

## ***The Types of Abuse – Dan Hitz***

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**Abuse takes many forms and can affect people from any cultural and economic background.** Its effects can go deep, carving painful ruts into the survivor's heart that can challenge his social and professional interactions for the rest of his life. The first step in fixing a problem is understanding that there is a problem. This article will help identify the five main types of abuse. Future articles will explore the effects of abuse, the profile of an abuser, and the steps to recovery from abuse.

**Abuse occurs when a person in a perceive position of power exerts that power over another for their own gain, at the expense of the person of lesser power.** We commonly think of this between an adult and a child, such as a parent abusing his child or a teacher abusing her student. Abuse can also occur between an adult who has a perceived position of power over another adult, such as a supervisor abusing an employee. Abuse can also happen when a child exerts his perceived power over another child, to the detriment of the other child, who may be younger or physically weaker than the dominant child. Abuse happens when an aggressive child forces a compliant child to do something harmful that he does not want to do. Sometimes those who are being abused may look and feel like they are willing participants. Abuse can be confusing.

**Sexual Abuse** –In his book, *The Wounded Heart*, Dr. Dan B. Allender defines sexual abuse as “any contact or interaction (visual, verbal, or psychological) between a child/adolescent and an adult when the child/adolescent is being used for the sexual stimulation of the perpetrator or any other person” (p48). In other words, sexual abuse occurs when an adult or person in a perceived position of power, uses another person in a way that causes the person in power to get a sexual buzz. Many people, even many abuse survivors, initially think of sexual abuse only in terms of intercourse or oral sex; however, sexual abuse takes many forms and can be as subtle as comments or innuendos. The continuum of sexual abuse ranges from *most severe*, including intercourse or penetration; to *least severe*, including inappropriate sexual conversations or nicknames. *Severe* forms of sexual abuse include intentionally touching clothed sexual parts and simulated intercourse. All forms of sexual abuse can cause significant emotional distress. Allender identifies two main categories of sexual abuse: *sexual contact* and *sexual interactions* (p48). Sexual contact is usually more obvious; a specific touch or action done to a specific portion of one's body. Sexual interactions can be much more subtle. They can be done in a way that leaves the victim wondering if the offender actually meant what the victim thinks he meant, or if the victim is merely imagining something much worse than what the offender intended. A skilled abuser can easily manipulate a victim into thinking that the interactions are their own idea or imagination. Such interactions include lude comments pointing out a young girl's developing body, and holding inappropriate sexual conversations with a minor. Intentionally exposing one's naked body to a child, or intentionally walking in on a teenager who is bathing, is included in abusive sexual interactions.

**Physical Abuse** – In his book, *Mending the Soul*, Steven R. Tracy writes, “physical abuse is legally defined as any nonaccidental injury to a minor by an adult caregiver. This could include blows, shakings, burnings, or other physical assaults that cause injury to the child.” (p29) In the student edition of his book, Tracy is careful to point out the difference between physical abuse and a properly administered, Biblical spanking. Biblical discipline will “build up a child to maturity” while physical punishment that causes injury “tears down a child physically, emotionally and spiritually” (student edition p32). *Domestic abuse* occurs when someone uses violence or threats of violence to manipulate another adult family member.

**Emotional/Verbal Abuse** – Tracy identifies emotional abuse as “a behavior pattern that harms a child’s emotional development and sense of self-worth” (student edition p35). Emotional abuse occurs when excessive, inappropriate or coercive demands are placed on a child that exceeds his emotional and/or physical abilities. Emotional abuse also occurs when an adult uses a child’s emotions against her, or criticizes a child for expressing emotions. Teasing or yelling at a child who is crying over hurt feelings or a physical accident is a form of emotional abuse. Children are not born with the skill to properly regulate their emotions. It is the job of godly parents to teach their children how to learn from their emotional responses and to express their emotions appropriately. Tracy defines verbal abuse as a form of emotional abuse where “words are systematically used to belittle, undermine, scapegoat, or maliciously manipulate another person” (student edition p34). Repeatedly yelling at a child and telling him that he is stupid is a form of verbal abuse that leaves lasting scars. Those words may echo in his heart even if he graduates as the high school valedictorian and becomes the CEO of a major corporation.

**Neglect** – Neglect is a stealthy form of abuse. The one who has experienced it is often unaware that it has happened, and equally unaware of its devastating effects. Other forms of abuse are obvious. Beatings, sexual abuse, and mental torment are tangible, identifiable actions. Neglect can be much more subtle. Tracy defines it as “the failure of a parent or guardian to provide a minor with adequate food, clothing, medical care, protection, supervision, and emotional support” (adult edition p30). Not feeding or bathing a child are obvious forms of neglect. Failing to emotionally nurture or protect a child is much less noticeable. Neglect can leave deep voids that can cause him to be ill prepared for the challenges of life, and can be just as damaging as physical and sexual abuse.



**Spiritual Abuse** – In their book, *The Subtle Power of Spiritual Abuse*, David Johnson and Jeff VanVonderen define spiritual abuse as “the mistreatment of a person who is in need of help, support or greater spiritual empowerment, with the result of weakening, undermining or decreasing that person’s spiritual empowerment” (p20). Simply put, spiritual abuse occurs when church leaders get their own needs met by using God’s name to manipulate other people to do what they want them to do. The spiritual abuser uses others to advance their own agenda whether it be to gain sexual favors, or to coerce others into a desired behavior pattern which will cause the spiritual authority to feel more powerful. Spiritual abuse is a devastating form of abuse which misrepresents God and can cause deep wounds and doubts in the hearts of those who are victimized by it. (To read a two part article about spiritual abuse, [click here for part one](#) and [click here for part two](#).)

This article on the types of abuse is meant to be an introduction and is far from conclusive. More information can be found in the works cited within this article. Future newsletters will address other aspects of abuse including the effects of abuse, the profile of abusers, and healing from abuse.

Jesus Christ came to heal the brokenhearted and free those who are in bondage (Luke 4:18). No matter what form of abuse someone has suffered, there is freedom in Christ. If you or someone you love has experienced abuse, call Reconciliation Ministries for help. Our number is 586.739.5114.

If you would like more information about Reconciliation Ministries, or any of the ministries we offer, visit us on the Web at [www.recmin.org](http://www.recmin.org), or call (586) 739-5114. You may also e-mail us at [info@recmin.org](mailto:info@recmin.org). All correspondence will be kept strictly confidential. Reconciliation Ministries is an affiliate ministry of [Restored Hope Network](#). Images licensed through [www.shutterstock.com](http://www.shutterstock.com).