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Verbal Abuse Recovery Clinical Practice Workbook

A clinically branded, function-preserving edition retaining the original exercises, psychoeducation, checklists, logs, planning tools, and response space.

DSM-5-TR · ICD-11 CLINICAL ALIGNMENT

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How to use this workbook

- Use this workbook selectively and collaboratively; it is educational and does not replace individualized assessment, diagnosis, treatment, medical care, or crisis services.
- Skip, pause, or modify any activity that increases distress, danger, shame, or loss of functioning. Adapt language for culture, disability, neurodivergence, health, resources, and lived context.
- Ratings in this workbook are reflection tools unless a named, validated measure and interpretation are explicitly provided.
- Assess current safety, suicidal and homicidal thoughts, self-harm, intoxication or withdrawal, violence, exploitation, psychosis, mania, medical instability, and ability to meet basic needs when relevant. Use local emergency or crisis procedures for imminent risk.
- Activities involving exposure, trauma detail, urges, means, disclosure, or relationship repair require appropriate competence, informed consent, pacing, and safety planning; a worksheet is not a substitute for these safeguards.

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What Is Verbal Abuse?

Verbal abuse is a pattern of using hurtful words and other related actions to control someone else.

Despite the stereotype that abuse happens to people who are weak or vulnerable, abuse can actually happen to virtually anyone.

Verbal abuse doesn't always come in the form of outright mean phrases like, "You're stupid," "You're ugly," or "You're worthless."

Verbal abuse can be a lot more subtle and might not match up with the way you understand verbal abuse.

Verbal abuse can involve:

- Speaking in a disparaging tone,
- Trying to confuse or gaslight another person, and
- Withholding kind, positive words.

A one-time use of mean words or a hurtful tone might not be a sign of verbal abuse. What makes someone abusive is their unwillingness to take responsibility for their own action or make real effort to change.

Notes:

Verbal abuse Test

Read through the following signs of emotional abuse and rate each item on a scale from 0 to 2 with 0 being rarely, 1 being sometimes, and 2 being almost always.

For each item you rate 1 or 2, add examples of times you have experienced these signs.

- ☐ Do they say hurtful words or withhold positive ones? _____

Examples:

- ☐ Is there a pattern of hurtful words or actions (not one-time incidents) with an underlying dynamic of power and control issues at play? _____

Examples:

- ☐ Do they blame you for their own words and actions? _____

Examples:

- ☐ Do they fail to take responsibility for their hurtful words and actions? _____

Examples:

- ☐ Do you often feel hurt and confused by their words and actions, even though you can't identify the abuse in them? _____

Examples:

Results: _____/10

The higher your total score, the more abusive the relationship is.

Why Would They Do It?

One of the most damaging things about being a victim of verbal abuse is the belief that you're being abused because you deserve it.

That is never the case!

Understanding the goals of verbal abuse can help you overcome self-blame and shame.

While every person is unique, the following are common goals or motivations behind verbal abuse. Reflect on them and see if any of these motivations could be present:

1. Control You

The abuser uses the abuse in order to gain or maintain power and control over their victim.

What were the clues that your abuser was trying to gain and/or maintain power and control over you?

How did your abuser's attempt to control you impact your thoughts, feelings and sense of self-worth?

2. Manipulate You

The abuser might try to trick or deceive someone else into doing something they want them.

What were the clues that your abuser was trying to manipulate you?

How did your abuser's attempt to manipulate you impact your thoughts, feelings and sense of self-worth?

3. Feel Better About Themselves

The abuser is usually someone who is battling deep-seated insecurities. They would use verbal abuse to belittle or dominate you and feel like you are the lesser person and in turn they would mask their own insecurities and feel better about themselves.

What were the clues that your abuser was trying to mask their own insecurities by belittling you?

How did your abuser's attempt to belittle you impact your thoughts, feelings and sense of self-worth?

Looking back now on when the abuse happened, what message do you wish you could tell yourself about how your abuser's motivation?

Validating Your Own Feelings

Don't try to minimize your hurt. It makes perfect sense that such experience would injure you emotionally.

Other people might have had it worse, but your experience with abuse was hurtful to you and your healing is important, too.

The following are some common feelings that people who have been verbally abused may experience. These feelings can linger long after the abusive relationship is over.

Reflect on them and see if you relate to any of them:

1. Anxiety

Many victims of verbal abuse would feel like they're "walking on eggshells" around their abuser, and even other people, anticipating attacks.

Notes:

2. Confusion

Victims of verbal abuse often are left questioning their experience (e.g., Why did this person treat me that way? Is there something wrong with me?).

