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**Could you be in an  
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WOULD  
*you* KNOW  
*if you're in an*  
**emotionally**  
**abusive**  
RELATIONSHIP?

*Name-calling,  
possessiveness,  
manipulation.  
This kind of  
psychological  
torture can be  
subtle, but the  
scars aren't*



When

hen Bec\*, 20, started going out with Chris, life was sweet. But

as time passed, he began to change. "He started telling me what I should wear, what I should be eating and who I should be friends with," she says.

At first Bec thought he was just joking, and brushed the criticism aside. But his controlling nature got worse and Bec eventually stopped talking to friends and her family – because Chris didn't like them. "I knew it wasn't right but I put up with it. I was afraid what would happen if I broke up with him."

You might think you know what domestic abuse looks like – the photos of Rihanna's bruised and battered face are pretty hard to forget – but ask any psychologist and they'll agree that Bec was the victim of abuse. Abuse of the emotional kind.

"People experiencing emotional abuse feel trapped," says psychologist Angelica Bilibio. "Often, people don't realise that they're in an emotionally abusive relationship because it's not as tangible as other forms of violence. But it's psychological violence, and can be as bad as physical and sexual abuse."

It's precisely because this kind of relationship is so subtle, and slow to develop, that it can be difficult to recognise as being toxic.

## Alarm bells

So what *is* emotional abuse? "Common signs include a lack of empathy for the victim; anger; demanding and selfish behaviour; destructive patterns when dealing with conflict; and an emotional climate marked by hot and cold," says Bilibio. "The victim feels 'unseen' in the relationship, and that they're constantly walking on eggshells."

Also, forget the idea that abuse always involves a physical element, adds psychologist David Indermaur. "Many perpetrators of domestic violence never actually hit their victim," he says.

The long-term effects of this kind of abuse include major trust issues, low self-esteem, health problems, depression, anxiety, and a decrease in functioning (think: work and sleep problems).

## A FRIEND IN NEED

Worried that someone you know could be caught in an emotionally abusive relationship? Gentle, clear intervention and unconditional support is the best way to go. Be careful not to be too critical about their partner. "Most women will get their guard up," says Cara. "If friends had approached me in a logical way and given me an article on domestic violence, I'd probably have read the characteristics, and gone, 'Oh my God, that's me.'" Indermaur suggests it's better to listen than to give advice. "Let the person know what's normal and what's not – that kind of clarity is often very helpful."

## When love is all too blind

In unhealthy relationships, it can be difficult to accept that the person you love is hurting you. Domestic abusers exploit the other person's affection or dependency for their personal gain. "They can be very convincing, loving and appreciative," says Bilibio.

The abuser regularly uses push-and-pull tactics to assert control. Bec recalls, "Chris would say something really rude, and then if I got offended he would blame himself and apologise profusely. It was really confusing. He came from a pretty violent family, so it also frightened me."

It's especially hard to see things straight if you're not that experienced with relationships. Emma was 18 when she met 24-year-old David. "It was my first adult relationship," she says. "I just thought every guy acted like this."

David discouraged Emma from seeing her friends, and made negative comments about her weight. Over time her confidence was so diminished, she no longer knew what was normal.

"Eventually, my parents sat me down. I began to realise his behaviour was wrong. When I think about abuse, I think about violence – but emotional abuse is so subtle. You begin to doubt your inner voice because you've become so groomed and manipulated that you can't see right from wrong."

## Danger zone

When a cycle of dysfunction starts to feel normal, it becomes harder to get out. It took Cara, now 31, four years to leave her boyfriend, Josh.

"Every day there was a negative comment – 'you're fat, you're ugly, I'm the only one who could possibly want you,'" she recalls. But the abuse didn't stop there. At first it was a few pushes. Then, when she fell pregnant and opted to have an abortion, Josh punched her in the stomach repeatedly.

It got so bad Cara contemplated suicide. "It was the darkest moment of my life," she says. The violence went on until the day Josh tried to strangle her. "I thought, 'Holy sh!t, I'm gonna die, because of this idiot.'"

She finally walked out, but the scars remain. Over the course of their relationship she'd racked up \$150,000 debt on her credit card to support him, put on 60kg, and lost her career in law. "I'm still undoing the damage from that time now," Cara admits.

## Getting out

Summoning the courage to leave can be the hardest part. If you decide to go, tell a friend first. "Have a safety plan, and deliver the news remotely," advises Indermaur. "Research shows that the most dangerous time for a woman is at that particular moment."

If you're not sure whether you're being emotionally abused, consider this: "A relationship should make you feel better than when you're by yourself," says Indermaur. If you don't feel good around him, talk to a trusted friend or a professional. **Yeong Sassall** COSMO

\* If you or someone you know has been affected by domestic violence, call 1800 364 277 or visit [relationships.org.au](http://relationships.org.au). For crisis support call the 24-hour National Sexual Assault, Family & Domestic Violence Counselling Service on 1800 737 732, or contact Lifeline on 13 11 14.

*Want more?* **COSMOPOLITAN.com.au**  
Read the 10 warning signs that everything might not be OK at [cosmopolitan.com.au/relationships/relationship-advice](http://cosmopolitan.com.au/relationships/relationship-advice).