

Relationship Destroyer #3: Meanness

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It's understandable to be angry.

And some people, when angry, revert to this conditioning: hurt the person is making us angry as much as possible.

However, when we are mean in an effort to hurt our partner, we are actively tearing our *relationship* apart.

Meanness can sometimes be all that it's needed to destroy a relationship.

And even if we move on and heal, meanness will leave a scar.

Contents

- [What Is Meanness in Relationships](#)
- [What Cruelty Does](#)
 - [Examples of Meanness](#)
- [Cruelty in Relationships Examples](#)
- [Fixing Meanness](#)
- [Summary](#)

What Is Meanness in Relationships

In the previous two installments, we dealt with [criticism](#) and [contempt](#).

Both criticism and contempt are part of Gottman's research.

This is one that I personally added myself. I feel meanness goes beyond criticism and contempt and is common enough that it deserve its own category.

Meanness -or cruelty- is anything a party says to cause the most possible harm to their partner.

It attacks the most closely held values and undermines people at an identity level. Either the personal level ("you") or at the relationship level ("we").

Cruelty is the opposite of loving and caring.

What Cruelty Does

Cruelty is often a point of no return.

It might be the ending salvo of the relationship. Or it might leave an indelible emotional mark which prevents the return to a normal, healthy relationship.

Cruelty shows a previous unknown, ugly side of our partner.

And the question emerges: can we really trust our partner when they're willing to go this far? Maybe not. And even if they were angry, can we still like them after what we've experienced?

The second main problem of cruelty is that it often references something real.

And if our partner really think so lowly of us, why the hell are they with us? That's the kind of question that destroys the emotional connection of a relationship.

Examples of Meanness

Here are some examples of retorts that qualify as overly mean:

Her: And you know what I did? I went to my ex and sucked his big cock while playing “our” songs.

Whether or not that was true, he will not be able to get that out of his mind. And with just one sentence, you destroyed your relationship.

Him: Stop acting like you’re an artist, you have no talent whatsoever. And that’s why you resent me and my business success.

Now she will never again be able to share her work with him and believe that he is honest in his praises.

Her: And you’re such a limp dick. I faked all my orgasms and I can’t wait to find a real man!

Tries to attack his manhood. And these often work. Even for men who don’t take it personally, they will think of you like someone who is untrustworthy when things get tough because all you care about is “winning” the battle.

Him: I didn’t want to introduce you to my friends because I was embarrassed. You eat like a pig, snore and have more body hair than I do... You’re not a real woman, you’re a butch!

Same as above, tries to attack her at her identity level ([femininity](#)).

Him/Her: I regret that I did it with you (/that we ever got together).

You will notice that a lot of these hurt at a closely held identity level. Masculinity, femininity, what we stand for, or erases history as a “we”.

Cruelty in Relationships Examples

1# La La Land

Here is a great example of how one single instance of cruelty can mark the point of no return:

Meanness delivered calmly is worst than a heated screaming exchange.

It means you’re saying it rationally and really believe it.

Sebastian: Maybe you liked me more when I was a failure because it made you feel better about yourself.

This is basically saying that she is a failure. A failure with a terrible character who can’t manage to be happy for her partner.

Since a healthy relationship is about mutual support and being happy for our partners, this type of cruelty spells the end of a (healthy) relationship.

2 Forgetting Sarah Marhsall

This scene starts off already very badly. [As we’ve previously seen](#) it’s a perfect example of contempt -and some criticism to boot-

It moves into cruelty when she says:

Sarah: And that does not make you a citizen of the world. It makes you full of shit.

(...)

Sarah: I hate your music

Russel: Yeah, well, I fucked the housekeeper the other day.

Criticizing his ideology is meanness because, contrary to typical criticism (“you’re so full of shit”), she tries to undermine all that he stands for. And she’s going out of her way to hurt him emotionally. After her second attempt at meanness Russel finally adds his own, which puts the final nail in their relationship coffin.

Could you see this relationship going back to a loving and mutually supporting one after that exchange? Or breaking up and staying good friends?

Exactly, that’s the magic of meanness.

Fixing Meanness

Meanness can become a mainstay of the relationship when:

1. Deeply disliking our partner
2. Response to meanness (the case of Russel above)
3. Anger management issue.

If it’s #1 and #2 you should ask yourself if it makes sense staying in the relationship. If you still find a reason to stay, then it’s time to revamp everything and possibly consider therapy.

If it’s #3 then you have to take responsibility for your personal change.

I had a girlfriend with a trend of burning bridges with family members out anger fits when she would sink into meanness.

The quickest fix is counting to 10 before speaking or leaving the room when you feel you’re reaching the boiling point.

Long term anger management therapy, meditation and working on communication skills will also help.

I remember an ex girlfriend of mine who was once about to blow up. But instead of blowing up, she simply left the room and went into another room to sit by herself.

My respect for her grew ten-folds after that.

Summary

There are situations in a relationship when one party will say anything to hurt the other.

These moments can break a relationship in one go, or make a damage for years to come in mere seconds.

Watch out then if you have a tendency of exaggerating when you’re angry. If that’s the case, it’s best to walk away and take a pause.

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