In addition, manipulation tactics used by abusers, such as gaslighting, can leave you confused, questioning your reality.

Notes:

3. Low Self-Esteem

When you have been disparaged, put down, and hurt for so long, it's difficult to feel good about yourself.

This is especially true if you continue to ruminate over your abuser's hurtful words or start beating yourself up, carrying over what the abuser started.

Notes:

4. Shame

Although abuse is never your fault, many victims and survivors of abuse do feel very ashamed of their experiences. They blame themselves, believing that they deserved such treatment.

Notes:

5. PTSD

Posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) is a diagnosable mental health disorder. Symptoms of PTSD include anxiety and panic attacks, hypervigilance, and reexperiencing the event (e.g., through flashbacks or nightmares).

If you're concerned that you may be experiencing symptoms, seek professional help.

Notes:

6. Other Emotions

Every survivor of verbal abuse is unique, and so are their emotional responses.

Other emotions you may be experiencing include anger, resentment, fear, sadness, depression, feelings of helplessness and powerlessness, etc.

Notes:

Acknowledging The Wrong In What Happened

Because abusers almost never acknowledge the hurt they've inflicted, survivors may find it difficult to recognize abuse as "wrong."

Validate your experience by acknowledging abuse as wrong. Think of incidents when you were verbally abused and put them into statements that begin with "It was wrong that..."

For example, "It was wrong that my mother embarrassed me in public when she was supposed to be the one who protected me."

It was wrong that _____

It was wrong that _____

It was wrong that _____

It was wrong that _____

It was wrong that _____

Finding The Truth

Just because the abuser said hurtful things about you doesn't mean those things are true.

Uncover lies the abuser told you about yourself and replace them with more realistic, factual beliefs.

Lie: _____

Evidence to refute this lie:

A more realistic, factual statement to replace the abuser's lie:

Repeat to yourself: "My abuser said _____

but the truth is that _____
_____"

Being Present With Yourself

Allowing yourself to sit with your own internal experience and to accept your feelings and thoughts without judgment and with compassion is a requirement for healing any emotional wounds.

Mindfulness allows you to do that!

Mindfulness is the practice of paying attention to the present moment, including your thoughts, feelings, and senses.

Instructions

1. Find a comfortable place where you won't be disturbed.
2. Gently close your eyes or lower your gaze, if that's more comfortable, and start focusing on your breath.
3. You may also choose something else to focus on, such as noises your hearing, smells, textures you feel, details you see, counting backwards, etc. anything to take your mind off your train of thought.
4. Once ready and your mind is clear, turn your attention to your inner state of being. Ask yourself
 - “What am I feeling in my body right now?”
 - “What emotions am I experiencing?”
 - “What thought am I having?”
5. Finally take a few more deep breaths and open your eyes.

Developing A Nurturing Inner Voice

This exercise will help you counterbalance the critical messages you have received growing up – that something is wrong with you, or that you're a disappointment, or that you'll never be good enough.

Instructions

1. Think of someone who is nurturing. It could be someone you don't know personally or an imaginary person. Who is it?
2. Picture this person in your mind. What do they look like? What are they doing? Perhaps reading a story or singing to a child or stroking their hair? Whatever feels right to you.
3. Once the image is vivid, imagine being the child in this scene. Imagine what it would feel like to be that child. Embody that role for a few minutes.
4. Now imagine ways you criticize yourself. Hear the words you would usually tell yourself and feel the feelings those words would usually trigger.
5. Counter the critical voice by using the more nurturing one. Imagine how the nurturing voice would respond.
6. Notice how it feels like to be responded to with compassion instead of criticism.

Use this exercise next time you find yourself using the critical voice.

The Person You Used To Be

Many survivors of abuse feel as though they have lost touch with the person they were before they faced abuse.

Take the time to reflect on how abuse has caused you to lose the sense of who you are by answering the following prompts:

1. What were you like before you experienced abuse?

2. What aspects of your pre-abuse personality and life do you want to work toward reclaiming?

3. What do spiritual, existential, and/or religious beliefs mean to you? If these beliefs are important to you, in what ways can you be more intentional about connecting with them? (e.g., engaging in spiritual practices, being in community with others with similar beliefs, reading spiritual books, etc.)

The Person You Know You Can Become

Recovery from abuse can be an opportunity for you to recreate yourself: be intentional about reclaiming the parts of your past self, and integrate the strengths you gained and lessons you learned to emerge as a stronger, wiser version of yourself.

1. What important life lessons did you learn after facing verbal abuse?

2. What new personal strengths and resources have been revealed or acquired?

3. How do you think you can incorporate these personal strengths and life lessons into the person you know you can become?

