

SILENCE

Talking is silver, silence is gold. Is that really so?

Dr. rer. nat. Marlies Koel

Silence is a non-verbal form of communication we all know and use. It can trigger a wide range of emotions and the emotions experienced are more likely to remain in our memory than the spoken word.

Silence itself is part of our interpersonal communication and is neither good nor bad – silence is simply silence, just as speaking is speaking. I can use verbal communication either constructively or destructively. It is up to me how I make use of this silence, either positively or negatively. Indeed, there are many different forms of silence. Yet, to put it simply, there is a positive or a negative and destructive silence.

In the following, I would like to encourage you to discover your own history of silence, that of your family, the use of silence at work and in society, and so on. For each and every one of us has their own story. However, because this topic is so broad and wide-ranging, I will just cover the most important aspects of silence in this article.

Here, I will be describing certain experiences of mine concerning silence. First of all, I will go into detail to describe the effects in terms of the negative aspects of silence in order to develop a greater awareness and attention on this subject. In the interest of simplification, I will only use the term “silence” in this article. And I will be examining this silence as a form of insult – a non-verbal insult.

Nevertheless, I would like to first start out by discussing the positive aspects of remaining silent. The use of silence can be the gateway to tranquility and calm, which, in the end, can lead to the inner self.

It can also be an expression of the deep understanding between two or more people who enjoy their time together without speaking. Silence can also be the expression of a successful communication without words. Even in some conflict situations, silence can also prevent antagonism, as it may not be the right moment to cause a stir or clarify a conflict. Silence can also be constructive when we just need a break from ourselves so we can come to terms with ourselves, to think through the issues at hand, to grasp what is happening within, in order to be able to express ourselves clearly later on. Silence must also be regarded as positive when we are engaged with our internal processes. Silent retreats are also time-outs for ourselves. We thereby can give ourselves the attention and the space for self-reflection.

When communicating we must, of course, always differentiate between who we trust, who we relate to, and who we open ourselves up to. Therefore, we need to have the feeling of trust and also have the feeling of security and respect to do so.

The most severely destructive form of negative silence is exclusion – the isolation from the community and thus the loss of belonging. We experience this as existential. This is particularly terrible for children. This kind of NO – the complete negation of our person – creates enormous stress for those affected, which may be because it is hardwired in our behavior through the clan and tribal cultures over the past million years. The culture of the Australian Aborigines provides a good example here. When an Aborigine clan excludes a member, the person is no longer seen or spoken to nor does anyone speak to

the excluded and isolated clan member. The clan remains silent. This person is no longer existent. For the excluded person this generally is a death sentence. However, what is interesting is that even if the excluded person is not present – they can be hundreds of kilometers away – they can sense this exclusion and usually die because of it. The community enters into a collective silence, a silence pertaining to the existence of a former member of the community or to certain events. Clearly this illustrates how much power such an exclusion from the community has. The affiliation to a system – be it family, clan, group or nation – is existential to our life. As noted before, the place and the affiliation to a system is a necessity that is not negotiable. Our genetic makeup is geared towards survival in the community. There is no difference whether we are in the middle or are on the fringe of the community, it is essential that we belong to the community. It can therefore be said that fear of exclusion is the greatest of all fears; and this has not changed over the short period of time in which civilization exists.

In our everyday life, silence is commonly ignored in interpersonal communication. Like the process of insult, silence is also a powerful tool.

In general, silence is one of the manifold forms of communication such as speaking, sign language, facial expressions, body language, singing, or the use of symbols, images, or glances.

There are many forms of destructive silence. It can be communicated through mute and silent glances and then everything “pans out” again, or one can silence the counterpart with a quick glance. In this case, silence is used as weapon. Silence can be used to punish, to manipulate others, to isolate people, to make people comply, or simply to ignore the other

person. This kind of silence can also be an expression of helplessness – speechlessness is an inability to act due to shock or through a play-dead reflex. Of course, it could also be that one has trouble finding a common basis for conversation with the other person and simply does not know what to talk about. This then leads to an uncomfortable silence. Another situation where destructive non-verbal silence occurs is when someone comes into a room and then everybody falls silent. Not speaking to someone and ignoring them is one of the worst forms of bullying. Defendants are often coerced to speak about their crime by remaining silent. Both physical and emotional abuse are not spoken about and are kept secret. Sometimes, people are forbidden to speak about certain topics, and many things are silently suffered through and endured. Often there is a veil of silence over conflicts and problems. This kind of atmosphere makes it virtually impossible to find constructive solutions in work teams. Unpleasant family histories are often hushed up in the hope that they will become non-existent, and thus those afflicted try to survive. Silence can also be used to draw attention to a feeling of being offended, to receive attention, or to draw attention to their own needs. Through the means of silence, information and knowledge can be held back. People also remain silent on the grounds of fear. And secretly buying things can also be seen as a form of silence.

Remaining silent produces fear of not being loved, not receiving attention, or the fear of losing the affiliation of the group. An interesting form of remaining silent is to speak without disclosing any personal information about oneself at all. People talk incessantly; however, they mostly don't talk about what is at stake. This is what I would call loud

silence. Remaining silent can also be regarded as an act of defiance, where the silent one goes into retreat; not wanting to have to justify oneself or have the feeling of being misunderstood.

