

Great wall of silence

How often has one marital partner said this about another: "It's like talking to a brick wall"?

It might be something many of us say occasionally in exasperation, but if this phrase describes your normal pattern of communication with your partner, you have issues to address.

This kind of non-communication is our fourth horseman of the apocalypse that can kill a relationship, and it's called stonewalling.

Other examples of this are a partner giving monosyllabic responses, changing the subject, maintaining a stony silence or leaving the room. Sooner or later, this lack of emotional feedback can have a huge impact on the partner who is trying to communicate.

So how do you know if you are a potential stonewaller? You are certainly on the way if you think your partner's behaviour is irrational or you have a belief that being non-responsive is a positive strategy.

However, if you want to get away from discussing issues, believe that your partner is treating you unfairly, avoid conflict or withdraw as a means of calming yourself, you may also be heading in this direction.

Stonewallers may believe they are stopping a situation from escalating, but what they really do is create frustration and dissatisfaction in their partners.

Research has shown that 85 percent of stonewallers are male. Men tend to use a distancing technique to cope with high levels of emotion in a relationship.

Stonewalling doesn't happen overnight. It grows slowly. But when it eventually stops all meaningful communication, the damage is well and truly done.

The couple still appear to be living together, but may have been living separate emotional lives for some time.

To avoid stonewalling developing, stay with your partner on an emotional level and resist the temptation to withdraw.

Instead of ignoring your partner's attempts to communicate, give some sort of response, even if it's just a nod or a brief reply that indicates you are listening.

Making time for positive experiences together, and taking time to reminisce about them, are other ways to maintain emotional connection.

And that hoary old saying about looking for the good in people can be a powerful, positive marital tool.

Survival tips

- **Withdrawing from an argument doesn't solve it. Time out can defuse a situation, but withdrawal can in fact escalate the problem**
- **Don't ignore your partner. Stay with your partner on an emotional level and at a minimum, give a nod or brief response**
- **Focus on your positive relationship history and the times you've been there for each other.**