

COMMON MANIPULATIVE TACTICS DURING COMMUNICATION:

MINIMIZATION

Downplaying the significance of an issue to make it seem less important or serious.

"You're overreacting. It was just a small mistake; it doesn't matter in the grand scheme of things."

"You're too sensitive.", "It wasn't that bad."

"You're being dramatic; it's not as serious as you're making it out to be."

Appropriate Responses:

- "I know this may not seem big to you, but it really touches something in me."
- "I want to feel like my feelings matter to you, even when they're different from yours."
- "This is something important to me, and I'm hoping we can talk about it with care."
- "It would mean a lot to me if we could take this seriously together."
- "Even if you don't fully get it, thank you for being willing to hear me."

More Assertive:

- "This may seem small to you, but it matters to me."
- "Please don't minimize how I feel."
- "What I'm saying deserves consideration, even if you disagree."
- "Dismissing this doesn't make it less real for me."
- "I'm asking you to take this seriously."

DEFLECTION

Diverting attention away from an issue or a challenging topic, often to avoid responsibility or to control the narrative.

Appropriate Responses:

- "I want to stay present with what's going on between us."
- "Let's not change the topic—this matters to me and to our relationship."
- "I'm not trying to argue—I just want to understand and feel closer to you."
- "Let's stay here for a moment, even if it's uncomfortable."
- "I love you, and I want us to work through this instead of avoiding it."

More Assertive:

- "Let's stay on the topic at hand."
- "This isn't about them, it's about us right now."
- "That may be true, but it doesn't answer my question."
- "I noticed you didn't answer what I asked."
- "Redirecting the topic won't solve the issue."

RATIONALIZATION

Providing logical but false reasons for one's behavior to justify actions and avoid accountability.

"If you wouldn't have said _____ then I wouldn't have treated you disrespectfully."

Situation: *Someone cheats on their partner.*

Rationalization: *"You never pay attention to me, so I had to find affection elsewhere," (instead of acknowledging the decision to cheat was wrong).*

Situation: *One spouse hides financial issues from the other spouse.*

Rationalization: *"I hid the financial issues because I was just trying to protect you from stressing about it."*

Appropriate Responses:

- "I hear your reasons, but it doesn't take away how that made me feel."
- "Even if it made sense to you at the time, it still had an impact on me."
- "I'm not trying to blame—just hoping we can understand the effect it had."
- "I know you didn't mean to hurt me, and I also want to talk about what happened."
- "Let's look at the bigger picture together, not just what 'makes sense.'"

More Assertive:

- "Explaining it away doesn't change how it affected me."
- "Justifying your behavior doesn't make it okay."
- "Even if you had reasons, it still hurt."
- "Let's not confuse an explanation with accountability."
- "Intent doesn't erase impact."

GASLIGHTING

One person tries to make another person doubt their own memory, perception of events, or sense of reality, often to gain power or avoid accountability. It involves consistently denying facts, minimizing feelings, or twisting the truth in a way that makes the other person question themselves.

Appropriate Response:

- “I love you, and I need my perspective to be heard too.”
- “We may remember it differently, but my feelings are still real.”
- “I know this is hard to talk about, but it’s important to me that my experience is validated.”
- “It hurts when I feel like I’m being told what I felt wasn’t real.”
- “I’m not trying to argue—just hoping we can understand each other better.”

More Assertive:

- “I remember it differently, and my memory is valid.”
- “That’s not how it happened for me.”
- “I know what I experienced, and I stand by it.”
- “Dismissing my feelings doesn’t make them go away.”
- “It’s not okay to tell me I’m overreacting just because you don’t agree.”
- “I know what I experienced, and it’s valid—even if you remember it differently.”
- “Your version doesn’t match how I experienced it. Let’s take a moment to sit with that.”
- “It’s okay for us to see things differently, but please don’t tell me my reality is wrong.”
- “When you say that didn’t happen, it makes me question myself—and that doesn’t feel fair.”
- “I’m open to hearing your side, but I won’t ignore how I felt or what I saw.”
- “Please don’t rewrite what I said or felt. I’m clear on my experience.”
- “I trust my memory and emotions, even if they make you uncomfortable.”
- “It feels like you’re trying to change the story instead of addressing the issue.”
- “If we can’t agree on the past, let’s focus on how we want to move forward respectfully.”
- “Dismissing my feelings makes it harder to solve things together. I need to feel safe sharing them.”

GUILT TRIPPING:

A form of emotional blackmail that is often intended to manipulate a person by preying on their feelings of guilt or responsibility.

