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When Words Are Used As Weapons: The Signs of Verbal Abuse

(Part 2 of a four part series)

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Verbal abuse finally is being recognized as a form of domestic violence and as the behavior that usually precedes physical violence. There has been little support for individuals who are verbally abused because it's not as readily visible as a black eye or bruise. However, many individuals, particularly women, suffer with verbal assaults from their partners.

According to Elaine Johannes, Kansas State University Extension family and community mental health specialist, the following are some examples of verbal weapons used for control and abuse.

- **Withholding:** The abuser refuses to share ideas, feelings, intimacy, thoughts and dreams with the partner.
- **Countering:** The partner's thoughts, feelings, perceptions and experiences are disputed or any point or idea is argued.
- **Discounting:** The partner's accomplishments or experiences are minimized or dismissed as unimportant.
- **Verbal abuse disguised as jokes:** The abuser jokes about the partner or things the partner has done that humiliates and embarrasses the partner, or makes the partner feel bad.
- **Blocking and diverting:** The abuser purposefully creates barriers to the partner's efforts to communicate and will change the conversation to gain control.
- **Accusing and blaming:** The abuser blames the partner for the abuse which would therefore excuse the abuser's actions. This often happens when the partner confronts the abuser about his hurtful behavior.
- **Judging and criticizing:** The abuser puts down the partner's thoughts, feelings, or actions.
- **Trivializing:** The abuser acts as though the partner's opinions, thoughts, actions, or concerns are trivial or don't count.
- **Undermining:** The abuser tries to erode the self-confidence and self-esteem of the partner. Nothing the partner does is "good enough."
- **Threatening:** The abuser implies harm to the partner's well-being. ("Don't you dare talk to your sister or else I'll show you something to be upset about.")
- **Name calling:** The abuser tries to strip away the partner's dignity and identity and replaces it with a foul name.
- **Chronic forgetting:** The abuser regularly "forgets" or is regularly late for appointments, agreements, incidents and other important events to the partner.
- **Ordering and commanding:** The abuser shows obvious displays of dominance and control over

the partner.

- **Denial of anger and abuse:** The abuser will deny the partner's reality and the abuser's fault.
- **Abusive anger:** The abuser has aggressive outbursts that threaten and may escalate to physical violence.

Any of these verbal weapons used regularly, separately or together erode self-esteem and the capacity to act independently. They are methods used to weaken, control and manipulate another person. They create shame, humiliation, hurt and anger.

Individuals who are emotionally or verbally abused may feel more confused, demeaned, or self-blaming than those who have been physically beaten. A person with a swollen lip or bruised stomach knows she has been abused. Emotional or verbal abuse is so complex and bewildering that it is difficult to name and take action against. If it cannot be clearly defined, the assaulted person may believe she's imagining it, or even worse, causing it.

In research conducted by Bosch, 1999, a survivor reported, "Emotional abuse to me is the worse. The soul dies a slow death." (Bosch and Bergen, 2003). Those who are abused suffer many losses, including the loss of freedom, peace and a life free of fear. They suffer a personal loss of self-confidence, independence and having a fulfilling relationship.

Recovery from abuse begins with its recognition. With the support of others and counseling, those who are assaulted may set limits and ask for change. Abusers must be willing to give up their denial of abuse if they are to have any chance of rehabilitation or change. To develop understanding and empathy, abusers must explore their desire to exert dominance and control over someone else. The more severe the abuse, the more difficult it will be for the abuser to change. Those who are abused cannot change abusive situations alone and need outside intervention.

Although you may not suffer with physical and/or sexual abuse, if you are in a verbally abusive situation, help can be found. Each state has a toll-free telephone number for domestic violence shelters and outreach services in addition to emergency telephone numbers such as 911.

Reach out to a trusted friend or family member, a social worker, a teacher, a mental health professional, extension educator, or trained religious leader. If one person cannot help you, it's important not to give up. Talk to someone else. The first step to recovery is being able to tell someone, "I am being verbally abused and it is not acceptable to me." The first step to help those who are abused is to listen to them and validate what they are telling you.

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