



The Emotional Terrorist by Erin Pizzey

Reproduced with permission of the author.

From her 1998 book [The Emotional Terrorist & The Violence Prone](#)
This site is supported and maintained by the [Equal Justice Foundation](#).

[EJF Home](#) | [Find Help](#) | [Help the EJF](#) | [Comments?](#) | [Get EJF newsletter](#) | [Newsletters](#) |
[Domestic Violence Book](#) | [DV Site Map](#) | [Data tables](#) | [DV bibliography](#) | [DV index](#) |

[Chapter 1 — The Human Problem Of Domestic Violence](#) |
[Next — Abused Women Have Choices by Wendy McElroy](#) |
[Back — Controlling Domestic Violence Against Men by Charles Corry, Ph.D., Martin Fiebert, Ph.D., and Erin Pizzey](#) |

Those of us working in the field of domestic violence are confronted daily by the difficult task of working with women in problematical families. In my work with family violence, I have come to recognize that there are women involved in emotionally and/or physically violent relationships who express and enact disturbance beyond the expected (and acceptable) scope of distress. Such individuals, spurred on by deep feelings of vengefulness, vindictiveness, and animosity, behave in a manner that is singularly destructive; destructive to themselves as well as to some or all of the other family members, making an already bad family situation worse. These women I have found it useful to describe as "*family terrorists*."

In my experience, men also are capable of behaving as family terrorists but male violence tends to be more physical and explosive. We have had thousands of international studies about male violence but there is very little about why or how women are violent. There seems to be a blanket of silence over the huge figures of violence expressed by women. Because family terrorism is a tactic largely used by women and my work in the domestic violence field is largely with women, I address this problem discussing only my work with women.

The potential for family terrorism may rest dormant for many years, emerging in its full might only under certain circumstances. I found that in many cases it is the dissolution, or threatened dissolution, of the family that calls to the fore the terrorist's destructiveness. It is essential to understand that prior to dissolution, the potential terrorist plays a role in the family that is by no means passive. The terrorist is the family member whose moods reign supreme in the family, whose whims and actions determine the emotional climate of the household. In this setting, the terrorist could be described as the family tyrant, for within the family, this individual maintains the control and power over the other members' emotions.

The family of the emotional terrorist well may be characterized as violent, incestuous, dysfunctional, and unhappy, but it is the terrorist or tyrant who is primarily responsible for initiating conflict, imposing histrionic outbursts upon otherwise calm situations, or (more subtly and invisibly) quietly manipulating other family members into uproar through guilt, cunning taunts, and barely perceptible provocations. (The quiet manipulative terrorist usually is the most undetected terrorist. Through the subtle creation of perpetual turmoil, this terrorist may virtually drive other family members to alcoholism, to drug-addiction, to explosive behavior, to suicide. The other family members, therefore, are often misperceived as the 'family problem' and the hidden terrorist as the saintly woman who "*puts up with it all*.")

While the family remains together, however miserable that "*togetherness*" might be, the terrorist maintains her power. However, it is often the separation of the family that promises to rend the terrorist's domain and consequently to lessen her power. Family dissolution, therefore, often is the time when the terrorist feels most threatened and most alone, and, because of that, most dangerous.

In this position of fear, the family terrorist sets out to achieve a specific goal. There are many possible goals for the terrorist, including: reuniting the family once again, or ensuring that the children (if there are children in the relationship) remain under the terrorist's control, or actively destroying the terrorist's spouse (or ex-spouse) emotionally, physically, and financially.

To take an extreme parable, when it was evident to Adolph Hitler that winning the War was an absolute impossibility, he ordered his remaining troops to destroy Berlin: If he no longer could rule, then he felt it best for his empire to share in his own personal destruction. Similarly, the family terrorist, losing or having lost supremacy, may endeavor to bring about the ruin (and, in some extreme cases, the death) of other family members.

The family terrorist, like the political terrorist, is motivated by the pursuit of a goal. In attempting to "*disarm*" the family terrorist, it is vital that the practitioner begin intervention by trying to recognize and understand the terrorist's

goal.

The source of the terrorist's goal as in the case of the political terrorist, usually can be understood to spring from some "*legitimate*" grievance. The grievance's legitimacy may be regarded in terms of justified feeling of outrage in response to an actual injustice or injury, or the legitimacy may exist solely in the mind of the terrorist. Whether this legitimacy be real or imagined, the grievance starts as the impetus for the terrorist's motivation. One hallmark of an emotional terrorist is that this motivation tends to be obsessional by nature.

Whence this obsession? Why this overwhelmingly powerful drive? In many cases, that which the terrorist believes to be the grievance against the spouse actually has very little to do with the spouse. Although the terrorist may be consciously aware only of the spouse's alleged offense, the pain of this offense (real or imagined) is invariably an echo of the past, a mirrored recreation of some painful situation in the terrorist's childhood.

