

EMOTIONAL BLACKMAIL

情緒勒索

Taiwan's bestselling book of 2017, Emotional Blackmail has sold over 110,000 copies and spent 34 weeks on the Books.com.tw bestseller list.

The concept of emotional blackmail was first posited by the renowned psychotherapist Susan Forward, and it refers to situations when one person induces negative feelings (such as failure, guilt, and fear) in another by being demanding, applying pressure, or refusing to communicate. Emotional blackmail occurs between employers and employees, between parents and children, and between partners, and it often results in a vicious circle of mutual distrust and resentment.

Chou Mu-Tzu explains how emotional blackmail functions with clarity and precision, and analyzes the kinds of mentality that are most susceptible to this negative cycle. She advocates a sense of self-worth and the establishment of clear emotional boundaries as the most important bulwarks against its effects.

The case studies in this book are all especially relevant to Asian cultures, where the traditions of filial piety and the veneration of authority make emotional blackmail a particularly pertinent topic. These practical examples are used to illustrate some of the more specialized psychological terms, making it easy for the reader to come to an understanding of how to avoid becoming ensnared in emotional blackmail.

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Why am I helpless – When you can't escape “responsibility” and “you should”

From the previously mentioned “six signs of emotional blackmail” and my own professional experience, I have observed that emotional blackmail is an interdependent circle involving three very important factors: feelings of self-worth, guilt, and safety.

That is to say, emotional blackmailers are often experts at belittling you or your abilities (self-worth), creating guilt feelings, and attacking your sense of safety.

Belittling you or your abilities

When emotional blackmailers discover that you will not meet their requirements, they use different methods to make you feel as if you have poor judgment. They may even go far as to make you feel that if you don't act the way they want then you are at fault, you have character flaws, you do not have good judgement, you are too lazy, or you're not capable. They use different ways to make you doubt your own feelings, to believe that you are the problem, and will embellish their own demands with various reasons until you finally discover *they are right*.

Often they will argue with you and attempt to persuade you to believe *they are right* and *you are wrong*. Sometimes, they use a position of authority (as a boss, a parent, or a teacher) to definitively negate your feelings, to the point that when they belittle your character, abilities, or judgement, you may begin to doubt whether your own feelings are right or not and believe that what they say may be true.

You may think this way: “If I don't do what they want, then I am in the wrong. They have better judgment than I do; my feelings may be incorrect.”

And so, you begin to think that you are not important and that their feelings are more important. You increasingly neglect or negate your own feelings. Slowly, you begin to lose your sense of self-worth, begin questioning yourself, and increasingly lose trust in yourself.

Belittling you and your abilities is a critical part of the circle of emotional blackmail. The reason is that after you are belittled, you begin to feel you are dirty, that you are no good... and to

make you better, the lure that the emotional blackmailer sets is: *as long as you do what I want / use the methods I want, I will affirm you.*

The kind of “affirmation” an emotional blackmailer gives may be verbal affirmation, a relatively peaceful mood, or some kind of prize.

After you have been belittled by an emotional blackmailer, when you feel that *you are not good* and you do things their way, often it will seem that this is the only way to make yourself feel better.

This is another reason belittling is a critical part of emotional blackmail.

Creating a sense of guilt

One of the biggest differences between emotional blackmailers and other blackmailers is that most of the time we have a particular relationship with them. They may be our boss, subordinate, or colleague; or they may be our parent, child, relative, or our partner or friend. It is their relationship with us that makes emotional blackmail so distinctive and so hard to escape, and explains why it leads to such a sense of guilt.

How do emotional blackmailers create a sense of guilt?

They may do it like this:

The things they say after belittling us are intertwined with the very words they used to belittle us.

“I’m doing this for your good,” they say.

“I care for you so much, but you don’t listen to me.”

“I’ve thought so highly of you; you disappoint me.”

“You don’t do what I want – do you really love me?”

“If you don’t do things the way I want, people will think poorly of me and I’ll lose face.”

All the phrases above seem to imply: “I’m doing this for you, how can you not do what I want?” The goal is to make us feel like we don’t know good from bad. If anything about this interaction makes us uncomfortable, we can only conclude that we must be imagining things.

Emotional blackmailers are always reminding us that we have a responsibility and a duty to fulfill their demands, and only then will we show that we are good enough. To them, this is what we *should* do.

So, after emotional blackmailers have belittled us and made us lose our sense of self-worth and ability to trust ourselves, creating a sense of guilt becomes a tool to amplify our sense of failure. Once we have been belittled, and have taken on the expectation of *how to do right* hidden in their words, then feelings of *I have failed, I have disappointed people, I am wrong*, will make us feel inferior, anxious, and unable to act.

At such moments, if they tell us their demands, expectations, or desires, it is hard for us to resist their message: “If you do what I want, then you are a good child, you are obedient, you are great.”

After being belittled and losing our sense of self-worth, their affirmation often becomes our life preserver.

That is to say, to improve our sense of self, to make ourselves feel as if we are not such failures, we will hold on to this implied *good way* and agree to do things the way they want, to

fulfil their demands and receive their praise, which thus replaces the sense of self-worth that was originally in our hearts.

When that happens, emotional blackmailers have achieved their goal.

Attacking your sense of safety

In addition to the above strategies, some emotional blackmailers will threaten you, sometimes threatening what you value most.

For example:

“If you don’t do what I want, we’ll have to break up.”

“If you marry him, we’ll cut off family ties.”

“If you don’t do what I want, I’ll kill myself.”

“If you don’t do what I want, you’ll lose this job.”

“If you don’t listen to me, I will destroy you.”

As I’ve said earlier, emotional blackmailers know what you care about most, and so they will threaten you and strip away your sense of safety.

Your sense of safety is like a hostage. Emotional blackmailers want you to know that your hostage is in their hands and if you want her back, then you need to obey them and do what they want.

This characteristic is why this relationship is called blackmail: emotional blackmailers threaten your most valued possession and make you unsettled or afraid, so that the only way you can relieve these feelings is to do what they want and thus buy back your sense of safety.

But your sense of safety is often your weakness, locked in the hands of the emotional blackmailer. Once they’ve succeeded, once they have tasted victory, they will seek out even more from you. The more you give way, the more you will lose your sense of self and joy.

Now you’ve read the “three methods” above – are any familiar? We can actually take these three methods and see that emotional blackmailers use them to convey one message: “You have a *responsibility* to convince me that you have become *better*.”

And the standards of this “better” are completely defined by the emotional blackmailers.

Apart from this, we can’t forget that emotional blackmailers will frequently use negative emotions as a strategy to hide these three methods. Using negative emotions is a way of placing pressure on the blackmailed person, whose blurred sense of emotional boundaries can make them feel responsible for the other person’s feelings. So emotional blackmailers get their way, and their victims can’t help but give them what they want.