

Emotional Blackmail

What is Emotional Blackmail?

Emotional blackmail is a powerful form of manipulation in which people close to us threaten (either directly or indirectly) to punish us if we don't do what they want. At the heart of any kind of blackmail is one basic threat, which can be expressed in many different ways: ***If you don't behave the way I want you to, you will suffer.***

A criminal blackmailer might threaten to use knowledge about a person's past to ruin her reputation, or ask to be paid off in cash to hide a secret. Emotional blackmail hits closer to home. Emotional blackmailers know how much we value our relationship with them. They know our vulnerabilities. Often they know our deepest secrets. And no matter how much they care about us, when they fear they won't go their way, they use this intimate knowledge to shape the threats that give them the payoff they want: *our compliance*.

Knowing that we want love or approval, our blackmailers threaten to withhold it or take it away altogether, or make feel we must earn it. For example, if you pride yourself being generous and caring, the blackmailer might label you selfish or inconsiderate if you don't accede to his wishes. If you value money and security, the blackmailer might attach conditions to providing them or threaten to take them away. And if you believe the blackmailer, you could fall into a pattern of letting him control your decisions and behavior. We get locked into a dance with blackmail, a dance with myriad steps, shapes and partners.

Emotional blackmailers hate to lose. They take the old adage "It doesn't matter if you win or lose, its how you play the game", and turn it on its head to read "It doesn't matter how you play the game as long as you do not lose." To an emotional blackmailer, keeping your trust doesn't count, respecting your feelings doesn't count, being fair doesn't count. The ground rules that allow for healthy give-and-take go out the window. In the midst of what we thought was a solid relationship it's as though someone yelled "Everyone for himself!" and the other person lumped to take advantage of us while our guard was down. Why is winning so important to blackmailers, we ask ourselves. Why are they doing this to us? Why do they need to get their way so badly that they'll punish us if they don't?

Blackmail takes two: it is a transaction. Following clarity comes change. It's easy to focus on other people's behavior and to think that if they change things will be fine. The change has to begin with the blackmail target. **Our compliance rewards the blackmailer, and every time we reward someone for a particular action, whether we realize it or not, we're letting them know in the strongest possible terms that they can do it again.** The price we pay when we repeatedly give in to emotional blackmail is enormous. It eats away at us and escalates until it puts our most important relationships and our whole sense of self-respect in jeopardy.

Part 1: Understanding the Blackmail Transaction

What Emotional Blackmailers Do

- Threaten to make things difficult if you don't do what they want.
- Constantly threaten to end the relationship if you don't give in.
- Regularly ignore or discount your feelings and wants.
- Tell you or imply that they will neglect, hurt themselves, or become depressed if you don't do what they want.
- Shower you with approval when you give into them and take it away when you don't.
- Use money as a weapon to get their own way.

Components of Emotional Blackmail

The issues may differ, but the tactics and actions will be the same, and clearly recognizable.

1. **Demand**--someone wants something
2. **Resistance**--the other does not feel comfortable with the demand
3. **Pressure**--used to make the resistant one give in
4. **Threat**--to turn up the pressure
5. **Compliance**--on the part of the resistant one
6. **Repetition**--this pattern reoccurs in at least other situations (just with a different name)

Examples of Emotional Blackmail

- “If I ever see another man look at you I will kill him.”
- “If you ever stop loving me I will kill myself.”
- “I've already discussed this with our pastor/therapist/friends/family and they agree that you are being unreasonable.”
- “I'm taking this vacation - with or without you.”
- “Your family hates me. How can you say you love me and still be friends with them?”
- “You've ruined my life and now you are trying to stop me from spending money to take care of myself.”
- “I took the money because you always put yourself first and don't seem to care about my needs.”

The Four Types of Blackmailers

1. **Punishers** (“*If you go back to work, I will leave you*”) let us know exactly what they want, and the consequences we'll face if we don't give it to them, are the most glaring. They may express themselves aggressively or they may smolder in silence, but either way, the anger is always aimed directly at us. The closer the relationship, the higher the stakes and the more vulnerable we are to punishers. When blackmail escalates, the threatened consequences of not acceding to a punisher can be alarming: abandonment, emotional cutoff, withdrawal of money or other resources. Explosive anger directed at us. And, at the most terrifying extreme, threats of physical harm.

