

# EMOTIONAL WELLNESS IMATTERS

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## Emotional Manipulation

“Fool me once, shame on you.  
Fool me twice, shame on me.”  
– Chinese proverb



e've all been manipulated by other people, and it's likely that we've done a bit of manipulation ourselves. Telling a white lie in order to get what we want is one way of manipulating someone. Students are notorious for telling teachers that they couldn't get their paper in on time because their computer crashed last night. Employees claim to have car trouble in order to miss a day of work. Politicians inflate a problem or make misleading statements in order to gain public support for their agendas.

When we manipulate other people, we deprive them of their integrity and their ability to make decisions based on their own accurate reading of reality. When we tell a lie, we provide an alternate reality to the other person – and they make decisions that may be to our advantage, but it may not be a decision they would make if they knew all the facts. Manipulation shows disrespect to the other person – but ultimately we are disrespecting ourselves and compromising our own integrity when we manipulate others. We give ourselves the illusion of control, but it is hardly a feeling of control that we can be proud of. Even if nobody ever finds out about it, we know that we got ahead by taking from another person. “I win and you lose – and that makes me feel good.” We deprive ourselves of the knowledge that our accomplishments in life are based on our own resourcefulness.



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Most of us want to trust and assume the best in other people. We believe that when someone tells us something, the other person is telling the truth. When we have been repeatedly hurt because others have taken advantage of our trust, we may change our beliefs about the world. We may become cynical and try to undermine others before we are hurt yet again. The best strategy is probably to trust until someone shows us that they can't be trusted. Hopefully, then, we can learn how to recognize emotional manipulation when it appears.

**“I keep my ideals, because in spite everything, I still believe that people are really good at heart.”**

*– Anne Frank*

## Recognizing Emotional Manipulation

Many of us don't recognize manipulation when it occurs, mainly because manipulation violates our basic assumptions about how people should behave. We simply don't expect it. Manipulators engage in “covert aggression.” They hide their anger toward the world in subtle ways and gain power over us in ways that are not obvious.

– We may sense, however, that we are on the defensive in their presence – and this serves as our first clue. We feel somehow that they are trying to overpower us.

– They come across as caring, hurting, defending, vulnerable – almost anything but fighting – and these tactics obscure their real motives. You might pay attention to your need to take care of them, but you don't recognize that they are trying to take advantage of you. “I care so much about you and now I've twisted my ankle. Can't you give up your afternoon to drive me around?”

– All of us have weaknesses or insecurities, and sometimes we are aware of them, but we don't expect that someone will take advantage of our vulnerabilities. We sometimes have the need to please others so that we'll be accepted – and this trait can be spotted easily by an emotional manipulator. They sometimes know our vulnerable areas better than we do, and they exploit them to their advantage.

– Be aware of the degree to which you have empathy toward others and how much you might hate to make harsh judgments about other people. If you are overly

trusting, you are vulnerable to being manipulated. The healthy stance is to learn how to recognize manipulation readily. You cannot be manipulated if you are aware that it is happening – at the moment it happens.

Take a look at some common examples of how manipulators work –

***Emotional manipulators turn your statements around and make you the problem.*** Trying to be honest with the manipulator opens up your vulnerability. He or she is an expert at playing the game of “blame the victim.” For example, if you say, “I really wish you had taken a dish to the potluck, and I feel embarrassed that you didn't,” the manipulator might respond with, “I wish you could understand the pain I'm suffering right now – and have been for some time – but then I guess your life is so happy that you can't really feel empathy for someone else. So, sorry.”

***They'll say one thing and later assure you that they didn't say it.*** “I'll pay for half the groceries this time,” and then later the manipulator comes back with, “I never said any such thing.” This is a crazy-making experience because your sense of reality is challenged. The manipulator offers such a convincing argument that they had never promised to pay for half the groceries that you begin to doubt your own sanity.

***The manipulator will offer to help you, but then the torrent of sighs begins.*** “Yes, yes, (sigh) I'll take out the garbage.” You feel that you are the one to blame, as if you're trying to control the manipulator. Again, you are considered the problem.

***The manipulating person will set a negative emotional tone in a group and others feel compelled to make the manipulator feel better just to ease the tension.*** “John, if Keira can't drive you to the dentist tomorrow, I'll do it. Here, have a cup of coffee. Now do you feel better?” Notice how we tend to enable the manipulator, rewarding him or her for the controlling behavior.

***Manipulators don't fight fairly.*** They might talk behind your back and encourage others to confront you – and then they come in to save the day, placing the blame on the other people. Manipulators don't deal with issues directly. They use passive-aggressive tactics so that you don't realize that they are actually being aggressive toward you – “I love your hair that

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color. It does a nice job of hiding the gray.” You respond graciously to the compliment, but are then left with the lingering feeling that something is not quite right.

