

EMOTIONAL WELLNESS MATTERS

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Manipulation in Relationships – And How To Deal With It

We are all vulnerable to being manipulated in relationships, whether between romantic partners, friends, parents, children, employers, coworkers, or neighbors. When we allow another person to manipulate us, we are colluding with their desire to control our feelings, motives, and even our thoughts through deceptive, exploitative, and unfair means. A manipulative relationship is one-sided and unbalanced, advancing the goals of the manipulator at the expense of the person being manipulated. These relationships become troubled over time. If you want to change this kind of relationship, you must first recognize the features of manipulation and then look within to understand your contribution to the manipulation. There are effective ways to stand up to manipulation and bring balance back into the relationship.

Manipulation is not the same as *influence*. We all use influence with other people to advance our goals, and this is one of the hallmarks of healthy social functioning. Influence recognizes the rights and boundaries of other people, and it is based on direct, honest communication. Influence is one way we have of functioning effectively in the world. Influence recognizes the integrity of the other person, including the right not to go along with the attempted persuasion. Manipulation, on the other hand, depends on covert agendas and an attempt to coerce another person into giving in. Even though it may appear that the manipulator is strong and in control, there is usually insecurity under the façade. The tendency to exploit others and disregard their rights is a sign of unhealthy personality functioning. In fact, people who manipulate others have difficulty in maintaining good interpersonal relationships.

Those who manipulate other people are good at spotting people to control. If they feel unable to manipulate someone, they usually give up and move on to somebody else who is more likely to be receptive to the attempted manipulation. Once you recognize the features of the manipulation, the next step in correcting the situation is



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to discover your own contribution to the problem. (This statement may seem a bit difficult to accept. After all, it's the manipulator who has the problem, you might say. But realize that manipulation cannot occur in a vacuum. As is true of any relationship, it takes two people.) You can come to understand your contribution to the manipulative situation and then take steps to correct it.

Here are some common traits of those who are vulnerable to manipulators –

- } ***You feel useful and loved only when you can take care of the needs of other people.*** This goes beyond being nice to other people. Your sense of worth is tied up in doing things for other people. In fact, you take this so far that you please other people at the expense of your own well-being. For example, you might buy something especially nice for your partner or a friend when you would never spend that kind of money on yourself. Manipulators are drawn to this type of person and have no qualms about taking advantage of this particular personality trait.
- } ***You need to have the approval and acceptance of other people.*** Although most people appreciate being accepted, a problem occurs when you feel that you must be accepted by everyone at all times. The core problem here is the fear of being rejected or abandoned – and it is so strong that you would do anything to avoid the feelings associated with this fear. The manipulator works by giving you the acceptance that you need – and then threatening to withdraw it.
- } ***You fear expressing negative emotions.*** Although expressing anger and engaging in a conflict are never pleasant, some people will go to any length to avoid a confrontation. They want things to be pleasant at all times. They fear that they will fall apart in the face of negative emotions. Manipulators have an easy task in this kind of relationship – all they have to do is to threaten to raise their voice, and then they get their way.
- } ***You are unable to say no.*** One of the characteristics of a healthy relationship is appropriate boundaries that clarify who you are and what you stand for. In order to maintain healthy boundaries, however, you must sometimes say no when someone attempts to push your limits. If you are afraid of the conflict that may arise when you say no, you play into the hands of the manipulator. Learning effective assertiveness techniques is a way to regain your sense of control in a manipulative relationship.
- } ***You lack a firm sense of your own self.*** A clear sense of self means that you know what your

values are, who you are, what you stand for, and where you begin and the other person ends. If you have an unclear sense of self, it is difficult to trust your own judgment or to make decisions that work in your favor. Without a clear definition of your self, you may be an easy target for a manipulator.

If you are in a manipulative relationship, it is helpful to recognize the personal tendencies that allow the other person to assert control over you. You can come to understand and explore these safely with the support of a professionally trained therapist. While you may not be able to change the behavior of the manipulator, you can change your own responses to attempts at manipulation so that you achieve a firmer sense of your own integrity. The unhappiness resulting from a manipulative relationship can lead to life-changing experiences that generate insight and the ability to cope more effectively with the demands of everyday living.

The Manipulator's Tactics

Manipulation in a relationship usually progresses over a long period of time. Manipulators learn over time how far they can go. They are unlikely to attempt to manipulate the other person at the beginning of a relationship since this could bring things to an immediate end. They observe the other person's vulnerabilities and learn eventually how to exploit them for their own purposes.

There are two basic tactics that are used to exert control, and they usually go hand in hand. The first is a promise of gain. That is, the manipulator will promise to provide something if the partner goes along with what the manipulator wants. "I promise – no arguments for a week if you'll end your friendship with Pat." The other tactic is the promise of avoiding loss. In this case, the manipulator threatens the partner with the loss of something if the partner does not go along with the manipulator's desires. "I'm going to stay out with my friends late every night unless this house is cleaned spic and span by the time I get home." (Of course, these two examples are obvious manipulation attempts. Most manipulators use more subtle methods than we see in these examples.)

