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When Words Are Used As Weapons: What Can I Do?

(Part 3 of a four part series)

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In the midst of conflict, it's sometimes difficult to determine if the argument is hostile or actually a misunderstanding. However, according to Elaine Johannes, Kansas State University Extension family and community mental health specialist, if the conflict intentionally humiliates, degrades, belittles or antagonizes, there is no confusion whether or not the conflict comes from conversational style differences; it's definitely abuse.

One theory that examines the lack of understanding between women and men is attributed to gender differences in the ways they speak. Problems may exist when couples ignore these differences in conversational styles. The differences are neither good or bad, but when they are taken to extremes they can be hurtful. Look to see if there are key differences in your relationship with your partner. Remember, there are many exceptions to the gender styles outlined below.

- Women tend to focus on connections in and between relationships. Men tend to focus on independence and status and are often comfortable with competition or some conflict. Women are more comfortable with intimacy and sharing. For example, some men view mutual conflict as a sign of involvement. Women also may be concerned with status and avoiding failure, but want to balance it with connection and intimacy. Men are concerned with achieving involvement but want to maintain independence. Women who go to extremes to avoid competition or conflict may be more easily used or exploited. Men who avoid intimacy and involvement become isolated and risk a decline in their status.
- Men tend to talk more in public settings while women speak more in private. The assumption that women speak more than men is often true, but only in private conversations. Men use conversations to command attention, convey information and insist on agreement. When men retreat to their homes, they no longer feel compelled to talk to protect their status. Author John Gray, in "Men Are From Mars, Women Are From Venus," calls this peaceful silence "men going into their caves." Not understanding this retreat from conversation might lead to misunderstanding, false assumptions and hurtful conflict. Both genders need to recognize the needs of the other. Men need to be conscious that women need to talk intimately and share thoughts; women need to be conscious that men need some time alone and to be silent.
- Women tend to use unassertive language and nonverbal responses to men's dominant cues. Men

and women often are socialized in different ways, which is evident when examining verbal and nonverbal responses. Women tend to use more "hedge" words ("It seems to me..."), tag questions ("Don't you think...") and disclaimers ("I might be wrong, but..."). Men often use language with clear intentions and few irrelevant words. Although it may be difficult, it is necessary to recognize these differences in relationships to identify whether or not words have become weapons. There is no doubt that misunderstandings and arguments will occur in any couple relationship but an awareness of any differences will help individuals determine whether an argument is about real conflicts or conversational "fighting" styles. Those who are verbally abused will find it especially difficult to acknowledge that a conflict is not just a conversational style difference, but a way to degrade and control.

So what can be done about verbal abuse?

Those who are verbally abused must know several principles before they can defend themselves against it.

- Know that you are under attack. Recognition is the first step.
- Know what kind of attack you are facing. You must know your opponent's skill, strength, or "weapon." You also must recognize the difference between verbal conflict and abuse.
- Know how to make your defense fit the attack. Your response should match your opponent's attack. Avoid becoming abusive yourself and know when "enough is enough."
- Know how to follow through. You must be able to carry out your response once you have chosen it. Many women are uncomfortable with confrontation and demonstrating verbal strength. Keep in mind that verbal self-defense is a gentle art to prevent violence, not to escalate it. Also, keep in mind that you cannot control what another person does or says; verbal (or physical) abuse directed toward you is not your fault. You can only control your own behavior and words. You cannot control your abusive partner or other people's behaviors.

To accomplish these principles and to realistically weigh the risk of verbal abuse evolving into physical violence, the assaulted person should:

- Start setting limits. What will or won't you accept? What are you willing to live with? What benefits are you getting from the relationship, even if it is abusive? When you communicate to your partner that a change must occur, what are the risks? What's your "bottom line"?
- Ask for changes you want in the relationship. Intimacy in a relationship involves mutual respect, communication, understanding, appropriate responses and emotional support with love. Setting limits means asking for changes. Discuss the needed changes and issues with your partner and make plans together.
- Stay in the present. Dwelling on the past or worrying about the future detracts from your assertive message that you will not tolerate abuse. Staying in the present forces the abuser (and the assaulted person) to identify every offense and deal with it.
- Get professional counseling and support. Find support from a counselor who has training and experience with issues of abuse and who will validate the verbal abuse directed toward you.
- Ask your partner to go to counseling. If your partner agrees to counseling, going together to the same counselor is not advisable. Abuse often escalates after personal issues are revealed during counseling sessions. An abuser must willingly seek individual counseling and intensive therapy in order to change abusive behaviors.
- Be aware that you can leave an abusive situation. If positive changes do not occur, if you feel that you or your children are at risk, if the abuse escalates into physical violence, the alternative might be to leave. Prepare for this possibility by packing a bag and discussing your plan with a trusted friend or family member. A call to a domestic violence program can help you find resources in

your community. Even though you begin responding to verbal abuse by speaking firmly and clearly, standing tall, and looking the abuser straight in the eyes, abusers often consider this behavior a threat. In some cases, perceived threats might move the abuser to physical violence. Research shows that some abusers feel so much control from being abusive that it is virtually impossible to change their behavior.

How does a person recover from abuse? It will take time, energy and a lot of personal support from friends and family who care about you to recover from abuse. It also may take a lot of professional counseling. Try not to worry about the cost of therapy or counseling because most places will work with you on payments and adjust fees to your income. Professional assistance probably will be the best investment you could make if you have been verbally abused. After all, you are a valuable person with much worth.

Healing will not happen overnight and will involve a lot of grieving. Not only will you grieve over a lost relationship, but you will hurt from the abusive behavior that was directed towards you. It is hard in the midst of a crisis to reach out to others, but you need to let people know you are needing their help. Some people will back away from you while you are in a crisis and grieving but others will stand beside you and be your friend.

Verbal abuse or abuse of any kind between partners is difficult to cope with because of the emotional attachment, commitment and shared intimacy. Whether you are the person who is abused, a friend, or a helping professional, it is critical that verbal abuse is recognized as inappropriate and hurtful behavior that will not be tolerated.

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