

## Partner Punishing

### Recognising destructive conflict resolution behaviours

In any intimate relationship, conflicts and disagreements are inevitable. However, how we choose to navigate those moments can either strengthen the bond or create deeper divisions. One unhealthy response to conflict is partner punishing - when a partner responds to unresolved issues or disagreements by punishing the other, instead of addressing the problem directly and constructively. This is often fueled by frustration, anger, or resentment, and can lead to passive-aggressive or retaliatory actions. Let's explore some common forms of partner punishing:

**1. Withholding sex or intimacy:** When intimacy becomes a tool for control, it transforms from an act of love into a form of manipulation. This can leave the punished partner feeling rejected, frustrated, or emotionally isolated.

**2. Shaming (Subtle or Overt):** Shaming can involve sarcastic remarks, belittling comments, or subtle digs at a partner's shortcomings. It can sound like comments such as "of course you don't understand," or "you never get anything right," can chip away at a partner's self-esteem, leaving them feeling small and devalued.

**3. Flirting with someone else:** Flirting with others or engaging in behaviors that spark jealousy, as a means of punishing a partner, makes the other feel insecure or less valued. The punisher tries to reassert control or force an emotional reaction, steering the focus away from the original conflict.

**4. Bringing up past fights or exes:** Instead of dealing with the current disagreement, comments such as, "you always [insert past mistake]," or, "my ex never did this." This tactic deflects from the present problem and piles on past grievances, escalating the argument.

**5. Passive-aggressive tasks:** A more subtle form of punishment is when one partner passive-aggressively does a task they've been asked to do, but in a way that shows displeasure. For example, cleaning the dishes but slamming them



Marvel, endgame...flirting with others

down, or completing a chore with exaggerated annoyance.

#### 6. Being snarky or intentionally oppositional

Snarky comments or deliberately disagreeing with a partner for the sake of it is another way of subtly punishing them. When one partner goes out of their way to oppose ideas or plans, it creates a hostile environment where healthy communication becomes stifled.

#### 7. Carrot dangling or moving the goalposts

This involves making promises or suggestions for resolution, but never truly delivering. For instance, agreeing to discuss an issue later or promising to change behavior but then constantly shifting expectations or delaying action. This leaves the punished partner in a state of emotional limbo, unable to resolve anything.

While partner punishing may feel satisfying in the short term, it often leads to long-term relational damage. The punished partner may feel rejected, unloved, and invalidated, eroding trust and deepening emotional distance. This dynamic can lead to resentment, emotional disconnection, or relationship breakdown. Breaking the habit of partner punishing is about fostering emotional maturity and creating a relationship based on mutual respect and understanding.

If you identify any of these patterns in yourself and want to be different, couples counselling could be a good idea, and learn ways of breaking these less than healthy behavioural patterns.

Words: **Scout Smith-O'Leary**

Scout is a Relationship Therapist providing counselling to couples & individuals. Based in Manly. Telehealth available. Call **0410 030 463** or visit **thelovescout.com** or for more info or to book a session.

PHOTO: ALEXIS BROWN - UNSPLASH

## Preparing for your mental health with a baby on the way

With 1 in 4 women and 1 in 10 men experiencing some form of postnatal depression, planning for your mental health is one of the most important things you can do before the birth of your baby. When you are making a birth plan, make a mental health plan too. Spend as much time thinking about your mental health as you do when purchasing the perfect stroller!

As a Lactation Consultant, I am often one of the first external people to realise there may be something wrong and to have gentle discussions with you and your family about how and where to get more help. I prioritise mental health over everything else, every single time.

**REMEMBER - Nothing else matters if you are not ok.**

Planning for postnatal mental health can look like the following:

- Set aside a time to have an open and honest discussion with your partner and any other key support people in your life about how they can best support you postnatally and how they might know you really need help vs normal adjustment to motherhood. This could be a codeword that you say to make sure it is taken seriously.
- Do you have a postnatal team in place? Therapist, GP, Lactation Consultant, Midwife or OB, Doula, Medications, Emergency Friend - list them all down.
- Think about what the most important thing to you is when becoming a parent, so that you can come back to that simple focus when you feel overwhelmed.
- What things make you feel good when you need it? A walk on the beach, a gym session, a coffee, 10mins alone, meditation etc?
- Who is a completely non-judgemental person that you can call in an emergency and they will drop everything and come and listen? Prepare them that they are your person too.

To help you clarify this plan, I have created a free downloadable mental health planning sheet which is available on the Beaches Baby website: [beachesbaby.com.au/beaches-baby-blog/antenatal-mental-health-plan](https://beachesbaby.com.au/beaches-baby-blog/antenatal-mental-health-plan)

I am also available for at home consultations where we discuss everything from your feeding concerns to debriefing your birth, check in on your mental health, family dynamics and making sure you have your support system.

#### If you need urgent mental health assistance:

Gidget Foundation: 1300 851 758  
NSW Health Mental Health Line: 1800 011 511  
Panda: 1300 726 306  
Lifeline: 13 11 14  
Emergency Services: 000

Words: **Peta Arthurson**

Peta Arthurson is an International Board Certified Lactation Consultant and founder of **Beaches Baby** [www.beachesbaby.com.au](https://www.beachesbaby.com.au)

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