

Ep #253: Self-Silencing: The Cost of Not Speaking Up



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With Your Host

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This is episode 253, and today I'm getting into why swallowing your truth feels safer than speaking up, what it's costing you, as well as some strategies for unwinding this tendency. So let's get into it.

If you want to do things differently but need some help making it happen, then tune in for your weekly dose of coaching from me, Maisie Hill, Master Life Coach and author of *Period Power*. Welcome to *The Maisie Hill Experience*.

Hello folks, welcome back to the podcast. I have an important announcement before we get going. So I am going to be teaching a power class on boundaries inside my membership on November 26th at 6 p.m. UK time. You will learn how to speak up, how to honour your boundaries, how to say no, and stay connected all at the same time. Holiday season is around the corner, and I know that this is the time of year when your boundaries will come under the spotlight in some form or another, whether it's boundaries in your family dynamics, boundaries with your boss, or random strangers. And I really want to help you. So I've put together this power class as well as boundary-specific coaching calls that are going to come after it. So make sure you join us inside Powerful for the upcoming boundaries focus and all the other coaching goodies that you get when you join.

Now, as for today's topic, how many times have you left a conversation or a room and thought, Oh, I wish I'd said something. Why didn't I say something? Either something happens in the moment and you just feel unable to respond genuinely in that moment, or maybe it's a situation where you've actually rehearsed something that you really want to say, but you still didn't say it. And you just froze, or your body went all hot and your throat tightened, and the words just never made it out. And then you replay the moment over and over. And it's this moment of freezing that we're talking about today.

Because recently, on a coaching call inside The Herd Within, which is my small group coaching program, the topic of self-silencing came up. And my client that I was coaching was saying how useful it was to hear me actually

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name that and talk about it. And I was like, Oh, I don't think I've spoken about this on the podcast before. Maybe other people are going to find it useful. So thank you to that client for prompting that direction in my brain.

So self-silencing is when you swallow what you think, or you swallow what you need or what you're feeling, in order to keep the peace and avoid conflict or perhaps protect a relationship. And it's a really common issue, but when you consistently inhibit your own expression, there are very real consequences.

So psychologically, it's linked with depression and eating disorders, but it shows up in all sorts of other ways: irritability, resentment, confusion, a general sense of I don't even know what to think anymore. There's all sorts of ways that it appears, and it affects the body in other ways too.

So in my experience, there is a strong relationship between self-silencing and PMS, as well as PMDD and loads of other issues that commonly show up during the cycle or perimenopause. So, in my earlier career when I was an acupuncturist practicing Chinese medicine, I knew that suppressed emotion and unspoken truths contribute to stagnation. So stagnation is the stuck energy that can show up as things like PMS, period pain, digestive issues, headaches. I think I've actually done a whole episode about stagnation once upon a time. But it goes both ways, so existing stagnation can make it more challenging to express yourself. So it's a bit of a vicious cycle.

And modern research is starting to back up what Chinese medicine has known for thousands of years, that holding things in all the time leads to an increase in stress hormones and inflammation. So this isn't just about communication and your relationships, it's also about your physiology and your ability to move and express and release. But it does strain relationships, too.

So other people might get to enjoy the short-term benefit of your compliance and your self-silencing. But there's a net loss of intimacy because when you do that, you're not fully present. You're not present in

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the conversation anymore because you're in your head thinking about the things that you're not saying.

So there's a lack of connection, and remember that stress responses take us out of connection because protection always trumps connection. So when you're experiencing stress in a situation and you're worrying about being honest and sharing your opinion or your feelings or what people might think of you or what they might say in response, then that stress will take you out of connection with yourself and with the other people.

Now, I'm not suggesting that you should say every single thing that crosses your mind in the name of authenticity, right? Because being authentic has been weaponised in this weird way where people are like, well, I'm just going to say what's on my mind because that means I'm being authentic. So we don't have to go in that direction with things. And there are moments when well-chosen silence is the most powerful expression that you can make.

There are also some environments and some people where you might make the wise decision to not say things. I've spoken before about how when you have ideas, baby ideas that need nurturing and some protection, as well as some exposure, then that's probably not the best thing to share with a parent who is highly critical of you, like really vocally critical of you, or if you've got a colleague who has a tendency to belittle people. I would be highly cautious of what I share around folks like that.

But there's a big difference between whether keeping quiet is an intentional choice or it's just you collapsing and freezing and being unable to speak up. So silence that's chosen will feel something along the lines of this grounded sensation in you; it will feel deliberate, whereas self-silencing feels very different. It might feel tight or heavy, like you're frozen but also revving up inside, like this increase of energy. So they're very different because one is expanding you and the other one is causing you to contract.

Your menstrual cycle also plays a role in how this shows up. So in the premenstrual phase, all the places that you silence yourself rise to the

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surface, right? We don't have oestrogen making everything lovely and glossing over stuff in the way it does when you're in the run-up to ovulation, when, as far as your body is concerned, that's all about finding a mate, having sex, and getting knocked up. So when that's the priority physiologically, you're not going to be lasering in on the pile at the bottom of the stairs or how they eat with their mouth open, things like that.

But premenstrually, the irritations, the frustrations, the boundaries you've ignored, they become impossible to miss. And that's a really, really good thing because they are things that need to be dealt with, so they ought to come into focus, right? They should be a thing. But then we need to deal with them, and that's the kind of stuff we get up to inside the membership.

We can also make use of the run-up to ovulation when we have that double whammy of oestrogen and testosterone, because that can make us more up for risk-taking and being a bit looser with what we're saying. So if you're someone who thinks a lot about the words that they use, that might be a time of your cycle where you can just experiment with being a bit freer, or you might notice that you're just being a bit freer without even having to think about it. So if you want to start playing with speaking up, then that could be a lovely phase of the cycle to roll the dice a bit.

But I would love for you to explore where self-silencing is coming from in you. And the reason behind it might be different for you in different scenarios. So think about this in terms of if self-silencing is the behaviour, figure out what belief and feeling are driving it. What are the thoughts that you have that are resulting in you self-silencing yourself?

Is it fear of conflict? Fear of saying it wrong and that being held against you in some way? Is it the belief that your opinions don't matter or that you don't matter? Or is it that being honest makes you difficult in some way? Or that you're being extra or fussy, or opinionated? Like, what is the belief that's underneath this? And as I said, there might be several.

But when you name the belief, you're going to loosen its grip on you, and then you can start to replace it with something that's more useful, right, and

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change that wiring. So that could be saying something like, my voice might shake when I say this, but it still matters. I can handle disagreements. Silence isn't keeping me safe, it's keeping me small. There are so many intentional thoughts that you could work with instead.

And I want to offer that if this is something that you struggle with, and many of you do, see if you can hold it lightly, right? It's one of those topics that can be a bit of a rabbit hole of delving into how this pattern originated, where it's come from, how you associate, and I'm not for one moment dismissing the importance of recognising those patterns.

That can be a real light bulb moment, like, oh, there were these times, these significant times in my upbringing and in my past experiences where people responded a certain way or I was told certain things, and therefore I've built this habit of silencing myself. That's a great thing to realise.

But sometimes it can actually take you down a path where you're just getting more invested in that, rather than starting to speak up. And in this conversation, in my work, through this podcast, through everything I do, it's about helping you to express yourself.

So just watch out that you don't tie yourself in knots with this or with topics like this, because generally speaking, most of us have been and continue to be rewarded for being agreeable, for being accommodating, and calm and supportive. And somewhere along the way, we've learned that people will withdraw love or approval when we're, quote unquote, "difficult" or opinionated or angry. And that's just across the board. I don't know a woman or anyone who's been socialised as female who doesn't have that as a thing, right? So it also doesn't have to be that deep.

Also, we tend to define ourselves and be defined by who we are in relation to others. We're daughters, sisters, friends, mothers, partners, girlfriends, wives, colleagues, and how often do we get to exist on our own?

So for many of us, identity has been built around how well we care and who we care for, how well we respond to others' needs, and how well we keep

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things together. Like, these are things that we're always praised for and therefore expected to behave in this way.

So then what happens is when the safety of a relationship feels threatened in some way, right, when someone might be disappointed or disapprove or pull away, then your body could register that as a threat to you, not just the relationship, but to your actual sense of self. And that's why self-silencing can be so instinctive, because it's not only about keeping the peace, it's about protecting the version of you that has always existed through connection.