2. **Self-punishers** (“*Don’t argue with me or I will get sick or depressed*”) turn the threats inward threatening what they will do to themselves if they don't get their way. High drama, hysteria and an air of crisis (precipitated by you, of course) surround self-punishers, who are often excessively needy and dependent. They often enmesh themselves with those around them and struggle with taking responsibility with their own lives. The ultimate threat self-punishers can make is frightening in the extreme: It's a suggestion that they will kill themselves.
3. **Sufferers** are talented blamers and guilt-peddlers who make us figure out what they want, and always conclude that it is up to us to ensure they get it. Sufferers take the position that if they feel miserable, sick, unhappy, or are just plain unlucky, there's only one solution: our giving them what they want ' even if they haven't told us what it is. They let us know, in no uncertain terms, that if you don't do what they want, they will suffer and it will be your fault. Sufferers are pre-occupied with how awful they feel, and often they interpret your inability to read their mind as proof that you don't care enough about them.
4. **Tantalizers** put us through a series of test and hold out a promise of something wonderful if we'll just give them their way. They are the subtlest blackmailers. They encourage us and promise love or money or career advancement, and then make it clear that unless we behave, as they want us to, we don't get the prize. Every seductively wrapped package has a web of strings attached. Many tantalizers traffic in emotional payoffs, castles in the air full of love, acceptance, family closeness and healed wounds. Admission to this rich, unblemished fantasy requires only one thing: giving in to what the tantalizer wants.

Each type of blackmailer operates with a different vocabulary, and each gives a different spin to the demands, pressure, threats and negative judgments that go into blackmail. There are no firm boundaries between the styles of blackmail, as they can be combined.

Emotions Felt by Victims of Emotional Blackmail

- They feel insecure, unimportant, unworthy and generally bad about themselves.
- They doubt their ideas and needs.
- They feel isolated.
- They may have consistent physical ailments as a result of the stress.

Characteristics of the Victim and Emotional Blackmailer

Victim:

- Constantly seeks approval
- Does their best to avoid anger and keep peace
- Takes the blame for anything that happens to others
- Has compassion and empathy
- Tends to feel pity or obligation

- Believes they need to give in because it is the “right thing to do”
- Has self-doubt with no sense of their worth, intelligence or abilities

Emotional Blackmailer:

- Has great fear of abandonment and deprivation or of being hurt.
- Feels desperate.
- Needs to be in control of things.
- Experiences frequent frustration.
- Has thought distortions regarding the reasonableness of their demands.
- Has had someone emotionally blackmail them and sees that it works to get them what they want.

A Blinding FOG

Blackmailers create a thick '**FOG**' that obscures their actions. **FOG** is a shorthand way of referring to **Fear**, **Obligation** and **Guilt**. Blackmailers pump up an engulfing FOG into their relationships, ensuring that we feel afraid to cross them, obligated to give them their way and terribly guilty if we don't.

Fear, the Real F-Word

Blackmailers build their conscious and unconscious strategies on the information we give them about what we fear. The blackmailers fear of not getting what they want becomes so intense that they become tightly focused, able to see the outcome they want in exquisite detail but unable to take their eyes off the goal long enough to see how their actions are affecting us. At that point, the information they've gathered about us in the course of the relationship becomes ammunition for driving home a deal that's fed on both sides by fear. One of the most painful parts of emotional blackmail is that it violates the trust that has allowed us to reveal ourselves.

Obligation

Often our ideas about duty and obligation are reasonable, and they form an ethical and moral foundation for our lives. Sometimes these are out of balance. Blackmailers never hesitate to put our sense of obligation to the test. Reluctance to break up a family keeps many people in relationships that have gone sour. Most of us have a terrible time defining our boundaries when our sense of obligation is stronger than our sense of self-respect and self-caring; blackmailers quickly learn to take advantage.

