Couple number one: “You know,” said David to his wife when she asked about their car’s crumpled fender, “your problem is you like to make a big deal out of nothing.”

Couple number two: “Why did you plan our date for Saturday?” asked Caroline. “That was a stupid thing to do. You know our date night is Friday.”

What do these couples have in common? One of the spouses in each situation is engaging in a form of abuse. Even though no yelling or physical violence occurred, these verbal jabs are typical of a widespread web of behaviors known as emotional abuse. Such behavior may well be the most common but least recognized of all forms of abuse because it has a certain acceptance within our society. In this seemingly invisible category of abusive behavior, men and women are about equally at fault, and the effects of such abuse on family members can be just as severe as other, more openly acknowledged kinds of abuse. Many hearts have been broken and lives severely damaged from living with the effects of ongoing emotional abuse. And if left uncorrected, it may also become the basis for other types of abusive behavior within a home and marriage.

President Gordon B. Hinckley, then Second Counselor in the First Presidency, spoke to married couples at a 29 January 1984 fireside broadcast from Temple Square. His counsel, as paraphrased in coverage of the event, was that “to make marriage all it can be, the couple must form a partnership based on the values of the gospel of Christ.” For a marriage to succeed, President Hinckley continued, “each married person should develop respect for his or her partner” as a cornerstone of the marital relationship (Ensign, Apr. 1984, 75).

Respectful treatment, especially in marriage, is essential to happiness and vital to our Latter-day Saint view of celestial partnerships, where “neither is the man without the woman, neither the woman without the man, in the Lord” (1 Cor. 11:11). Worldly traditions, however, are not generally supportive of respectful and loving treatment for all mankind. Yet the Savior’s teachings invite us to a higher standard: gentleness, meekness, love unfeigned, and kindness (see D&C 121:41–42). These qualities ought to form the foundation for our earthly relationships, which are to be patterned after the example he set.

On the other hand, emotional abuse prevents couples from living up to Christ’s higher standard. It seeks to perpetuate false traditions and inappropriate behavior such as “exercis[ing] control or dominion or compulsion upon the souls of the children of men” (D&C 121:37) in subtle and seemingly socially acceptable ways. As the world hangs on to such standards, Latter-day Saints increas-
ingly face the challenge to “come ye out from the wicked, and be ye separate” (Alma 5:57). Indeed, Saints who continue to mold their hearts to be Christlike will find an ever-widening gulf between the light, joy, and peace found in their homes and the darkened home environments of those who are unkind, harsh, and cruel.

To help Latter-day Saints better understand how these subtle and invisible forces may be affecting their homes and marriages, the following discussion will (1) explain behaviors that are considered to be emotionally abusive, (2) provide a yardstick by which couples can gauge the seriousness of the problem in their own lives, and (3) offer Christ-centered solutions that couples or individuals may begin to implement immediately and that will lead to healthier, happier marriage partnerships.

**Defining Emotional Abuse**

In a 1995 booklet published by the Church, Responding to Abuse: Helps for Ecclesiastical Leaders, we are told that emotional abuse of a spouse includes the following broad categories of problem behavior:

**Name Calling.** Words such as idiot or jerk, sarcastic or exaggerated use of terms of endearment, unflattering nicknames, and insulting labels constitute name-calling. President Howard W. Hunter counseled that a husband “should always speak to his wife lovingly and kindly, treating her with the utmost respect,” for “marriage is like a tender flower ... and must be nourished constantly with expressions of love and affection” (Ensign, Nov. 1994, 51). Wives, too, must do the same to their husbands. Sarcastic comments, the staple of TV sitcoms, are also considered to be verbally abusive and have no place in Latter-day Saint marriages.

**Demeaning Statements.** President Hunter also said, “Any man who abuses or demeans his wife physically or spiritually is guilty of grievous sin and in need of sincere and serious repentance” (p. 51). Ways that both men and women might engage in demeaning behavior toward their spouses include the following:

- **Trivialization.** To intentionally overlook the substantial effort put into a project, whether it’s preparing a dinner for company or repairing the family car, is a way of trivializing the time, effort, and talent needed to accomplish what could very well be a necessary and selfless act of service. Demeaning a spouse in this way can be done even in an apparently thoughtful tone of voice. For example, after a husband had spent considerable time doing tax returns, his wife commented, “Taxes are really not as complicated as most people make them out to be. I’m surprised it took you so long.”

- **Put-down humor.** A partner with a quick wit can come up with many ways to embarrass and humiliate his or her spouse, who may then be accused, in an effort to deflect responsibility for any insult taken, of not having a sense of humor. “Jack’s on a diet,” said his wife. “His third this week.”

