

A person is standing in a shallow puddle, holding a large, tattered, brown umbrella. The puddle's surface is highly reflective, mirroring the bright blue sky and white clouds above. The person's shadow is cast onto the pavement and the edge of the puddle. The overall scene is surreal and evocative, suggesting a sense of being protected or sheltered in a harsh environment.

HOW TO PROTECT YOURSELF FROM MANIPULATION

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Do you remember the last time someone manipulated you? Manipulation comes in all varieties. Dictators use fear to control countries. Scammers trick the naive into falling for their schemes. Salesclerks skillfully tap into our innate longings to move us to buy their products. But perhaps the people hardest to resist are the ones we know and love. To question them feels mean. Yet to blindly comply breeds regret, resentment, and broken relationships.

Giving in to the manipulator isn't good for him or her either. The five-year-old who charms her parents to get her way may become the boss who flatters to squeeze extra hours of work out of her employees without fair compensation. The religious leader who uses guilt to secure workers and funds for his new project abuses his influence even if he believes his goal is noble. The parents who dangle exotic vacations and expensive gifts over their adult children to get them to spend holidays with them and turn a cold shoulder when they don't comply are using their children and won't ever feel loved by them because they know they bought their kids' time.

Giving in to manipulation may bring relief and reward—in the short-term—but creates an unhealthy pattern and lasting regret. The longer this dance continues the more jaded we become. Perhaps you can relate to the following.

Manipulated by the Wrong Definition of Love

Example # 1

I joined an outreach ministry after college to work with high school students. In my inexperience, I confused love with not disappointing people and allowed a needy student to manipulate me out of time and sleep. Her urgent calls at all hours left me exhausted. When my director heard about it, he offered some sound advice.

He pointed out that the time I gave this girl stole time and energy from receptive students. My time belonged to God. I was accountable to Him, not this gal, for how I spent it.

His counsel resonated with me and gave me permission to limit my interaction with this young woman. Cutting our calls short prompted her to replace the flowery notes of appreciation she'd formerly left on my car windshield with hate letters. But I didn't care. I was free.

Example # 2

Strangers aren't the only ones who take advantage of us. When my son attended a year-round middle school, during his breaks I took time off from work for activities he enjoyed. As much as I enjoyed being with him, other responsibilities prevented me from entertaining him his whole three-week break.

To avoid the guilt I felt when he moped, I gave him more time than I could afford. Frustration built in me when my work called and yet my son was still not content. He sensed my irritation and forgot all the fun we'd previously shared. No one was happy.

When I recognized this pattern, I preempted it. I explained what I could give and what I couldn't. I put the responsibility of his happiness back on his shoulders. We both grew from this and enjoyed our time together. We learned where our respective responsibilities lay. My peace didn't depend on my son's attitude, and his happiness didn't rest in me.

How Do We Protect Ourselves from Manipulation?

Jesus said no one can serve two masters. Caving in to manipulation makes the wrong person lord. Jesus is the only one worthy of directing our time and talents. If we accept tasks not meant for us, our work, family, and happiness suffer. We also run the risk of robbing others of the joy of exercising their gifts and relying on Jesus.

The first step to resisting manipulation is to recognize it. The controllers in our lives may be blind to their tactics, but we don't have to be. The closer we walk with the Lord the quicker we recognize His gentle voice in the din of competing influences.

Questions to Consider when You Suspect Manipulation:

- **How do I feel when I'm with this person or group?**

Manipulators provide free guilt trips for their victims. We feel bad if we don't buy anything from the shoe clerk who brought out a dozen pairs of shoes when we asked to see one. Being kind and generous is different from feeling cornered into doing something we don't want to do. If I feel resentful, I need a clearer understanding of what is going on.

A woman pulled aside a friend one night to complain about not having any friends. My friend prayed for the woman but left feeling guilty. Driving home, she realized the woman's manipulative tactics. Her guilty feelings evaporated with understanding.

- **What's motivating my compliance?**

When I comply in order to avoid angering or disappointing someone, I'm being manipulated. The Bible instructs us to act in faith and love ([Romans 14:23](#)). I should never trade what is true and right for temporary relief.

Giving in to controlling people doesn't protect us from emotional pain. We despise our spineless compliance and resent them and any reminder of them. This isn't love. People who habitually let others control them tend toward self-destructive habits. They mindlessly eat, shop, drink, or gamble to numb the pain of feeling used.

- **Have I counted the cost of complying?**

Controllers use fear, sweet words, and pathetic looks to manipulate our feelings and drown out reason ([Pro. 29:25](#)). The Scripture warns, “Charm is deceitful” (Pro. 31:30 NASB).

A young woman I once knew surrendered her virginity to a young man because he told her nobody liked him and she obviously didn’t either since she wouldn’t sleep with him. This woman’s pity overwhelmed her values and good sense. Her momentary lapse left her with ongoing regret.

- **Do I automatically avoid conflict?**

Perhaps because of past experiences and/or different temperament inclinations, conflict unsettles some more than others. The need to silence it at all cost overwhelms them, especially when religious jargon and guilt are flung around. Learning to resist this urge may be what’s needed for faith to grow.

When some religious people tried to control a group of believers in the early church, Paul wrote, “It is for freedom that Christ has set us free. Stand firm, then, and do not let yourselves be burdened again by a yoke of slavery” (Gal. 5:1 NIV).

Standing firm in our God-given freedom may upset controlling people. But that isn’t bad. Paul said, “No doubt there have to be differences among you to show which of you have God’s approval” (1 Cor. 11:19 NIV). Conflict exposes hearts. If it arises because you won’t cave to manipulative pressure, take heart, you’re in good company.

How to Stop Caving to Manipulation

Did someone come to mind who uses pity, guilt, or anger to control you? Are you being manipulated? Consider the following tips to help you when you face manipulation.

1. **Don’t confuse biblical love with pleasing someone.**

Jesus often said “no” to people in order to say “yes” to His Father ([Gal. 1:10](#)).

2. **Learn to recognize power struggles and walk away.**

We become slaves of the one we obey ([Rom. 6:16](#)). Obey the Holy Spirit.

3. **Take charge of your response.**

Don’t waste time wishing the manipulator would change. (The clerk probably has customers who love being tempted. Your mother-in-law believes she’s being helpful.) If others pout and blame you for their bad moods, remember their attitudes are their

problem. The fruit of the Spirit is self-control ([Gal. 5:22-23](#)).

4. **Screaming obscenities is mean; saying “No, thank you,” is not.**

Practice giving and receiving “no.” Your needs and desires matter because you matter to God ([1 Pet. 5:7](#)).

5. **Look at your situation as from the outside.**

Would you ask someone to do what this person is pressuring you to do? Would you want your loved one to comply to such a request, or would you warn them against it? Sometimes we need someone else’s perspective to gain objectivity.

6. **Set boundaries.**

Do you say no like you mean it? Or are you sending a mixed message? Limit your time with boundary busters.

7. **Give yourself grace.**

Discernment develops through practice ([Heb. 5:14](#)). Look at these encounters as opportunities to grow in wisdom and strength. God is for you ([Rom. 8:31](#))!

Reach Out to Your Big God

When the pressure to comply overwhelms you, reach out to your big God. Your High Priest stands ready and able to help in your time of need.

Remember people with religious-sounding arguments tried to manipulate Jesus and the apostles too. They understood what was at stake and escaped those nets. When we serve one Lord, we too will discern and resist manipulation.

For help in learning to think biblically, check out [Debbie’s books](#).

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