

Signs of An Abusive Personality: Traits to Look For

Many people are interested in ways to predict whether they are about to become involved with someone who might be abusive. Abuse can occur in any type of relationship whether it is a heterosexual, lesbian, bisexual, pansexual, queer, or gay relationship. All genders have the potential to be abusers or to be abused. Abuse also happens in relationships that aren't romantic- family members, roommates and friends can be abusive.

Below is a list of behaviors that are seen in people who abuse. If the person shows at least three of the first 15 behaviors there is a strong potential for physical violence – the more signs a person shows, the more likely the person is prone to abuse. In some cases, an abusive person may demonstrate only a couple of the listed behaviors, but in a much exaggerated manner (e.g., will try to explain their behavior as signs of their love and concern). The partner may be flattered at first but as time goes on, these behaviors become more severe and serve to dominate and control the partner. This is not an exhaustive list of abusive behavior, but covers some common signs of abuse.

1. Jealousy: At the beginning of a relationship an abusive person will always say that jealousy is a sign of love. Jealousy has nothing to do with love; it's a sign of possessiveness and lack of trust. The abusive person will question their partner about who they talk to, accuse their partner of flirting, or be jealous of time their partner spends with family, friends, or children. As the jealousy progresses, the abusive person may call their partner frequently during the day or drop by unexpectedly. The abusive person may refuse to let their partner work for fear they will meet someone else or even do strange behavior such as checking the car mileage or asking friends to watch their partner.

2. Controlling: At first, the abusive person will say this behavior results from concern about their partner's safety, their partner's need to use their time well, or to make good decisions. The abusive person will be angry if their partner is "late" coming back from the store or an appointment. The abusive person will question their partner closely about where they went or who they talked to. As this behavior gets worse, the abusive person may not let their partner make personal decisions about the house, clothing, or going to church. The abusive person may keep all the money or even make their partner ask permission to leave the house or room.

3. Quick Involvement: Many people who have experienced abuse knew their abuser for a short time before they entered a relationship with them. The abusive person comes on like a whirlwind, claiming, "You're the only person I could ever talk to," or "I've never felt loved like this by anyone." The abusive person will pressure their partner to commit to the relationship in such a way that, later, their partner feels guilty if they want to slow down their involvement or break it off completely.

4. Unrealistic Expectations: An abusive person expects the survivor to meet all of their needs; they expect their partner to be the perfect wife, husband, partner, parent, lover, friend, etc. The abusive person will say things like “if you love me, I’m all you need and you’re all I need.” Their partner is expected to take care of everything for them emotionally and in the home.

5. Isolation: The abusive person tries to cut their partner off from all other resources. They may say they are “hurt” or “lonely” if their partner wants to spend time with friends or family without them. If their partner has friends of the gender they tend to be sexual with, they might be called a “whore”; if the person is a heterosexual woman who has women friends, she might be called a “lesbian”; and if she is close to her family, she might be said to be “tied to their apron strings.” The abusive person accuses people who are their partner’s support of “causing trouble.” They may want to live in the country without a phone; they may not let their partner use the car or have one that is reliable. They may try to keep their partner from working or going to school.

6. Blames Others for Their Problems: If the abusive person is chronically unemployed, someone is always “doing them wrong” or is “out to get them.” They may make mistakes but then blame their partner for upsetting them and keeping them from concentrating on the work. The abusive person will blame their partner for almost anything that goes wrong.

7. Blames Others for Their Feelings: The abusive person will tell their partner, “You make me mad” or “You’re hurting me by not doing what I want you to do,” or “I can’t help being angry.” It is really the abusive person who makes the decision about what they think or feel but they will use those feelings to manipulate their partner. Less obvious blaming statements are claims that “You make me happy,” or “You control how I feel.”

8. Hypersensitivity: An abusive person is easily insulted and claims that their feelings are “hurt” when really they are very mad. The abusive person will “rant and rave” about the injustice of things that have happened – things that are really just part of living such as being asked to work overtime, getting a traffic ticket, being told some behavior is annoying or being asked to help with chores.

9. Cruelty To Animals and/or Children: A person who punishes animals brutally or is insensitive to their pain or suffering may also abuse people in their life. An abuser may expect children to be capable of things beyond their ability (i.e., may physically discipline a toddler for wetting a diaper) or may tease children until they cry. 60% of people who abuse other people also abuse their children. Abusers may not want children to eat at the table or may expect them to remain in their rooms all evening while they are at home.

10. Use of Force in Sex: This kind of abuser may like to throw their partner down and hold them down during sex, and may want to act out fantasies during sex where their partner is helpless. An abuser may be letting their partner know that the idea of rape is exciting. (This kind of non-consensual, violent behavior is different than safe and consensual BDSM or SM (bondage/dominance/sadomasochism, a type of sexual activity that should use carefully negotiated sex play.)

Abusers may show little concern about whether the person wants to have sex and may use sulking or anger to manipulate them into compliance. Abusers may start having sex with the person while they are sleeping or demand sex when the person is ill or tired.

11. Verbal Abuse: In addition to saying things that are meant to be cruel or hurtful, verbal abuse can be seen when the abuser degrades the person, cursing at them or minimizing any of their accomplishments. The abuser may tell the person that they are stupid and unable to function without them. This may involve waking the person up to verbally abuse them or not letting them go to sleep.

12. Rigid Sex Roles: The abuser expects a person to serve them and may say the person must stay at home, that they must obey in all things, even things that are criminal in nature. An abuser may believe that anyone of another gender is inferior to their gender, is responsible for menial tasks, and/or is stupid and unable to be a whole person without a relationship.

13. Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde: Many people are confused by their abuser's "sudden" changes in mood – they may think the abuser has some special mental problem because one minute the abuser is nice but the next minute they are exploding. Explosiveness and moodiness are typical of people who abuse their partners and these behaviors are related to other characteristics such as hypersensitivity.

14. Past abuse: This person may say they have abused people in the past but that the person made them do it. The potential partner may hear from relatives or ex-spouses/partners/dates that the potential abuser is abusive. An abuser may beat any person that they are with. If the person has been abusive in the past, they always have the potential to be abusive in the present unless they have done intense interpersonal work with a professional around their abusive behavior. If the person is with the abuser long enough, the violence could begin. Situational circumstances do not make a person abusive or prevent a person from acting abusively.

15. Threats of Violence: This could include any threat of physical force meant to control the person: "I'll slap your mouth off," or "I'll kill you," or "I'll break your neck." Most people do not threaten their mates but an abuser will try to excuse threats by saying that "everyone talks like that."

16. Breaking or Striking Objects: This behavior of breaking loved ones' possessions or needed home items can be used as a punishment but is mostly used to terrorize the person into submission. The abuser may beat on the table with their fists or throw objects around or near the person. Again, this is very remarkable behavior – not only is this a sign of extreme emotional dysfunction but there is a great danger when someone thinks that they have the “right” to punish or frighten their partner.

17. Any Force During an Argument: This may involve an abuser holding the person down, physically restraining them from leaving the room, or any pushing or shoving. The abuser may hold the person against a wall and say, “You’re going to listen to me!”

No one ever deserves abuse in any of their relationships. An abuser is responsible for their behavior, and it is never the survivor’s fault that they were abused.

Help is available 24 hours a day – contact our 24-Hour HelpLine for more information about abuse and how to plan for safety in an abusive relationship.

SafePlace HelpLine: 360.754.6300