- **Faultfinding.** Criticism chips away at a person’s sense of worth. It is not done out of a genuine regard to help someone be a better person, as some claim. “You know, honey, if you’d learn to chop the vegetables a little finer, you could probably make a decent salad.”

**Intimidation.** A partner may use threats to intimidate the spouse in order to get his or her own way:
“The day you hang that painting in the bedroom is the day I move out of it!” Venting anger in harsh words, shouting, stomping around the house, and throwing or breaking things are abusive. Less-noisy forms of signaling discontent, ill will, or censure—from snapping at others to displaying angry looks and other signs of belligerence—can also be intimidating and thus constitute abuse.

**Isolation.** Some partners seek to limit their spouse’s interaction either with them or with the outside world. Subtle manifestations of this include—

- **Withholding:** The partner fails to give needed information to the spouse, refuses to participate in mutual problem solving, holds back on displays of affection, or may be unwilling to spend time or converse with the spouse.

- **Preventing closeness:** Some partners seek to distance their spouses by perpetuating feelings of ill will or estrangement. If time spent together fosters the beginning of shared closeness, the partner may say or do something hurtful to create distance again.

One family took the children for a cookout. The day was delightful, and everyone had a good time. Finally it was time to go, and they began the short drive home. “Let’s stop for ice cream cones,” suggested the mother. Suddenly the father began shouting that he didn’t have time to waste like “some people he knew.” The outing had cost him enough already, he fumed, and he still had important things to do. Stunned, the family sat in fear and silence all the way home. The wife felt her feelings of shared fun evaporate into cold loneliness. She realized this had happened before.

Closeness is also prevented if one spouse refuses to participate in the sharing of emotions of pain or joy, whether it’s to offer comfort at the loss of a pet or to celebrate receiving a raise.

- **Setting inappropriate rules:** Isolating and controlling a spouse can take the form of creating an often unspoken set of rules for him or her. The rules may be subtle, like setting time limits on telephone calls, disallowing certain people at the house, and limiting or forbidding the spouse to have money or to go places alone. Not-so-subtle rules may include things such as no phone calls, no visitors, or no Church callings. The partner tries to justify the rules, saying they make good sense, but the victimized spouse falls into an increasingly cold and lonely world.

**Manipulation.** Some methods used to manipulate others include acting pitiable, creating guilty feelings in others, or blaming others for problems.

One woman writes, “[My husband] does not come to family home evening because we do not meet his expectations and he claims the kids won’t sit still and listen.” This husband has neatly blamed his children for his own lack of involvement with them.

Another manipulative tactic is to disagree with or counter, for purely selfish reasons, the spouse’s decisions. The offending partner seeks to implement his own ideas not because they are better, but because they allow him to continue to feel in control or smarter than his spouse. Such controlling behaviors are often couched as concern, such as the wife who critically examined her husband’s apparel each time they left the house, suggested he wear a different tie or shirt for the occasion, then waited impatiently while he changed—even though by reasonable standards his choice of dress was
appropriate.

**Gauging the Seriousness of the Problem**

If what you’ve read makes you feel uncomfortable, you may wish to simply ask your spouse to read this article and ask if he or she believes there is a problem in your marriage regarding these kinds of behaviors. The degree of pain or unhappiness experienced by the spouse, as well as your own feelings of unease, determines the severity of the problem. If the kind of emotional interaction in the marriage is satisfactory to both partners, and if love and joy are experienced by both, there is little cause for concern since occasional pardonable mistakes do not qualify as serious emotional abuse. However, if one person believes there is a problem, even if the partner disagrees, there is a problem. Those who abuse are often satisfied with the way things are and are insensitive and not motivated to make needed changes.

The following discussion points out the stages that victims of abuse may go through as they try to cope with what is happening to them. This information will help couples determine the extent of a problem.

As isolated incidents begin to form a pattern, tension builds up from accumulated hurts that have not been fully resolved. Feelings of fear, wariness, nervousness, or anxiety may be present. In time, the hurting spouse may actually become accustomed to being treated badly and fail to realize that inappropriate behavior is occurring. Such persons may assume they are “too sensitive” or in some way deserve what they get. Nevertheless, in an effort to lessen the pain and establish a better relationship, they may increase efforts to be kind, pay compliments, or perform more acts of service in order to please their partners and “earn” a compliment or kindness in return. Such gestures are often taken for granted or ignored by the abusive partners, leaving the spouses to wonder if they will ever measure up or be “good enough” to be loved, no matter how much effort is put forth.

