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Building resilience one family at a time.

Before Boundaries: Silent Agreements

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When I was growing up, there were a great many expectations that were agreed upon although never spoken of. Some are classic, like as a child, I was expected to do well in school, clean up after myself, do my chores, and the like. I expected my parents to provide nurturing, housing, clothes, food, and basic necessities. These were not talked about, they were just understood. These are “silent agreements.” However, there were other “silent agreements” with their set of expectations that were not discussed, then or now! These included never discussing my grandmother’s manic-depressive illness, even when she was hospitalized; my grandfather’s recovery from alcoholism, even though he went to meetings almost every night and held court in our house every Sunday; my mother’s Crohn’s disease even though it meant she would not be able to work; my step-father’s depression, even when he did not get out of bed for days on end. The Big Silent Agreement was that my sister and I would take care of the unwell adults and not complain about it or expect that our emotional needs would be met. In the family I created as an adult, these agreements could have continued except that I learned to challenge them. MJ

If a family’s way of dealing with mental illness is not in the best interest of all its members, then it is not the best solution (Johnson, 1994; p. 169).

What are silent agreements?

The proverbial “Elephant in the room.”

Negative beliefs and expectations. Family rules, roles, and expectations. When your thoughts go to the “Should’s, ought’s, must’s, have-to’s” you are identifying the silent agreements that may or may not be healthy for you or anyone else.

ROLES PLAY AN EXTREMELY IMPORTANT PART IN HEALTHY FAMILY FUNCTIONING. MOST RESEARCHERS AGREE THAT THE ESTABLISHMENT OF CLEAR ROLES WITHIN A FAMILY IS DIRECTLY CONNECTED TO A FAMILY’S ABILITY TO DEAL WITH DAY -TO-DAY LIFE, UNFORESEEN CRISES, AND THE NORMAL CHANGES THAT OCCUR IN FAMILIES OVER TIME. (Peterson & Green, 1999).

Voice is not given to needs, wants, or desires of family members.



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As Kern (2017) points out, “they are those unspoken “rules” of our relationships that grow from the topics we don’t talk about—the needs, wishes and expectations that we don’t share but hold others accountable to anyway.

Silent agreements are not just about communicating poorly in your relationships,” says Licensed Clinical Psychologist Sonia R. Banks, PhD. “In contrast, a silent agreement is a situation where you have consciously or unconsciously agreed to something with another person without discussing it at all.”

What are the downfalls of challenging the silent agreements? Resistance. Withdrawal. Shaming, Shunning. Resentment. Uneven burdens. Inability to manage crises. Poor problem-solving skills.

What are the benefits of challenging the silent agreements? AAA: Awareness, Acceptance, Action, The benefit is *choice*. Once you become aware of the silent agreement, you can decide what, if anything, you want to do about it. You can respond instead of react. You become the captain of your own ship. Live your truth.

What are effective strategies for challenging silent agreements?

Consider the following (Johnson, 1994; p. 170):

What do others expect of me in relation to my family member with mental illness?

What are some shared beliefs within my family about our loved one with mental illness?

What do I believe is the cause of mental illness? How does this affect how I interact with my family and how does it affect the plans I make for our futures?

What do I believe would help my family member with mental illness get well?

At this time, what is my biggest fear?

After answering the above, ask **WHY** for each answer you have written.

For example, Why do your parents believe that your sibling with mental illness shouldn’t be held accountable when she threatens you?

What silent agreements do you have with every family member?

How do these agreements affect **YOU**? Your feelings, goals, and relationships?



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THE WORK by Byron Katie is designed to challenge your beliefs so that you can make better decisions about what you think and how you think.

1. Is it true? (yes or no; if no, move to 3)
2. Can you absolutely know that it is true? (yes or no)
3. How do react, what happens, when you believe that thought?
4. Who would you be without that thought? (picture yourself without that thought)

What do silent agreements have to do with boundaries?

You *respond* instead of *react* to your partner—and to others. Setting clear, firm boundaries means that you don't automatically react to everyone's thoughts and feelings. You tolerate other people's opinions and do not become defensive when you disagree. You recognize that your reaction is your responsibility. You adopt a healthy skepticism regarding what others say about you (good or bad), and your self-esteem doesn't rise and fall as a result. You say no, and you accept hearing no. (Esposito, 2017).

Parting thought: The Seven C's (<https://moyerfoundation.org/resources/coping-with-addiction-for-kids-the-seven-cs/>)

I didn't CAUSE it.

I can't CURE it.

I can't CONTROL it.

I can help take CARE of myself by

COMMUNICATING my feelings.

Making healthy CHOICES and

CELEBRATING me.



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