Manipulative people have a strong need to be in control. This may derive from underlying feelings of insecurity on their part, although they often compensate for these feelings with a show of strong self-confidence. Even though they may deny it, their motives are self-serving, and they pursue their aims regardless of the cost to other people. They have a strong need to feel superior and powerful in their relationships – and they find people who will validate these feelings by going along with their attempts at manipulation. They see power as finite. If you exert power over them, they will retaliate in order to gain

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back the control they feel they are losing. They cannot understand the idea that everyone can feel empowered or that everyone can gain. When they are not in control – of themselves and over other people – they feel threatened. They have difficulty in showing vulnerable emotions because it might suggest they are not in control.

Those who are manipulative usually don't consciously plan their maneuvers. They emerge from the manipulator's underlying personality disorder, and are played out within the context of a victim who colludes with, and unwittingly encourages, the manipulation. There is a wide range of tactics used by manipulators ranging from verbal threats to subtle attempts to arrange situations to suit the manipulator. For example, one of the more common forms of manipulation is called *splitting* – turning two people against each other by talking to each one behind the back of the other, getting them to dislike or distrust each other, and leaving the manipulator in a position of control. They may use active techniques like becoming angry, lying, intimidating, shouting, name-calling or other bullying tactics. Or they may use more passive methods like pouting, sulking, ignoring you, or giving you the silent treatment.

Some Groundrules for Dealing with Manipulation

- } **Focus on changing yourself, not the manipulator.** It is not helpful to try to outmanipulate a skillful manipulator – you are simply making yourself vulnerable to further manipulation. You will not change a manipulator by focusing on his or her imperfections and trying to work toward their achieving insight. You may think that it would be helpful to share with the manipulator how you feel and how his or her behavior has an impact on you – but this is generally not helpful since most manipulators are not capable of empathy and may use this information against you in the future. The only effective method of changing manipulative behavior is to disable it by making a change within yourself, thereby changing the dynamics of the manipulative relationship. If you cease to cooperate with the manipulative tactics, you will alter the nature of the relationship. If manipulators have to work hard to maintain control in the relationship, they usually give up – often by leaving the relationship and finding someone else to control.
- } **Assess the worth of this relationship to you.** Depending on the severity of the manipulation and the damage it has done to your sense of happiness and integrity, you may need to consider whether it is worth it to continue the relationship. Of course, there are many situations (parent/child, for example) when you must stay in the relationship, so it is helpful at least to achieve some clarity about what you want in your life and assess how the relationship

has the potential to lead you toward your personal goals.

- } **Use assertiveness techniques to change the nature of the relationship.** You might be so accustomed to complying with the manipulator's tactics that you automatically do his or her bidding without thinking about it. First, you need to stop your automatic compliance. You do this by buying time to think about each situation as it arises. "I'll get back to you on that when I have the time to think about it." At this point you are now in control of the situation. It is not helpful to let the manipulator ask you why you need time since this invites your loss of control. Simply repeat the same thing over and over again without explanation. "I need more time to think about it." Next, you need to confront the fear, anxiety or guilt that has driven you to comply in the past with the manipulator's demands. This requires a deep look within that may be achieved by working with a professional therapist. Exploring your own personal feelings, why you react as you do, and how to use alternate responses may be a challenge, but the benefits are far-reaching – and they may save your relationship, or at least prepare you for healthier relationships in the future. Finally, you might label the manipulation for what it is. "When you threaten to leave me I feel afraid. If you would simply state your wishes and show me respect, I would be more able to listen to what you want." In a calm voice and with direct eye contact, it may be time to announce that the old manipulations have come to an end. "We both understand that you have a pattern of playing on my fears, and now you know how I feel about that. Your way of threatening me is not going to work any longer." In making these types of assertive statements, you are defining your boundaries. There is no need to make threats. Simply state that you will not participate any longer in manipulations. Make it clear that by setting limits and enhancing your own personal integrity, you expect a better relationship in the future. Learning to assert yourself in the face of a manipulative individual who feels threatened when not in control is a challenge, and doing this with the help of a professional therapist is recommended.

Recommended Reading

Braiker, Harriet B., *Who's Pulling Your Strings? How to Break the Cycle of Manipulation and Regain Control of Your Life*. McGraw Hill, 2004, \$21.95. ISBN: 0-07-140278-0.

THE BACK PAGE

Are You in a Manipulative Relationship?

Answer the following questions with a T (for true) or an F (for false).

I sometimes feel confused about what my partner really wants.

I feel that my partner frequently takes advantage of my giving nature.

Even when I do something that pleases my partner, the positive feelings never last long.

With my partner I feel that it's hard just to be myself or do what I really want.

Around my partner, I feel taken for granted.

I seem to work harder on this relationship than my partner does.

My partner has a very strong impact on what I think and feel.

I sometimes feel that I am trapped in my relationship and there is no way out.

I don't feel as good about myself in my relationship as I once did.

I feel that I need my partner more than my partner needs me.

No matter how much I have done, I feel that it's not good enough for my partner.

I feel that my partner does not understand who I really am.

There are twelve questions in this quiz. If you answered more than half of them with a T, you might want to consider exploring whether you are in a manipulative relationship.