I will not describe here in any detail the types of childhood that tend to create the subsequent terrorist. I will say, however, that invariably the terrorist's childhood, once understood, can be seen as violent (emotionally and/or physically). Also invariably, the terrorist can be regarded as a "*violence prone*" individual. I define a violence prone woman as a woman who, while complaining that she is the innocent victim of the malice and aggression of all other relationships in her life, is in fact a victim of her own violence and aggression. A violent and painful childhood tends to create in the child an addiction to violence and to pain (an addiction on all levels: the emotional, the physical, the intellectual, the neurochemical), an addiction that then compels the individual to recreate situations and relationships characterized by further violence, further danger, further suffering, further pain. Thus, it is primarily the residual pain from childhood — and only secondarily the pain of the terrorist's current familial situation — that serves as the terrorist's motivating impetus. There is something pathological about the terrorist's motivation, for it is based not so much on reality as on a twisting, a distortion, a reshaping of reality.

Because the emotional terrorist is a violence-prone individual, addicted to violence, the terrorist's actions must be understood as the actions of an addict. When the family was together, the terrorist found fulfillment for any number of unhealthy appetites and addictions. When that family then dissolves, the terrorist behaves with all the desperation, all the obsession, all the single-minded determination of any addict facing or suffering withdrawal.

The single-mindedness, the one-sidedness of feeling, is perhaps the most important shibboleth of the emotional terrorist. Furthermore, the extent of this one-sidedness is, for the practitioner, perhaps the greatest measure and indicator of how extreme the terrorist's actions are capable of becoming.

Any person suffering an unhappy family situation, or the dissolution of a marriage or relationship, will feel some pain and desperation. A relatively well-balanced person, however, will be not only aware of their own distress but also sensitive, in some degree, to the suffering of the other family members. For example, reasonably well-balanced parents, when facing divorce, will be most concerned with their children's emotional well-being, even beyond their own grief. Not so the emotional terrorist.

To the family terrorist, there is only one wronged, one sufferer, only one person in pain, and this person is the terrorist herself. The terrorist has no empathy and feels only her own pain. In this manner, the terrorist's capacity for feeling is narcissistic, solipsistic, and in fact pathological.

Again, I will not attempt here to detail the factors in childhood that lead to the creation of an emotional terrorist. What is evident, however, in the terrorist's limited or nonexistent ability to recognize other people's feelings, is that the terrorist's emotions and awareness, at crucial stages of childhood development, were stunted from reaching beyond the boundaries of self, due to a multiplicity of reasons. Later, the adult terrorist went on to make a relationship that was, on some level, no true relationship, but a reenactment of childhood pains, scenarios, situations, and "*scripts*." Throughout the relationship, the solipsistic terrorist did not behave genuinely in response to the emotions of other family members but self-servingly used them as props for the recreation of the terrorist's programme. And when that relationship finally faces dissolution, the terrorist is aware only of her own pain and outrage and, feeling no empathy for other family members, will proceed single-mindedly in pursuit of her goal, whether that goal is reunion, ruin, or revenge. The terrorist's perspective is tempered by little or no objectivity. Instead the terrorist lives in a self-contained world of purely subjective pain and anger.

Because conscience consists so largely of the awareness of other people's feelings as well as of one's own, the emotional terrorist's behavior often can be described to be virtually without conscience. In this lack of conscience lies the dangerous potential of the true terrorist, and again the degree of conscience in evidence is a useful measure in my work to anticipate the terrorist's destructiveness.

An additional factor, making the terrorist so dangerous, is the fact that the terrorist, while in positively monomaniacal pursuit of her goal, feels fueled by a sense of omnipotence. Perhaps it is true that one imagines oneself omnipotent when, in truth, one is in a position of impotence (as in the case of losing one's familial control through dissolution). Whatever the source of the sensation of omnipotence, the terrorist believes herself to be unstoppable, and unbound by the constraints or conscience or empathy, believes that no cost (cost, either to the terrorist or to other family members) is too great to pay toward the achievement of the goal.

The terrorist, and the terrorist's actions, know no bounds. (The estimation of the extent of the terrorist's "boundlessness" presents the greatest challenge to my work). Intent only to achieve the goal (perhaps "hell-bent" is the most accurate descriptive phrase) the terrorist will take such measures as: stalking a spouse or ex-spouse, physically assaulting the spouse or the spouse's new partners, telephoning all mutual friends and business associates of the spouse in an effort to ruin the spouse's reputation, pressing fabricated criminal charges against the spouse (including alleged battery and child molestation), staging intentionally unsuccessful suicide attempts for the purpose of manipulation, snatching children from the spouse's care and custody, vandalizing the spouse's property, murdering the spouse and/or the children as an act of revenge.

