

## What's up with the Silent Treatment?

Some relationships are marked by overt expressions of anger; yelling, shouting and the like. There are also those conflicted relationships that are marked by silence. Silence though, doesn't mean the same thing in all situations. Silence can mean at least four different things:

Some people go silent amidst an interpersonal conflict to upset their partner even more than he or she might already be. When someone is waiting upon a response by the other, keeping silent is an effective way to punish or wreak vengeance for a perceived wrong. The silent treatment or withholding, keeps the other person on the hook, so to speak, waiting to settle some matter. This is indeed nerve wracking for the person awaiting the response. This is retaliatory behaviour, the goal of which is to discharge anger by making the other person upset. This is not necessarily meant as abusive behaviour, but may speak to an immaturity or limited capacity on the part of a person to effectively express anger appropriately.

In these situations, if the non-silent partner has been guilty of untoward behaviour, silence may be the silent partner's only available means of response, but it will be ineffective in the long run unless the untoward behaviour is actually addressed. If the silence and the behaviour both continue, both partners will continue to be distressed.

The silent treatment can also be used as a form of bullying in that it is used to manipulate an outcome in favour of the one engaging in the behaviour. Not with the goal of discharging one's upset, but causing the other person to acquiesce to one's preference, this form of bullying works because the victim cannot tolerate the other person's withdrawal. The victim feels abandoned and likely has their own issues of self-worth which in turn makes this an effective strategy for the bully. The victim, needing to feel connected, acquiesces to the demands of the bully to abate the silent treatment. These relationships are often lop-sided in favour of the bully. The bully gets what he or she wants, but at the expense of a wholesome relationship.

Some folks go silent amidst an interpersonal conflict because they either cannot cope with the conflict or are no match in a verbal battle with their partner.

Seeing the futility of arguing, this person goes quiet to avoid an escalation of conflict or to resist being overwhelmed by the other person's verbal repartee. In these situations, the silent treatment serves as a means of self-preservation. In situations such as these, it is common to see the other party as excessively verbose, often defensive and certainly with much to say. Given the difficulty of getting these people to listen and stop arguing their case, their partner simply withdraws. This is most like giving up. These persons are often more sad than mad.

In some instances, both persons go silent towards each other. This mutual silent treatment is like a Mexican stand-off with each seeing who gives in first. The mutual silent treatment is almost childlike in appearance with stubbornness and pride at the root. With neither party willing to back down, these situations can go on indefinitely typically creating even greater distress for those friends, neighbours and loved ones who likely see the folly of both persons' ways.

Regardless though of why a relationship is marked by the silence, silence always spells some sort of difficulty resolving conflict. Be it to wreak vengeance, a strategy to bully, a means for self-preservation or pride, silence in a relationship is indicative of unremitting conflict.

Silence as a strategy to manage either one's feelings or another's behaviour is self-defeating. In lieu, people are encouraged to find their reasonable voice and learn to express their needs, wants and issues verbally, non-judgementally and informationally.

Like we tell our kids, *use your words*.

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