

IS STONEWALLING SPOILING YOUR RELATIONSHIP?

Back in the day, 'stonewalling' was only known as 'shutting down'. Actually the term has been around since the 1800s and is linked to the American Civil War when the Confederate troops were encouraged to stand solid like a dry-stone wall as a defence against the enemy. The term was later picked up by cricketers in the late 1800s as a reference to the batter's obstructive blocking of balls. Sadly, what may prove a triumphant tactic on the battlefield or the cricket ground is less than successful when it's used as a defence in couple rows.

In relationship therapy, one of the pivotal tasks for the therapist is to observe, and then to help their clients better examine the habits that they have fallen into when trying to resolve differing points of view.

Communication styles vary enormously, but one of the most intense triggers for couple fury is the inability to row safely and fairly. Time and again one of them will complain that once things get heated, the other shuts down and stonewalls them. This behaviour can be acted out in several ways. For example:

- There's the 'room leaver' who either creeps away, or slams out of the conflict.
- The "I've just got something important to do" who changes the subject.
- The 'eye roller' who sighs and refuses to engage.
- The 'pick up the phone and fiddle with emails' and
- The plain 'shout down the opposition' tactic.

There are probably many more ways to avoid or swerve an angry partner who seemingly can't be placated. This, of course, leaves the more vocal one with no oxygen to feed their frustration and will, in all likelihood, just allow them to ratchet up their emotions until they are incandescent with rage and have no place to vent their fury.

This dynamic can be hard to shift without outside intervention and once it becomes entrenched behaviour it will really reduce a couple's ability to find solutions through difficult times and can prove incredibly destructive.

One of the main indicators that a couple is in serious trouble is when they start to view each other with contempt. This is one of the first steps to the point of no return. Happily, most couples do see warning signs and will often enter therapy in time to gain insights that will lead to change. The path to these insights is to start looking at what is sometimes referred to as 'the music behind the words'.

We often act on instinct and need to better understand what drives our Fight or Flight responses when we are confronted with what feels like danger, but is often a situation that just appears to be out of our control.

Interestingly, many of the rows that are described in therapy, centre around a situation that sounds trivial or easily resolvable. In the moment though, for the two people involved, it can feel visceral and enormously intense.

In the therapy room it is important to find a quiet time to describe what happens to each partner when tensions escalate. The 'leaver' often describes feelings of being overwhelmed, and unable to gather their thoughts. They may outline what begins to sound like a wounded sensitivity to rejection that they then deal with by exhibiting this distancing behaviour.

They may also think that by entering into the row, they might inflame the situation, so it's the best and safest tactic to remove themselves. The 'shouter' could not agree less. By feeling isolated in the situation, it removes everything from them, both positive and negative. They want to have it out and get a reaction that they feel shows that their opinion is being heard. If this isn't available to them, then their frustration can build until they become provocative and unreasonable. They can feel a sense of worthlessness that seemingly their partner doesn't care enough to hear their points. The anger can then get destructive and their terminology can begin sound scary (often to themselves as well as their other half). I often picture this as one person knocking on a locked door so hard that their knuckles begin to bruise, while the other person is cowering on the other side, with both of them frightened and unhappy.

It can be hugely helpful in therapy for each of them to remember where they first learned this method of attack or defence in childhood. Early experiences can really shape our attitudes to conflict, and I've seen people in tears when listening to the way the other was subjected to problems in early life. Stopping to think 'where have I felt like this before' can be a very reflective experience. There may be a critical or angry parent or carer in the mix. Some people come from conflict averse families and have never seen productive anger. Some come from warring homes where fury and blame were intense and unresolved. No wonder that so many of us have to learn how to row safely and understand the triggers in our partners that feel so alien to us.

Some useful guidelines

First, it's important to make a plan when all is calm and the couple feel close. This is a time when tolerance and kindness can be helpful for constructive thoughts.

Safety planning

- If possible, try to develop a communication that gives the clear warning that one of you is starting to feel overwhelmed or anxious.
- Explain this and ask for a moment to allow things to slow down. A yellow card to show there's a problem looming is a useful safety valve before a red card that makes a situation explosive.
- Make a pact that when things start to feel unmanageable, one of you will leave the room. This has to be described and understood, in advance, as a creative tactic and must be used in that way. This is to be a gentle retreat to safeguard both partners.
- Plan in advance who goes first, and for how long. Often as little as 20 minutes is enough for both people to calm down.
- Rows are rarely resolvable when adrenalin is coursing through our bodies.
- Agree that once things are quieter, you will both be able to express your feelings in a non-judgemental way avoiding phrases like 'you always you never'.
- Remember it's our responses to the situation that have aroused these difficult feelings in us.
- If it's near bedtime, park the row, but on the clear understanding that you will return to it at a calm moment. Pinpoint a time so that it doesn't disappear into the infamous black hole that stores rows, only for them to be ignited and pulled into the next argument.

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- Try to keep talking time equally, it's often the case that one person is more speedily articulate. Both people need fair airtime.

Both partners need to hone their listening skills to really take in what the other is saying. Often it's interrupting or feeling unheard that can trigger the shutdown.

The whole point of a row is not to have a winner (and therefore a loser) but to get a clearer understanding of how your partner feels, and why. This way you get to better understand each other.

It's important to understand that we are talking here about healthy couples who have both rather hit that stone wall in their blocked communication methods.

This is not the same thing as intentional or abusive behaviours that are meant to hurt and damage another. That is a situation that needs specialist outside help, and should be dealt with individually by the person concerned.

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