

ANNALS

OF THE
AMERICAN
PSYCHOTHERAPY
ASSOCIATION

Vol. 5/No.5 The official peer-reviewed journal of the American Psychotherapy Association September/October 2002

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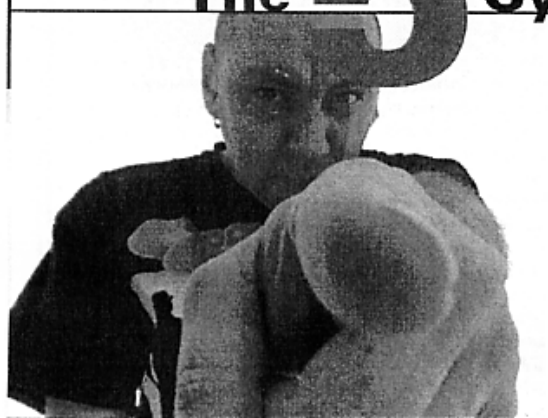
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The **5** Cycles of Emotional Abuse:

Investigating a Malignant Victimization

by: SaraKay Smullens, MSW, BCD, DAPA



Abstract:

In 1982, SaraKay Smullens began a journal recording the early years of emotional abuse she recognized in the histories of many of her clients and in her own early life. These recordings led to an identification and documentation of five cycles of parental or caretaker behavior that constitute emotional abuse. Her recordings indicated further that when emotional abuse begins in childhood, it leaves its victim vulnerable, entrapping them in future relationships with friends, lovers, co-workers and forming an ever expanding cycle of emotional abuse. Her findings and how to break the malignant yet invisible cycles of emotional abuse will be published in her forthcoming book, *Setting Yourself Free* (New Horizon Press, September, 2002).

Key Words:

emotional abuse, cycles, entrapment, dignity, assertion

The Five Cycles of Emotional Abuse: Investigating a Malignant Victimization

Emotional abuse is a form of psychological manipulation and acute victimization that gets considerably less attention in professional therapeutic circles than its counterparts, sexual abuse and physical abuse. There are three primary factors that influence this exclusion: the often covert nature of emotional abuse; a lack of acceptance of the severity and longevity of the impact of emotional abuse; and the relatively uncharted territory of the phenomenon of emotional abuse, including a lack of subdivisions within the field of study that can enhance understanding and give rise to clear identification of developmental problems, their ramifications and effective treatment plans. I will address these three issues, in turn, for the balance of this article.

The Covert Nature of Emotional Abuse

When clients honestly assess the present and are either afraid to admit to themselves what they want out of life or believe they are not good enough to have, or even pursue, what they want, emotional abuse is very often the cause.

When it comes to emotional abuse, the infection and subsequent scarring are on the inside. From external appearances it is impossible to assess with accuracy who may be a charismatic and gregarious father in public but a bullying, belittling force behind closed doors. Similarly, it is impossible to know which mother may appear to want nothing but the best for her child, yet be in fact so terrified of being alone, that her efforts to keep the child safe and satisfied are really intended to prevent that child's healthy individuation.

Often in an emotionally abusive household it becomes a "he-said-she-said" situation, where an abuser denies and the abused affirms what actually goes on. Often the abused are children, who have neither words nor perspective to communicate their pain and are naturally granted a lesser authority and platform in society. Over time abused children often look back and struggle to reconnect with what actually happened to them, to recover what feelings, attitudes and beliefs were encouraged or discredited in their youth and precisely what experiences they underwent at a time when their cognitive abilities were only beginning to form.

Because of this situation, much emotional abuse work begins with present symptoms that the client becomes aware of as being unhealthy or not ideal. These behaviors may include: food issues such as anorexia or bulimia, excessive indulgence in alcohol or use of narcotics, hypochondria, depression, suicidal ideation, acting out sexually and engaging in risky or dangerous physical stunts or exploits and ignoring or undercutting relationships with promise – gravitating instead to destructive ones.

These behaviors may manifest themselves as an immediate cry for help or may manifest periodically or be maintained at a low-level of a lingering, chronic unhappiness. Their origins lie in deep-seated feelings of low self-esteem and worthlessness.

For those who experienced emotional abuse, their voice of truth – the essence of who they are, as opposed to what their parents or caretakers needed or willed them

to be – is buried within. If a client begins therapy aware that his or her behavior is self-defeating, there is usually a realization in contrast to something. That something is a hope, a vision, one that never, in spite of what the client endured, was entirely lost. Once clients are alerted by the symptom formations described above (that they learn to understand are counter-intuitive behaviors), they can assert themselves and work toward unpacking their legacy of emotional abuse. Through this process of learning to see clearly, hopes and promises for today and the future are visited, dignity is attained, and buffering and caring communities can be created.

The Underestimation of the Impact of Emotional Abuse

In a society in which the impact of psychology has been undeniable, certain stagnant or repressive sectors still hold sway over our understanding of how the psyche is formed and where limiting, dangerous and inappropriate behaviors actually come from. Because the behaviors which constitute emotional abuse appear on the surface at least as less transgressive within our cultural norms, this attitude is more likely to attach and find a foothold in the discussion of emotional abuse than in that of sexual or physical abuse.

Emotional abuse can take many forms but some examples include taunting, withholding money, openly flaunting sexual interest in someone other than one's partner, refusing to discuss matters of importance or making light of someone's feelings every time he or she shows the courage to express them. Emotional abuse can also be found in insults, blame, the silent treatment, and threats of abandonment. Basically, any intentional manipulation (whether conscious or not) by a parent or a caregiver that destroys a child's opportunities or his or her attempts at expression, individuality and self-confidence can constitute emotional abuse.

In an attempt to bring clarity to the evaluation and healing of this clinically under-represented phenomenon, I have divided emotional abuse into five separate cycles.