

The Six Strategies of Subtle Emotional and Psychological Abuse

Much is written about overt abusive behavior, the kind of in-your-face actions that are easily recognizable to virtually anyone. Those more obvious forms of abusive behavior include behaviors such as yelling, screaming, name calling, threatening and intimidating as well as physical forms of violence such as hitting, kicking, pushing, shoving and strangulating up to stabbing and shooting. But what of the more subtle forms of abusive behavior?

With the more subtle forms of abusive behavior, the abuser can appear with a smile on their face and absolutely calm and in control of themselves. They can be remarkably charming and convincing, causing the abused to believe they are the problem. These are more cold and calculating forms of abuse. However the victim, unable to identify the abuse is still be affected by it.

There is a craziness the victim of these more subtle forms of abuse feels and that craziness is often accompanied by feelings of guilt and/or depression and/or anxiety and/or anger and resentment.

The goal of the subtle forms of abuse is the same as for the more overt or egregious forms of abuse: power and control. In virtually all cases of abuse, the abuser is seeking to hold power and control over another person to one's own gain. That gain can include power and control for its own sake as well as for other objectives such as sex, money, favors and/or access to other resources.

By identifying the more subtle forms of abuse, the victim is freed from thinking the problem is oneself and can more appropriately hold the abuser accountable for their actions. Although the abuser using these strategies will be skilled in the art of manipulation including deflection of responsibility, it is important for the target of the abuse to realize they must not depend upon the abuser acknowledging the abuse in order to free oneself from their clutches.

The victim must come to their own realization and accept the fact the abuser may never take responsibility for their behavior. When this is the case it becomes vital for the target of the abuse to extricate themselves from the situation for self-protection. The victim of this abuse can be a spouse/partner, colleague, work-mate, employer, supervisor or any other professional having to work with someone with this disposition.

These are six key forms of subtle abusive behavior: Stonewalling, Gaslighting, Duplicity, Guilt, Memory Loss and Sarcasm.

1. *Stonewalling* is basically a refusal to communicate or address the issue. It can take an angry form such as when a partner exclaims they are not going to talk or outright refusing to listen to your concerns. It can also take a more passive form such as when a partner simply avoids you or puts off dealing with the matter at hand. The abuser uses extreme patience to wait you out until finally you cave to their wants.

2. *Gaslighting* is the distortion of information so that something appears other than what it is. For example, when you think your partner is having a romantic tryst and it gets explained away as an innocent business meeting, yet the credit card charge includes the hotel fee. While you are given a plausible explanation for something, the total story doesn't hold together, yet it is difficult to put your finger on it.
3. *Duplicity* is out right telling you one thing while doing another. Outright deception. You know your partner is duplicitous when you finally gather irrefutable evidence of the problematic behavior.
4. *Guilt* is when the abuser tries to make the other feel bad about themselves for somehow not having met the abuser's needs or expectations, particularly when those needs or expectations are only self-serving and/or could undermine the well being of the other. You are somehow made to feel bad for thwarting their objective. A favorite line of this abuser is "If you really loved me, you would...."
5. *Memory loss* is simply the "I forgot" strategy. If I forgot, then somehow I am not accountable. People who use this strategy however will appear to have excellent memories when it suits them.
6. *Sarcasm* is the use of humor to disguise verbal abuse. When the target of the sarcasm complains about the comment, the abuser hides behind the humor, saying the comment was just a joke. Abuse disguised as humor is still abuse.

All of those behaviors are emotionally and psychologically abusive. If you are the victim of any of these behaviors, trying to hold your partner accountable is like trying to catch smoke. Your partner will be slippery and likely not take responsibility for their actions. If you think you need their validation of the abuse in order to perhaps leave or at least feel better, then you will remain in their clutches.

Rather, if you are victim to any of these forms of abuse and your partner will not take responsibility, then couple counseling is likely useless and you should consider individual counseling to address the need for validation and to consider your options. First and foremost though, YOU ARE NOT CRAZY, although you may be driven nuts.

Like banging your head against the wall, it's so good when you stop. When your partner will not change, you may want to consider getting out of your partnership.

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