Next, a spouse may attempt to get help or understanding from the partner about the growing chasm between them, but is either ignored or told that he or she is imagining things. Such denial creates confusion in the abused spouse, and feelings of loneliness, frustration, despair, or even self-doubt may emerge.

At this point some people seek help from friends or priesthood leaders. However, because emotional abuse usually takes place in private, where there are no witnesses, it is often difficult to find anyone willing to believe that the problem is serious. In fact, the abusive partner can be well liked and considered charming by other people. Says one woman, “People from our ward often tell me how lucky I am to be married to such a nice guy. I am confused by this. It is very painful for me to be with him.”

This lack of a sympathetic witness to the pain often leads to efforts to cope alone. This may result in a number of behaviors attributed to other causes:

- **Fighting back.** Some people fight back by employing the same abusive tactics as their partners. There is much heated argument and recrimination in such homes.
• *Suffering in silence.* Other people respond by stifling their feelings. To keep peace in the home, they see no alternative except to go numb and brave it out. Often they have trouble either laughing or crying, for feelings may have closed down.

• *Diverting feelings.* Still others retreat into depression or ill health. Discouragement from trying to make one’s voice heard and trying to receive justice, coupled with a determination to honor temple marriage covenants, may contribute to the belief that the situation is hopeless, that one must endure a dysfunctional marriage. The pain may turn into depression or a variety of other problems, sometimes lasting for years, because the underlying cause is not correctly diagnosed. In serious cases, thoughts of suicide may even result.

Once a pattern of emotional abuse has developed, there is a risk that in some cases such hurtful behavior will escalate into physical abuse. The transition often begins with seemingly playful or accidental invasions of the spouse’s personal space: standing too close; stepping on toes; not-so-gently shoving, hitting, or slapping for “fun”; and teasing that does not stop when a spouse asks for it to stop. If this, too, is tolerated, further serious physical abuse may follow. Men and women continually experiencing these supposedly playful invasions of personal space need to take a firm stand with their partner and seek help now. A spouse who does not tolerate such treatment will often stop a partner from moving any further down the road toward physical abuse. There is no guarantee that things will get better by waiting, praying for the partner to change, or assuming the partner means it when he or she promises it won’t happen again … and it happens again. Both partner and spouse may need help.

### A Christ-Centered Solution

The Lord Jesus Christ has shown us how to live in peace and happiness with one another. “Come unto me” is his invitation, “all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn of me; … and ye shall find rest unto your souls” (Matt. 11:28–29). He has set us an example that, when followed in marriage, will open the door to a more peaceful relationship.

While effective change most rapidly takes place when two people work together to solve the problem, a spouse need not wait to begin to make changes that can set the course of a marriage aright. Whether a couple works together on the problem or one spouse goes it alone, there are steps that can be taken immediately.

### Seeking Change as a Couple

The following steps can help a couple begin the process of change:

1. **Meet together.** Set a time to discuss the problem where you won’t be disturbed. Begin with prayer to invite the Lord to guide each of you in what you say and to help you find solutions. Pray to have an open mind and heart.

2. **Evaluate the problem.** It may be helpful to begin the discussion with a review of this article. Couples may find initially that they have a hard time pinpointing exactly how and when hurtful
behaviors happen. However, once such a discussion has been held, awareness increases and damaging patterns become more visible.

3. **Decide to do something different.** Once problems have been identified, a couple can work together to help each other replace old habits and patterns of behavior with new ones. One way to do this is to agree on a signal, either verbal or nonverbal, that alerts the partner to an unfolding problem. This takes courage on the part of the offended spouse and patience on the part of the abusive partner. Each will probably need to pray together and separately for the Spirit of truth and understanding.

4. **Review often.** Initially, couples will probably need to meet together often to discuss the process and refine their methods for dealing with negative behaviors. For many, the process is one of unfolding both the severity of the problem as well as the sweetness of the solution. Ultimately, the yielding of hearts to the principles of the gospel will bring couples true companionship and love.

**Seeking Change as an Individual**

If the abusive partner is not ready to discuss the problem, there are things that the other spouse can do to start the process of change.

1. **Seek to know the truth.** “If ye continue in my word, then are ye my disciples indeed; and ye shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free” (John 8:31–32). Here the Savior, speaking to those who love him and continue in faithfulness to him, promises them the great gift of knowing the truth.

Some who have adapted to living in an abusive situation lose the ability to recognize when they are being treated with disrespect. Most, however, know something is wrong but don't know what to do about it. Sooner or later both parties must come to know the truth and risk the consequences of facing the abuse, putting their full trust in the Savior.

