

### **Relationships & Marriage - Identifying Verbal Abuse**

Verbal abuse is often difficult to recognize. It can be subtle and may only occur at home. To recognize verbal abuse, remember that verbally abusive persons need to maintain a one-up position. They have difficulty being in a learning posture and often sound like experts. Why? They grew up in families wherein there was constant competition (labeled "healthy rivalry"), criticizing ("Are you going to wear *that?*"), and sarcasm (verbal jabs miss-labeled as "joking around"). To show empathy, validate an alternative opinion, or apologize was to become vulnerable and weak. If one was not dominating, the only alternative was to be shamed, blamed, and dominated. After having grown up in the later position, the abuser makes sure she/he stays one-up at all times for fear of re-experiencing the shame and helplessness of childhood. The option of viewing another as an intellectual and spiritual equal does not occur to this person (for they experience another's equality as *their* inferiority). If an abuser is confronted by a partner with "I feel hurt when you say...", he/she will respond with blaming or a denial of the other person's reality such as, "You're too sensitive," "You think you know it all," "You're just trying to start an argument," or "I never said that." Other strategies include minimizing, countering, threats to leave, refusals to discuss things, judging, etc., in order to maintain power. Ordering the partner around may be frequent, such as, "Get in here and clean this up," or "Don't you EVER..." Finally, undermining the partner's self-worth is commonplace such as, "It's over your head," "You don't know if you're coming or going," or "Who asked you?" Check out a book on verbally abusive relationships at your local library to help you identify and respond to verbal maltreatment, and/or get some perspective from a counselor or support group.