



# Help! I Think One of Us Might Be Manipulative

By Janel Breitenstein

Hi. I'm Janel, and I am a former manipulator.

I hope.

Would you believe sometimes I was the last to figure out I was manipulating?

From childhood up, we've all acquired healthy and unhealthy ways to obtain what we crave. Certain dynamics in our home of origin, like addiction or other emphasis on appearance, can make us even more prone to manipulating.

The longer we're married, the longer we've studied what buttons to push to produce a specific product, so to speak, from our spouse.

**If you're manipulative and you know it, clap your hands! (Clap, clap!)**

Maybe you're wondering how to qualify manipulation in the first place.

The Oxford dictionary will tell you it's about *controlling or influencing a person or*

*situation cleverly, unfairly, or unscrupulously.*

We all influence each other and try to persuade one another. So it's worth asking a few questions. **How can we tell whether or not we might fall on a spectrum of manipulating a circumstance—or being manipulated?**

**Are these actions...**

- Beneath what the receiver easily notices?
- Inconsiderate of the receiver's personal interests (from his or her perspective)?
- Not really allowing them to make an unbiased decision?
- Anything less than honest?

Manipulation has a lot to do with how direct we're willing to be—but "direct" can still mean "controlling".

There are times indirectness can preserve a relationship, fitting relational protocol, or someone's dignity (think Queen Esther's

approach to her husband). It can be good manners (“Would you be open to spending some time together this weekend?”).

Acceptable “manipulation” varies widely by culture. Many cultures would find directness similar to reaching across the table for the salt, rather than asking politely for it to be passed.

Consider our own more appropriate forms of indirectness, i.e. sarcasm: If an American says “Yeah, right,” none of us assume that person actually agrees.

In fact, your spouse learned to navigate a certain subculture in their family of origin. Not all of his or her methods may be appropriate or healthy. (Pro tip: Yours aren’t either.)

But that’s part of the beautiful process of marriage that makes us more holy.

Manipulating doesn’t mean we’re headed for the jaws of divorce. But it does mean we can recognize when we’re trying to play someone—or vice versa.

And we can choose to walk in the truth.

Wondering about ways you might be manipulative?

Take the quiz below to get an idea.

## Get relentless.

Proverbs reminds me that “The getting of treasures by a lying tongue is a fleeting vapor and a snare of death” (21:6).

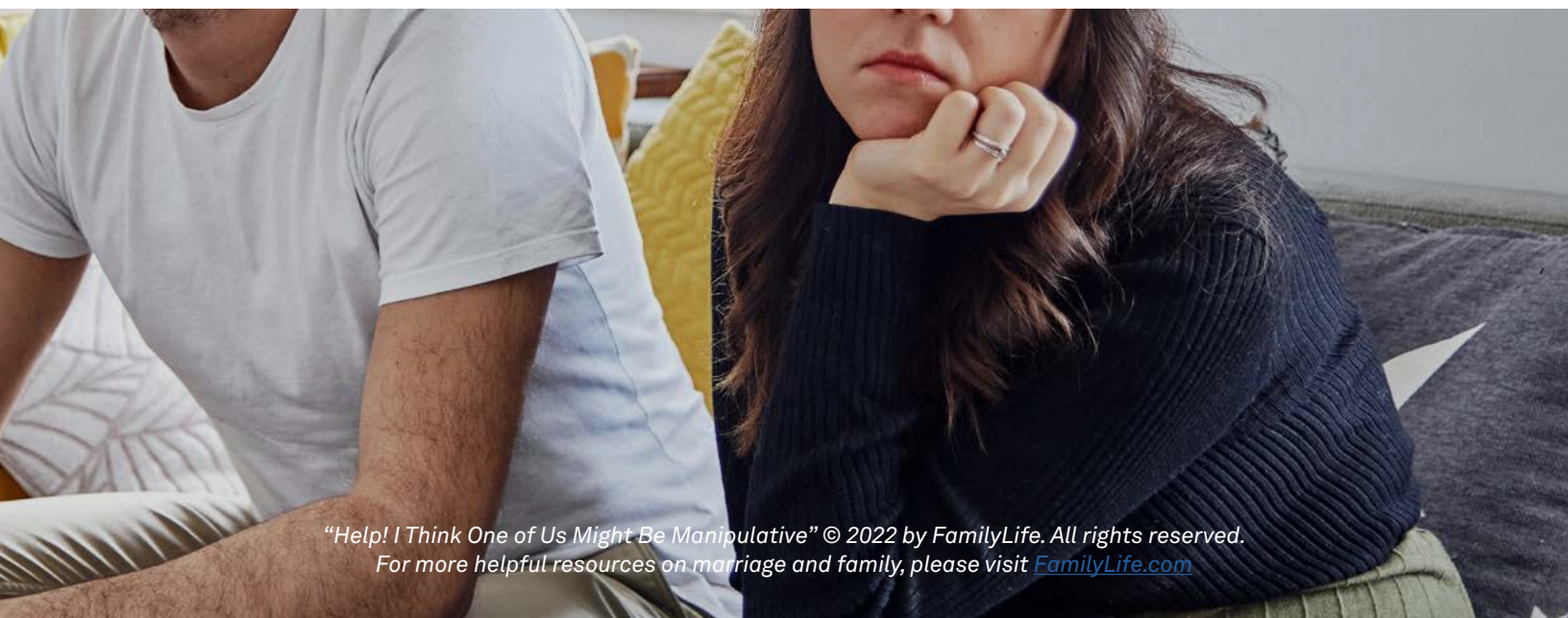
So along with me, get relentless in your effort to purge yourself of shrewd, cagey speech designed to control someone.