Explains one man: “I was so used to hearing endless complaining and faultfinding that I lost any sense of perspective. After learning about emotional abuse, I still did not see it happening to me until I made prayer part of the solution. Initially, I was shaken by the truth. But in time I understood that I had to admit to the truth of what was happening in our home in order to free myself from the pain and finally begin working on the real problem that has plagued our relationship.”

2. **Pray for courage.** “For God hath not given us the spirit of fear; but of power, and of love, and of a sound mind” (2 Tim. 1:7). Often, whether or not the abused spouse realizes the full extent of the fear and anxiety that have marked a life of abuse, it is very hard for him or her to imagine ever confronting the partner with the plain facts. However, once it becomes understood that emotional abuse is a problem in the marriage, the abused spouse shares responsibility for helping to bring the truth to light.

This stage may be the hardest to accomplish. Fear paralyzes people, but the gospel brings peace, and with the help of the Spirit, fear may be conquered.
“As I prayed for help, I began putting labels on hurtful behavior after it had happened. I finally realized I needed to recognize when I was being abused as it occurred and find the courage to quietly stand up for myself. This was a very difficult step for me. I asked Father in Heaven to help me, and I was literally shaking with fear the first time I finally spoke up, even though my husband has never hit me. But I did speak up, and my husband just gaped at me in surprise.”

3. **Change your behavior.** “He that hath no rule over his own spirit is like a city that is broken down, and without walls” (Prov. 25:28). Those experiencing abuse often feel they are unsafe and without boundaries, in the sense that people use them, ignore their needs, or treat them disrespectfully. By changing their formerly unproductive ways of responding, and by substituting new ways, they begin a process of change that can establish firmer limits to what will and will not be tolerated. And when one person in a marriage makes a personal change, change is introduced into the relationship.

Said one husband, “It took all my self-control to stop yelling back, walking away, or speaking sarcastically to my wife. I learned I had to stay absolutely calm and in control of myself before I could bring the truth to light.”

4. **Clearly label the offending behavior.** “A soft answer turneth away wrath: but grievous words stir up anger” (Prov. 15:1). When a spouse undergoes emotional abuse, he or she should stand quietly and in a calm and conversational voice clearly label the behavior. For example: “You are shouting.” Or, “When you criticize me, I feel hurt because I expected a compliment.” Or, “I do not feel like cooperating with you when you are sarcastic. Please speak to me kindly.”

The success of this approach depends on the degree of courage and self-control present in the spouse. Kind but firm language delivered in a completely mild conversational tone of voice is most effective. President Gordon B. Hinckley said that a cornerstone of marriage is the “‘soft answer’ …, for quiet talk is the language of love, it is the language of peace, it is the language of God” (Ensign, April 1984, 76). Anger and sarcasm are tools of the adversary, and resorting to their use will never lead to healing in the relationship. Paul, in speaking to the Romans, said, “Recompense to no man evil for evil. … Be not overcome of evil, but overcome evil with good” (Rom. 12:17, 21; emphasis added).

5. **Be still until the abuse stops.** “Stand, therefore, having your loins girt about with truth, having on the breastplate of righteousness, and your feet shod with the preparation of the gospel of peace” (D&C 27:16; emphasis added). There is great power in standing your ground calmly and allowing truth to win the day.

One woman tells of her husband storming up the stairs, clearly angry over lost keys and shouting at her, blaming her for not putting them where they belonged. For the first time in her life, she ignored the issue causing the outburst and looked him squarely in the eyes and said quietly, “John, you’re shouting at me.” He stopped, momentarily stunned, then turned and went back down the stairs.

“I was surprised to see that it worked,” she said. “Ordinarily, I would have frantically searched for the keys in order to make him stop yelling at me. But for once I stood there calmly, waiting for him to speak to me kindly. Things have improved significantly—faster than I would ever have thought. He’s been yelling at me for years. I didn’t think he would ever change. I didn’t know I had a part in
bringing about that change.”

These five steps may begin a process of change that can significantly improve marriage relationships. When one or both spouses pursue solutions with prayer, courage, commitment, and calmness, emotional abuse decreases significantly. As the offended spouses begin to change their responses to abusive behavior, the offending partners may finally rethink their refusals to discuss the issue of emotional abuse. If kindness and love govern the discovery stage, in time there is hope for a stronger and healthier marriage as both partners begin working together to resolve difficult issues amicably.

Father in Heaven has promised his children happiness when they obey correct principles. All of us must have the willingness to seek out those principles and, with help from the Savior, use them to strengthen our homes and marriages. Bringing into the open emotional abuse that has been hidden or tolerated because of the influence of worldly values allows couples to unmask the invisible heartbreaker in their marriage and to recover the fruits of peace, joy, and love.

This article has been prepared in consultation with LDS Social Services.