

Stonewalling in Relationships: Examples and Fixes

The Power Moves | 10 May, 2018 | by Lucio Buffalmano

In this article you will learn everything about stonewalling in relationships.

What is stonewalling, stonewalling examples, what stonewalling does to relationships and, most of all, **how to fix stonewalling**.

So let's start:

Contents

- [What's Stonewalling](#)
 - [Stonewalling: An Holistic Overview](#)
 - [Men Are Usually Stonewallers](#)
 - [When Stonewalling Spells Relationship Doom](#)
 - [Why Partners Stonewall](#)
- [What Stonewalling Does to Relationships](#)
- [Stonewalling Examples In Relationships](#)
- [How to Get Through A Stonewaller](#)
- [How to End Stonewalling](#)
 - [1. Stop arguing](#)
 - [2. Call a break if you stonewall](#)
 - [3. Practice self soothing](#)
 - [4. Trust yourself and engage](#)
- [Stonewalling Power Dynamics](#)
- [Summary](#)
 - [Further Reading:](#)

What's Stonewalling

In [Why Marriages Succeed or Fail](#), John Gottman defines Stonewalling as:

One partner withdrawing from the conversation and stopping to engage.

Stonewalling is expressed in a variety of different ways:

- Turning around and looking away
- Silent treatment
- Physically leaving the room
- Refusing to answer or talking about the issue at hand
- Yelling to stop the conversation

Stonewalling often happens often as a consequence of flooding, such as feeling so overwhelmed that we can't focus. But instead of exploding, the stonewaller implodes.

Stonewalling: An Holistic Overview

Stonewalling is the fourth and last [Horseman of The Apocalypse](#), a nickname John Gottman uses also for [Criticism](#), [Contempt](#) and [Defensiveness](#).

The Four Horsemen of The Apocalypse often go together and predict divorce in more than 90% of the cases.

That's why it's crucial you fix them.

Men Are Usually Stonewallers

While criticism, contempt and defensiveness are gender neutral, stonewalling is mostly a male phenomenon. Indeed, **men account for 85% of stonewalling cases**.

Why is it more men?

Stonewalling Explained Through Evolution

The reason why men are kings of stonewalling harkens back to evolution, explains John Gottman in [one of his best books](#).

Women produce more milk when they're relaxed and oxytocin flows in the brains. So self soothing during tense situation was advantageous for women.

Men instead survived more frequently in the wild when they quickly accessed their [fight or flight](#) response -a great state to survive but a terrible one to talk things out-.

Still to this day that holds true: men get flooded more quickly and it takes them longer to soothe and relax.

When Stonewalling Spells Relationship Doom

Shirley Glass, author of [Not Just Friends](#), says that when wives complain about a lack of emotional intimacy they are still committed to the relationship.

But when they start withdrawing and stonewalling, it's a sign that they have become discouraged and are giving up.

Funny enough, men are happy about female stonewalling in the beginning because they believe the nagging has stopped and they have finally won some respite.

But it's a false sense of security: female stonewalling is often the sign the relationship is about to end.

Why Partners Stonewall

There can be different reasons why a partner stonewalls, including:

- He can't take it anymore (honest flooding)
- To willingly hurt or win an argument (a power move)
- Fear or unwillingness to vulnerably engage (avoidant strategy)
- Feeling of complete powerlessness
- To avoid further escalation

The last one is particularly interesting. Many stonewallers indeed erroneously believe that by withdrawing they are doing their part to make things better. But they couldn't be farther from the truth.

What Stonewalling Does to Relationships

When women stonewall, it frustrates men.

But when men stonewall, it can truly hurt women.

Laboratory studies show that when men stonewall women's heart rate jumps ([Levenson & Gottman, 1985](#)).

Unbeknownst to most men, **stonewalling is emotionally painful for women** and damages relationships in the following ways:

1. It Escalates Arguments

A partner who refuses to answer can lead the other partner to see their engagement with more and more vehemence. The result is an escalation of the conflict.

And bitter feelings for both: the wife aggresses to reconnect, and he is more and more indignant by her reaction.

2. It Leaves Problems Unsolved

Checking out prevents any possible solution to problems and, if anything, it precipitates them and snowballs problems.

3. It Leads to Emotional Disconnection

With one partner fails to fully engage there can be no emotional connection. And emotional connections are the bedrock of good relationships.

4. It Triggers Sense of Hopelessness In her

When stonewalling becomes the norm, the couple loses the ability to talk and solve problems. A sense of hopelessness about the relationship sets in, and that's the death of the relationship.

Stonewalling Examples In Relationships

And here are a few examples of stonewalling in relationships:

#1. Spread: The Avoidant Stonewalling

Kutcher has a typical [avoidant attachment style](#) in the movie Spread. And like many avoidants, he distances himself from relationships when they start getting too serious.

Stonewalling is one of their ways to keep emotional distance:

He stonewalls when he leaves.

But notice how by avoiding [defensiveness](#) when he's under attack he manages to stop the escalation.

#2. Spread: Defensive Stonewalling

This is an example of stonewalling with a mix of defensiveness and emotional overload. Both the critique and the emotional intensity of “*I love you*” were too much for him to handle.

Let’s watch:

Stonewalling after someone opens up their heart is, needless to say, one of the worst moments to leave.

#3. SATC: Emotional Overload

This is a more hidden, under the radar example of stonewalling in a relationship. But at the core, he couldn’t handle her emotions.

