

Emotional Abusers: Steps to Change

1. Learn what emotional abuse looks like. Rely on the victim to provide examples. Understand what it means to be “controlling” or manipulative, and note which symptoms resonate with you. Refer to [InstituteofKindness.com](https://www.instituteofkindness.com) for a comprehensive list of signs and examples. Learn to identify these behaviors as they arise. You don’t need to fix these behaviors YET, just be attentive and catch yourself as they happen.
2. Are you hiding anything?
 - a. Do you have any secrets (e.g., cheating on spouse, hiding a drug addiction, etc.) that you’re using anger/abusive behaviors to cover up? As long as they’re hidden, nothing will change.
 - b. You may already be aware of childhood trauma, or you may have pushed it down deep. Now is the time to face it. Identify any traumatic experiences that include physical abuse, emotional abuse, sexual abuse, childhood neglect, death of a loved one and start therapy to address it. Start “inner child” work. This is the time to re-parent yourself. Refer to [InstituteofKindness.com](https://www.instituteofkindness.com) for resources.
3. Recognize feelings of shame, worthlessness, defectiveness, and start the process of building self-worth. Understand the difference between toxic shame (“I am inherently bad or defective and will never change”), guilt (“I did something bad”), and healthy shame (“I did bad things but am motivated to fix myself now”). Don’t allow yourself to descend into “toxic shame,” which will prevent any kind of healing. Refer to [InstituteofKindness.com](https://www.instituteofkindness.com) for resources.
4. Build empathy and eliminate your sense of entitlement. “Entitlement” is the feeling that others exist to fulfill your own needs. Abusers frequently tell themselves they “deserve” things. They deserve to let off some steam; deserve to get their way without any discussion; deserve sex regardless of a spouse’s interest. At some level, entitled people feel they deserve to hold the power in the relationship, because they never had power as a child. They were bullied or they were abused, and now is their chance to reclaim their power, even if it means dominating the person they love the most. Building empathy shatters that misconception, reminding the abuser that we’re all equal and all deserving of kindness. No one is entitled to abuse others. Important to understand the difference between apathy, sympathy, and empathy.
5. “Feel your feelings” and manage anger using mindfulness techniques. Start being aware of feelings, rather than using other distractions or potentially harmful behaviors to avoid feeling discomfort.
6. After 1-5 have been addressed, work with your partner and affected loved ones and allow their feedback to guide your progress.