**Understanding Abusive Relationships**

**Abuse in Relationships**

Definition: Abuse can be physical, sexual, emotional, cultural, and/or verbal and is designed or used to control, coerce, humiliate, demean, or otherwise cause harm.

If you are in a relationship where you experience some or most of the warning signs of abuse or you are experiencing the characteristics of abusive relationships, you are encouraged to seek confidential help through the Broene Counseling Center, call 526-6123 to make an appointment. For more information about Broene Counseling services go to: [http://www.calvin.edu/broene/index.html](http://www.calvin.edu/broene/index.html)

Students experiencing abuse can also seek support by contacting Jane Hendriksma (Dean of Students) or Ralph Johnson (Assistant Dean of Students) or any trusted member of the Student Life staff.

**Warning Signs of an Abusive Partner**

Abusive people are likely to:

- Emotionally hurt you (insults, belittling comments, ignoring you, acting sulky or angry when you initiate an action or an idea).
- Tell you who you may be friends with, how you should dress, or try to control other elements of your life or relationship.
- Get jealous when there is no reason.
- Drink heavily, use drugs, or try to get you drunk or high.
- Berate you for not wanting to get drunk, get high, have sex, or go with them to an isolated or personal place.
- Refuse to let you share the expenses of a date and gets angry when you offer to pay.
- Be physically violent to you or others, even if it’s “just” grabbing/pushing to get their way.
- Act in an intimidating way toward you by invading your personal space (sitting too close, speaking as if they know you much better than they do, touching you without permission).
- Be unable to handle sexual and emotional frustrations without becoming angry.
- Not view you as an equal because they are older or see themselves as smarter or socially superior.
- Go through extreme highs and lows—acting kind one minute and cruel the next.
- Be angry and threatening to the extent that you have changed your life so as not to anger them.
- Blame others for his/her actions.

**Characteristics of an abusive relationship**

Abuse can be physical, sexual, emotional, cultural, and/or verbal and is designed or used to control, coerce, humiliate, demean, or otherwise cause harm.

When we think of abusive relationships, we most often think of physical violence. Physical battering is only one of many tactics of abuse that abusers use to control their partners. Oftentimes, emotional abuse or the threat of physical violence is used to perpetuate fear and control. It is of the utmost importance that we do not devalue nonphysical forms of violence in abusive relationships. These other forms of non-physical violence are powerful and deadly in their own right and cause extreme harm to survivors of relationship violence.

The objective of abuse is to maintain power and control over one’s partner.

Abuse is about power. In a society that is riddled with the injustices of sexism, heterosexism, racism, and classism, there are many forms of privilege that abusers have at their disposal to control and manipulate their partners. For example, this could mean threatening to share someone’s sexual identity, gender identity, immigration status, HIV status, or sexual history.
Abuse occurs in a cyclical fashion.

Abuse in intimate relationships is diverse and complex, but there are often common patterns. There are generally four phases of the cycle of abuse: the calm phase, the tension building phase, abusive incident, and reconciliation or making up. Keep in mind that emotional abuse often happens in all but the calm phase.

The abused partner often feels alone, isolated, afraid, and usually believes that the abuse is her/his/ his fault or could have been avoided if she/he/ he had only known the right thing to do.

There are many reasons why individuals do not leave abusive relationships. When thinking of reasons why people “choose” to stay in abusive relationships it is important to keep in mind the intersecting social, political, and economic factors, and the fear of lethal psychological and physical violence that may prevent an individual from accessing life-saving resources and support.

Remember, this is serious because abuse is dangerous and sometimes can be lethal.

Research has shown that abuse often gets worse over time. Survivors often find themselves in the most danger when they are trying to leave an abusive relationship. At the end of this section, you will find some materials and resources on how survivors can create different types of safety plans to protect themselves during and after an abusive relationship.

