suffer from exhaustion, TMJ disorders, and Irritable Bowel Syndrome. Such physical afflictions can cause needless suffering and disrupt a person's capacity to serve and to enjoy life.

## Responding To Abusive Words

**S**ome might think that verbal abuse in marriage isn't really all that serious. But those who have been on the receiving end of it know how frustrating and devastating it can be.

The sort of control and unkindness that shows up in every marriage may not require the kind of serious intervention needed in more

severe cases of verbal abuse, but it does deserve more of our attention as individuals and within the church.

Whether verbal offenses merely touch or completely cover the landscape of our marriages, we need to base our response to them on some central relationship principles. Before turning our attention more specifically toward some of the particulars of how to respond to verbal abuse in marriage, let's take a brief look at what it means to love a spouse who wounds us with words.

**What Does It Mean To Love?** Most of us find it difficult to love those who hurt us. To be sure, love is not simply making our spouses feel better. It is not merely appeasing our husbands or wives. It is not avoiding conflict just to get along. Put simply, to love is to seek the best interests of our spouses. This means at

least two things: First, love means we care deeply for our spouses even though they have lost our trust. Second, love confronts and addresses sinful patterns in the lives of our partners, even if that upsets them or makes them uncomfortable.

Jesus, who loved perfectly, was at times confrontational. He aggressively confronted and chased the money lenders out of the temple who were cheating people with their inflated prices (Mt. 21:12-13). There were moments when He made sharp remarks to others (Mt. 23:13-36; Lk. 11:39-54).

Jesus, however, confronted not to get even with His enemies but to wake up those who didn't realize the damage they were doing. He confronted to give offenders the opportunity to acknowledge their sin, to repent, and to find the forgiveness of God.

In the same way, husbands and wives should lovingly confront each other out of a desire to see their mates come to their senses and be reconciled to God and themselves.

### **What Can A Wounded Spouse Do?**

Whatever degree of verbal harm spouses are struggling with, their response needs to include a greater awareness of the problem, thorough self-examination, a carefully planned confrontation, and a willingness to give their spouses time to change. As they look and wait for a sincere change of heart and behavior, they should be open to developing a desire to forgive.

**Recognize The Problem.** Verbally assaulted spouses help themselves and their mates by learning to recognize how and when their partners are using words

to control and attack them. They can't lovingly confront a problem they neither see nor understand.

One way for wounded spouses to better recognize the problem is to listen more to their own perceptions, thoughts, and feelings. They need to give their own perspectives as much weight as they are giving their spouses.

If you are in an extremely verbally abusive relationship, you aren't as dumb or selfish or over-sensitive or at fault as your spouse has led you to believe. Your opinions and perceptions are legitimate. So turn up the volume on your own thoughts and feelings. Allow yourself to hear what they are telling you. Awaken your deadened emotions and feel the anger you've been suppressing for so long. Feelings aren't reliable alone as a guide to our thinking, but like one

gauge among many on the dash of a car, feelings are an indicator that something is wrong.

Keeping a journal of how and when your spouse verbally dominates or assaults you can also help you understand the patterns of control and manipulation you are up against. Please understand, however, that the purpose of such a journal is for your understanding, not revenge. Record-keeping should *never* become a list of wrongs that you later throw back in your spouse's face (1 Cor. 13:5).

As you keep this account, you will begin to notice patterns. These will allow you to predict how and when your spouse tries to control and punish you. Once you realize this, you are less likely to be caught off guard when it occurs. You will be better prepared to confront the problem

when it happens again.

Another part of recognizing the problem is knowing when you need help. Addressing serious cases of verbal abuse often requires strong corrective measures. You may not be confident enough to do it alone. You may be facing financial or child-care issues that you don't have the resources to handle on your own. That is why it may be important for you to seek help from those who have the experience and the resources. At the very least, you may need to talk with a trustworthy friend or enlist the help of a pastor or Christian counselor who understands the dynamics of serious verbal abuse. In some severe cases, an abused wife may need to seek help from a women's shelter.

***Conduct A Careful Self-examination.*** Without minimizing the pain you are

experiencing as a result of your spouse's unjustified behavior, you need to take time to look within yourself. It is appropriate for you to be angry and concerned about your spouse's sin against you, but only after you've first looked to see if there is a "log" in your own eye. Jesus taught that we should focus on our own faults first before we attempt to correct someone else. Then we will be in a better position to address the faults of others (Mt. 7:3-5).

