



Wild & Sublime® Podcast, Season 2 Episode 29
“How to deal with a stonewalling partner”
July 1, 2021

"When we get into an argument, my partner won't talk to me for hours or even the whole day. What do I do?" Panelists discuss "stonewalling" – when one partner checks out during intense moments and refuses to talk things through – and what you can do if it's happening in your relationship.

Host: Karen Yates

Guests: Tazima Parris, Jason Best, Korey McWilliams

[Wild & Sublime theme music]

Tazima Parris

And I remind myself that the only way that you can get to the land of intimacy is through the valley of vulnerability. You can't get to intimacy without vulnerability.

Karen Yates

Welcome to Wild & Sublime, a sexy spin on infotainment®, no matter your preferences, orientation, or relationship style, based on the popular live Chicago show. Each week, I'll chat about sex and relationships with citizens from the world of sex positivity. You'll hear meaningful conversation, dialogues that go deeper, and information that can help you become more free in your sexual expression. I'm sex educator Karen Yates. Today, our panel discusses the toxic effects of the silent treatment during arguments, and what you can do to change the dynamic. Plus, my Sermon on the Pubic Mound®. Keep listening.

If you're a Wild & Sublime fan and enjoy our weekly content on all things sexual, consider joining The Afterglow, our Wild & Sublime community on Patreon. For as little as \$5 a month, you get a bonus Q&A session with sexperts where you get to ask the questions, my weekly audio creator notes, and more. Upper levels can interact live on these sessions, or in Zoom hangouts. And there's even a Wild & Sublime coffee mug as a bonus reward. If a monthly membership is not your thing, consider throwing some bucks in the tip jar in appreciation for our work. More info is in the show notes.

Hey, folks. Have you ever been in a relationship where things completely shut down when you're having an argument? Where your partner either sequesters themselves in another room, becomes obsessively busy, or gives you the silent treatment, basically ignoring you? Well, the term for this is "stonewalling," and there's no way around it. It sucks. We had a Wild & Sublime Patreon member ask our panel about it, and I think you'll get a lot out of the answers given. I know I did. And stick around for my Sermon on the Pubic Mound at the end of the episode, where I'll talk a bit further on it as well.

You will now be hearing from sex coach and pleasure mentor Tazima Parris, relationship and sex therapist Korey McWilliams, and queer-kinky-poly therapist Jason Best, of Best Therapies, who will be kicking us off. Enjoy.

[to panelists] Let's go into the next question, for Jason. "My partner, when we start having an argument, basically goes into his office, shuts the door, and sulks for, like, two hours, or even a full day. This seems insane. Then he doesn't want to talk about it when he comes out. We don't get into a ton of fights, but this is what happens when it gets intense. What do I do? Signed, Stonewall (and I don't mean in a rainbow kind of way)."

Jason Best

Oh, it's so sad. So, if I was to drop a solo ballad, it would be maybe "Stonewall (not in a rainbow kind of way)." So look for that maybe this summer, next year? Ohhh! So first of all, when people tell me stories like this, where they have these super-intense arguments, communication completely shuts down, sometimes for hours, sometimes for days, I've heard for weeks or even months sometimes, where people are just, you know, icing each other out. Oftentimes, what I think is, first of all, the initial argument got way too heated. You know, it probably got to a place where both parties were very flooded -- their hearts were racing, their adrenaline was going, they went into that "fight, flight, or freeze" response. A lot of people, in that response, will sometimes go for the freeze, which is stonewalling, right? Sometimes it's completely shutting down. You might even be in the same room with your partner, and they might look like they have a very blank face, they might just not be talking. Sometimes they can be incredibly infuriating, you know, for these people's partners, because they might seem like they don't care, or they're not calm. But if you put a heart rate monitor on the same people, their heart's beating 1000 miles a minute. They are flooded with adrenaline, flooded with these intense stress hormones. So, I'm a big fan of taking a break. I think breaking from each other is good. I think one, you have to work more on striking while the iron is cold, right? You have to get in outside of an argument, outside of some big disagreement and say like, "Hey, the way we're doing these arguments isn't working

for me. This is feeling really uncomfortable, it's really messy, it feels awful. And the fact that we don't really come back and have a resolution just feels like we're leaving it wide open." So you have to have those conversations and then talk about, "What can we do? What could our offramps be earlier?" Like, what if you took a break a little bit before, or maybe a lot before you reach the point where you had to go off and hide in your room for a day or two? Could we look at that? I would give you that permission. I would want you to have that time for yourself. I want to listen to you. Sometimes when we're listening, we have to work on setting aside our agendas. We have to set aside our desire to persuade the other person, and really try to take in what they're saying. And then, you know, we ask them to give us the same courtesy. We want them to hear us. Because if you're not communicating well, if you're not talking well, that's a big problem.

