

Managing Manipulation Assertively

Sometimes people communicate in manipulative ways either consciously or unconsciously. They do so to try and get the response or behaviour from you that they want. Ways you can tell include:

- You feel uncomfortable in some way, you don't feel OK but are not quite sure why.
- You find yourself doing what they want but with resentment or guilt.
- They take the role of the "victim" or martyr.

They may not mean to do this, it might be how they learned to ask for things. Honestly and straightforwardly saying how things are for them and what they want gives you a choice to agree or refuse, so they ask in a way in that makes it hard for you to refuse without feeling guilty, resentful or scared.

Here are some ways you can "push back", that is, call attention to the manipulation and protect yourself. When you use them:

- Adjust them to the specific situation.
- Be aware of the possible effect on the other person; they might get defensive or angry, so go ahead only if you will be safe.
- Check whether *you* use manipulation in your communications, and start to change that to being more genuine and owning your own stuff.

Examples of manipulative speech:

- "You go out, I'll stay home like always and do the chores, you go and enjoy yourself, you deserve it."
- "My friend's husbands always take out the garbage / wash the dishes / etc, it's a real pity you never do but then maybe I'm not important to you."
- "You're my wife / husband, you should want to spend your time with me if you were a good / caring wife / husband."

The most straightforward push-backs:

- "What is it you want / are really saying / telling me?"
This is the most straightforward response to get someone to be real.
- "It seems like you are asking / telling me something, but I am not sure exactly what it is. Can you be clearer and more specific. Can you give me an example."
- "I understand / hear that you see ... like this, I see it like ... "
They are entitled to their view, it does not make it right, it just makes it theirs. You are entitled to state your view and remind them that their view is just that, their view.

Some more push-back suggestions:

- "What did you just ask me to do?"
—with surprise and humour in your tone.
- I hear you saying ..., what is it you are asking me to do / want me to do / are telling me you think I *should* do?"

- "So what you are saying is ..."
Example: "So what you are saying is you don't like the way I am doing it and you want me to do it your way?"
Hint: Don't add your own thoughts or behaviours to this, simply reflect back what you believe the person is really saying.
- "Are you asking me to justify my actions?"
People disguise a command as a question, such as "Why did you ... / have you done ...?"
- "When you ..., I feel ... and I wish you would ..."
Example: "When you are late for a special date, I feel hurt and I am worried that you are losing interest in me." This could easily turn into a manipulative statement, so take care to genuinely express your feelings. The other person will detect whether it is genuine or manipulative.
- "I need some time out / space, I'll get back to you."
You don't need to give someone an immediate answer. You nearly always have the right to decide in your own time even if you are experiencing pressure, bullying or coercion, maybe especially if you are experiencing those things.
- "I'm feeling unsettled / confused / afraid. I need time to work through what's going on for me."
Again, take time out when you want or need it.
- "I don't want to talk about it now."
This must not be an excuse to keep putting something off. If you are afraid of abuse, you might need to make other decisions about keeping yourself safe, which might mean removing yourself from the abuse.
- "Uh-huh, what are you doing / thinking / planning to do about it?"
This one is useful when someone repeatedly says how difficult / bad things are for them, and every suggestion or advice you give just brings a "Yes, but ..." response.

Some more push-backs which can be harder to do:

- "Why do you ask?"
This needs to be said in the right tone, not sarcastic, more genuine inquiry or with humour.
- Silence with eye contact, simply look back at them with interest waiting to hear what they are really saying.
You'll probably need to be doing your self-calming breathing to do this one.
- "Ummm, excuse me?!"
A helpful tone of voice would be surprise, questioning.

The effect on the other person

These responses are not aimed at simply frustrating the other person. They are to call attention to the manipulative behaviour so that you don't get caught up in it and do what they say without awareness of the manipulation. The aim is to increase genuine communication. It is possible that the person will respond with another manipulative response. If you can hold to your own awareness of what is going on, and like the "broken record" technique, continue with push-backs, you could reach a clear communication where the person takes responsibility for their emotions and their request.