An important part of examining yourself is owning your response to the abuse. If you've been in an extremely verbally abusive relationship, you will find it especially difficult to take responsibility for your response because you've been through so much.

You are, of course, in no way responsible for your spouse's verbal

mistreatment. Despite your mate's attempts to saddle you with blame, you haven't in any way *caused* your spouse to be disrespectful, manipulative, or oppressive

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toward you. You may, however, need to accept responsibility for permitting your spouse to demean you and boss you around. Owning your response helps to keep powerlessness and bitterness from taking root in your heart.

Another crucial aspect of examining yourself is taking a thoughtful look at *why* you may have allowed your

marriage partner to verbally mistreat and control you. Countless stories of extreme verbal abuse bear out the fact that a compliant, permissive response is partly due to a strong fear of abandonment, either emotional or physical. This fearful response is often rooted in a history of anxious and unsettled relationships where there was no assurance of acceptance and support.

Fearfulness often reveals a hesitancy on our part to entrust our well-being to God. Painful events in our lives may have caused us to doubt the heart of God. Does He care? Will He protect us? These questions eat away at our faith when there is reason to wonder if He will be there for us when we need Him. So it's a struggle to trust Him with what matters most.

Although we may have doubts, God does hear our

cries for help (Ps. 10:17-18). Gideon, who struggled with doubt in the midst of oppression, showed us by example that wrestling through our doubts in prayer may be a part of what convinces us that God is for us. We may not find satisfactory answers to all of our questions, but our honest struggle prepares us to see God in a way that restores an undeniable faith in Him, even though we still have doubts (Jud. 6:1-17).

If you are in an extremely abusive relationship, your fear of being left alone and your struggle to trust God make it difficult for you to respond in the right manner. If you continue to act out in fear of what your spouse might do, it will trap you in more self-protective responses that will only add to your trouble (Prov. 29:25). As you struggle with doubts, you can deal with these

matters of fear and mistrust by honestly facing the truth that may be causing you to live so fearfully. You may discover a connection between your painful past and the present way you are interacting in your marriage. You may learn that you have been complying and trying to please your abusive mate out of fear. If this is true, you will need to carefully consider the effect that being controlled by fear has had on you and others. And you may need to recognize that you have tolerated abuse because you have been trying to save a relationship that has long since died.

While all of us find it painful to face our losses realistically and acknowledge the harm others have done to us, our honesty allows us to accept what we've lost and motivates us to turn to God



to mend our wounded hearts (Ps. 147:3). At the same time, honestly facing how we've mishandled sinful treatment by others allows us to grieve over our own wrong responses and to know the thrill of seeing that our heavenly Father eagerly waits for us to return and put our trust in Him (Lk. 15:20-24). It is here that we can truly learn the meaning of Proverbs 29:25, which says, "Fear of man will prove to be a snare, but whoever trusts in the Lord is kept safe." Even though we might have to endure harm from others, we can know that by contrast to other relationships, our relationship with God is absolutely safe and secure, no matter how much we fail Him. In the assurance of His forgiveness, we can find the courage and desire to respond properly to a verbally controlling

spouse—less out of fear and more out of love (Lk. 7:47; 1 Jn. 4:18).

***Confront The Verbal Offenses.*** The Scriptures teach us to try to live at peace with everyone "if it is possible, as far as it depends on you" (Rom. 12:18). You may, however, be in a marriage where your spouse has made it impossible to live in peace and harmony. Your mate is either blind to his or her offensive ways, or doesn't care. In such a case, confronting a pattern of verbal offense is necessary.

There are two options for you to consider: You can confront at the moment your spouse verbally abuses you, or you can choose a time to discuss your concern at a less emotionally charged moment. In severe cases, though, it may not be safe to confront an abusive spouse alone. You may feel legitimately afraid of a physically violent reaction.

If this is the case, it is best for you to confront your spouse in the presence of a pastor or a counselor.

Regardless of when you decide to confront, the confrontation involves naming the abuse, setting limits, and following through with consequences.