The effect of silence is particularly disastrous for children. If they are exposed to continuous silence, they will perceive it as existentially threatening. Children become emotionally and psychologically stunted. Silence is a powerful instrument in the behavioral repertoire of humans. If, for example, the mother remains completely silent towards her own child and ignores her child entirely, the child will generally try to do anything possible to get back into contact with the mother. In general, children are unable to stand the silence. Most likely, the child will start to change its personality and try to be someone else. It will negate and deny itself in order to get the mother's attention. Some patients have told me that they perceived their mothers silence as it were life threatening and said, "if, at least, she had scolded or beat me, it would not have been as bad as her silence." Another example: in their helplessness, parents and teachers put children in the "naughty corner" or send them out of the room so that everybody can see how naughty the child is. This is reminiscent of the pranger and pillory in the middle ages. Of course, children are capable of reacting differently to silence; with defiance, retreat, anger or aggression.

For children, it is crucial that someone is at home when they come home from school. They come home and call out for their mother or next of kin and want to talk about what happened that day. At my practice, parents told me a story about their daughter. She came home one day and the first

thing she said was "Mom" and she expected her to be there. One day both parents were home and they thought they would try out and see what happens if they remained quiet when their daughter came home. Their daughter went completely hysterical when nobody answered. She started screaming and began to cry and was very upset. For a child, it is a nightmare to come home to a silent home. The child comes home and feels left alone and lost in this world, because nobody is there.

In this connection, I would like to mention the experiment Frederick the Great carried out with infants in Prussia in the eighteenth century. In this experiment, the infants were looked after by wet nurses who were not permitted to build a relationship to the children. They were only permitted to feed the children without having any facial expression or eye contact, as if the babies were being taken care of by machines. Due to this treatment without any affection, all infants died. We are able to kill somebody through silence. It can be stated that silence is massive assault on life.

To a great extent, destructive silence is negatively charged and it is therefore very important that we learn to deal with it constructively. Nevertheless, it should also be understood that destructive silence will always be a part of our life. We will continue to encounter this form of silence repeatedly and we will also continue to use it as an instrument in our own communication. A prerequisite for the constructive use of silence is that we open ourselves up to our own history of silence. It is important to understand that as adults we continue to act and react as we did when we were children. To receive silence always gets under our skin and therefore has a profound negative impact on our lives.

What would it feel like if we could observe silence without it having an affect on us? What would it feel like if we were free from the effects of silence from our early childhood? Most of all, it is our decision how we deal with silence. My own perception is my own choice.

Silence is a complex interaction between two parties. On the one hand, there is the person who remains silent and, on the other, the person who is ignored and not spoken to, the person who receives the silence. In this situation, the person who is ignored generally feels guilty and often does not know the reason. This creates an enormous amount of stress for the person. Of course, the person who receives the silence can also react differently, for example, with aggression or can try to flee the situation etc. And, of course, the person who remains silent has his or her own story with silence. Perhaps this person decided, based on their own personal experience, that attack is best defense and thus uses silence as an instrument. The person remaining silent can feel more or less comfortable with this strategy.

The case of patient T's silence:

In marital conflicts with her husband, silence was used invariably following the same pattern: Her husband felt offended and, moreover, felt justified to do so. For this reason, he would stop talking to her—often for days or weeks— and during this time would also distance himself spatially from her. At the beginning of their relationship, she would run after him and ask him to talk about what was bugging him. However, her husband would block her. Since this was not a solution to the problem, she gave up and let it go. Only through her self-denial and letting him have his way, she was able to come into contact and

get closer to him again. Until her husband's death, this was the only way to stay in contact with him during conflict situations. However, this strategy had a severe effect on her: she became ill; in particular, she had issues with her gastrointestinal tract, she had allergic reactions and, at times, depressions. Her husband had taken into account that he was harming his wife's health. Due to his biography, he was apparently only able to successfully assert his needs by remaining silent. This silence gave him the feeling that he was right. Ms. T would never have chosen "silence" as a means of communication. She always strove to clarify the situation, since these could only get worse. Through her own physical reactions and symptoms, she experienced the effects of silence on her own health. When asked how she knew this pattern, her experience with her sister came to mind as the cause.

Silence is a constant companion in our lives. We can only learn to become consciously aware of the effects of silence. Maybe silence has a greater effect on us than we would like it to have. Our goal can only be to look at the situation neutrally and to find a constructive approach.

Each and every one of us has their own history with "silence." Even if we have had the experience that we have been remained silent to, we also apply silence on others. We can ask ourselves what silence triggers in ourselves. I would suggest writing a letter to the "silence." Use your gut instinct to write the letter and don't think about it too much. This strategy allows us to give silence its own space.

Not telling something is another possibility. Everybody uses silence in their own way. In conversations, information is sometimes exchanged through what

is not being said. It is not so obvious but it works wonderfully. What we don't want is more easily put into words than expressing our needs openly. Ultimately, we remain silent about our needs.

We are often unable to express clearly what our desires and needs are. We are perhaps afraid, due to our experiences in early childhood, to receive a no as an answer. If you consider how often children and adolescents receives a NO as answer and we don't know how the child experiences and interprets this no, we must take into consideration that there are many different behavioral possibilities to chose from. From their point of view, children are not capable of understanding that their parents are saying no for their own good. How should they?

As in the process of feeling offended, silence is a mechanism that we all use, either consciously or unconsciously. I personally believe it is worth while paying more attention to "silence."