

'I felt as if I was dead to her': The psychological cost of the silent treatment

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The silent treatment is a refusal to verbally communicate with another person.

—People who use the silent treatment may have trouble communicating pain.

—When the silent treatment becomes a pattern, it can be abusive.

Most of us know what it's like to be hurt by words—the cruel ones, the insensitive ones, the ones that replay themselves over and over again in our minds. But many of us have also been hurt by the absence of words, by the spaces between them, by silences that truly can become deafening.

The silent treatment is a refusal to verbally communicate with another person, a way of withholding connection. It can look like a spouse who completely stops talking after a fight or a displeased parent who refuses to speak or make eye contact with a child. Psychologists say when it becomes part of a pattern of controlling or punishing behavior, it can be abusive.

"There's nothing wrong with wanting to set a boundary or in a disagreement or in distress saying, 'hey, look, I need to take a break' or 'I need to stop talking about this.' But I think what's different about the silent treatment is its intention isn't to set a boundary or regain emotional regulation. The intention is to punish the other person," said Vaile Wright, senior director of healthcare innovation at the American Psychological Association.

Wright said the silent treatment is not an effective means of resolving disputes, and it can often reflect someone's inability to communicate pain.

"I think it's probably, to a certain degree, a defense mechanism related to not being able to articulate ways in which somebody feels hurt. Instead of using your words, you act out in behaviors that aren't particularly adaptive, but may feel protective," she said.

The silent treatment: Painful, terrifying, damaging

Kipling Williams is a [psychology professor](#) at Purdue University who studies the silent treatment specifically, and ostracism broadly. Williams wrote in his book, "Ostracism: The Power of Silence," about the fear and desolation felt by those who've experienced the silent treatment.

"Few events in life are more painful than feeling that others, especially those whom we admire and care about, want nothing to do with us. There may be no better way to communicate this impression than for others to treat you as though you are invisible—like you didn't exist," he wrote.

Jeannie Vanasco is a writer whose forthcoming book "A Silent Treatment" explores her mother's use of the silent treatment within their relationship. A few years ago, Vanasco's mother moved from Ohio to Vanasco's basement apartment in Baltimore, Maryland. Vanasco said her mother began to use the silent treatment whenever she felt frustrated, or hurt, or when she believed Vanasco wasn't spending enough time with her. Her periods of silence would typically last two to three weeks, but one episode during the pandemic lasted six months.

"I can't recall feeling as bad as I felt during that time except when my dad died, when I was 18," she said. "I felt as if I was dead to her."

Vanasco coped through distraction, by studying the history of punitive silence, pouring over research on what might motivate someone to engage in this type of behavior. Her mother was widowed, had left her home and friends and was living in a basement during the pandemic. Vanasco said she began to understand how her mother's isolation and vulnerability were factoring into her punitive behavior.

"When people weaponize silence, a lot of times it's coming from a place where they feel as though they don't have a lot of power," she said.

Is the silent treatment abuse?

While use of the silent treatment can reflect the source's own emotional pain, there is also a profound psychological cost for the receiver. The silent treatment can damage relationships, sometimes irreparably. When it becomes part of a pattern of behavior, Wright said it can be abusive. Especially when it includes other harmful behaviors, such as threats or insults, where the intention is to control.

A [research paper](#) published in the journal "Group Processes & Intergroup Relations" found that people who received the silent treatment experienced a threat to their needs of "belonging, self-esteem, control, and meaningful existence."

Use of the silent treatment can be damaging to any relationship, but Wright said the risks of harm are especially potent when a parent uses it on a child.

When children experience the silent treatment, it can lead to feelings of emotional abandonment. They are likely to engage in behaviors such as clinging or reassurance-seeking, anything they can do to try and get the parent to stop engaging in that behavior.

"The biggest long-term consequence may be a child's inability to securely attach in future relationships," she said. "You're always kind of worried that the other person's going to leave you."

On the video app TikTok, a platform where many adults are collectively processing childhood trauma, the hashtag #silentlytreatment has nearly 40 million views. Many of the app's users are sharing what it felt like when their parents would go silent.

Tammy Chow, who posts on TikTok under the username

@somaticspirit, said her mother would often give her the silent treatment after an explosion of anger. It would typically last around two weeks.

"I would just tiptoe around the house like a little mouse," she said in one video. "My whole body was in a state of heightened arousal."

It was agony, she said, to feel that kind of rejection.

Chow said eventually her mother would start speaking to her again, but without any real resolution to the conflict, Chow remained in a state of hyperarousal, primed for the next event. She became a people pleaser and sought perfection like it was armor.

What to do if someone is using the silent treatment on you

If someone is using the silent treatment on you, Wright said it's important to find ways to emotionally regulate yourself.

You can focus on what things are in your control to protect yourself and your emotional well-being. If you feel safe enough, you can approach the person giving you the silent treatment and articulate how that behavior makes you feel.

Vanasco said she found her mother's silent treatment so intolerable that most of the time she would try to break it, but that tactic didn't serve her in the long term. When Vanasco's mother refused to speak to her for six months, Vanasco worked hard to ensure she was not the one to resolve the conflict, and eventually, her mother did.

"My therapist would try to discourage me from breaking the silence. You don't want to be the one to break it, because the person inflicting

this on you needs to understand that you won't stand for this," she said.

How to stop using the silent treatment

If you're using the silent treatment to communicate hurt, experts say you need to work to determine healthier, more effective ways of regulating your emotions.

A parent who is using this behavior on a child must recognize there are long-term emotional harms, and may need the help of a mental health professional to stop the cycle. A spouse may need to reflect on what need they're trying to meet when they use this tactic, so they can avoid turning to escapism.

"In a healthy way, you set boundaries, you don't make the other feel person feel like you're punishing them, but you ask for the space you need in order to resolve your distress and come back to the conflict in a healthy way," Wright said.

When preparing to navigate conflict in a relationship, which is inevitable, it can be useful to have conversations in times of calm about how you best communicate, how you can manage conflict and you can fight well. You can ask one another questions such as, "How much of a break do we need after a big fight?" or "How do we decide to come back together again?"

To the extent that you can maintain some emotional regulation. it's important to articulate that you need time, and better yet communicate a timeframe that you're willing to reconvene to have the discussion again.

If someone in your life is continuing to use the silent [treatment](#) and you've told them that behavior is unacceptable, then it's important to evaluate whether that relationship is worth keeping.

"I know that that's not something we like to talk about," Wright said, "but if it isn't a mutually beneficial relationship, then you have to make decisions about whether or not that relationship is worth your time and attention."

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