Guilt

Guilt is an essential part of being a feeling, responsible person. It's a tool of conscience, in its distorted form, registers discomfort and self-reproach if we've done something to violate our personal or social code of ethics. One of the fastest ways for blackmailers to create undeserved guilt is to use blame, actively attributing whatever upset or problems they're having to their targets. Once blackmailers see that their target's guilt can serve them, time becomes irrelevant. There is no statute of limitations. Guilt is the

blackmailer's neutron bomb. It can leave relationships standing, but it wears away the trust and intimacy that makes us want to be with them.

Tools the Emotional Blackmailer Uses to Create FOG

- Making demands seem reasonable.
- Making the victim feel selfish.
- Labeling with negative qualities and connotations.
- Pathologizing or crazy making.
- Making a demand that needs an immediate response.
- Allying themselves with someone of authority or influence i.e. parents, children, mental health professionals, religious leaders etc.
- Comparing the victim to a person that the victim does not like or is in competition with. Learning the victim's "triggers".
- Assess how much pressure to apply before the victim will give in.

Tools of the Trade

The tools are a constant that runs through the endlessly varied scenarios of emotional blackmail, and all blackmailers, no matter what their style, use one or more of them:

The Spin

Blackmailers see our conflicts with them as reflections of how misguided and off base we are, while they describe themselves as wise and well intentioned. They let us know that they ought to win because the outcome they want is more loving, more open, more mature. Any resistance on our parts is transformed from an indication of our needs to evidence of our flaws. In addition to discrediting the perceptions of their targets, many blackmailers turn up the pressure by challenging our character, motives, and worth. We may be labeled heartless, worthless or selfish in any relationship with a blackmailer, but those labels are especially difficult to withstand when they're coming from a parent who can wipe out our confidence faster than anyone else.

Pathologizing

Some blackmailers tell us that we're resisting them only because we're ill or crazy. This is called pathologizing. The experience of being pathologized can be a devastating blow to our confidence and sense of self and is therefore an especially toxic and effective tool.

Pathologizing often arises in love relationships when there's an imbalance of desires more love, more time, more attention, more commitment when it's not forthcoming, he/she questions our ability to love. Like the spin, pathologizing makes us unsure about our memories, our judgments, our intelligence, and our character. With pathologizing the stakes are higher, and can make us doubt our sanity.

Enlisting Allies

When single-handed attempts at blackmail are effective, black-mailers call in reinforcements (parents, children, mental health professionals, religious leaders etc.), to make their case for them and to prove that they are right. They may turn to a higher authority such as the bible.

Negative comparisons

Blackmailers often hold up another person as a model, a flawless ideal against which we fall short. Negative comparisons make us feel suddenly deficient. We react competitively.

The Inner World of the Blackmailer

Emotional blackmailers hate to lose. Blackmailers can't tolerate frustration. To the blackmailer, frustration is connected to deep, resonant fears of loss and deprivation, and they experience it as a warning that unless they take immediate action they'll face intolerable consequences. These convictions may be rooted in a lengthy history of feeling anxious and insecure. Complementing and reinforcing possible genetic factors are powerful messages from our caretakers and society about whom we are and how we are supposed to behave. Blackmailers believe that they can compensate for some of the frustrations of the past by changing the current reality.

The potential for blackmail rises dramatically during such crises as a separation or divorce, loss of a job, illness and retirement, which undermine blackmailers' sense of themselves as valuable people. Often people who have had everything and have been overprotected and indulged have had little opportunity to develop confidence in their ability to handle any kind of loss. At the first hint that they might be deprived, they panic, and shore themselves up with blackmail.

Usually blackmailers focus totally on their needs, their desires; they don't seem to be the least bit interested in our needs or how their pressure is affecting us. They often behave as though each disagreement is the make-or-break factor in the relationship.

Blackmailers frequently win with tactics that create an insurmountable rift in the relationship. Yet the short-term victory often appears to be enough of a triumph ' as if there were no future to consider. Most blackmailers operate from an I-want-what-I want-when-I-want it mind-set. Any logic or ability to see the consequences of their actions is obscured by the urgency blackmailers feel to hold on to what they have.

