

SPECIAL REPORT

5 Red Flags Your Marriage May Be Destructive



LESLIE VERNICK

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When Emma first met Rick, she was instantly smitten by his handsome features, strong masculine build, his take charge personality and over the top charm. Ten months later they were married in a fairy tale wedding in front of over 200 friends and family.

Once they returned home from their honeymoon, Rick made it clear to Emma that he was the head of their home. He immediately took over the family finances, told Emma that he didn't like her best friend, Cheryl, and he didn't want her hanging with her anymore. He said she was a bad influence. Despite that fact that Emma worked full time as a Project Engineer, Rick found fault with everything she did. It was never good enough or up to his standards.

Sometimes Rick would leave for hours at a time and not tell her where he was. When she questioned where he went, he told her it was none of her business. Many nights Emma endured Rick's tongue lashings, telling her how incompetent, stupid, or disappointing she was. She tried hard to please Rick, hoping that he'd see how hard she tried to please him but somehow she always fell short. The more she tried, the more he found wrong.

Now, five years and two children later, Emma feels broken and scared. What was so wrong with her that Rick couldn't love her? Why couldn't she make her husband happy? He often called her the most foul and degrading names. Emma felt like she was dying inside. Who could she talk to? What should she do? Did anyone see or care about what was happening to her?

Emma's cries echo the despair of many women who find themselves in a marriage that is destructive and damaging to their emotional, spiritual, mental, financial and physical well-being. Emotional abuse is something people don't openly talk about or even recognize yet it is real and it's pervasive.

Here are five red flags that your marriage may be emotionally destructive.

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1 You feel controlled: Does your spouse regularly squash your perspective on things? Does he refuse to treat you as an equal partner and share power in decision making?

2 You feel afraid: Whenever there is any kind of physical or verbal abuse your marriage is destructive. Emma wasn't physically abused but she felt afraid to put her foot down and challenge Rick on anything. Her self-esteem and worth were constantly diminished by Rick's overbearing personality and she felt afraid she was losing who she was within her marriage.

Does your spouse bully you, threaten you, humiliate you, intimidate you, force or coerce you to do things you don't want to do?

3 You often feel confused: Rick told Emma that he would take care of paying the bills. When late payments started coming in Emma brought it to Rick's attention. Rick got angry and accused Emma of failing to remind him when they were due. Emma didn't know she was supposed to remind Rick, and when she did remind him of things, he accused her of trying to control him.

Does your spouse mislead you? Deny things that you know are true, lie about things or try to make you feel crazy?

4 You feel dismissed: Your perspective, feelings, desires, and needs are regularly ignored or minimized. He is indifferent to you as a person.

5 You feel objectified: Rick wanted a happy and willing wife in the bedroom but wasn't interested in Emma as a person. He never asked about her day, didn't encourage her interests and got angry when she asked him to do something for her when there was nothing in it for him.

Does your spouse act as if your sole purpose is to meet his needs and make him happy?

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If you recognize your marriage has one or more of these red flags, here's what you need to do to make necessary changes.

- 1 Tell the truth, especially to yourself.** You can't see clearly what your next steps will be until you take this first one. Many women feel terrified to admit, even to themselves, that their marriage is destructive. Instead they pretend, minimize, rationalize, and make excuses. Like Emma did, many women blame themselves for their husband's mistreatment and say, "I shouldn't have said (or done) that. It's my fault I made him mad." But healthy people live in reality not fantasy. The worst lies a woman can tell are the ones she tells herself. You won't get or accept the help you need unless you can first tell yourself the truth; your marriage is emotionally destructive.
- 2 Find some support:** Most women feel a lot of shame about being abused. It's hard to admit the ugly truth to yourself let alone share it with someone else. Isolation is a tactic used by concentration camp guards to maintain control over prisoners. Does your husband try to isolate you from your family and friends? The more you submit or comply to keep peace, the more power and control he will gain over you. Educate yourself about abusive tactics and look for a support group where she can share your story with other safe women who understand.
- 3 Learn to speak up and set boundaries.** Healthy individuals already know how to do this and that's why they don't allow themselves to be repeat victims. When you have lost your freedom to say "No" you've been captured, muzzled, or restricted like a child. This is not healthy for you as an adult woman or a wife. You are your husband's partner but that does not mean that you silently prop him up in order to enable his destructive behavior to continue. Rather, you can learn to lovingly yet firmly speak up and set boundaries so that he might come to his senses, see his destructive behaviors, and hopefully be willing to stop them.
- 4 Implement appropriate consequences:** One of life's great teachers is painful consequences. Sadly, many Christian women have been encouraged to mitigate negative consequences because "love covers a multitude of sins." While that's true, love does not cover all sins and sometimes someone's wrong-doing is so grievous and chronic the only way to shock someone awake is to implement strong negative consequences. For example, you might refuse to drive with your husband if he's regularly indulged in road rage or you may initiate a therapeutic separation because he refuses to change his abusive behaviors

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What's happening behind closed doors is not only destructive to you; it's harmful to your children as well as to your spouse. No man feels good about himself when he mistreats the people he's promised to love and protect. For your family's future, change needs to happen and that change begins as you grow strong enough to wisely stand up for yourself and your family.

LESLIE VERNICK was a licensed clinical social worker for over 35 years. She is also a relationship coach, speaker and author of 7 books, including her most recent, *The Emotionally Destructive Marriage: How to Find Your Voice and Reclaim Your Hope*.

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