

# 9 Signs You're Dealing With an Emotional Manipulator

By Travis Bradberry, Ph.D.

We all know what it feels like to be emotionally manipulated. It can be extremely effective, which is why some unscrupulous individuals do it so much.

A few years ago, Facebook, in conjunction with researchers from Cornell and the University of California, conducted an experiment in which they intentionally played with the emotions of 689,000 users by manipulating their feeds so that some users only saw negative stories while others only saw positive stories. Sure enough, when these people posted their own updates, they were greatly influenced by the mood of the posts they'd been shown.

Facebook caught a lot of flak over the experiment, primarily because none of the “participants” gave their consent to join the study. Perhaps more frightening than Facebook's faux pas was just how easily people's emotions were manipulated. After all, if Facebook can manipulate your emotions just by tweaking your newsfeed, imagine how much easier this is for a real, live person who knows your weaknesses and triggers. A skilled emotional manipulator can destroy your self-esteem and even make you question your sanity.

It's precisely because emotional manipulation can be so destructive that it's important for you to recognize it in your own life. It's not as easy as you might think, because emotional manipulators are typically very skillful. They start out with subtle manipulation and raise the stakes over time, so slowly that you don't even realize it's happening. Fortunately, emotional manipulators are easy enough to spot if you know what to look for.

**1. They undermine your faith in your grasp of reality.** Emotional manipulators are incredibly skilled liars. They insist an incident didn't happen when it did, and they insist they did or said

something when they didn't. The trouble is they're so good at it that you end up questioning your own sanity. To insist that whatever caused the problem is a figment of your imagination is an extremely powerful way of getting out of trouble.

**2. Their actions don't match their words.**

Emotional manipulators will tell you what you want to hear, but their actions are another story. They pledge their support, but, when it comes time to follow through, they act as though your requests are entirely unreasonable. They tell you how lucky they are to know you, and then act as though you're a burden. This is just another way of undermining your belief in your own sanity. They make you question reality as you see it and mold your perception according to what is convenient to them.

**3. They are experts at doling out guilt.**

Emotional manipulators are masters at leveraging your guilt to their advantage. If you bring up something that's bothering you, they make you feel guilty for mentioning it. If you don't, they make you feel guilty for keeping it to yourself and stewing on it. When you're dealing with emotional manipulators, whatever you do is wrong, and, no matter what problems the two of you are having, they're your fault.

**4. They claim the role of the victim.** When it comes to emotional manipulators, nothing is ever their fault. No matter what they do—or fail to do—it's someone else's fault. Someone else made them do it—and, usually, it's you. If you get mad or upset, it's your fault for having unreasonable expectations; if they get mad, it's your fault for upsetting them. Emotional manipulators don't take accountability for anything.

**5. They are too much, too soon.** Whether it's a personal relationship or a business relationship,



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emotional manipulators always seem to skip a few steps. They share too much too soon—and expect the same from you. They portray vulnerability and sensitivity, but it's a ruse. The charade is intended to make you feel “special” for being let into their inner circle, but it's also intended to make you feel not just sorry for them but also responsible for their feelings.

### **5. They are an emotional black hole.**

Whatever emotional manipulators are feeling, they're geniuses at sucking everyone around them into those emotions. If they're in a bad mood, everyone around them knows it. But that's not the worst part: they're so skillful that, not only is everyone aware of their mood, they feel it too. This creates a tendency for people to feel responsible for the manipulator's moods and obliged to fix them.

### **6. They eagerly agree to help—and maybe even volunteer—then act like a martyr.**

An initial eagerness to help swiftly morphs into sighs, groans, and suggestions that whatever they agreed to do is a huge burden. And, if you shine a spotlight on that reluctance, they'll turn it around on you, assuring you that, *of course*, they want to help and that you're just being paranoid. The goal? To make you feel guilty, indebted, and maybe even crazy.

### **7. They always one-up you.**

No matter what problems you may have, emotional manipulators have it worse. They undermine the legitimacy of your complaints by reminding you that their problems are more serious. The message? You have no reason to complain, so shut the heck up.

### **8. They know all your buttons and don't hesitate to push them.**

Emotional manipulators know your weak spots, and they're quick to use that knowledge against you. If you're insecure about your weight, they comment on what you eat or the way your clothes fit; if you're worried about an upcoming

presentation, they point out how intimidating and judgmental the attendees are. Their awareness of your emotions is off the charts, but they use it to manipulate you, not to make you feel better.

## Overcoming Manipulation

Emotional manipulators drive you crazy because their behavior is so irrational. Make no mistake about it—their behavior truly goes against reason, so why do you allow yourself to respond to them emotionally and get sucked into the mix?

The more irrational and off-base someone is, the easier it should be for you to remove yourself from their traps. Quit trying to beat them at their own game. Distance yourself from them emotionally, and approach your interactions with them like they're a science project (or you're their shrink if you prefer that analogy). You don't need to respond to the emotional chaos—only the facts.

Maintaining an emotional distance requires awareness. You can't stop someone from pushing your buttons if you don't recognize when it's happening. Sometimes you'll find yourself in situations where you'll need to regroup and choose the best way forward. This is fine, and you shouldn't be afraid to buy yourself some time to do so.

Most people feel as though because they work or live with someone, they have no way to control the chaos. This couldn't be further from the truth. Once you've identified a manipulator, you'll begin to find their behavior more predictable and easier to understand. This will equip you to think rationally about when and where you have to put up with them and when and where you don't. You can establish boundaries, but you'll have to do so consciously and proactively. If you let things happen naturally, you're bound to find yourself constantly embroiled in difficult conversations. If you set boundaries and decide when and where you'll engage a difficult person, you can control

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much of the chaos. The only trick is to stick to your guns and keep boundaries in place when the person tries to cross them, which they will.

### Bringing It All Together

Emotional manipulators can undermine your sense of who you are and even make you doubt your own sanity. Remember: nobody can manipulate you without your consent and cooperation.

### ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

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Dr. Travis Bradberry is the award-winning coauthor of [Emotional Intelligence 2.0](#) and the cofounder of TalentSmart® the world's leading provider of emotional intelligence [tests](#) and [training](#) serving more than 75% of Fortune 500 companies. His bestselling books have been translated into 25 languages and are available in more than 150 countries.

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