

How to Respond When Your Spouse Gives You the Silent Treatment

The silent treatment. I'm guessing every spouse has given or gotten it at least once. It communicates a ton without saying a word, conveying things like anger, frustration, bitterness, manipulation, resignation, disappointment and sorrow. But a long bout of the silent treatment can hurt a marriage and causes loneliness. The habitually silent spouse isolates the other, who becomes the lonely spouse. If you're the lonely spouse, suffering in silence, there is hope. Here are some things to understand and do to encourage communication again.

1. Don't assume you know the reason for the silent treatment.

The causes can be complex and varied. Assuming you can simply figure out what's going on in your spouse's head and heart can be counterproductive. If your spouse hasn't explained the silence, your assumptions can cause defensiveness, anger and extended silence if you're seen as oversimplifying or arrogant.

2. Explain to your silent spouse your need and desire to communicate.

This may seem simple, but misunderstandings and assumptions happen all the time in marriages, hurting the couple. They may think the silence is golden, causing a false sense of peace, and not realizing that the silence is damaging your relationship.

3. Be ready to listen, not just talk.

Communication is a two-way street that requires talking and listening. Listening skills are as important, if not more so,

than talking when you are trying to coax your silent spouse. If they sense that you just want them to talk as a set-up for you to take the floor and give them a piece of your mind, they will likely clam up. Learning effective listening is critical to communication.

4. Be gracious, not caustic or sarcastic, when your spouse *does* make the effort to talk with you.

Avoid “it’s about time” or “oh, you figured out how to talk after all!” Say “thank you” instead. Sarcasm can kill any genuine progress you might be making in communicating together, so bury the eye rolls and the sarcastic comebacks.

5. Practice the Golden Rule in how you respond.

Dealing with a silent spouse can elicit a lot of negative emotions, and it can be hard to treat them the way you want to be treated. But it’s important, in part, because you are trying to model for them how you want them to interact with you. Don’t use the Golden Rule as a manipulation; simply put yourself in their shoes and hear yourself, thinking before speaking.

6. Try to show empathy instead of winning sympathy from your silent spouse.

Empathy is hard to do, especially for someone who you feel is hurting you. If you want their sympathy for your loneliness more than you want to empathize with and understand their pain, you are probably encouraging the silent treatment.

7. Be willing to let go of your grudge.

Grudges can be natural, even understandable in certain circumstances—but they are also devastating. Some people who are carrying a long-term grudge think it doesn’t impact the rest of their life. But a grudge tends to leak out into other parts of life. You’ll need to work on letting it go.

8. Make time.

Getting a silent spouse talking takes time. And you might need to schedule time where you can just be alone. If you're not in the habit already, this might be a good reason to start making date nights to have some time away from kids and work and everyday stuff to focus on communicating.

9. Be ready to ask for forgiveness.

Sometimes the silence comes from an unspoken hurt you're unaware of causing. If it surfaces, don't be defensive, but be willing to evaluate it and own it. Asking for forgiveness in a meaningful way can be a powerful help to a marriage. At times when Susan has given me the silent treatment, I've found that one of the best ways to get her to open up is to offer a sincere apology—"I apologize. I was wrong. Will you please forgive me?"

10. Be ready to offer forgiveness.

Sometimes silence comes from your spouse's guilt or shame. If this surfaces, having a forgiving heart may be just what's needed to open up the gates of meaningful conversation again with your spouse. Forgiveness is a decision. When you really forgive someone, you are making a decision to release, embrace, pardon and grow.

11. Understanding passive-aggressive silence.

Silence can be a manipulation tool in the hands of a passive-aggressive spouse. And that can make everything more difficult. If you suspect that, [click here](#) to see our post on handling the passive-aggressive spouse.

12. Don't give up.

Complacency is so destructive in marriage. If you are feeling worn down by the loneliness and the silence, find friends and family who will encourage you and hold you up.

This list is not exhaustive or magical. Communication, and marriage, is just hard work sometimes. But prayerfully and patiently pursuing peace and resolution can help your marriage get stronger as you emerge from the valleys of silence and loneliness together. {eoa}

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This article originally appeared at .