

## Your Personal Coach

Kathleen Brehony, Ph.D.

Dear Kathleen,

**My boyfriend Greg is nice to me most of the time, in fact, everyone thinks he is a ‘nice guy.’ But he can be extremely critical, and is always telling me what I’m doing wrong. When he’s angry, he yells at me, calls me terrible names, and tells me I’m stupid. Lately, he has started putting me down with sarcastic remarks and does this especially when we are with other people. I feel embarrassed and don’t want to make a scene. He never apologizes, and says that I’m being too sensitive. If I push the issue, he gives me the silent treatment, and then says he was just making a joke when he put me down with our friends. But his comments often hurt my feelings and I can tell by the way my friends react to his statements that they don’t think, he’s funny (if they are jokes, after all). What would you do if you were me?**

**-- Liz**

Dear Liz,

If I were you, I’d dump a loser who made jokes at my expense, put me down in front of our friends, yelled at me, and was constantly critical. What he is doing to you is called ‘verbal abuse,’ and it’s important to not trivialize it. In many ways, verbal abuse is at the root of all other kinds of abuse, and although it does not leave physical scars, verbal abuse can be every bit as emotionally and psychologically damaging to one’s self-esteem and self-worth.

Verbal abusers lie, exploit, demean, ignore (e.g., the “silent treatment”), and manipulate. These behaviors are always intended – consciously or unconsciously – to exert control over you, and to make someone feel powerful. Personally, I’d be out the door. But, I’m assuming that you care for him, and that he has other positive qualities that cause you to want to remain in a relationship with him (though they better be pretty darn good qualities to make up for this maltreatment). So short of suggesting that he take a long walk off a short pier, here’s what I would do:

I’d start by having a heart-to-heart conversation to express – in no uncertain terms – that I will no longer stand by and allow him to verbally abuse, mock, or use hostile language with me. And then you have to mean it. The next time he criticizes or puts you down, you must stand up for yourself. Remain calm. Don’t get into a shouting match. Look him in the eye and firmly tell him that you will not allow him to speak to you with insulting words or with a disrespectful tone. If it seems hard for you to stand up to him, I suggest you work with a therapist or counselor who can be supportive of your decision to no longer be a victim of verbal abuse.

Greg needs help. He may not know it, or even want to accept this idea, but he may not be able to stop this behavior without competent professional help from a qualified therapist. It is almost certain that he has very low self-esteem himself and that he feels powerless in his life. And in spite of the fact that many people may see him as a “nice guy,” he is being anything but that in his relationship with you. Think about what he is doing. He takes his rage out on you and then minimizes the impact by saying his words are only jokes or the problem lies in you (Remember? You’re the one that is “too sensitive”). That old saying, “sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will

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never hurt me” is not true. Verbal abuse leaves lasting scars. It causes its victims to question their value, and intensifies feelings of low self-worth and, sometimes, depression.

You deserve better than this, Liz. Give Greg a chance to change, but if he will not or cannot, you will have no choice but to leave him.

Send your personal coaching questions to [kathleen@fullpotentialliving.com](mailto:kathleen@fullpotentialliving.com) or call 473-4004. Kathleen is a personal and executive coach, clinical psychologist, and writer. (©2004 Kathleen Brehony. All Rights Reserved.) Columns are archived at [www.fullpotentialliving.com](http://www.fullpotentialliving.com).