Let’s see:

If anything, this is a sneakier form of stonewalling in relationships.

By giving an appearance of caring in the beginning, he makes it seem as if she is overreacting (which she probably is, BTW :).

#4. The Godfather: Aggressive Stonewalling

Stonewalling isn’t always and necessarily peaceful and quiet.

Trying to forcefully stop the conversation is also a form of stonewalling, as exemplified here:

| *Godfather: “I don’t wanna hear about it. OVER!”*

Maybe not an accident that her first comment after his aggressive stonewalling is “I feel no love for you anymore”.

#5. Blow: When Stonewalling Escalates Arguments

Albeit this example is way overblown (excuse the pun) as it involves drug usage, it’s an example of escalation following stonewalling.

Let’s see:

<https://youtu.be/vA5159X3mH0?t=21s>

She’s still a crazy, [low value woman](#), but if he had fully engaged her, the escalation might have not happened.

6. Crazy Stupid Love: Powerless Stonewalling

In this example he feels so powerless to listen and engage that he goes out of his way to end the interaction (another pun, sorry :).

[Now that’s some high commitment to stonewalling :](#)

I don’t want to overload this post with too many examples, but if you’re interested check out again Cal Weaver, later in that same movie he uses another stonewalling technique: [pretending not to hear and talking about something else](#).

How to Get Through A Stonewaller

Let me give you the bad news first:

The best way to deal with a stonewaller is to make the stonewaller want to fix stonewalling.

But I know that's not always possible or easy.

So here are a quick tips for you:

- **Start softly**

Most men stonewall because they feel they are being overpowered by a barrage of highly-emotional complaints.

Men take longer to warm up and prep up.

Solution? bite the bullet and go slower.

Talking always beats yelling and the one who goes slow and steady wins the race.

- **Repair and de-escalate**

When you see your partner begins to tense up or when he start getting defensive, it's not the time to double down as most people do. It's time repair and take a step back.

Remember: one step back, two forward.

- **Remember his ego: paraphrase**

Yes, many men (and women) have a fragile ego. Remember that and try to use

If their breath stinks, don't use the word "stink", but turn into a positive. Say that you love to kiss their mouth when it's fresh right after toothbrush.

- **Accept influence**

Remember that influencing is a two way street. If you accept their needs and wants, they are more likely to accept yours.

As much as you can, make it a communal problem solving.

Also read this very useful guide on [how to argue](#).

- **Let him read this guide**

As I mentioned before, most men are clueless about stonewalling. They have no idea how painful it is for women and how deeply it can damage relationships.

If he is open minded, mature and strong enough to accept and incorporate feedback for improvement -and if you, the man, are reading this, you should be-, chances are he will be willing to help.

How to End Stonewalling

Once you understand that stonewalling damages your relationship, here's what you can do to combat it:

1. Stop arguing

If you notice your partner stonewalls, stop arguing because it will only get worse. Tell him you both need a break instead.

2. Call a break if you stonewall

If it's you who stonewalls, heed the signs. Such as, when you feel your heart rate increasing, diminishing focus and defensiveness kicking in, that's the moment to call a break.

Here's a few things you can say:

- I want to listen to you but this is getting too intense for me. Let's take a break and resume in 20 minutes
- I feel like I'm about to blow up and I don't wanna blow up to you. Give me please a few minutes to recollect
- I can't handle this anymore, please help me soothe and then we'll continue

3. Practice self soothing

Watch during the break:

Gottman says men are more likely to think negatively about their partner during the break. Those breaks only make matter worse if you allow negative feelings to fester.

Instead, it's paramount you don't ruminate and truly take your mind to a neutral state instead.

Some good activities during the break include:

- Working
- Reading a magazine or book
- Take a walk around
- Listen to music

It's important that you only go back once we are fully calm, and it usually takes more than we think. Stay 5 minutes longer in the break *after* you already feel fully calm.

4. Trust yourself and engage

Finally, trust yourself that you can handle emotional arguments. And the more you do it, the better you become.

And remind yourself that engaging is good everyone: for you, for your partner, and for your relationship.

Stonewalling Power Dynamics

Keep this in mind:

Stonewalling communicates powerlessness.

It's men who have given up to arguing, to negotiating -and to winning- that retreat into a silent world. As psychologist Shawn Smith explains, it's men who have given up on their marriage and who are about to lose their relationship who are also most likely to stonewall and avoid arguments ([Smith, 2014](#)).

Men who are in [control of their relationships](#) don't retreat like babies into a silent cave.

They confront the issues and take action.

They are [good at controlling frame](#) and enforcing boundaries. If she was wrong, they tell them as such.

If she was right, they are not afraid of admitting it, and making good on their words.

The good thing is that many conflicts will disappear once men start taking action, because their wives' respect for them will increase.

It's a positive circle: the less he stonewalls, the fewer reasons for stonewalling he will have.

[How to Maintain Power & Control in Relationships](#)

Summary

Stonewalling is a refusal of engaging with our partner.

It leaves our partner feeling ignored in the best case, and it actively hurts our partner and escalates the fight in the worst cases.

And of course, it prevents from actually solving the issue.

In the long run, it leads to emotional death and hopelessness.

In this article, you have learned what's stonewalling and what you can do to deal with stonewalling in your relationship.

Further Reading:

- [Develop intimacy by getting to know your partner](#)
- [How build emotional connection](#)
- [Decrease combativeness by accepting influence](#)

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