

What the 'silent treatment' says about your relationship

Source: Dick Jones Communications

Silence may be golden, but the "silent treatment" can ruin a relationship.

The silent treatment is part of what's called a "demand-withdraw" pattern. It happens when one partner pressures the other with requests, criticism or complaints and is met with avoidance or silence.

"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, including more than 14,000 participants, "A Meta-Analytical Review of the Demand/Withdraw Pattern of Interaction and its Associations with Individual, Relational, and Communicative Outcomes," published in *Communication Monographs* (March, 2014).

Research shows couples engaged in demand-withdraw pattern experience lower relationship satisfaction, less intimacy and poorer communication. The damage can be emotional and physical; the presence of demand-withdraw pattern is associated with anxiety and aggression as well as physiological effects (urinary, bowel or erectile dysfunction).

It's also a very hard pattern to break.

"Partners get locked in this pattern, largely because they each see the other as the cause," says Schrodt. "Both partners see the other as the problem." Ask the wife -- whom research shows is more often the demanding partner -- and she'll complain that her husband is closed off, emotionally unavailable. Ask the husband and he'll say he might open up if she'd just back off.

Regardless of the role each partner plays, the outcome is equally distressing.

"One of the most important things we found is that even though wife-demand/husband-withdraw occurs more frequently, it's not more or less damaging," he says. No matter what part each partner plays, it's the pattern itself that's the problem. "It's a real, serious sign of distress in the relationship."

Story Source:

The above story is based on materials provided by Dick Jones Communications. Note: Materials may be edited for content and length.

Journal Reference:

Paul Schrodt, Paul L. Witt, Jenna R. Shimkowski. A Meta-Analytical Review of the Demand/Withdraw Pattern of Interaction and its Associations with Individual, Relational, and Communicative Outcomes. *Communication Monographs*, 2014; 81 (1): 28 DOI: 10.1080/03637751.2013.813632