

Dealing with a Manipulative Family Member

Objective

To identify ways to cope with manipulative family members.

What to Know

Manipulative family members influence others with the intent to control how they act, think, feel, and perceive the world. They want others to conform to ideas, emotional states, or actions—creating specific outcomes for them. If you believe you are supposed to do what the manipulative family member wants (no matter what) you may struggle to break this pattern—even in adulthood.

Family dynamics sometimes involve manipulation. Sometimes it is harmless, and in a healthy family, it might be turned into a joke. No one gets upset, and everyone is aware of what is happening. Family members can express their feelings and make choices without fear.

But some family members might exploit weaknesses or try to control others. They may even punish the family member who refuses to be manipulated. Manipulation can be subtle, so you might not immediately recognize it. Recognizing manipulation within your family can be especially difficult if the person is a parent, older sibling, or relative with authority. You may notice these signs. Check off the statements that relate to your family situation.

- You feel tricked or pressured into doing things.
- You cannot do anything right, and your efforts never seem good enough.
- You believe it is not possible to say no.
- The truth is frequently twisted or distorted.
- You often feel guilty or confused.
- Your feelings are frequently invalidated or ignored.
- You are not allowed to share how you feel.
- Family members interrupt or talk over you.
- Your concerns are dismissed.
- You are reprimanded or punished if you refuse to “go along.”
- You are told how you should feel.
- When you give in, you are “rewarded” with kindness and affection.
- The family member denies things or insists they told you something when they did not.
- Guilt is used to make you feel bad or do things you would rather not do.

___ Stonewalling or the silent treatment is often used.

___ The family member might blame others for difficulties, downplay their own responsibility, and avoid doing anything to help themselves.

___ You are shamed, mocked, scapegoated, or blamed.

___ Put-downs, insults, harsh criticism, and other tactics designed to make you feel inferior are used.

___ You question reality.

___ You fear abandonment.

___ You feel misunderstood.

___ You believe you are the problem.

___ You believe you can never cut them off because they are “family.”

___ Total your checked statements.

If you checked more than five statements, you are probably dealing with a manipulative family member.

If you are uncertain about how to handle this situation, you might avoid responding at all to avoid conflict. So, what can you do? These strategies can help.

1. Acknowledge you are aware of the manipulative behaviors. Directly communicate that you feel manipulated and offer examples. Discuss it in a calm and non-aggressive way.

2. Use respectful language and “I” statements. Express yourself without being confrontational. Simply making accusations about the other person might not be helpful. You might say:

“It’s upsetting when things don’t go as planned. I wish things had worked out—but since I wasn’t involved, I have no reason to feel guilty.”

“I did everything you asked and when you go back on your word, I feel deceived and disrespected.”

“I understand you might not remember saying you’d pick me up, but I still have your text message if you’d like to see it.”

3. Let them know how it affects you. You might try these approaches:

- Acknowledge their perspective: “I know you’re stressed because you have a lot to do for this event.”
- Express your anger and hurt in a calm and respectful way: “I’ve asked you before not to yell at me. When you don’t respect my request, I feel angry and sad.”
- Explain how manipulation affects you and the relationship: “When you lie to me, I lose trust in you. I don’t feel like helping you when that happens.”

4. Set firm boundaries. A boundary clearly states your needs and communicates what you will and will not do. When you set boundaries, others may accuse you of “withholding” or punishing them. But boundaries exist to protect you, giving you the opportunity to decide what you will accept. Others may or may not choose to respect your boundaries and interact in a way that works for you.

5. Do not isolate yourself. Avoiding some family members entirely can be difficult. Instead, prioritize connections with those who treat you with sincerity, respect, and kindness.

6. Find support. Discuss the situation with someone you trust—another family member, friend, counselor, teacher, or romantic partner. A family therapist can help you address problematic behaviors and prevent long-term effects.

Addressing manipulative behaviors with a family member sometimes improves the situation. If things do not change, remember that you cannot change others. You only have control over your own reactions—and what you will (and will not!) put up with. You might feel a sense of duty toward your family—but consider putting your own wellbeing first. You are not obligated to maintain a relationship with someone who continues to hurt you.

Please note: If safety is an issue and you do not feel comfortable talking to the manipulative family member alone, bring someone you trust, write a letter, or make a phone call.

What to Do

Write down how you are feeling about this situation. Include what you observe, how you feel, and the overall impact of the family member’s behavior.

What impact does the family member continuing this pattern of behavior have on your relationship?

What boundaries would be helpful for you to put into place?

What are the possible outcomes that are acceptable to you?

Are you comfortable having an honest conversation with this person? Why or why not?

If you decide to communicate with this person, what will you do? (*texting is not recommended*)

in-person meeting phone call letter email

If you are interested in having an in-person conversation with your family member, set a time for the discussion.

Date/time/location: _____

Did you follow through? _____

Once you have the discussion, describe what happened.

If expressing your concerns and setting boundaries are ineffective, you might want to seek the advice of a trained professional such as a mediator, family therapist, or counselor. Do you think this situation requires professional help? Why or why not?

Did this exercise help you cope with your manipulative family member? Why or why not?

What else can you do to effectively handle manipulation? Be specific.

Reflections on This Exercise

How helpful was this exercise? _____
(1 = not very helpful, 5 = moderately helpful, 10 = extremely helpful)

What did you learn from this exercise?