Tips for keeping yourself safe if you think you might be in an abusive relationship:

1. Stay in touch with friends and make an effort to spend time with people other than your partner.
2. Continue doing activities you enjoy and that make you feel good about yourself.
3. Be open to making new friends and try to increase your support network.
4. At Calvin College, contact the Broene Counseling Center or the Dean of Students office or any trusted member of the Student Life staff.
5. Tell your RA, or a family member or a trusted friend about what is happening.
6. Tell your roommate(s) what is happening; they can help you screen visitors.
7. Update your people search settings and limit or remove your information from access.
8. If you feel that you are in physical danger, contact Campus Safety for assistance.
9. Try not to be alone with your partner, especially in isolated or deserted locations.
10. Try not to be dependent on your partner for a ride.
11. Trust your instincts! If you feel you’re in danger, get help immediately. Do not minimize your fears.
12. Work with a friend or a college resource to develop a safety plan.

Sample Safety Plan

Safety planning can help victims/survivors in an abusive relationship or who intend to leave.

1. If I cannot get home, a safe place for me to go is__________________.
2. If violence starts while I am out with my partner, a safe way for me to get home is__________________.
3. I can call _______________ in an emergency.
4. I will use ____________________ as my code word with my parents, relatives, school personnel, and/or friends so they can call for help.
5. If the abusive partner comes to my house, I will (inform my roommates, call the police, call a neighbor, etc.).

6. If he/she calls my cell, I will (let voice mail pick up, have phone number changed, get number blocked, etc.).

7. When I expect we are going to have an argument, I will try to move to a space that is lowest risk, such as (crowded hallway in school, safest room in your house, not the kitchen or bathroom where there may be implements/tools that can be used as weapons and not in a room that has no access to an outside door).

8. If I am at a party and he/she should escalate their behavior, I will (have a friend take me home, leave the party, call a taxi etc.).

**ABUSE IN RELATIONSHIPS**

What is Emotional Abuse?

Abuse is any behavior that is designed to control and subjugate another human being through the use of fear, humiliation, and verbal or physical assaults. Emotional abuse is any kind of abuse that is emotional rather than physical in nature. It can include anything from verbal abuse and constant criticism to more subtle tactics, such as intimidation, manipulation, and refusal to ever be pleased.

Emotional abuse is like brain washing in that it systematically wears away at the victim’s self-confidence, sense of self-worth, trust in their own perceptions, and self-concept. Whether it is done by constant berating and belittling, by intimidation, or under the guise of “guidance,” “teaching,” or “advice,” the results are similar. Eventually, the recipient of the abuse loses all sense of self and remnants of personal value. Emotional abuse cuts to the very core of a person, creating scars that may be far deeper and more lasting than physical ones (Engel, 1992, p. 10).

**Types of Emotional Abuse**

Emotional abuse can take many forms. Three general patterns of abusive behavior include aggressing, denying, and minimizing.

**Aggressing**

- Aggressive forms of abuse include name-calling, accusing, blaming, threatening, and ordering. Aggressing behaviors are generally direct and obvious. The one-up position the abuser assumes by attempting to judge or invalidate the recipient undermines the equality and autonomy that are essential to healthy adult relationships. This parent-to-child pattern of communication (which is common to all forms of verbal abuse) is most obvious when the abuser takes an aggressive stance.

- Aggressive abuse can also take a more indirect form and may even be disguised as “helping.” Criticizing, advising, offering solutions, analyzing, probing, and questioning another person may be a sincere attempt to help. In some instances, however, these behaviors may be an attempt to belittle, control, or demean rather than help. The underlying judgmental “I know best” tone the abuser takes in these situations is inappropriate and creates unequal footing in peer relationships.

**Denying**

- Invalidating seeks to distort or undermine the recipient’s perceptions of their world. Invalidating occurs when the abuser refuses or fails to acknowledge reality. For example, if the recipient confronts the abuser about an incident of name calling, the abuser may insist, “I never said that,” “I don’t know what you’re talking about,” etc.

- Withholding is another form of denying. Withholding includes refusing to listen, refusing to communicate, and emotionally withdrawing as punishment. This is sometimes called the “silent treatment.”