So if being good has always meant being agreeable and nice, then speaking up can feel like self-betrayal, which goes against everything we typically talk about when it comes to being authentic.

And when you've learned that love and approval depend on maintaining harmony, even the smallest expression of truth can feel way too risky. It's going to feel like a really big deal to you. But the paradox is that every time you stay quiet to preserve connection, you actually erode the connection that you're trying to protect.

Self-silencing is a protective strategy, and it comes from fawn or freeze responses where we're seeking safety through appeasement or invisibility. The problem is that each time you silence yourself, first of all, you're deepening that neural pathway, and you're also chipping away at your self-trust. And that might be the kind of thing that you don't even notice at first. And even if you do, you might tell yourself, Oh, it's not a big deal.

But with time, those small moments of silencing yourself and complying can lead you to eventually lose touch with your inner compass. So then we also have resentment and loss of confidence, and then before you know it, your identity isn't as solid either. That feels very permeable and like you've kind of lost track of who you are and what you think. So when you silence yourself enough times, then you just genuinely forget what you think, let alone the idea of sharing it.

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So this muting of your needs or deferring to others in order to maintain harmony might seem that it preserves closeness in the short term, but the long-term effect is anger, and that might be anger that starts off as being directed towards others, but it's like you're turning that anger inward towards yourself. And that's not a great place to be. And all the traits that our culture rewards in women, like selflessness and agreeableness, suppression of anger, right, for the greater good, these are all the same traits that undermine our well-being.

All of you who do have health issues, menstrual cycle issues, headaches, migraines, I would love to see what would happen if we could just wave a magic wand and you stopped self-silencing yourself. What would happen to those symptoms? I would be very interested to know what the difference would be.

And of course, we've got the people-pleasing dynamic in this as well, right? When you keep everyone else comfortable, you become the uncomfortable one. And your body, your nervous system, never fully settles because it's just busy scanning for how you're going to prevent the next potential rupture in your relationships. But when I'm talking about speaking up, it doesn't have to be dramatic or confrontational, right? You don't have to walk into a room with a megaphone, sharing your opinions. It can be really basic and straightforward. It's not necessarily going to feel basic and straightforward to you, but I promise it is.

Most of what you all want to say isn't a big deal, and I know this because it's been coming up so much in coaching recently. It's not a big deal, but you're just so used to erasing your needs and your desires and your opinions that it feels like it is a big deal. So this is your mission for this week, should you choose to accept it. Next time you feel that tightening in your throat or a bit of a freeze creeping into your gut, here's what I want you to do.

Step one, notice the impulse to edit or apologise before you've even spoken. And then you're just going to take one easy breath. Doesn't have to be any particular kind of breath, just take an easy breath. You could also

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wiggle your fingers and toes, just like bring a bit of movement into your body.

And then say a few honest words, one honest sentence instead of swallowing it. Just test it out. Doesn't have to be a big long monologue. You don't have to shout. It doesn't have to be like the biggest thing that's on your mind. I mean, it totally can be though. I am 100% behind you if that's what you opt for.

But just one sentence, just start developing another neural pathway. It already exists. It's there somewhere. We just want to get involved in that one again and limit the time we spend in the self-silencing one. And that's it. And every time you do this, you're sending a signal to your nervous system that your words can exist in the world without some catastrophe unfolding.

Okay, if this episode resonated, I'd love to help you to take this work deeper inside my membership, Powerful. So come and join us. We've got the boundaries power class coming up on November 26th, but there's all sorts of good things waiting for you in there. There's unlimited one-on-one written coaching. We've got amazing group coaching calls on specific topics like boundaries and like decision-making, but also open coaching calls where you can get coached on anything. We have the most incredible, inspiring, motivating community where you get to show up as you, but you get to connect with like-minded peers who are doing this work as well.

And then of course, we've got the existing power classes on making any decision, protecting the asset, and rewiring your inner voice, like dealing with the inner critic. So there's so much goodness in there, and I would love to have you join us and do this work together.

All right, folks, that is it for today. I will catch you next week.

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