I will say one last thing on this. Stonewallers tend to be men. It's more likely the person is masculine. And the other thing that I kind of heard is this desire not to come back and talk about the feelings involved. You know, I have absolutely seen stonewallers of every gender. I've seen, you know, people who are afraid of talking about these meta emotions, these emotions that they might consider negative: anger, anxiety, frustration. There's some people that don't see the benefit to it, and they will resist it. It is a mistake. You know, if you can't share those problems, they tend to come up again and again. If you can't resolve them -- I know it's awkward to talk about sometimes; it can be difficult to talk about -- but if you don't go back and kind of put them to bed, then they can be like zombies, waiting for the chance to rise up and, you know, eat your brain. So, you know, working on talking more about those uncomfortable feelings, obviously, that might be time to go see a therapist, if you guys can't do that yourselves. I would recommend someone with Gottman training, because I think that's a really great model to follow in working with these kinds of issues. You know, I'm guessing that my co-panelists have some great responses to this too, so I won't keep talking for another five hours. But I think this is the kind of case that I love, because I think there's so much that you can do sometimes with these confrontations, to really relieve a lot of stress and anxiety in the relationship.

Karen Yates

Awesome. Korey and Tazima?

Tazima Parris

I'd love to share a couple things that I know about emotions. Everything that Jason was saying, especially around taking the break earlier, I completely want to highlight that. That is super important. I also want to encourage people to get support about the

dynamic of the relationship, the dynamic of how you enter into difficult conversations, or what happens when everybody gets heated. Because understanding that dynamic is difficult to do from the inside. It's extremely challenging. It's hard to access sort of logic and theoretical stuff when you feel so hurt, or you feel so angry or whatever. I want to share a little bit about the emotion stuff that's happening at those times. So if someone feels threatened and the "fight or flight" thing is happening -- fight, flight or freeze is happening -- oftentimes, the stone wall, I've found, is a cold version of anger. And anger is usually the hard, spiky protective covering over softer, more vulnerable feelings. And if you can start to access, for the partner that's behind the stone wall, what is underneath that anger, or that guarding, or the protective layer? Is it hurt? Is it fear? Is it these other vulnerable sadness? What's going on underneath that? Being the person who's been stonewalled out, you may not be able to get in there to ask that person. But also notice what's going on for you. If this person is reacting in this way, what are my emotions in this moment? What am I feeling in this moment? And then thinking about, "Oh, wow, if this person is upset enough that they're stonewalling, they're protecting themselves, what's going on underneath that thing?" Because we tend to, like, fight with the spiky part. We're spiky part against spiky part. But really, what's happening is that inside, what's the soft stuff on the inside, more vulnerable feelings? And I like to highlight for my clients, and people who are going through similar things, and I remind myself, that the only way that you can get to the land of intimacy is through this valley of vulnerability. You can't get to intimacy without vulnerability. So if you've got an impervious layer of stonewall, or spiky anger, or witty quips even, or sarcasm, or any of that, you know, stuff, you're not going to get through that hard outer shell. It's a voluntary opening that both people would need to start doing, in order to break that down so that you can reconnect, and you can repair the rift that's happening. And my heart goes out to Stonewall.

Karen Yates

Korey, what do you have to say?

A couple things, just real quick. Just to reiterate. Yeah, feelings. Some people aren't tuned into that. Some people never learned to identify, and they don't have the language of it. If that's the case, and you know your partner's the case, because they go and they hide out for two hours, and they don't want to talk about things, then as a caring partner, we can maybe try to empathize and see what it is they're needing. We can ask them, we can make empathic guesses about what they need. But trying to really connect with what's underneath those feelings, what's causing the shutdown, I think, is really important. And one of the things those people who don't like feelings -- unfortunately, as humans, we all have them. The problem is not in having them. The

problem is how we deal with them, and how we express them. And does that match up with our partner's ways, and what they know? And oftentimes, that's a source of conflict, right? I want to talk things through, and you want to go hide for two hours... Okay, we're gonna have to find some way to reach common ground; that starts with understanding each other, and understanding each other's needs and feelings. And sometimes, the language of needs is maybe a little less threatening to people who don't want to talk about feelings. But the way I think about feelings is that they all come out of either needs that are met, or needs that aren't met. The good feelings come out when our needs are met -- yay, I got what I wanted. When our needs are not met, [disappointed noise]. You know, that's when we start striking out.