**They negate what you say by outdoing you.** If you want to talk about what a rough day you’ve had, they’ll come back with an account of their exceedingly brutal day, which makes your experience look like a day in the park. “Well, if you think that’s bad, listen to what I’ve been through today.” They bring attention back to themselves so that you find it difficult to feel any degree of validation. This is how emotional manipulators distance themselves from you and gain the upper hand. They lack the ability to relate to others with healthy boundaries and maturity.

**Emotional manipulators are experts at playing on your emotions.** If they sense that you respond easily to guilt, then they will try to make you feel guilty (“I feel embarrassed for you when you play with Dora’s kids as if they were your own – and it’s all because you’ve never had children”). Manipulators also play on our sympathy by playing the role of victim (“All I do is work, work, work – You’ll be sorry when I have a heart attack”). Or they might blame you for your anger, even though they have induced it (“Look, you’re the one who can’t control your emotions, not me”). Emotional manipulators have difficulty in expressing their desires or emotions directly, but by playing on the emotions of other people they covertly get their way.

**Manipulators project blame onto other people or circumstances.** They fail to take the responsible path of believing that they are accountable for their own lives. Their focus is on what others have done to them, and they are forever the victim (“My father was the first one to treat me badly, just as every man has done since”).

## How Do You Deal with the Emotional Manipulator?

Manipulators work in covert ways. It is sometimes difficult to know that you are being manipulated, but then your frustration with this person grows over time and you know that something must be wrong with the relationship. You may feel pulled toward the manipulator, but then repulsed by this person at the same time. These relationships are generally conflict-ridden.

You may find yourself in a double bind. That is, if you go along with the manipulation, you feel angry – and if you drop the relationship, you feel guilty. It may seem that you can’t win. But there is a way out of the bind –

• **Be aware of your own emotions within the relationship.** Your emotions are your best tool for sensing that there is a problem between you and the other person. Examine whether you feel defensive, guilty, angry, or sympathy toward the other person. You may not have these feelings during the interaction, but afterward, when you are thinking about what happens between the two of you, these emotions might emerge.

• **Define the emotion and understand the pattern.** When you think about what happens between you and the manipulator, describe the emotions that you feel. Put your feelings into words. What specifically was said that led you to a certain feeling? How did you respond at the time? What was the effect of your response? (It may help at this point to work with a professional therapist who is trained to help you sort through this often puzzling set of questions.)

• When you have a good understanding of the pattern of interaction between you and the manipulator, **ask yourself whether you want to continue with the relationship or not.** Sometimes we find ourselves in toxic relationships, and if we aren’t getting anything positive from the relationship, it might be in our best interest to terminate it, or else place good boundaries around it (like limiting our time with the other person). Some relationships cannot, or should not, be ended unless there is a pattern of abuse present.

• **Whenever a manipulation attempt occurs, right at that moment point it out to the other person.** This is your way of taking control of the manipulation. There is no need to express anger when you give the manipulator this feedback. Do it assertively and calmly. The manipulator at this point might come back with a guilt trip or an angry response. Say something like, “I feel that you are trying to manipulate me at this point, and I am not going to go along with it. I would like a healthy interaction between us, so could you try to say what you need to say in a more positive and direct way?”

Emotional  
Manipulation

## WHY DO PEOPLE MANIPULATE OTHERS?

**M**anipulative people have a strong need to be in control. This may derive from underlying feelings of insecurity on their part, although they often compensate for these feelings with a show of strong self-confidence. Even though they may deny it, their motives are self-serving, and they pursue their aims regardless of the cost to other people. They have a strong need to feel superior and powerful in their relationships – and they find people who will validate these feelings by going along with their attempts at manipulation. They see power as finite. If you exert power over them, they will retaliate in order to gain back the control they feel they are losing. They cannot understand the idea that everyone can feel empowered or that everyone can gain. When they are not in control – of themselves and over other people – they feel threatened. They have difficulty in showing vulnerable emotions because it might suggest they are not in control.

**T**hose who are manipulative usually don't consciously plan their maneuvers. They emerge from the manipulator's underlying personality disorder, and are played out within the context

of a victim who colludes with, and unwittingly encourages, the manipulation. There is a wide range of tactics used by manipulators ranging from verbal threats to subtle attempts to arrange situations to suit the manipulator. For example, one of the more common forms of manipulation is called *splitting* – turning two people against each other by talking to each one behind the back of the other, getting them to dislike or distrust each other, and leaving the manipulator in a position of control. They may use active techniques like becoming angry, lying, intimidating, shouting, name-calling or other bullying tactics. Or they may use more passive methods like pouting, sulking, ignoring you, playing the victim, or giving you the silent treatment.

**S**ome manipulators can be described in terms of having an *antisocial personality* (these people are sometimes called *psychopaths* or *sociopaths*). This is a personality disorder often associated with criminal behavior. They feel little compassion for other people, don't really feel guilty when they do something harmful, pathologically lie, show superficial charm, tend to be impulsive, and don't take responsibility for their own actions. Changing their ways can pose a challenge. Some people who have a need to nurture others may feel that they can help an antisocial person change their lives – and this would be a formidable task.

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