*First, describe the verbal offense.* This involves simply putting words to *how* you see your spouse trying to control, punish, or invalidate you. For instance, one wife said to her husband, “You may not be aware of it, but I’ve noticed that you try to intimidate me by yelling. And you are doing it right now.” Another husband said to his wife, “Honey, I want to have a conversation with you, but it seems to me that you are trying to manipulate me to get your own way.”

In severe cases, abusive spouses will deny what they do and will often attempt to

back their partners down with more verbal intimidation. It’s important to expect such efforts to control and not to get sidetracked. Stick to describing *how* he or she talks to you, and not necessarily the content of *what* has been said. Don’t try to reason or explain at this point—because your mate really does not want to be reasonable. As kindly and firmly as possible, point out that even in denial your mate is still trying to control.

*Second, set limits.*

Naming the abuse needs immediately to be followed by setting limits. While love covers a multitude of sins, it also knows when to set appropriate constraints and limits. Telling your mate what you will no longer accept is one way to set a limit. Setting constraints may involve saying to your spouse that criticizing what

you do in a degrading way, calling you a derogatory name, bossing you around, or yelling at you is wrong, and that you are not going to ignore or accept it any longer.

*Third, follow through with consequences.*

Setting limits means little without consequences. A consequence is something that *you* (not your spouse) will do if your limits are not recognized and honored. For example, one wife said to her husband, “Right now you’re being sarcastic and you’re belittling me. I’ve let you know that I’m not going to accept that kind of talk anymore. We need to resolve this issue, but if you will not give me the same respect you expect me to give you, I’m ending this conversation. When you can treat me with more respect, then we can talk again.”

Another spouse whose wife regularly yelled at him

over the phone told his wife, “You are screaming at me, and I’ve asked you to stop. If you continue, I’m going to hang up the phone. When you can be more civil, I’ll be glad to talk.”

The consequences should fit the situation. The more serious the verbal offenses, the more serious the consequences. Options can range from leaving the room and ending a conversation to a temporary legal separation and the suspension of sexual relations. In severe cases, a more permanent separation is not out of the question if there is no significant repentance and change in a reasonable length of time.

Divorce is an extreme consequence that has far-reaching implications for all parties involved. There is an indication in Scripture that divorce would be allowed in an abusive marriage, but without the right of

remarriage (1 Cor. 7:10-11; see RBC booklets *Divorce & Remarriage* [Q0806] and *When Violence Comes Home* [CB951]). Certainly if a verbally abusive situation reaches such an impasse, the offended party must obtain wise spiritual and personal guidance from a loving and understanding pastor or Christian counselor.

***Allow Time For Change.*** Those who've been hurt by a pattern of verbal offense need to give their mates ample time to change their behavior. Just as it may have taken a long time to recognize the seriousness of the abuse, abusive spouses usually need time to understand how much damage they have done. In many cases, offenders are so self-centered that they have no clue about the destruction they are causing with their words. Many feel that as long as they haven't

laid a hand on their mates, they haven't crossed the line into serious abuse. Often, they must be compelled to listen as their partners describe the pain they've suffered. Only then can they start to understand and express meaningful words of sorrow and repentance.

It's important that your abusive partner is not let off the hook prematurely. Because of habit, self-deception, and self-centeredness, verbally abusive mates will often need time to suffer and bear the weight of the harm they have caused over a period of time before their hearts will begin to soften and change. Don't put too much stock in quick apologies. Don't rescue your spouse from feeling the pain of his or her sin. Proverbs 19:19 says, "A hot-tempered man must pay the penalty; if you rescue him, you will have to do it again." Give your spouse

time to contemplate the harm he or she caused you, because that's what it takes for your spouse to begin to feel the need for genuine change (Ps. 51:17).

***Look For A Real Change Of Heart.*** It's important that those who have been severely hurt by verbal abuse know what kind of repentance to look for. Tough love won't give in to a mate who tries to make a quick apology and then follows it with a demand for forgiveness. A person who has had an honest change of heart does not say, "I said I was sorry, and now you need to forgive and forget."

Truly repentant people don't focus on their desire for forgiveness. That's a continuation of self-centeredness. Instead, they express a genuine willingness to bear and focus on the pain they've caused. They seek help in their effort to understand

how they try to control and punish. They are willing to hear what their words have done to their mates. They don't try to blame their partner. They don't try to make an apologetic excuse like, "I'm sorry I hurt you so badly, but . . ." Genuine repentance contains no "buts"!

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Truly repentant persons recognize and take responsibility for their unacceptable behavior. They are willing to own up to the fear and mistrust they have created for their spouses. They realize that it is wrong

to expect the one they have hurt to act as if nothing has happened. Instead, they give their husband or wife time to work through issues of forgiveness and trust. Even if a wounded person is able to extend forgiveness quickly, it is important to understand that such forgiveness may not mean a quick restoration of the relationship. Restoration is a process, not an event.

***Learn To Forgive As God Has Forgiven You.***

Few subjects are more misunderstood than forgiveness. Yet few actions are more needed than that of an offended person saying, "I forgive you." The necessary things are so often the hardest things to do.

Jesus said, "If your brother sins [against you], rebuke him, and if he repents, forgive him" (Lk. 17:3). Implied in this simple statement is the need for

*words* of rebuke, *words* of repentance, and *words* of forgiveness that truly express the love of God.

God forgives those who honestly confess their sin and entrust themselves to His mercy. He does not promise to remove all natural consequences of the wrong. Instead, He releases the offender from the *guilt* and the offended from the *anger* that would otherwise make mutual love impossible.

Jesus teaches us to love our enemies (Lk. 6:27-36), but He doesn't demand that we forget or ignore the consequences of oppressive wrongs. He teaches us to love others even though they may have harmed us, and to be willing to forgive those who have sincerely repented (17:3).

Loving those who hurt us doesn't come easy. We all need time to get to the place where we want to show love

to those who have hurt us so much. But to continue to withhold love is to become like the one who has harmed us. To harden our hearts and deny forgiveness to someone who has had a change of heart is to return evil for evil. We don't have the right to do this. The New Testament tells us that God alone has the right of vengeance (Rom. 12:19-21).

Releasing the right of vengeance to God is what gets the bitterness out of our hearts. Letting go of the debt that a repentant offender could never repay is showing love in a godly way. Canceling the unpayable debt of a repentant mate is what distinguishes us as a people who have been forgiven by God (Mt. 6:14-15).

If we do not have any desire to forgive our repentant husband or wife, we need to do some real soul-searching.

Vindictiveness indicates that we are not experiencing the mercy and forgiveness of God for our own sins. A vengeful, hateful attitude toward others shows us that our own self-righteous hearts need to be broken by the countless wrongs that we too have committed against God and others.

Certainly, such an awareness of our own wrongs doesn't excuse the evil others have done against us. But it does remind us that we are all on common ground at the foot of the cross of Christ. It makes us aware that if we are not willing to love others as God loves us, we ourselves are in desperate need of the mercy and love of God in our lives. Let's be thankful that His offer of mercy is still available to us (Jn. 3:16-18).

## **ADDITIONAL RESOURCES**

*The Verbally Abusive Relationship* by Patricia Evans (Adams Media Corporation, 1996)

*The Emotionally Abused Woman* by Beverly Engel (Ballantine Books, 1990)

*Angry Men And The Women Who Love Them* by Paul Hegstrom (Beacon Hill Press, 1999)

*Christian Men Who Hate Women* by Margaret Rinck (Zondervan, 1990)

*Boundaries In Marriage* by Henry Cloud and John Townsend (Zondervan, 1999)

## **OTHER RBC BOOKLETS ON RELATED TOPICS**

*When Violence Comes Home* (CB951)

*When Anger Burns* (CB942)

*When Help Is Needed* (CB931)

*When Hope Is Lost* (CB973)

*When Forgiveness Seems Impossible* (CB941)

*When A Spouse Is Unfaithful* (CB001)

*When The Flame Flickers* (CB012)

*What Is The Promise Of Marriage?* (Q0805)

*What Does God Expect Of A Man?* (Q0504)

*What Does God Expect Of A Woman?* (Q0505)

*Divorce & Remarriage* (Q0806)

*Abigail & Leah: Living In A Difficult Marriage* (HP972)

**The complete text of all the RBC booklets is available at [www.discoveryseries.org](http://www.discoveryseries.org).**

*Author Jeff Olson is a licensed counselor in Michigan and works in the RBC biblical correspondence department.*

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Managing Editor: David Sper

Cover: Michael Forrest

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