Yeah, I like that work-around a lot, about needs versus emotions. That some people just don't want to talk about the emotions, but if you phrase it a different way.

Korey McWilliams

[facetiously] I don't have feelings. What are you talking about?

Karen Yates

I do have needs though, right?

Tazima Parris

While we're on feelings, even the word feelings, I want to identify, too, that people sometimes mistake ideas for feelings. So, "I feel hurt" is very different from, "I feel like you intentionally hurt my feelings."

Karen Yates

It's like a bad pool shot. Bing-bong-bing-bong, bong-bong-bong! A banking shot.

Tazima Parris

So, anytime you hear yourself or your partner saying, "I feel like..." that's my flag to say, this is an idea and a concept. It's a thought more than it is a feeling, and an emotion specifically.

Karen Yates

If you're interested in finding out more about therapist Korey McWilliams, Jason Best and his practice Best Therapies, or Tazima Parris and her company Infinite Relating, go to our show notes. And did you know that all Wild & Sublime episodes have transcripts? Go to the episode on our website, and directly below the audio player, you'll see the link and you'll be able to download them.

The work I do in Biofield Tuning, an energy modality that uses sound waves to help repattern your bioelectric field, can support you in getting out of stuck behaviors and become more aware of different choices. If you're interested in working with me, or learning more about my weekly group biofield tuning sessions on Zoom on a variety of topics, including increasing intuition, expanding consciousness, balancing your energy centers and more, go to karen-yates.com. That link is in the show notes.

[music] Wild & Sublime is also sponsored in part by our Sublime Supporter, Chicago-based Full Color Life Therapy, therapy for all of you, at fullcolorlifetherapy.com. If you would like to be a Sublime Supporter, showcasing you and your business and supporting us at the same time, contact us at info@wildandsublime.com. And now, it's time for my Sermon on the Pubic Mound.
[organ music]

As we just heard, making your way through the stonewall experience is hard -- both for the person erecting the wall, and the one wanting to tear it down. In some regards, as far as I can figure, there are some points that apply to both parties. First, it's not about you. If someone you're in a relationship with is building a wall, that 100% has nothing to do with you. Wall-building is a coping mechanism that started long before you came along. So get out of the spinning thoughts like, "If only I had said this instead of that," or "If I do this one thing, it'll change my partner's behavior." It won't. You're not that powerful, to be able to get into your partner's head with a wrench and turn a few bolts, and then they start acting like you want them to. It doesn't work like that.

Now, if you're the one building the wall, it has nothing to do with you either. What do I mean? The wall-builder is a version of you from a long time ago, who started building walls as an act of self-preservation. It made total sense back then. That scenario, and that person, no longer exists, but you're using the same playbook. That playbook is outdated. Do you want a better one? Well, guess what, you have to do something different. Like the old saying goes, if you do what you've always done, you'll get what you've always got. Which leads me to the second point: self-esteem. You might think that building a wall preserves your esteem and keeps you protected, but I'm sorry to say, based on personal experience: the wall is actually an airtight vault that's probably killing you. Okay, that sounds grim, but I wanted to get your attention. If you can't share your thoughts with your partner, that means nothing's getting out. But that also means nothing new is getting in; you're in a repeating loop. And we all know from "The Matrix" what that means. You're actually in some weird little box getting your life juices sucked out of you. So why is this an issue of self esteem? Because you are important

enough to talk about what matters to you, even if initially it comes out as an inarticulate mess. If you have the courage to share what matters to you, that builds self esteem, because you're actively showing yourself that you respect yourself. And the more you share, the easier it gets. And then over time, things change in general, because you're able to take in new information that reinforces self esteem. And here's a cool secret: The more you do this, the less important your partner's reaction is, because you're actively engaged in a more important relationship -- the relationship with yourself. And for the person who is with a stonewaller, self esteem can get built by unhooking from the drama. Okay, so they want to be obsessively reorganizing the broom closet, or hiding out in the basement and not talking to you. That's cool. You can go for a walk, or get together with a friend, or read a book, and feel good. You don't have to suffer because of their issues. Because remember point one: this has nothing to do with you. So let go and enjoy your life.

Well, that's it folks. Have a delightfully pleasurable week. Thank you for listening. If you know someone who might be interested in this episode, send it to them. Do you like what you heard? Then give us a nice review on your podcast app. You can follow us on social media @wildandsublime and sign up for newsletters at wildandsublime.com. I'd like to thank associate producer Julia Williams and design guru Jean-Francois Gervais. Theme Music by David Ben-Porat. This episode was edited by The Creative Imposter studios. Our media sponsor is Rebellious Magazine, feminist media, at rebelliousmagazine.com.