- Countering occurs when the abuser views the recipient as an extension of themselves and denies any viewpoints or feelings which differ from their own.
Minimizing

- Minimizing is a less extreme form of denial. When minimizing, the abuser may not deny that a particular event occurred, but they question the recipient’s emotional experience or reaction to an event. Statements such as “You’re too sensitive,” “You’re exaggerating,” or “You’re blowing this out of proportion” all suggest that the recipient’s emotions and perceptions are faulty and not to be trusted.
- Trivializing, which occurs when the abuser suggests that what you have done or communicated is inconsequential or unimportant, is a more subtle form of minimizing.
- Denying and minimizing can be particularly damaging. In addition to lowering self-esteem and creating conflict, the invalidation of reality, feelings, and experiences can eventually lead you to question and mistrust your own perceptions and emotional experience.

Understanding Abusive Relationships

No one intends to be in an abusive relationship, but individuals who were verbally abused by a parent or other significant person often find themselves in similar situations as an adult. If a parent tended to define your experiences and emotions, and judge your behaviors, you may not have learned how to set your own standards, develop your own viewpoints, and validate your own feelings and perceptions. Consequently, the controlling and defining stance taken by an emotional abuser may feel familiar or even comfortable to you, although it is destructive.

Recipients of abuse often struggle with feelings of powerlessness, hurt, fear, and anger. Ironically, abusers tend to struggle with these same feelings. Abusers are also likely to have been raised in emotionally abusive environments and they learn to be abusive as a way to cope with their own feelings of powerlessness, hurt, fear and anger. Consequently, abusers may be attracted to people who see themselves as helpless or who have not learned to value their own feelings, perceptions, or viewpoints. This allows the abuser to feel more secure and in control, and avoid dealing with their own feelings and self-perceptions.

Understanding the pattern of your relationships, especially those with family members and other significant people, is a first step toward change. A lack of clarity about who you are in relationship to significant others may manifest itself in different ways. For example, you may act as an “abuser” in some instances and as a “recipient” in others. You may find that you tend to be abused in your romantic relationships, allowing your partners to define and control you. In friendships, however, you may play the role of abuser by withholding, manipulating, trying to “help” others, etc. Knowing yourself and understanding your past can prevent abuse from being recreated in your life.

Are You Abusive to Yourself?

Often we allow people into our lives who treat us as we expect to be treated. If we feel contempt for ourselves or think very little of ourselves, we may pick partners or significant others who reflect this image back to us. If we are willing to tolerate negative treatment from others, or treat others in negative ways, it is possible that we also treat ourselves similarly. If you are an abuser or a recipient, you may want to consider how you treat yourself. What sorts of things do you say to yourself? Do thoughts such as “I’m stupid” or “I never do anything right” dominate your thinking? Learning to love and care for ourselves increases self-esteem and makes it more likely that we will have healthy, intimate relationships.

Basic Rights in a Relationship

If you have been involved in emotionally abusive relationships, you may not have a clear idea of what a healthy relationship is like. Evans (1992) suggests the following as basic rights in a relationship for you and your partner:
- The right to good will from the other.
- The right to emotional support.
- The right to be heard by the other and to be responded to with courtesy.
- The right to have your own view, even if your partner has a different view.
- The right to have your feelings and experience acknowledged as real.
- The right to receive a sincere apology for any jokes you may find offensive.
• The right to clear and informative answers to questions that concern what is legitimately your business.
• The right to live free from accusation and blame.
• The right to live free from criticism and judgment.
• The right to have your work and your interests spoken of with respect.
• The right to encouragement.
• The right to live free from emotional and physical threat.
• The right to live free from angry outbursts and rage.
• The right to be called by no name that devalues you.
• The right to be respectfully asked rather than ordered.

What Can You Do?

If you recognize yourself or your relationships in this brochure, you may wish to:

• Educate yourself about emotionally abusive relationships. Two excellent resources include:


• Consider seeing a mental health professional. A counselor can help you understand the impact of an emotionally abusive relationship. A counselor can also help you learn healthier ways of relating to others and caring for your own needs.

At Calvin, you can call 616-526-6123 to make an appointment with a counselor at the Broene Center. For more information about Broene Counseling Services, go to: http://www.calvin.edu/broene/

This information was adapted from information presented on the website of University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign.