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Death by Sarcasm

By GLENN CAMPBELL

The most widespread form of child abuse is practiced by the Jewish mother. And the Greek mother and the Irish mother... maybe even your mother.

"Fine," she says, "do what you want. I don't care."

But the way she says it doesn't exactly give you permission. It's a no-win situation. If you do what her words say—which is go out and have fun—you know there will be retribution later. But if you do what she seems to want—stay home and not have fun—you're also going to suffer because you're disobeying her words.

The expanded complaint might go like this: "I work my fingers to the bone, but what thanks do I get? Nada. No one cares what I feel, so I don't care either. You go have fun, and I'll just stay home and be miserable."

Welcome to the classic parental/spousal guilt trip. It's a special way they have of making you feel bad no matter what you do.

It tends to happen when you are actually winning the argument and your mother/father/spouse doesn't have a reply. "Fine, do what you want." That translates into, "You've won, but I'm not going to let you feel good about it."

There is no easy way to describe the guilt trip and the way it makes you feel, but its means of expression seems to be related to sarcasm. That's the practice of deriding something by saying the opposite of what you mean. ("Great, another rainy day.") Sarcasm is an epithet used by the weak to cover up their own helplessness. In relationships, it's the verbal equivalent of domestic

violence: If you can't win an argument by reason, just hit 'em in the jaw with shame.

Sarcasm is a different than irony—which is saying the opposite of what is expected. ("I love you, my little piglet.") Irony can be gentle and humorous, while sarcasm conveys an air of cynicism and bitterness. ("Yeah, right.") When someone is too insecure to express their opinions directly, they can use sarcasm to say them indirectly, without really taking responsibility for them. ("I just *love* what our President has done for the country.")

Cloying mothers (and fathers) of every ethnicity have a range of sarcastic weapons in their arsenal, including the guilt trip, the no-win permission and the backhanded compliment.

"Dear, I admire your courage in wearing a dress like that."

Sarcasm is often used as a means of manipulation—getting ones way by playing on other people's emotions. If you can't get what you want by negotiation, you can try using guilt or pity. ("You take such good care of your mother.") Manipulation doesn't usually work in the long run, because the subject eventually catches on and pulls away (to the other side of the country if possible) but that doesn't prevent the manipulator from trying. Her own self-confidence is so low that she may not even attempt negotiation before laying on the guilt trip.

Sarcasm is child abuse because it gives the kid no way out. Any path he takes leads to humiliation. He can never feel the pride of winning an argument or negotiating for what he wants, because the parent allows no victory.

Most importantly, sarcasm doesn't change the child's behavior, at least in the way the parent intends. Instead, it encourages the child to withdraw and go underground. He stops asking permission for things but does them on the sly. He comes up with cover stories for his actions—creative lies about where he's going and what he's doing that won't destabilize the caregiver—and he may even forget what his real feelings are.

The children of sarcasm tend to be passive-aggressive, just like their parents. They don't lash out at others so much as fail to get things done, like chores and homework. Faced with conflict, they tend to withdraw emotionally, just like they did from Mom. In a romantic relationship (usually just after the wedding), they'll do the minimum required of them and little more. Sarcasm may seem like harmless words, but it can be deadly to ones emotional life.

There's isn't much we can do about sarcasm in society at large. There are no laws against it, and the sarcastic person isn't usually open to advice. The only thing we can do about this scourge is try to stamp it out in our own communications.

There is great power in expressing yourself simply, directly and without the bitter edge, so people clearly understand what you want and how to give it to you. In the political minefield of human relations, such honesty can be tricky, but it's usually healthier for everyone in the long run.

—G.C.

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