psychological abuse

Why It Matters: Psychological abuse is the systematic perpetration of malicious and explicit nonphysical acts against an intimate partner, child or dependent adult.¹ This can include threatening the physical health of the victim and the victim’s loved ones, controlling the victim’s freedom and effectively acting to destabilize or isolate the victim.² Psychological abuse frequently occurs prior to or concurrently with physical or sexual abuse.³ While psychological abuse increases the trauma of physical and sexual abuse, a number of studies have demonstrated that psychological abuse independently causes long-term damage to its victims’ mental health.

did you know?

95% of men who physically abuse their intimate partners also psychologically abuse them.⁴ Psychologically abusive men are more likely to use a weapon against their partners, have prior criminal arrests, abuse substances, and have employment problems.⁵ An employed woman with an unemployed partner is more than twice as likely to be psychologically abused by her partner.⁹

Having a physical disability increases a woman’s risk of psychological abuse by 83%.⁷

Women who earn 65% or more of their households’ income are more likely to be psychologically abused.⁸

children

Children who are victims of or exposed to psychological abuse are more likely to be involved—as victims or perpetrators—with psychological abuse as adults.¹²

Incidents of child physical abuse are more frequent when accompanied by psychological abuse.¹³

Children who have been psychologically abused are more likely to experience behavior problems during their childhood and develop symptoms of anxiety, depression, and post-traumatic stress disorder later.

the elderly

Perpetrators of psychological abuse against the elderly often take advantage of their vulnerability in ways that control and/or humiliate the victim, including:¹⁵

Denying or creating long waits for food, medication, heat, or basic care.

Taking the victim’s walker, glasses or dentures.

Intentionally failing to follow medical, therapy or safety recommendations.
What is psychological abuse?

Examples of psychological abuse include:  

1. Denying the victim access to money or economic support.  
2. Harassing the victim at work or school.  
3. Threatening to injure, permanently disfigure, or kill the victim and/or loved ones.  
4. Damaging the victim’s property.  
5. Preventing the victim from eating, sleeping or leaving her place of residence.  
6. Threatening or physically abusing the family pet.

The effects of psychological abuse

Individuals who are victims of psychological abuse are more likely to experience:  

1. Poor physical health  
2. Difficulty concentrating  
3. Emotional and/or mental impairment  
4. Poor work or school performance  
5. Higher likelihood of illegal drugs and alcohol use  
6. Suicidal thoughts and/or suicide attempts

Psychological effects of physical and sexual abuse

The most common psychological effects of physical abuse include depression, difficulty sleeping, loss of appetite, panic attacks and anxiety. One study shows that factors such as good overall physical health, high self-esteem and a support network of family and friends can mitigate the psychological impact of physical and sexual abuse.

Women who have been sexually assaulted are more likely to develop clinical depression and post-traumatic stress disorder. 

 Victims of sexual assault are more likely to suffer from self-blame, self-defeating attitudes and an inability to develop coping mechanisms to deal with present and future trauma.

Resources

National Center on Domestic Violence, Trauma and Mental Health  
312-726-7020, ext 10  
http://www.nationalcenterdvtraumamh.org

National Health Resource Center on Domestic Violence  
888-RX-ABUSE  
www.endabuse.org/health

If you need help

For more information or to get help, please contact the:  

National Domestic Violence Hotline at 1-800-799-SAFE  
National Sexual Assault Hotline at 1-800-656-HOPE
sources


10 Follingstad & DeHart. (2000).


14 Schneider, et al. (2005).


17 Carlson, et al. (2002).
