

# How Manipulation Prevents Problem-Solving

*by Mindy, a Hotline Advocate*

Here at The Hotline, there are a few common questions we get from victims and survivors regarding how to communicate in their abusive relationships. For example: “How can I talk to my partner to make them understand?”, “What can I do to stop the arguments?”, or “How can I defend myself?” These are all valid questions, and within the framework of a healthy relationship there are possible answers and solutions to those questions. However, these things aren’t likely possible in an abusive relationship, and here’s why:

We know that abuse is a **choice** that one partner makes in order to have **power and control** over the other person. It can be hard to accept that your relationship isn’t healthy, and it may be even harder to acknowledge that your partner is abusive and is choosing to hurt you. It’s normal to look for solutions or ways to address the behavior because you want to fix the relationship. You’ve invested a lot in this relationship (love, time, energy, etc.) so you don’t want to give that up. However, you also know that the way things are right now isn’t right, healthy, or what you signed up for. So, it’s reasonable that you’re looking for tools on how to communicate with your abusive partner to make them understand that what they are doing is harmful and not okay. The frustrating truth about this is that because abuse is a choice, your partner already knows that their actions are harmful and controlling. Their behavior is like that by design, because they’ve identified what behaviors will get them a desired response, thus they continue to rely on those behaviors. Abuse isn’t something that you- the person experiencing it- can fix or solve, because while abusive behavior is problematic to a relationship, abuse isn’t a relationship problem, it’s an individual’s choice.

For that reason, you might often feel like arguments are never solved, that your words get twisted and used against you, or that there’s just nothing you can say to feel understood. This is because your partner does not have the same goals that you have. While you want to focus on solving problems or getting your concerns heard, an abusive partner wants to gain more power and control in the relationship...

As advocates, we often try to explain why arguing with an abusive person feels so frustrating and confusing, and it’s because an abusive person’s remarks and claims aren’t coming from a rational or truthful place...

Abuse is about control, which means that abusive people use irrational demands and accusations to control the dialogue in the relationship and prevent you from feeling heard or understood. There’s no way to have a constructive, productive conversation because abusive partners aren’t coming from a place that allows that to happen. This is also an effective manipulation tactic that allows the

abusive partner to **displace blame and responsibility** in order to make their behaviors the fault of someone or something besides themselves. All of this means that there is rarely anything you can say or do that will prevent an argument from starting or escalating. In that moment, the abuser has already decided that they are going to use this opportunity to be manipulative or hurtful. Lastly, let's talk about defenses. To start, there's a big difference between setting up emotional defenses versus defending yourself. When you're in an abusive relationship, you often feel exhausted, broken down, or like you're just trying to keep your head above water while this negative presence is pulling you down... We know that self-preservation in the face of something unfair happening to you doesn't always feel like enough. We often have the urge to stand up for ourselves when someone is hurting us, or we want to show them exactly how much their actions hurt by us responding in kind. While those feelings are understandable (and fighting back when in danger can sometimes be a reflex), safe self-defense is often not possible...

Again, abuse is all about power and control and if you try to stick up for yourself, an abusive partner will escalate in order to stop that momentum and maintain control, rather than giving you space to feel heard or understood...

An abusive relationship is an incredibly difficult thing to go through, and because of the reasons we've discussed in this blog post, the simple but difficult answer is that there is likely not a strategy that you can use to safely talk to your abuser to get them to stop being abusive, or to get them to understand/validate your feelings. We know that may be difficult to hear, but that doesn't mean that you don't have options.