Appropriate Responses:

- I care about you deeply, but I need to make choices from love, not guilt.
- You matter to me, and I want us both to feel safe expressing our needs.
- I want to support you, and I also need space to honor my own limits.
- I know you’re hurting—let’s find a way to talk that doesn’t involve blame.
- I’m here with you, but guilt isn’t a healthy path forward for either of us.

More Assertive:

- You may feel that way, but I’m not responsible for your emotions.
- I can care about you and still set boundaries.
- I won’t make decisions based on guilt.
- Trying to make me feel bad doesn’t change what’s fair.
- That sounds like guilt, not a solution.

PLAYING THE VICTIM:

When someone turns the situation around & plays the victim to avoid accountability. Individuals might exaggerate suffering to avoid accountability, use past trauma as a shield, claiming helplessness to avoid responsibility, etc.

Examples: “You always make me the bad guy! Everyone’s always out to get me!”, “You’re right, I am such a horrible husband!”, “So you think I’m a terrible person now?”, “You can’t get mad at me for being controlling—I’ve had a hard life!”

Appropriate Responses:

- It feels like you’re avoiding accountability by shifting to victim mode.
- I’m willing to support you, but I can’t be the villain every time.
- I’m not trying to attack you, I’m just asking to be understood too.
- It feels like we’re stuck in “who’s more hurt”—let’s step out of that together.
- I care deeply about how you feel, and I hope you can care about my side too.
- I hear you, but I also need you to hear me.
- This isn’t about who’s hurting more—it’s about understanding each other.

PROJECTION:

A defense mechanism of displacing one's feelings onto another person, animal, or object. For example, a person with manipulative tendencies might cause tension and drama but blame someone else for creating that energy.

Example: A husband accuses his wife of being insecure & unfaithful when he himself is the one struggling with infidelity or insecurity issues.

- *"I'm in a bad mood? No, you're the one in a bad mood. You just can't see past your own bad attitude."*
- *"I'm overreacting? No, you are the one overreacting."*
- *"I'm not the one with trust issues, you are."*

Appropriate Responses:

- I'm hearing something in your words—can we explore if that might be how you're feeling too?
- That doesn't feel true for me, but I want to understand your emotions better.
- Let's each own how we feel so we can really support each other.
- Maybe this is about something deeper—can we talk gently about it?
- It's okay to feel vulnerable—I'm here with you.

More Assertive:

- It sounds like you might be projecting how you feel onto me. ▪ I'd like to speak for myself, and I hope you can too.
- Let's talk about your feelings instead of assigning them to me. ▪ I don't own that emotion—you might be feeling it.
- That may be how you're feeling, but it's not what I'm experiencing.

CIRCULAR TALK / "CRAZY MAKING"

A communication tactic where a person intentionally keeps the dialogue going in circles, repeating the same points or arguments without making any progress or resolution. This technique can be used to frustrate, confuse, or wear down the other person, making it difficult for them to escape the conversation or effectively challenge the manipulator's position.

Appropriate Responses:

- "This is feeling a little tangled—can we pause and reset together?"
- "I'm getting confused, and I'd love for us to slow down."
- "Let's take turns so we both feel heard and loved."
- "I want to understand, not win. Let's break this down gently."
- "Let's come back to the heart of what we're really trying to say."

More Assertive:

- "We keep going in circles—let's pause and regroup."
- "This pattern isn't helping either of us feel heard."
- "Can we focus on one thing at a time?"
- "Let's each take a turn to speak without interruptions."
- "This is feeling chaotic—let's simplify it"

NEGGING (Subtle Insults Disguised as Jokes)

When one individual continually pushes the buttons or pressures another person into a situation where they feel trapped, forced to comply, or unable to defend themselves without consequences. Due to the constant pressure, the target eventually has enough & usually reacts out of character, verbally or physically. In turn, the manipulator will make the target feel "crazy" by drawing attention to their irrational response or reaction.

Appropriate Responses:

- "That felt like a joke at my expense—can we talk about what you meant?"
- "I know humor's your way of coping, but that one stung."
- "I want to laugh with you, not feel laughed at."
- "I love our playfulness, but I need it to feel safe too."
- "Can we find a way to tease that still feels respectful?"

More Assertive:

- "That felt like an insult disguised as a joke."
- "I don't find that kind of comment helpful or kind."
- "That kind of remark chips away at respect."
- "Let's talk to each other with kindness, not jabs."
- "Please don't put me down to make a point."