The most important thing to take away from the tour of a blackmailer's psyche is that emotional blackmailer sounds like it's all about you and feels like it's all about you, but for the most part it's not about you at all. Instead it flows from and tries to stabilize some fairly insecure places inside the blackmailer. Many times it has more to do with the past than the present, and it's more concerned with filling the blackmailer's needs than with anything the blackmailer says we did or didn't do.

It Takes Two

Blackmail cannot work without the target's active participation. The target gives it permission to occur. You may be aware of the blackmail but feel as though you can't resist it, because the blackmailer's pressure sets off almost programmed responses in you, and you're reacting automatically or impulsively.

Blackmailers may be aware of your hot buttons. Faced with resistance, blackmailers' fear of deprivation kicks in and they use every bit of information to ensure that they prevail. The protective qualities that we have that open us up to emotional blackmail are:

- An excessive need for approval.
- An intense fear of anger.
- A need for peace at any price.
- A tendency to take too much responsibility for other people's lives.
- A high level of self-doubt

When kept in balance and alternated with other behavior, none of these styles dooms you to the status of 'preferred target' of an emotional blackmailer. Emotional blackmailing takes training and practice. *Emotional blackmailers take their cues from our responses to their testing, and they learn from both what we do and what we don't do.*

The Impact of Blackmail

Emotional blackmail may not be life threatening but it robs us of our integrity. Integrity is that place inside where our values and our moral compass reside, clarifying what right and wrong for us.

- We let ourselves down.
- A vicious cycle ensues.
- Rationalizing and justifying.
- We may betray others to placate the blackmailer.
- It sucks the safety out of the relationship.
- We may shut down and constrict emotional generosity.

The impact on our well-being:

- Mental health
- Physical pain as a warning

Part 2: Turning Understanding into Action

To change, we need to know what we have to do and then we have to act. If you're willing to take action now and let your feelings of confidence and competence catch up with you, you can end emotional blackmail.

What is Necessary to Stop Emotional Blackmail

- The victim must begin to look at the situation in a new way.
- They must detach from their emotions.
- They must realize that they are being blackmailed and that it is not appropriate for the blackmailer to be treating them in that manner.

- They must make a commitment to themselves that they will take care of themselves and no longer allow this abusive treatment.
- They need to see that a demand is being made on them and that it makes them uncomfortable.
- They must determine why the demand feels uncomfortable.
- They must not give into the pressure for an immediate decision.
- They must set boundaries to be able to take time to consider the situation and to look at all of the alternatives to make the decision.
- Finally, they must consider their own needs first for a change, in this process.

How to Respond to Emotional Blackmailers

Below are some specific ways to answer the most common types of responses. It can't be emphasized too strongly how important it is to practice saying these statements until they feel natural to you; how to respond to the other person's catastrophic predictions and threats. Punishers and self-punishers may try pressuring you to change your decision by bombarding you with visions of the extreme negative consequences of doing what you've decided to do. It's never easy to resist the fear that their bleak vision will come to pass, especially when the theme they're pounding home is "Bad things will happen - and it'll be your fault." But hold your ground.

When they say:	Then you say:
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> * If you don't take care of me, I'll wind up in the hospital/on the street/unable to work. * You'll never see your kids again. * You'll destroy this family. * You're not my child anymore. * I'm cutting you out of my will. * I'll get sick. * I can't make it without you. * I'll make you suffer. * You'll be sorry. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> * That's your choice. * I hope you won't do that, but I've made my decision. * I know you're very angry right now. When you've had a chance to think about this, maybe you'll change your mind. * Why don't we talk about this again when you're less upset? Threats/suffering/tears aren't going to work anymore. * I'm sorry you're upset.