In my experience both men and women are equally guilty of the above behavior, but on the whole, because it is men's dysfunctional behavior that is studied and reported upon, people do not realize that to the same extent women are equally guilty of this type of violent behavior. My working definition, then, of a "family terrorist" or an "emotional terrorist" is: a woman or a man (but for the purposes of this work, I refer only to women) who, pathologically motivated (by unresolved tendencies from a problematical childhood), and pathologically insensitive to the feelings of other family members, obsessively seeks through unbounded action to achieve a destructive (and, therefore, pathological) goal with regard to other family members.

Of course, this defining profile pertains to individuals in differing degrees. Many people, unhappy within a relationship or made unhappy by the dissolution of a relationship, may lapse into periods of "irrational" behavior. What characterizes the terrorist, however, is that the vindictive and destructive behaviors are consistent; the moments of calm and periods of lucidity are the lapses, temporary lulls in the storm.

There are also women who, suffering chagrin and misery during or after the life spans of a relationship, appear far more self-destructive than destructive to anyone else. For the other partner, contemplating leaving this kind of individual, the very thought of leaving such a person is made difficult and untenable by such frequently uttered protestations as "I cannot live without you," and "Without you, I might as well be dead." To be sure, many women exist, extremely dependent within their relationships, who, probably having suffered severe emotional betrayal during their childhood, genuinely feel that their life outside a relationship would be so lonely as to be unbearable.

It is difficult to leave such a woman, and the man attempting to leave may well feel that, by leaving, he would be responsible for delivering a mortal blow to an already pathetic wretch. Men also, are often kept in their relationships, which can only be likened to "personal concentration camps," by the fact that they feel a genuine feeling of "chivalry" towards their partner. Women tend to put so much more of themselves into their relationships and therefore suffer when these relationships fall apart.

There is a valid question as to whether or not this sort of suicidally-inclined individual may be deemed a terrorist. (To many minds, this kind of individual, no doubt, would seem to fall more within the category of "emotional black-mailer.") I believe that, sadly, there are people, deeply damaged by their childhood, who genuinely cannot face life by themselves. When dealing with such potential cases, however, I try to make the leaving partner understand that the suicidal inclinations predate the relationship by many years, and that, however tragic the situation, one person simply cannot be held responsible for keeping another person alive.

In some individuals, the authentic (though unhealthy) longing for death is a longing planted within them since early childhood, and there is very little a partner can do to alter the apparently inevitable course of that longing.

Among true terrorists, however, threats of suicide can be seen to serve a largely manipulative role. In short, the terrorist says, "If you can't do as I tell you, I will kill myself." Whether suicide remains only a threat or is realized, the true terrorist uses suicide not so much as an expression of desperate grief but as a weapon to be wielded against others.

In working with clients struggling either in relationships or with the dissolution of a relationship, I am faced with many questions, all relevant to gauging the woman's terrorist potential:

- Will the woman persevere in her efforts to financially ruin her partner?
- Is she sincere when she promises to kill her partner, or have him killed, should he ever become involved in a new relationship?
- Are the threats of suicide genuine or manipulative?
- Will she carry out the promises of using the law to "kidnap" the children in order to hurt the ex-partner?
- Will she brain-wash the children to such an extent that her ex-partner dare not form a new relationship?

Emotional terrorism is by no means confined to the family context. I know an extremely successful woman in the world of fine arts. This woman has been haunted by a former assistant who, vicariously imagining herself to the writer herself, dresses like her, stalks her, and issues public statements that it was she, not the writer, who created the works of art for which the writer is internationally famous. If the writer is to ensure her own safety, then very definite steps must be taken.

In situations of emotional and family terrorism, there are two areas of work to be done: practical measures of protection ("*strategies for survival*") on the part of family members, and therapeutic work with the terrorist himself or herself. I must reiterate at this stage, that both men and women are capable of terrorist tactics but men tend to behave in a more physically violent manner within the family. Women, as I have shown, use far more subtle tactics, i.e., that of the terrorist as opposed to outright war.

The first step, on the part of other family members, toward limiting the terrorist's destructive potential is to understand the terrorist to be a terrorist. In a recent case, a Mr. Roberts described to me how, during his marriage, he and his children faced a daily onslaught of verbal abuse from his wife. Mrs. Roberts was also physically violent to the children. Now that he has asked for a divorce, she is making use of every weapon in her arsenal. In the children's presence, she has used drugs and drunk alcohol to the point of extreme intoxication. She has staged several unsuccessful suicide attempts in front of the children, threatened over the telephone to "*do something stupid*," promised to kill Mr. Roberts new partner, and assured Mr. Roberts that when she has finished with him he will not have a penny to his name. To Mr. Roberts, all of this behavior seemed perfectly usual.

