

Sulking, being unwilling to talk, or withdrawing from engaging in constructive communication, is an unhelpful way of communicating either anger or disappointment. We only sulk with those we are emotionally close to. We are likely to sulk when someone close to us does not do what we want them to do, or does something we do not like, such as criticising, rejecting or disapproving, or depriving us of something. The function of sulking is to punish the other person; to get what we want; to extract proof of caring; to restore power; or to protect oneself from hurt.

This pattern of unhealthy communication has its roots in childhood experiences, where parents were likely to have avoided openly expressing negative feelings, and did not give the child permission to openly express direct anger. The sulking child punishes the parent by freezing them out, inviting them to cajole him or her out of it, but simultaneously being determined not to be appeased.

Be patient with the person who sulks. Do not say 'stop sulking', when they are sulking as this only makes matters worse – they are likely to retreat even further into their shell. Ask the person, when they are not sulking, how you can help.

■ Unhelpful beliefs underlying sulking

- ❶ **Demandingness or over-use of the words 'should', 'must' and 'ought'.** This 'should' not happen. The other person 'should' behave differently. I 'must' be treated well. People 'should' not get angry, or criticise me.
- ❷ **Catastrophising/awfulising.** 'The world is a terrible, awful place for allowing such a thing to happen', 'Isn't it awful', 'I can't bear it'.
- ❸ **All or nothing thinking.** 'That person is bad . . . they have rejected me . . . they do not accept me. I cannot accept the other person for being like they are . . . I cannot tolerate this feeling'.

■ Helpful beliefs

There are healthier, more constructive, alternatives to 'sulking' and these are the feelings of disappointment or anger. The person who feels disappointed thinks, 'I am a person in an unfortunate situation', which is subtly different

from the sulker who thinks, 'Poor me for receiving such treatment'. The person who expresses their annoyance in anger thinks, 'This is frustrating and I am going to tell somebody and do something about it'. Anger can at times be inappropriate, but if expressed carefully can help to identify and resolve problems. A healthier philosophy is based on the following key beliefs:

- ❶ It is undesirable to be treated unfairly, but it is not awful.
- ❷ I can stand this hurt and frustration and I can try to do something about the situation.
- ❸ I accept how the other person is. They may not have been rejecting me as a whole person but rather just one aspect of my behaviour.
- ❹ It is best to openly express my feelings; the consequences will not be as bad as I think.

■ Tactics for overcoming sulking

- ❶ Look at the advantages and disadvantages of sulking. Advantages might include, 'It lets him know that I'm angry', 'I feel more in control'. Disadvantages might be, 'It hides and avoids dealing with the real problem', 'It has a negative effect on our relationship'.
- ❷ Understand why you sulk. Think back to your childhood. Were you allowed to express your feelings openly, were you encouraged to be assertive?
- ❸ Analyse one specific episode of sulking at a time. Identify the most prominent feeling, eg, anger, disappointment, hurt. Pinpoint the aspect of the situation that you were most hurt by. Try to put into words and formulate in your own mind your interpretation of what happened, how you felt, and what you would like to be different.
- ❹ Express those negative feelings. Use the three-part assertive message. (1) 'I don't like it when you . . .' (2) 'It makes me feel . . .' (3) 'I would like it if . . .'
- ❺ Challenge unconstructive thinking patterns, particularly the overuse of the words 'should', 'ought' and 'must' and for your tendency to 'awfulise', and use 'all or nothing thinking'.