Healing Past Wounds

Note: if you find this exercise triggering, skip it and revisit it once you have strengthened your coping resources or consider seeking professional help.

Revisiting old hurts can help you reevaluate the memory and heal it.

1. Reflect on something hurtful your abuser said or did and describe it briefly below:

2. On a scale from 1 to 10 (1 being least hurtful and 10 being most hurtful) rate how hurtful the incident was: _____

3. What was especially about this incident? What particular vulnerability or yours did it target?

4. What specific emotions did you feel back then?

5. Reflecting back on the incident, is there anything you can see now that you didn't see then (e.g., the abuser's motivations, the fact that the things you were told were untrue, etc.)?

6. Can you see how the "wrong" in what happened? If so, write down beginning with "It was wrong that..."

It was wrong that _____

It was wrong that _____

It was wrong that _____

7. Imagine yourself talking to your younger self. What would you say to offer compassion and support?

Forgiving Others

Forgiveness should never be forced.

Only forgive when you feel ready and willing to liberate yourself and let go of resentment and anger.

Forgiveness doesn't require an apology from the abuser.

Forgiveness has little to do with the other person. They may never know that you have forgiven them and moved on.

Forgiveness is an internal process that involves releasing the pain and hurt other people caused.

1. What does forgiveness mean to you?

2. In what ways could forgiveness help you move forward in your healing process? Use the following table to help you in your decision. Score each item on a scale from 1 to 5 based on how important it is for you:

Person you have not forgiven _____			
Costs of not forgiving	Score	Benefits of forgiving	Score
Total		Total	

3. Should you decide to forgive, use the following template:

Start with a description of what happened then answer the following prompts:

Because of this I felt _____

Because of what happened I believed _____

I now realize that _____

I have now learned from this that _____

This experience has enabled me to _____

I commit to _____

I have forgiven _____ for _____

I have forgiven myself for _____

I am grateful for _____

2026 Clinical Alignment

DSM-5-TR (including Sept. 2025 update) · ICD-11 CDDR / 2026 MMS

Classification status

- DSM-5-TR: No diagnosis under this title · not a DSM-5-TR diagnosis
- ICD-11 CDDR: · not an ICD-11 mental disorder diagnosis
- This workbook is non-diagnostic. A title, checklist, or completed activity never establishes a diagnosis.

Pages requiring the updated interpretation

- The audit identified source pages 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12, 13, 14, 15, 16, 17, 18, 19, 20, 21, 22, 23, 24, 25. The statements below supersede incompatible diagnostic, scoring, safety, or resource wording on those pages.

Diagnostic and differential limits

- Assess coercive control, retaliation risk, stalking, physical/sexual violence, dependent adults/children, immediate safety, trauma symptoms, depression/anxiety, substance use, and jurisdiction-specific reporting or resources.

Document-specific corrections

- Define patterns behaviorally and distinguish conflict, isolated harmful speech, coercive control, threats, stalking, and broader intimate-partner violence.
- Do not speculate about why the person used abuse or assign a diagnosis without assessment.
- Prioritize safety and retaliation risk before confrontation, boundary, disclosure, or relationship decisions.
- Make forgiveness optional and explicitly unnecessary for recovery, safety, accountability, or legal action.
- Avoid suggesting the survivor's past wounds or communication caused the abuse.

Measures, scoring, and permissions

- Pages [1, 3, 5, 6, 21, 23, 24]: identify each measure and rights holder; verify intended population, reliability/validity, scoring and cutoffs, reproduction permission, and current license. If these are author-created items, label them informal, remove diagnostic cutoffs, and do not claim validation.

Intervention scope and contraindications

- Pages [1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12, 13, 14, 15, 16, 17, 18, 19, 20, 21, 22, 23, 24, 25]: require topic-qualified clinical review for consent, readiness, contraindications, escalation thresholds, and whether clinician-guided use is necessary.
- Screen privately for coercive control, stalking, retaliation, sexual coercion, financial abuse, and violence. Conjoint disclosure or repair work may be contraindicated when safety or free participation is compromised.

Crisis and current resources

- United States: National Domestic Violence Hotline, <https://www.thehotline.org/> and 800-799-SAFE; local emergency services for immediate danger.

Authoritative references

- <https://www.psychiatry.org/psychiatrists/practice/dsm>
- <https://www.who.int/publications/i/item/9789240077263>
- <https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/violence-against-women>
- <https://www.psychiatry.org/psychiatrists/practice/dsm/updates-to-dsm/updates-to-dsm-5-tr-criteria-text>
- <https://icd.who.int/browse/2026-01/mms/en>
- <https://988lifeline.org/>