

How Contempt Destroys Relationships

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A rudely dismissive listening stance invites relationship ills.

An upper lip raised on one side suggests contempt. Contempt may be hard to define but I bet you know it when you feel it. Beware. Contempt is a prime sign of relationship or marriage problems ahead. Marriage researcher John Gottman lists it as one of his top indicators of a relationship that will fail.

Here's some common signs that contempt is underlying the negative tone in a conversation. Eye-rolling suggests contempt. An upper lip raised on one side suggests contempt. So does a sarcastic tone of voice. Beware if you have these habits, and also if you have been on the receiving end of these negative communications. They are sure signs that someone is not listening or listening to deprecate you (or you to deprecate your partner), not to gain understanding.

Empathy and contempt are polar opposites. Empathy involves caring about others feelings and concerns. Contempt is arrogant ("I know best") disregard, dismissal and denigration of others' concerns. Empathy nurtures relationship bonds; contempt invites relationship and marriage problems.

How do parents teach their children empathy and/or contempt?

What parents do toward each other and toward their children teaches kids to do the same. Some kids, and adults, though are clever. They discover contempt on their own, or learn it from peers.

What is the nature of contempt that makes it such a potent predictor of marriage failure?

Why does eye-rolling cause work relationships to end poorly? What is it about a snippy tone of voice that conveys that you are dismissing and disregarding what someone has said?

Wikipedia gives helpful basic information on the nature of contempt. It writes:

"Contempt is a ... mix of the primary emotions disgust and anger.[1]The word originated in 1393, from the Latin word contemptus meaning "scorn." ...

Robert C. Solomon places contempt on the same continuum as resentment and anger, and he argues that the differences between the three is that resentment is directed toward a higher status individual; anger is directed toward an equal status individual; and contempt is directed toward a lower status individual.[3]"

Contempt presents a perfect storm of relationship spoilers.

Here's multiple ways that contempt insidiously or explicitly poisons relationships, and especially long-term relationships like marriage and parenting.

1) Insufficient loving.

The more expression of contempt, the less caring for and about each other.

Empathy has the opposite impacts. The more acts and attitudes of empathy, the more caring and love. The more empathy between spouses and toward children, the more that everyone in a household feels loving and loved.

2) Powering over.

Talking with a contemptuous tone of voice or dismissing information from the other of says "I matter. You don't." That's a power play. If I know better than you do about you, I'm setting myself above you.

3) Toxicity dumping.

Contempt dumps toxicity into a relationship.

As Eric Berne once wrote, relationships that convey "I'm OK, You're OK" feel safe. "I'm OK, You're Not OK" feels unsafe.

We all want to feel positive about ourselves. Negative messages of you're-not-ok are in this sense toxic, poisoning our self-concept like mercury poisons a pool of water.

Tone alone can convey the contemptuous *you're not ok* message. Even if the words are fine, when the tone sounds contemptuous, the tone will prevail.

4 Contempt signifies rejection.

Rejection may be of what the other person is saying. It may be also of the other person as a whole.

A baby who tastes rotten food immediately wrinkles his nose, curls his lips in an expression of disgust, and spits it out. When someone speaks to you with a tone of contempt, you are likely to feel spit out from that person's world. "Get out of my life" is the subconscious message embedded in the "you're not ok" and "your concerns and your thoughts are not ok" tags that get communicated via contemptuous tone of voice or attitudes.

If you are the person who felt the contempt/disgust, you are likely to choose to leave the relationship, to spit it out from your life-space. If you feel you have been treated in this manner, you also are likely to exit the relationship. That's because most people react to being treated contemptuously with the thought "If you don't want me, then I don't want you!"

5. Contempt signifies breaks in the flow.

A relationship connection is expressed and reinforced via information-sharing, that is, by talking and listening. As soon as you say something to me and I respond in a way that indicates that I have heard and accepted your information, we both will feel connected. In a good conversation, two people take turns offering and accepting information, braiding their connection all the while.

If, by contrast, you dismiss what I say, brushing my input aside as if it were unimportant or wrong, the break in the flow of information between us severs the connection. Contemptuous spitting out or dismissing of what the other person in a relationship has said causes a break in the flow of information much like a broken pipe causes a break in the flow of a liquid.

6. Contempt invites feelings of hopelessness.

Psychologist Martin Seligman clarified that when people feel depressed, i.e., hopeless, they regard a negative attribute as permanent and pervasive, i.e., as something that will always be there and cannot be changed. Contempt conveys the sense that you have a quality that is hopelessly unfixable.

What's the alternative to contempt?

Listening to understand, appreciate and agree is the opposite of listening dismissively with contempt.

Another alternative to contempt in relationships is positivity. Positive people enhance their relationships via positive communications such as, for instance, appreciation, gratitude, affection, agreement, interest and smiles.

Want to enjoy positive work relationships, healthy relationships with your children, and a long-loving marriage? Dump the contempt. Listen well. And pump up the positivity!

Source: <https://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/resolution-not-conflict/201303/how-contempt-destroys-relationships>