



# /guide

## Your questions answered

## WHAT IS STONEWALLING?

**T**he purpose of this Stowe guide is to explain what stonewalling is and why some people do it.

Stonewalling in a relationship is when one person refuses to communicate or cooperate with their partner becoming like “a stone wall”. You may know it as its more common name, the ‘silent treatment’.

Alternatively stonewalling can mean a partner dismissing everything as if the other person is “making a big deal out of nothing”, belittling what they say or pretending “everything is fine” when it clearly is not.

Being stonewalled can be incredibly frustrating for the person on the receiving end as they want to know what is wrong but are unable to get an answer. It can be considered a form of emotional abuse and is often used as a form of control.

### Why do we stonewall in relationships?

People stonewall in relationships for a number of different reasons. For some, it is a way to punish a partner because of

something they have done. Often people believe their partner should know what is wrong without them saying it.

Others stonewall as they are not capable of expressing what they are feeling, at times because it is too difficult or painful.

Again, people often believe their partner should know what is wrong or be able to figure it out.

It can happen when couples are really busy and get out of the habit of discussing emotions or when someone is unsure of what they are feeling so it seems easier to say nothing.

Some people may stonewall as it is a habit they have had for a long time, especially those people brought up in an environment where no one said how they were feeling. Or if they did it was met with negative consequences. For some people talking about emotions and feelings can make them feel incredibly anxious and avoidance is a preferable route.

The more sinister side of stonewalling is when it is used with intent, often an attempt by a partner to dominate the relationship by not addressing any issues they prevent you from taking any action.

## How to recognise stonewalling

You may not realise that you are being stonewalled. You may not realise that you are stonewalling your partner.

The starting point is to look at your partners, and also your own behaviours in the relationship. Take notes in a diary over time to see if patterns emerge.

Listed below are some of the signs of stonewalling in a relationship.

### Signs of stonewalling

- They ignore you when you talk and do not respond to any questions (this can last weeks or even months)
- If you start a serious conversation they walk away or start doing something else to get out of it
- Dismiss your concerns as if they are unimportant
- Make fun of you and patronise what you say when you speak
- Roll their eyes or refuse to make eye contact at all
- Refuse to take responsibility for giving you the silent treatment.

## What is the effect of stonewalling on a relationship?

Stonewalling has a very destructive effect on a relationship. As a very negative form of communication, it breaks down any intimacy in a relationship leading partners to withdraw from each other. This can easily lead to couples leading very separate lives without any shared activities or interests.

What is the effect on the person who is being stonewalled?

Feeling hurt, angry, confused and frustrated are some of the emotions a person being stonewalled may feel. When someone is being frequently dismissed or ignored, they

can begin to devalue themselves which leads to feelings of being helpless, worthless and powerless. This is a natural response particularly as stonewalling is considered a form of [gaslighting](#).

People may find they become confused, dependent and weak making it difficult for them to leave the relationship or they become very angry and leave as quickly as they can.

Either way, they may need to seek professional counselling support to heal from the experience.

## What is the impact on the person who is stonewalling?

There is no winner as far as stonewalling in a relationship is concerned. The person who is stonewalling also suffers as they are denying themselves the emotional intimacy that can make people really happy. Cutting off from your feelings, withdrawing from social situations and intimacy will make you and your partner miserable.

## Is stonewalling a form of emotional abuse?

It is clear that stonewalling is a harmful behaviour in a relationship but is it abusive?

To answer this, it depends on the intent of the person stonewalling. For example, there are many people for whom stonewalling is a learnt response to cope with emotional and difficult issues. They do not want to control or manipulate but instead use it (usually without realising) as a way to protect themselves from feeling uncomfortable.

But this is not always the case and that is when stonewalling is used as something intentionally and abusive. In these situations, people use it to fight for control in the relationship and often use it alongside tactics such as [gaslighting](#) to make their partner feel useless, confused and powerless.

Sometimes referred to as narcissistic stonewalling, it means one person blames the other for all of the issues in the relationship but refuses to fix them.

## Is the silent treatment manipulation?

Like stonewalling, it is the intent behind the use of silent treatment that defines if it is manipulative behaviour. Storming out of an argument or conversation and then deliberately ignoring them for hours, days even weeks is very unhealthy for relationships; leaving the other person not knowing what they have done.

This is very different from when a partner asks for some time to cool down and find space to collect their emotions during an argument.

## What does stonewalling/silent treatment do to a relationship?

When used as a tool to manipulate stonewalling/the silent treatment is destructive. It breaks down the ability to communicate and collaborate with each other. It allows the silent person to transfer attention to appeasing them instead of dealing with the real issues. A regular pattern of this behaviour can be both toxic and abusive.

## How can you address stonewalling?

If stonewalling is in your relationship – you need to become very aware of what is happening and why.

If you both want a healthy, happy relationship you both need to take responsibility for your behaviour and try to empathise with each other.

There are tips outlined below on how improving communication and counselling can help if you are both willing to make changes.

However, if this is part of a larger emotional abuse issue, it is extremely important you take professional advice. The [National Domestic Abuse Helpline](#) run by Refuge can be contacted on 0808 2000 247.

If you or anyone else is in danger please call the police immediately.

## What can you do if someone is stonewalling you?

If you recognise that your partner is stonewalling you it is useful to take some time to look at both of your behaviours in the relationship. Understanding what motivates both of your behaviours can help to identify what changes can be made to help.

However, it is important that your partner takes responsibility for their stonewalling behaviour.

Working with a professional counsellor can help you both make a real difference to your self-esteem, confidence and communication skills.

Simple but effective ways of dealing with difficult feelings and situations can also help. Try starting a discussion with “I” statements rather than “you”. This makes it much less threatening as “you” can put people on the defensive.

## Need more information?

Call our Client Care Team on **0330 838 7456** to speak with one of our specialist family lawyers or visit [www.stowefamilylaw.co.uk](http://www.stowefamilylaw.co.uk)

## What can you do if you realise you are stonewalling someone?

If you did not realise the impact of stonewalling on your partner but you do now and want to change, being willing to admit you stonewall without blaming your partner is a big first step forward.

Now you are aware of your behaviour, examine the motives behind it. Understanding why can help you to change your responses and behaviours.

When communicating with your partner moving forward, work on your listening skills and look at the discussion as a way to solve a problem rather than a contest or proving a point.

Think about things from your partner’s point of view. Even if you do not agree, listening will make your partner feel heard. And be empathic, put yourself in your partner’s shoes and see their point of view.

And share how you feel, are you defensive? Upset because? Being vulnerable and explaining your emotions and why you feel them helps communication between you both.

## What if they are unwilling to change their stonewalling behaviour?

If your partner is unwilling to change, or you are suffering from emotional abuse, it is important that you make your emotional and physical safety a priority. Any form of abuse is harmful and can escalate.

Please talk to someone and seek out professional help.

Below is a list of support agencies.

### Useful contacts

National Domestic Violence Helpline – 0808 2000 247

The Men’s Advice Line, for male domestic abuse survivors – 0808 801 0327

The Mix, free information and support for under 25s in the UK – 0808 808 4994

National LGBT+ Domestic Abuse Helpline – 0800 999 5428

Samaritans (24/7 service) – 116 123