When they say:	Then you say:
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<ul style="list-style-type: none"> * I can't believe you're being so selfish. This isn't like you. You're only thinking of yourself. You never think about my feelings. * I really thought you were different from the other women/men I've been with. I guess I was wrong. * That's the stupidest thing I've ever heard. * Everyone knows that children are supposed to respect their parents. * How can you be so disloyal? * You're just being an idiot. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> * You're entitled to your opinion. * I'm sure that's how it looks to you. * That could be. * You may be right. * I need to think about this more. * We'll never get anywhere if you keep insulting me. * I'm sorry you're upset.
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When they say:	Then you say:
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> * How could you do this to me (after all I've done for you)? * Why are you ruining my life? * Why are you being so stubborn/obstinate/selfish? * What's come over you? * Why are you acting like this? * Why do you want to hurt me? * Why are you making such a big deal out of this? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> * I knew you wouldn't be happy about this, but that's the way it has to be. * There are no villains here. We just want different things. * I'm not willing to take more than 50 percent of the responsibility. * I know how upset/angry/disappointed you are, but it's not negotiable. * We see things differently. * I'm sure you see it that way. * I'm sorry you're upset.

Handling Silence

But what about the person who blackmails through anger that is expressed covertly through sulks and suffering? When they say nothing, what can you say or do? For many targets, this silent anger is far more maddening and crazy than an overt attack. Sometimes it seems as if nothing works with this kind of blackmailer, and sometimes nothing does. But you'll have the most success if you stick to the principles of non-defensive communication and stay conscious of the following do's and don'ts.

<p>In dealing with silent blackmailers, DON'T:</p>	<p>DO use the following techniques:</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> * Expect them to make the first step toward resolving the conflict. * Plead with them to tell you what's wrong. * Keep after them for a response (which will only make them withdraw more). * Criticize, analyze or interpret their motives, character or inability to be direct. * Willingly accept blame for whatever they're upset about to get them into a better mood. * Allow them to change the Subject. * Get intimidated by the tension and anger in the air. * Let your frustration cause you to make threats you really don't mean (e.g., "If you don't tell me what's wrong, I'll never speak to you again"). * Assume that if they ultimately apologize, it will be followed by any significant change in their behavior. * Expect major personality changes, even if they recognize what they're doing and are willing to work on it. Remember: Behavior can change. Personality styles usually don't. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> * Remember that you are dealing with people who feel inadequate and powerless and who are afraid of your ability to hurt or abandon them. * Confront them when they're more able to hear what you have to say. Consider writing a letter. It may feel less threatening to them. * Reassure them that they can tell you what they're angry about and you will hear them out without retaliating. * Use tact and diplomacy. This will reassure them that you won't exploit their vulnerabilities and bludgeon them with recriminations. * Say reassuring things like "I know you're angry right now, and I'll be willing to discuss this with you as soon as you're ready to talk about it," Then leave them alone. You'll only make them withdraw more if you don't. * Don't be afraid to tell them that their behavior is upsetting to you, but begin by expressing appreciation. For example: "Dad, I really care about you, and I think you're one of the smartest people I know, but it really bothers me when you clam up every time we disagree about something and just walk away is hurting our relationship, and I wonder if you would talk to me about that." * Stay focused on the issue you're upset about. * Expect to be attacked when you express a grievance, because they experience your assertion as an attack on them as an attack on them. * Let them know that you know they're angry

and what you're willing to do about it. For example: "I'm sorry you 're upset because I don't want your folks to stay with us when they're in town, but I'm certainly willing to take the time to find a nice hotel for them and maybe pay for part of their vacation."

- * Accept the fact that you will have to make the first move most, if not all, of the time.
- * Let some things slide

These techniques are the only ones that have a chance to interrupt the pattern that's so typical of a silent, angry blackmailer, the cycle that goes "Look how upset I am, and it's all your fault. Now figure out what you did wrong and how you're going to make it up to me." I know how infuriating it is to have to be the rational one when you feel like strangling the other person, but it's the only way I know to create an atmosphere that will allow change to take place. Your hardest job will be to stay non defensive and to convince the quietly angry person that it's OK for them to be angry when they've spent a lifetime believing just the opposite.

(This review is based on the book: "Emotional Blackmail" by Susan Forward, Ph.D. The author is an internationally acclaimed therapist, lecturer, and author.)