After all, he had witnessed this sort of commotion for thirteen years of their marriage. When I suggested to him, "*What you endured is emotional terrorism*," he suddenly and for the first time was able to see his situation clearly. Now, he realized, his wife's behavior was neither appropriate nor acceptable. No, this was not the treatment that every man should expect from his wife, either in or out of marriage. No, he does not want his children to be subjected to such extreme behavior any longer.

The fact of recognizing a terrorist is the essential first step. Then, because a terrorist is fueled by a feeling of omnipotence and is prepared to behave without bounds, usually encouraged by feminist therapists who insist that their clients suffer from "*low self esteem*," pragmatic measures must be taken to define clearly the boundaries of acceptable behavior.

Unfortunately the legal situation which many divorce agreements mandate is open-ended. Certainly, when both parties to a divorce are reasonably well-balanced, it is entirely fitting for the settlement to be flexible enough to incorporate changing financial circumstances, child-care capabilities, and visitation rights. When, however, one party to the divorce is an emotional terrorist, then both the confrontational divorce procedure and the resultant open-ended divorce settlement provide infinite opportunity for the courts, lawyers, and the entire battery of psychologists called in for evaluations, to be used as the terrorist's weapons. In these cases, the court and the divorce procedure provide no boundaries for the terrorist; instead they allow the terrorist to continue to behave boundlessly.

For this reason, when dealing with a terrorist, it is best for the divorce procedure and final decree to be as swift, as final, as absolute, as unequivocal as possible. Every practitioner or attorney handling divorces is familiar with clients described as "*litigious*." ["*Tar baby*" is a popular term among Colorado lawyers.] Only when "*litigiousness*" is seen as a manifestation of terrorism can the course to swift and precise legal settlement be steered.

To limit the terrorist's feelings of omnipotence, there are many effective measures. The guiding principle, as in the handling of political terrorists, must be: "*There is no negotiating with terrorists*." Endless telephone calls, conversations, confrontation, trial "get-back-togethers," correspondence, visitations, gestures of appeasement, and efforts to placate the terrorist's demands, all serve to reinforce the terrorist's belief that she is accomplishing something. Only determined resolution in the face of terrorism shows the terrorist that her power is limited.

Furthermore, for anyone dealing directly with the terrorist, reassurances, "*ego boosts*," and consolations are lamentably counterproductive. Mrs. Roberts soon found for herself a feminist therapist staunchly supporting the erroneous belief "*All feelings* (and therefore behaviors) *are valid*." Mrs. Roberts is told by this therapist that she has a right to feel and to behave in any manner she chooses, in callous disregard for the devastation inflicted upon the children. Such reassurances serve only to fortify the terrorist's already pathological, solipsistic, and eternally self-justifying perspective.

If wishing to undertake the second sphere of disarming a terrorist — personal intervention with the terrorist herself — the therapist must be prepared to be straight, honest and very direct. In my own dealings with women as terrorists, I have found on occasion that one quite simply can point out to the terrorist, "*You are behaving like a terrorist. This is what you are doing. This is how you are being destructive. This is the destruction you are heading towards*," and the terrorist, seeing themselves clearly for the first time, might be encouraged to reconsider their behavior. More commonly, however, extremely deep therapy is required. For the terrorist's behavior to change, there must first be a solid and fundamental change within the terrorist's physiological constitution.

Usually it is only by an in-depth excavation and resolution of early childhood pain that the terrorist can begin to gain a real, true, and level-headed perception of her own current situation. Direct intervention with a terrorist — like all forms of therapeutic intervention — can hope to achieve change only if the individual concerned wishes to change and possesses that vital yet ineffable quality: the will to health. When the will to health is lacking, there can be no change. If the terrorist cannot or will not change, one can only help the other family members to be resolute, be strong, and, whenever possible, be distant.

As a result of their failure to acknowledge emotional terrorism or a propensity for violence in their clients, shelters are totally ineffective in dealing with such women. To recognize such behavior in females would violate deeply held convictions and defile feminist dogma. A basic human response to such contradictions is an attempt to deny they exist. One way to do that is to cover up the operation.

[Top](#)

| [EJF Home](#) | [Find Help](#) | [Help the EJF](#) | [Comments?](#) | [Get EJF newsletter](#) | [Newsletters](#) |
| [Domestic Violence Book](#) | [DV Site Map](#) | [Data tables](#) | [DV bibliography](#) | [DV index](#) |

| [Chapter 1 — The Human Problem Of Domestic Violence](#) |
| [Next — Abused Women Have Choices by Wendy McElroy](#) |
| [Back — Controlling Domestic Violence Against Men by Charles Corry, Ph.D., Martin Fiebert, Ph.D., and Erin Pizzey](#) |

This site is supported and maintained by the [Equal Justice Foundation](#).
Last modified 11/30/10