

## Relationships

# The sound of silence

In relationship therapy, where there's a silent partner, we help them to understand the impact they're having, whether it's intentional or not



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**A**s therapists, many of us will be aware of the power of silence in our work. The space we leave for clients to process and consider their thoughts and feelings. The space we leave for ourselves to think and feel. The space we create between us within which we can experience the moment, and gain a sense of self and the other. These are powerful times when what is not said can be felt, when thoughts can be lived, when new meanings and insights are given time to emerge

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and take shape. As in John Cage's experimental musical work, '4'33", the silence is filled with the sound of imagination, emotions and subliminal messages. And client and therapist can emerge from the silence richer for the experience.

But there are other silences that take place within intimate relationships. Silences of comfortable companionship between people who know each other well, where nothing needs to be said. Where shared histories and routines negate the need for words, and just being present is enough. Sometimes, though, there is a difference in how these silences are perceived – comfortable or boring? Knowing the other or assuming you know? I often work with couples where they believe they know what the other is thinking and feeling, and, as a consequence, their real thoughts and feelings never get expressed. And when the actions of the other don't meet their assumptions, discord quickly follows.

Beyond comfortable silence there is another way in which couples use silence, which can be immensely destructive: silence that controls or is used as a weapon to hurt, frighten, coerce and

defeat. As Watzlawick<sup>1</sup> says, it is impossible to not communicate. Every behaviour is communication; so staying silent is a way of communication that can be incredibly powerful.

Silence can be damaging to relationships if it is used to punish. Withdrawing into a cocoon of non-communication sends a message – but a message the recipient must work hard to interpret. I have worked with many couples where silences are an expression of an insecure avoidant attachment style, or learnt behaviours, or deliberate strategies to punish and hurt their partner. When confronted with silence, we have to try to work out what it means. And when we aren't given information, we can only fill the space with our own (often wrong) ideas. Not being acknowledged, not having our entreaties responded to, being left to mull over and try to imagine what it is we have done to 'deserve' this; these are all techniques in manipulation.

Working as a relationship therapist, I try to help the silent partner understand the impact they are having, whether it is intentional or not. For the avoidant person, silence may well be a defence to help them in their own affect regulation, rather than to punish the partner. If they have grown up in a household where feelings are not OK, they may not have the vocabulary to express themselves and so prefer silence to perceived ignorance. Helping both partners learn a language within which it is safe to express themselves, is an important part of the work. And for those who deliberately use silence as a tool of oppression, they either need to recognise and change this behaviour, or the other partner needs to be helped to understand what coercive control is and how to survive it.

There is another silence that can damage relationships: the silence of secrets. We are all entitled to privacy; I'm no believer in radical honesty or that every last element of the self needs to be shared with our partners, no matter how 'strong' the relationship. But sometimes keeping things to ourselves can be a burden and, often without being consciously aware, carrying that burden can cause blockages in other areas of our communication.

For many people growing up outside the cisnet (cisgender heteronormative) norm, secrets are a part of our lives. We learn from an early age to hide, pretend and censor ourselves. And when we form relationships, we then have to carry out a risk assessment as we determine how much of ourselves we share. What can our partner cope with? What will the impact on us be if they find out? Some people, for example, are attracted to more than one gender, or enjoy cross-dressing, or may feel their gender identity isn't quite right, or feel constrained by monogamy, or enjoy kinky sex. How much of this is it safe to tell a new partner? And, for some people, these ideas and feelings only emerge long after they have started a relationship. I have worked with several men, well into their 50s (or later) and in long-term marriages, who are only just coming to consider and accept the fact they are gay. Counselling provides a space for them to share their secret as they start to consider how they want to manage it within the context of their relationships.

If we can help people consider their secrets, and work through what it means for them, we can help them decide if and what they want to tell their partners. Being able to be open about a burden like this might open up whole new levels of communication within the relationship. But each circumstance is unique; telling may in fact damage the relationship beyond repair, if the other is unable to accept this previously hidden element of their partner. What therapy can do is help them navigate the silence and recognise its power for good, but also its potential for harm. ●

#### Reference

1. Watzlawick P, Beavin-Bavelas J, Jackson D. Some tentative axioms of communication. In: pragmatics of human communication – a study of interactional patterns, pathologies and paradoxes. New York: WW Norton; 1967.

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