8 Signs of Psychological Abuse and Ways to Heal

Recovery from any form of abuse can be a difficult journey.

This is especially true when the mistreatment doesn't leave any physical evidence of harm.

Victims do not trust themselves to know whether the abuse was even real, and that can make healing a complex process.

The cryptic nature of psychological abuse leaves people unable to even trust their own judgments. It involves repetitious mind games that are played on purpose by an abuser against his or her target.

If you have found yourself on the receiving end of psychological abuse, it is important to know that recovery is possible.

Signs of psychological abuse

- Is verbal silence or physical withdrawal used as methods to make you anxious and feel rejected?
- Are you criticized for every aspect of your life or personality that were once highly praised?
- Do you find it difficult to explain how the relationship suddenly went from being soul-mates to chronic tension?
- Did you go from being a confident person to having trouble making daily life decisions?
- Do you worry that you may not be strong enough to ever choose to leave the relationship and stay away?
- Has your physical health deteriorated the longer you have been around the toxic person?
- Is social media used to make you jealous of your loved one's connections to other people?
- Does the other person have the habit of denying saying or doing things that you clearly remember?
- No matter how politely you try to approach issues in the relationship, are you accused of being 'disrespectful' by the other person?

1. A Rollercoaster

Being in a relationship with a toxic person is a lot like being on a rollercoaster.

There are wonderful, exhilarating highs, and then scary, sudden drops where you lose your breath and wait in anticipation for the highs to return.

Up and down, twist and turn, back and forth. Being an unwilling participant of an emotional rollercoaster is not fun. You have no idea when the relationship will, without warning, turn sour again.

Everything in you aches when the abuser shifts moods and you go from being connected to the other person, to intense drops that take your breath away. When the abuser returns, you feel relief and can have fun again together.

Next time this happens, go find a picture of a large rollercoaster that has high peaks, steep declines and many twists and turns.

Print out the picture and write the name of your psychological abuser at the top of the page. Sit back and reflect on the fact that this relationship only follows this pattern of an ever-changing, twisting, environment.

2. Party of one

You most likely have witnessed a side of the abuser that no one else has seen, and people find it hard to believe when you try to explain it.

Psychological abusers often have a great public image and can even be leaders within the community.

They sometimes seek out high-profile employment, which works as an excellent mask to hide their abusive side even further. In order to heal from being a target of psychological abuse, you need to remind yourself that even if no one ever sees what was done to you, it still occurred and you know that's the truth.

And you know who else knows the truth? The abuser. They are keenly aware of the games they play with you, and the number of people they abused before you.

Take comfort in knowing that even though other people don’t necessarily see the abuse as clearly as you do, the abuser knows that you’ve seen the ugliest parts of them

A very helpful grounding exercise is to write down 5-10 moments in the relationship that help you recall the toxicity in each experience.

There's no need to go into great detail on this list, just enough to remind yourself of exactly what you have dealt with in the relationship.

How is a list useful? When you begin to doubt yourself, going back to the list will help you re-center and you will probably find yourself saying 'that's right, I forgot about that!' Survivors can't forget or they will lose sight of the truth and healing.

3. A raindrop in a thunderstorm

One of most difficult aspects of psychological abuse is that the abuser tries to get the victim to look at only one abusive episode at a time.

This is a calculated tactic because if you zero in on one moment at a time, you don't realize how deep the abuse goes in the full picture.

Survivors of psychological abuse can struggle with the temptation to make excuses for the abuser when they try to come back and attack.

Stepping back and seeing the 'storm' is exactly what victims need to do. This brings the clarity needed to begin the recovery process.

4. Abusers don’t abuse every day

Abusers have good moments and days when they do the right thing.

When this happens, the key for victims to remember is that these positive times are an abuser just trying to trick you.

This does not wipe their slate clean of all the other terrible days. If survivors are going to heal from the unhealthy bonding that happens in these toxic relationships, knowing that good days do exist is vitally important.

Otherwise, survivors will be confused by the scarce happy times in the relationship, and be tempted to only focus on the days they enjoy.

The best strategy for not being conned by the good days is to remind yourself that the toxic person will only stay enjoyable for periods of time. Some abusers have a pattern of behaviors that can be identified.

They may be able to hold it together for only a few days or weeks at a time. The abuser becomes less attractive when you can predict the length of the good days or weeks, and then watch the abusive behaviors return again.

Try journaling about the cycle the abuse and good days seem to follow. You will no doubt begin to see a pattern emerge. It always does.

5. Free-will or their own wounds?

Targets of psychological abuse must come to terms with the question of whether the abuser knows what they're doing. Victims often will fall into the trap of believing this behavior is all the abuser has ever known.

Pity clouds judgement and prevents you from setting boundaries so you can heal. Psychological abusers know the harm they inflict and do so because it is simply entertaining for them. Shocking, but true.

Abusers choose to systematically deconstruct the personhood of another individual knowing precisely the harm they're causing – out of free-will.

Wondering if the person you know behaves out of their free-will or their own wounds?

Think about how they apologize and what lasting changed behaviors you see. Free-will abusers give horrible apologies and sometimes, might not be willing to apologize at all.

Many toxic people think apologizing is beneath their ego and will never make lasting changes.

The key work is lasting. Yes, they shape up and behave better for short spurts but that's just until the dust settles in the relationship and then they return to their abusive baseline.

A wounded abuser is authentically remorseful of their actions, apologizes specifically for the wrongs they have committed and will stay in counseling as long as it takes to unlearn their abusive responses

Free-will abusers rarely stick with individual counseling. They might go for a couple of sessions to complain about you and how they are the actual victim, but in the end are not capable of sustained self-reflection.

Once a victim is able to come to terms with the truth that psychological abuse is done out of free-will, the next step is to determine what boundaries need to be put in place. There are two different types of boundaries for this form of abuse.

The first people often try is what I call 'detached contact'. This is exactly as it sounds, and it involves more than just limiting time with the abuser.

Detached contact is about the posturing of the survivor's heart. With this type of boundary, there are still interactions with the abuser, but the tone is radically different than before the abuse was acknowledged.

The heart of detached contact is the victim being in control their emotions and not being spun by the abuser. This is achieved by having rock solid clarity of who is abuser is and who they never will be.

The other form of boundary is called 'no contact'. This happens when the victim closes all ability for the abuser to make contact.

That means blocking on social media, phone access and not engaging if they run into the abuser around town.

No contact can also mean cutting ties with people who support the abuser or who choose not to see the psychological abuse games being played. No contact takes a great deal of willpower to begin the process of cutting contact, but once implemented and followed, survivors move forward into their healing and ultimately never regret setting the boundary.

6. A beautiful collage

If a target of psychological abuse wants to move forward and heal, they must begin to value the positive aspects of their life more than their connection with the abuser.

When survivors of abuse truly begin to find worth in the time they have in each day, their energy levels, emotional stability, financial security and physical health, the trauma bonding between the victim and abuser begins to unravel.

Creating a picture collage is a wonderful way for victims to remind themselves of what they could lose by continuing to be in this toxic relationship with the abuser.

The pictures may include personal goals they know will not be achieved or aspects of life that may be lost if they stay connected to this poisonous person.

7. Would I treat someone the same way?

Always remind yourself that the behaviors you've witnessed aren't your fault. This form of abuse is confusing and can cause a victim to misinterpret the actions of the abuser.

One very helpful way to recognize the damage being done is for victims to ask themselves if they would say the things that have been said to them by the abuser.

Victims should take the time to reflect on how they have been treated and ask the hard question of whether they can justify the treatment they have received, even though they wouldn't treat other people the same way.

8. What will I miss?

All survivors of psychological abuse must authentically grieve the positive aspects of the relationship with the abuser.

There will always be fleeting moments where you felt loved and connected or made you hopeful that the relationship could perhaps one day be healthier.

Why is this important?

Without addressing what will be missed by leaving the relationship, a survivor cannot fully heal from the experience.

Yes, there were good moments that can't be ignored.

However, those moments never lasted and were not sustainable as the norm in the relationship.

Those times were like bubbles that would gently float in the air, only to be abruptly popped. Recognizing the happier times and pausing to feel the loss of them will help you fully move forward and out of the toxic relationship.

Healing from hidden abuse may feel impossible but many other survivors of psychological abuse have walked the same path and have found restoration after an abusive relationship.

Choosing to value oneself over the demands of the abuser is a critical aspect to finding lasting recovery.

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