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Mind Games People Play

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At one point in Shakespeare's Hamlet, the author has Hamlet say to Guildenstern, "Why, look you now, how unworthy a thing you make of me! You would play upon me, you would seem to know my stops, you would pluck out the heart of my mystery..." Shakespeare was talking about manipulation, about playing with somebody's mind in order to get something from them without their knowing it. People have probably been playing mind games from the beginning of time.



We play mind games because it makes us feel powerful and allows us to avoid taking responsibility for our feelings. The drawback of playing mind games is that you never really have an authentic relationship with people and thus never feel a deep loving connection that comes from honesty and trust.

Below are seven common mind games.

1 – Disqualifying. This is a method of saying something hurtful to someone and then, when they become hurt, doing a double-whammy by making it seem you didn't at all mean what they thought you meant. You may say to someone, "Sometimes you're so gullible." If the person becomes hurt (which you consciously or unconsciously want), you reply, "Oh, I was just joking. Sometimes you're so over-sensitive." Not only do you hurt them once, but you hurt them twice, by disqualifying what you first said and then insulting them. This can make the other person both angry and confused.

2 – Forgetting. Passive-aggressive personalities play this game. Basically they forget important things like appointments, promises, paying back loans and the like. You wait for them to remember but they don't, and when you bring it up they reply, "Oh, I'm so sorry, I forgot." After having to bring it up several times you start to get annoyed. Then they reply, "Oh, I'm really sorry. Are you angry? You seem angry." If you ask them if they're angry at you, they protest, "Oh, God no. If I were I'd tell you." They make you feel that you're angry over nothing, which makes you more angry. This is how they "dump" their anger onto you without giving you a chance to voice your own anger.

3 – Persecuting. Sometimes people project their hatred onto others and persecute them. They are either unaware of their own hatred or they think it's justified. Once they begin projecting, they look for reasons to persecute. If the hated individuals disagree with them on politics, decline an invitation or smile the wrong way, the persecutor finds a way to punish them. They may talk trash about them behind their backs, get others to gang up against them, or speak to them in a condescending or insulting way. They judge them as bad or evil and treat them accordingly. They never discuss their feelings or try to work things out. This is the opposite of the golden rule, "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you." This could be stated, "Punish others for not being what you want them to be."

4 – Guilt-Tripping. The game here is to make someone feel guilty unless they do what you want them to do. A wife calls her husband a "sexist," and at first he may protest, but eventually, in order not to be a sexist, he tries to be the kind of husband she wants. A husband tells his wife she's frigid because he wants her to feel guilty about not having sex with him. Thus, instead of simply saying to one's spouse, "It makes me feel hurt when you do such and such," which would lead to a discussion that might require both to look at themselves objectively, one simply calls the other a name and arouses guilt while avoiding reality.

5 – Gas-lighting. The term "gas-lighting" comes from the classic movie with Ingrid Bergman, in which her husband tries to make her think she's going crazy because she's seeing things (such as the gas lights going on and off). When she sees the lights going on and off, he says he doesn't see that at all. Some very disturbed people use this technique on a hated relative. They say and do things and then deny they ever said them. When their partner persists in bringing up these things, the gas-lighter begins to question the other's sanity. "I think maybe you have an over-active imagination, my dear." At time the disturbed person isn't even conscious he or she is doing it.

6 – Shaming. People who play the shaming game express their anger by looking to catch people they don't like saying or doing something they consider inappropriate. It is the opposite of idealizing someone; it is demonizing someone. A militant religious person may wait for those who are not religious to say the "wrong thing." "Religion isn't always good," someone might say. The religious nut might then jump on them as they would a monster, distribute their quote all over the internet in an outraged tone and demand an apology. This game enables the shamer to dump his or her anger while looking to all the world like an innocent, concerned citizen.

7 – Pretending. Pretending can take various forms. A man can pretend to be interested in a woman in order to get laid. A woman can pretend to be attracted to a man in order to lead him on, thereby acting out anger. People can pretend they're not angry when in fact that are very angry. People can pretend to be your best friend in order to get you to trust them while they hide their real motives. Good pretenders are good actors. Sometimes they even convince themselves that they're sincere. In psychoanalysis we call that a reaction-formation. A person may be jealous of you but deny it to himself and convince himself of the opposite, that he wishes the best for you. If you believe such a person, you may fall into their trap and regret it. Pretending is a way of controlling you and avoiding any confrontation that might result from honesty.

These mind games are bad enough when they occur among adults, but unfortunately some parents unwittingly play these games with their children, leaving them hurt and confused. These games all have advantages, but at the same time they prevent authentic relating and love, which are truly what make life worth living. Stay away from those who play these games and lean towards those who don't.



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Gerald Schoenewolf, Ph.D. is a licensed psychoanalyst in New York and has been practicing for over 37 years. He works with adults, couples, families, adolescents, and children. He has graduated from three psychotherapy institutes and received a Certificate in Psychoanalysis from the Washington Square Institute in 1981. He has been an Adjunct Assistant Professor of psychology at the Borough of Manhattan Community College since 2002 and has authored thirteen books on psychotherapy and psychoanalysis as well as four novels and a book of poems and drawings. More recently he wrote 20 screenplays (winning four first-place awards at festivals) and produced and directed two feature films.

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