

- Nonverbal communication

WHY THE SILENT TREATMENT IS A FORM OF ABUSE

Refusing to talk to someone can be used as a way to control or punish them. Experts say it can cause psychological harm, especially to children

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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 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 behaviour, 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’,” says Vaile Wright, senior director of healthcare innovation at the American Psychological Association.

“But I think what’s different about the silent treatment is its intention is not to set a boundary or regain emotional regulation. The intention is to punish the other person.”

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

“I think it’s probably, to a certain degree, a defence mechanism related to not being able to articulate ways in which somebody feels hurt. Instead of using your words, you act out in behaviours that aren’t particularly adaptive, but may feel protective,” she says.

Kipling Williams is a psychology professor at Purdue University in the US state of Indiana 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 writes.

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 the US state of Ohio to Vanasco’s basement flat in Baltimore, in Maryland. Vanasco says 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 says. “I felt as if I was dead to her.”

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 behaviour, Wright says it can be abusive, especially when it includes other harmful behaviour, such as threats or insults, where the intention is to control.

Tammy Chow, who posts on TikTok under the username @ somaticspirit, says 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 says in one video. "My whole body was in a state of heightened arousal." It was agony, she says, to feel that kind of rejection.

Chow says 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 armour.

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

"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 says.

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 behaviour on a child must recognise there is long-term emotional harm, 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 person feel like you're punishing them, but you ask for the space you need to resolve your distress and come back to the conflict in a healthy way," Wright says.

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?"

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