BLAMING OTHERS

**Shifting the focus to someone else's faults or mistakes instead of addressing the issue at hand.
This is a tactic to avoid accountability for actions.**

- *"It's not my fault the project failed; John didn't do his part."*
- *"If you would have shown me more attention, I wouldn't have cheated."*
- Parent to child: *"I am in a bad mood today because I found out you made a low grade on your test."*

Appropriate Responses:

- "Let's not focus on who's wrong—I want us to be on the same team."
- "This isn't about blame, it's about how we can feel better together."
- "I know we're both trying, and it's okay to make mistakes."
- "We're stronger when we take shared responsibility."
- "Let's work toward healing, not blaming."

More Assertive:

"I'm open to hearing feedback, but blame won't get us anywhere."
"Can we focus on solutions rather than fault?"
"Let's each take responsibility for our part."
"I won't accept full responsibility when it's shared."
"Blaming me doesn't help us move forward."

PLAYING THE VICTIM

The manipulator turns the situation around & plays the victim to avoid accountability.

Appropriate Responses:

- "I see that you're hurting, and I am too—let's support each other through this."
- "I want us both to feel seen, not just one of us."
- "I'm not trying to attack you, I'm just asking to be understood too."
- "It feels like we're stuck in "who's more hurt"—let's step out of that together."
- "I care deeply about how you feel, and I hope you can care about my side too."

More Assertive:

- "I hear you, but I also need you to hear me."
- "We both have responsibility in this."
- "It feels like you're avoiding accountability by shifting to victim mode."
- "I'm willing to support you, but I can't be the villain every time."
- "This isn't about who's hurting more—it's about understanding each other."

MOVING THE GOALPOSTS

A manipulative tactic where one party continually changes the criteria for success or acceptance to ensure that the other party can never satisfy the requirements. This strategy is often used to undermine, frustrate, or delegitimize the other party's efforts or arguments.

- a. **Initial Agreement:** Clear criteria are set initially.
- b. **Achievement:** The other party meets the initial criteria.
- c. **Change in Criteria:** The goals are changed or new requirements are added after the initial criteria are met.
- d. **Pattern:** This pattern repeats, ensuring the goal is never actually reachable.

Appropriate Responses:

- "I want to meet your needs, but I need us to agree on clear expectations."
- "When things keep changing, it's hard to feel secure—can we talk about that?"
- "Let's go back to what we originally discussed and figure it out together."
- "I'm trying my best, and I want us to feel like we're growing together, not shifting constantly."
- "Your needs matter, and so does our clarity—can we slow down and reset?"

More Assertive:

- "When expectations keep changing, I feel overwhelmed."
- "We agreed on something earlier—can we revisit that before adding more?"
- "It's hard to feel successful when the target keeps moving."
- "I want to meet your needs, but I also need clear and stable expectations."
- Let's pause and clarify what we originally agreed on."

😞 PASSIVE-AGGRESSIVENESS 😞

When a person doesn't actually voice their feelings or address the problem with a person. Instead, they find indirect ways to express their anger & disapproval &/or undermine the other person.

Appropriate Responses:

- It sounds like there's something underneath that—can we talk openly about it?
- I'd rather hear your honest feelings than try to guess them.
- We don't need to be perfect, just honest and kind.
- I love you, and I'd rather we be direct than hurt each other with jokes or jabs.
- I want to understand what's really going on inside for you.

More Assertive:

- That comment felt indirect—can we talk about what's really going on?
- If you're upset, I'd rather you tell me directly.
- I want us to be honest instead of using sarcasm.
- Let's try being open with each other about how we feel.
- I care about you and want us to be clear, not cryptic.

🚫 STONEWALLING (Silent Treatment) 🚫

Refusing to communicate with another person &/or withdrawing attention, affection or avoiding conversation to create distance.

Stonewalling examples include:

- Ignoring what the other person is saying
- Refusing to respond to questions
- Refusing to make eye contact or offer nonverbal communication cues
- Using dismissive body language such as rolling or closing their eyes
- Walking away from discussions that cause stress
- Engaging in passive-aggressive behaviors such as stalling or procrastinating to avoid talking about a problem
- Refusing to answer phone calls or respond to text messages

Appropriate Responses:

- "I miss feeling connected with you—can we talk, even if it's hard?"
- "I'm here and ready to listen when you feel safe enough to open up."
- "Let's take a short break if you need it, but I want us to come back to each other."
- "When you go quiet, I feel shut out—I'd love for us to reconnect."
- "I understand if you're overwhelmed. I'm here when you're ready."

More Assertive:

- "I can tell you're shutting down—can we talk about why?"
- "I'm here to listen when you're ready."
- "I need communication to feel connected to you."
- "Can we take a break and revisit this later?"
- "I don't want to pressure you, but silence leaves me feeling disconnected."