



BY MERILEE KERN

BREAK THE *Silence*

It Begins With You

6 Ways
'Silent Agreements'
Are Undermining
Your Life

If you have engaged in relationships of any kind, you have experienced and likely battled against “silent agreements.” While most have never used or even heard of this term, silent agreements are present in our everyday lives where they lurk in the shadows of our relationships—at home, in social circles, and in the workplace. 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. Most often the other party is doing the same thing, which adds layers that make silent agreements even more complicated and challenging to uncover and rectify.

Sometimes the unspoken expectations of two people line up, and when they do, their silent agreements line up as well. Then the relationships can hum along without drama, stress, or misunderstandings. Often enough, this does not happen organically. Because many silent agreements can be completely out of line and given their sometimes clandestine nature, silent agreements are sometimes problematic for our relationships. With the litany of unspoken expectations people often have of one another on any front—money, commitment, intimacy, kids, jobs and careers, health issues, technology and social media connections—silent agreements can exist in all aspects of life. Sometimes unawareness of these values or expectations can naturally result in long term complications or even outright relationship chaos.

“Whether in alignment with others or not, in many cases the silent agreements we have with one another, or towards another, are not acknowledged or openly discussed,” notes clinical psychologist, Michele L. Owens, Ph.D. “This is largely due to the fact that we, ourselves, may not be consciously aware of the expectations we harbor. Other times, we feel that we have too much to lose if we talk openly, or we regard silence as less frightening than what would happen if we tell the ‘real’ story about what we are thinking and wanting from another person. So, we avoid discussing the real issues because we are afraid to upset the status quo. Each of these scenarios creates the opportunity, and some might say the likelihood, for disappointments, misunderstandings, distortions, false assumptions, and resentment between individuals. The more a relationship lacks awareness of these silent agreements, the more pervasive the silent agreements are, and the more likely we risk losing authentic communication.”

“Often, we erroneously believe our silent agreements with others to be understood or implied, thinking we share the same understanding or meaning of an unspoken expectation,” reveals clinical psychologist, Linda Anderson, PhD. “One person can have a particular perception about an unspoken issue while the other is experiencing something entirely different. The result can be debilitating and downright deadly for relationships. Silent agreements that don’t match typically come to the fore eventually because of the complications and challenges they present to the relationship. And in the meantime, they’re growing and potentially taking their toll on you in other unknown ways. Avoiding communication is not a healthy way to deal with it, and as time goes by, the harder it becomes to hide behind the silence.”

“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. That unspoken agreement and missed conversation shows up in your interactions and can have ramifications not only for your relationships, but for so many other aspects of your life. Once you become more aware of your silent agreements, you can identify and make choices about the ones that are prohibiting you from realizing your relationship potential. You’ll be much better equipped to actually begin breaking the silence and talking. Unfortunately, relatively few have the awareness and insights needed to recognize and address the silent agreements that adversely affect their relationships and lives overall.”

Silent agreements often revolve around those issues that people do not recognize or are too uncomfortable to acknowledge and “put on the table” to openly discuss. Sometimes individuals remain silent to protect themselves from exposing their insecurities or fears.

Consider these six examples of some typical land-mine issues at home, play, and work that often result in, and are exacerbated by, detrimental silent agreements:

1 **Change and Stagnation:** *Changing the hardest paradigm you fear.*

People who have been dissatisfied in their jobs and stay anyway often create silent agreements resulting in missed opportunities. Perhaps they are loyal to a person or cause that no longer fits them. The type of agreement they are living with undermines pursuing the career course they truly desire. This silent agreement starts with yourself and the fear of change. A more enriching silent agreement must first begin with a conversation with yourself. Acknowledge the challenge in moving on and create a way to leave even while you are feeling the discomfort.

2 **Flexibility and Inflexibility:** *When roles limit us.*

He washes dishes and she cooks. Then one day he comes home and cooks and she doesn’t wash the dishes. The expectation that she would silently switch roles was part of his silent agreement but not part of hers. Inflexibility can undermine the goals of relationships when unexpected shifts occur without an open discussion of the issue. Here his agreement involves an exchange of duties, while hers is less flexible and focused on a predictable division of labor.

3 **Creative Freedom and Stable Tradition:** *Building blocks that sustain us.*

Some couples are inseparable, and yet that intimacy works to keep each from being their “best independent self.” Their silent agreement maintains the intense closeness by avoiding any pursuit of individual fulfillment. Consider how this agreement develops. She does not apply for the job promotion because of how it will make him feel. Later, she resents him for it. We sabotage each other’s ability to explore enriching options and reach our true potential when we sign on to silent agreements that neglect the desire for creative freedom.

4 **Commitment:** *Feeling secure in the face of insecurity.*

The cheating boyfriend married his longtime girlfriend, each with different notions of their commitment to each other. He thought, “Now she’ll never leave me,” and she thought, “Now he’ll never cheat again.” They weren’t aware of their differing silent agreements and were unable to talk about what they needed to feel secure in the relationship. So, he cheated and she left, and locked in their silence, neither got the relationship they sorely hoped for, NOR the chance to achieve that goal together. When misaligned silent agreements are uncovered, it can prevent outcomes like these.

5 **Favoring Perception Over Reality:**

Debilitating agreements with yourself.

This silent agreement is sure to undermine us when we are committed to the trappings of success at any cost. It takes emotional maturity to recognize that what is truly important is not always what others approve of or perceive as important. Credit cards maxed and income squandered suggest that your emphasis on appearances has undermined your actual security. When maintaining excessive spending habits, financial insecurity, and monetary chaos is more important than reality, it is likely that you are in a depleting silent agreement with yourself. In contrast, an enriching silent agreement is the commitment to confront the conflicting identities being created at the literal expense of financial ruin, allowing you to make friends with the truth of who and where you are in your real life.

6 **Self-Care and Neglect:**

Denial does wonders for your health.

Communication is often undermined in relationships by counterproductive and contradictory actions that grow out of silent agreements. A silent agreement evolved with the couple that doesn’t talk about how their weekly baking of cakes and sweets impacts the husband’s diabetes. With this silent agreement, they won’t have to face the fact that both of them have agreed to undermine his health. One baked and the other ate. While they talked about the impact of cakes on his diet and health, they never uncovered the real silent agreement. Rather than talk about the silent agreement that would require them to acknowledge the impact of sweets on his illness, he blames her for baking and she blames him for lack of self-control. As long as they don’t cooperatively acknowledge their mutual investment in the neglect of his self-care, they can point the finger at each other for the chronic disease that becomes life threatening. If they could imagine that their relationship could be enriched by acknowledging their silent fears about his illness while supporting each other, perhaps then they would prefer a relationship of open agreements.

Anderson concludes, “We convince ourselves that it’s safer to avoid bringing up sensitive issues in order to keep the peace. So we simply go on as if we have already communicated when the fact is that we have not. Meanwhile, in fact, our relationships continue to be unfavorably affected by this silence that’s bolstered with a poisonous undercurrent of expectation. After all, there are some things just not worth talking about, right? Wrong! Once you become more aware of the agreements that are keeping your life from flourishing, you can begin to uncover what is actually going on in your relationships.”

Doctors Linda Anderson, Sonia Banks, and Michele Owens are licensed clinical psychologists with private practices and a consulting agency, “Sessions: Innovations in Psychology.” Reach them on line at www.SilentAgreements.com and follow them on Twitter @agreements101.



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