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IS LOVE ENOUGH?

The silent treatment and other signs you're in a dysfunctional relationship

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What the silent treatment really means in

relationships



Most of us are guilty of not only ending up in a dysfunctional relationship, but sticking it out long after its expiration date. Sometimes the WTF-am-I-doing epiphany takes longer to show up than it should, but what matters is that we finally see the relationship for what it really is — and isn't. One of the most common — and lethal — signs you're in a dysfunctional relationship? The silent treatment.

Whether we've given or been on the receiving end of it, the silent treatment is silent but deadly. It's a classic "demand-withdraw" pattern, when one partner pressures the other with demands or complaints, causing the other to essentially hide under a rock until it's over. "It's the most common pattern of conflict in marriage or any committed, established romantic relationship," says Paul Schrodt, Ph.D., professor and graduate director of communication studies at Texas Christian University. "And it does tremendous damage."

Schrodt led a [meta-analysis](#) of 74 studies, and found that couples engaged in this pattern experience lower relationship satisfaction, less intimacy and poorer communication. What's worse, it can lead to health problems: The presence of the demand-withdraw pattern is associated with anxiety and aggression, as well as physiological effects like urinary, bowel or erectile dysfunction (yikes!).

It's a vicious cycle that's hard to break, mainly because partners see the other as the cause: The wife will complain her husband is closed off while the hubby will complain he'd be more open if she'd just back off. And it doesn't matter which partner is more demanding — it's the pattern that's the problem.

"The silent treatment is used, usually, because one person in a relationship wants to either get the other's attention or punish them," says relationship expert [April Masini](#). Here's how to break the cycle.

If you're using it to get someone's attention...

Once you get their attention, let go of the silent treatment. "Many times people use the silent treatment with a purpose, but get swept away in the emotional storm that comes from being angry," says Masini. "So much so, they forget to change tactics once the silent treatment works." If you don't, you'll stay stuck and the silent treatment will become a catalyst for future problems.

If you're using it as punishment...

Give yourself a deadline date for ending it. "The silent treatment as a life sentence is ineffective, and in the end, you wind up punishing yourself instead of the person you intended to," says Masini.

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If you're stuck in the silent treatment...

Whether you're being punished or are the one doing the punishing, all you have to do is — get this — open your mouth and speak. It really is that simple. Masini suggests saying something like, "I've hated giving you the silent treatment, and I don't like being this person, but here's what's been bothering me. Can you help me at all with this?"

This puts your partner on notice that you're stopping the silent treatment, you're still in the relationship, and you're wanting help without putting them on the defensive. Win/win.

This one issue might not mean it's time to pull the plug on your relationship, but combined with other signs (like the ones below), it could be time for some soul searching:

1. Everything revolves around your partner

Every conversation, every outing, every social gathering, revolves around his needs, goals and desires. Maybe this is happening because he's a dillhole, or maybe early on you went overboard in the catering-to-him department and now there's an expectation — but it's usually a combination of both.

2. It's impossible to be yourself around him

What's worse, it's been so long since you've felt like yourself you've lost sight of who that even is. You look at yourself and see a stranger — and so do your friends and family... and cat.

3. You feel best when he's not around

Every day is another challenge, another day of walking on egg shells. Every relationship has little

frustrations, but you spend your entire day putting out fires. When he goes out or takes a trip solo, you're so excited for the time to yourself you're compelled to frolic in a meadow.

4. There's too much that hasn't been said

When there's a disagreement or an argument, they're always dealt with to his satisfaction and never yours. There's now so much buildup from past fights that went unresolved you don't bother arguing at all.

5. He holds you back from growth

There's being stuck in a rut, then there's being held back from evolving as a person. If, after many attempts at growing and improving yourself, he drags you back to where you don't want to be, it's time to seriously evaluate your situation — and book it.

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