

Emotional and psychological abuse

Australian and international studies demonstrate the prevalence of emotional and psychological abuse as a form of domestic and family violence that may be part of a broader and complex pattern of abusive behaviours experienced by a victim.

Emotional or psychological abuse may include verbal, non-verbal or physical acts [Bagshaw et al 2000] by the perpetrator that are intended to exercise dominance, control or coercion over the victim; degrade the victim's emotional or cognitive abilities or sense of self-worth; or induce feelings of fear and intimidation in the victim.

Verbal attacks by the perpetrator may involve jealous control, ridicule, put-downs, name calling and humiliation, and may be focused on the victim's intelligence, sexuality, appearance, capacity as a parent or intimate partner, and unfavourable comparisons with others. For example in a criminal case the male perpetrator's abuse of his female intimate partner included: 'insisting that she sleep outside the house, and without access to amenities such as a toilet; insisting that the children refer to her by demeaning names such as "slut", "whore", "moll", and not "mother", or "mum"; insisting the children not show affection for her; and generally treating her in a humiliating and abusive manner, including attempting to persuade her to engage in a sexual act with a dog.'

Non-verbal and physical acts of emotional or psychological abuse by the perpetrator may also involve:

- > **stalking or harassing** the victim in or around the workplace
- > threatening to divorce or abandon the victim, or to have an affair if the victim fails to comply with the perpetrator's demands
- > **threatening to commit suicide** if the victim ends or leaves the relationship
- > **restricting the victim's contact with family, friends and pets; access to a car or finances; or choice of clothing**
- > **monitoring** the victim's whereabouts
- > **threatening to harm or kill the victim, the children or other family members or pets**
- > **threatening to or actually damaging or destroying the victim's personal property**
- > associated menacing or intimidatory behaviours or gestures directed repeatedly and strategically at the victim including angry verbal outbursts, staring, silence, ignoring and withdrawal of affection.

Research indicates that threats of physical violence, restrictions on the victim's freedoms and damage to the victim's personal property are **strong predictors** of actual violence causing severe injury or death [Mouzos & Makkai 2004].

Past perceptions of emotional or psychological abuse as having fewer, less severe and more transient consequences than physical violence have been superseded by a growing understanding of its impacts on victims including increased rates of serious or chronic illness, **disability or impairment, post-traumatic stress disorder, depression, misuse of alcohol and drugs**, dysfunctional parenting and long-term low self-esteem [[Sackett & Saunders 1999](#)].

In many cases victims describe the cumulative daily emotional or psychological abuse as having a more debilitating effect on their self-esteem and ability to cope with their situation than the physical violence they have also experienced. Victims also report that threats of violence can be as effective as actual violence for the control they exercise and fear they induce, often preventing the victim from leaving the abusive relationship [[Follingstad et al 1990](#)].