

Understanding Invalidation

By [KARYN HALL, PHD](#)

Emotional invalidation is when a person's thoughts and feelings are rejected, ignored, or judged. Invalidation is emotionally upsetting for anyone, but particularly hurtful for someone who is emotionally sensitive.

Invalidation disrupts relationships and creates emotional distance. When people invalidate themselves, they create alienation from the self and make building their identity very challenging.

Self-invalidation and invalidation by others make recovery from depression and anxiety particularly difficult. Some believe that invalidation is a major contributor to emotional disorders.

Most people would deny that they invalidate the internal experience of others. Very few would purposefully invalidate someone else. But well-intentioned people may be uncomfortable with intense emotions or believe that they are helping when they are actually invalidating.

In terms of self-invalidation, many emotionally sensitive people would agree they invalidate themselves, but would argue that they deserve it. They might say they don't deserve validation. They are uncomfortable with their own sensitivity. The truth is that validation is not self-acceptance, it is only an acknowledgement that an internal experience occurred.

Verbal Invalidation

There are many different reasons and ways that people who care about you invalidate you. Here are just a few.

Misinterpreting What It Means to Be Close: Sometimes people think that knowing just how someone else feels without having to ask means they are emotionally close to that person. It's like saying they know you as well as you know you, so they don't ask, they assume, and may even tell *you* how you think and feel.

Misunderstanding What it Means to Validate: Sometimes people invalidate because they believe if they validate they are agreeing. A person can state, "You think it's wrong that you're angry with your friend," and not agree with you. Validation is not agreeing. But because they want to reassure you they invalidate by saying, "You shouldn't think that way."

Wanting to Fix Your Feelings: "Come on, don't be sad. Want some ice cream?" People who love you don't want you to hurt so sometimes they invalidate your thoughts and feelings in their efforts to get you to feel happier.

Not Wanting to Hurt Your Feelings: Sometimes people lie to you in order to not hurt your feelings. Maybe they tell you that you look great in a dress that in truth is not the best style for you. Maybe they agree that your point of view in an argument when in fact they do not think you are being reasonable.

Wanting the Best for You: People who love you want the best for you. So they may do work for you that you could do yourself. Or they encourage you to make friends with someone who is influential when you don't really enjoy the person, telling you that that person is a great friend when it's not true. "You should be friends with her. She'll be a good friend to you."

There are also many different ways of invalidating. I've listed a few below.

Blaming: "You always have to be the crybaby, always upset about something and ruin every holiday." "Why didn't you put gas in the car before you got home? You never think and always make everything harder." Blaming is always invalidating. (Blaming is different from taking responsibility.)

Hoovering: Hoovering is when you attempt to vacuum up any feelings you are uncomfortable with or not give truthful answers because you don't want to upset or to be vulnerable. Saying "It's not such a big deal" when it is important to you is hoovering. Saying someone did a great job when they didn't or that your friends loved them when they didn't is hoovering. Not acknowledging how difficult something might be for you to do is hoovering. Saying "No problem, of course I can do that," when you are overwhelmed, is hoovering.

Judging: "You are so overreacting," and "That is a ridiculous thought," are examples of invalidation by judging. Ridicule is a particularly damaging: "Here we go again, cry over nothing, let those big tears flow because the grass is growing."

Denying: "You are not angry, I know how you act when you're angry," and "You have eaten so much, I know you aren't hungry," invalidate the other person by saying they don't feel what they are saying they feel.

Minimizing: "Don't worry, it's nothing, and you're just going to keep yourself awake tonight over nothing" is usually said with the best of intentions. Still the message is to not feel what you are feeling.

Nonverbal Invalidation

Nonverbal invalidation is powerful and includes rolling of the eyes and drumming of fingers in an impatient way. If someone checks their watch while you are talking with them, that is invalidating. Showing up at an important event but only paying attention to email or playing a game on the phone while there is invalidating, whether that is the message the person meant to send or not.

Nonverbal self-invalidation is working too much, shopping too much or otherwise not paying attention to your own feelings, thoughts, needs and wants.

Replacing Invalidation with Validation

The best way to stop invalidating others or yourself is by practicing validation. Remember that validation is never about lying. Or agreeing. It's about accepting someone else's internal experience as valid and understandable. That's very powerful.