But wait! There’s more.

Our talk is the overflow of our hearts (Matthew 12:34). This means words are the symptoms of underlying desires.

Ask God to reveal:

- When and why you’re tempted to manipulate.
- Why you may feel uncomfortable with speaking truthfully.
- How to trust Him with people and circumstances in which you feel powerless.
- Ways you can be truthful without sacrificing kindness, gentleness, and the other person’s dignity.
- How you can discern between *rightly, courageously influencing and cleverly controlling*.



## Stopping Manipulation IRL: 12 Ideas

What do those principles look like in the trickle-down? A few ideas from a recovering manipulator.

- 1 Ask kindly for what you hope for, without demanding it.
- 2 Give without strings attached.
- 3 Seek to champion the image of God in your spouse (rather than your image). What would it look like for your mate to be the fullest version of the person God created them to be?
- 4 When you're thinking "no," say it without being stubborn or hard. Earnestly seek not to hedge, backpedal, mislead, wheedle, etc.
- 5 Push yourself to loving honesty. (And when you're wrong, admit it humbly.)
- 6 Don't rely on your spouse to fill the place of God in your life. He or she is not created to fill your soul's holes.
- 7 Ask yourself, "Am I influencing my spouse in a way that's aboveboard, or seeking to control them without his or her consent or knowledge?"
- 8 Refuse to punish your spouse when your desires aren't fulfilled.
- 9 Forego self-deprecation and overapologizing.
- 10 Consider honestly whether your sarcasm is cutting.
- 11 Even in criticism, speak with an attempt to build rather than corrupt.
- 12 Be willing to lay bare to yourself—and maybe even your spouse—your motivations toward your spouse at any given moment. Ruthlessly assess your "whys"...and don't always believe the best about what drives you.

# Quiz: For the Manipulator

Consider whether any of the following manipulation “warning lights” might be true of you. Answer as honestly as you can.

(Answering options: Rarely me, Sometimes me, Frequently me)

1) I’m vague in asking for what I need or want.

- Rarely Me       Sometimes Me       Frequently Me

2) If I’m yearning for a compliment from my spouse, I say or do something specific... without actually asking for the compliment.

- Rarely Me       Sometimes Me       Frequently Me

3) I allow my spouse to do something, but later make him or her feel guilty.

- Rarely Me       Sometimes Me       Frequently Me

4) I occasionally give things, resources, or time to my spouse and expect something in return (even appreciation).

- Rarely Me       Sometimes Me       Frequently Me

5) I don’t always tell my spouse everything.

- Rarely Me       Sometimes Me       Frequently Me

6) If my spouse doesn’t do what I want, I employ subtle ways to change his or her mind.

- Rarely Me       Sometimes Me       Frequently Me

7) Instead of setting boundaries or saying no, I may try to communicate in other ways. It could be to get people's permission or encouragement to do what I want.

- Rarely Me       Sometimes Me       Frequently Me

8) Sometimes I fib about how things went down.

- Rarely Me       Sometimes Me       Frequently Me

9) I withhold something my spouse wants—like sex, affection, money—to get what I need.

- Rarely Me       Sometimes Me       Frequently Me

10) I give my spouse the silent treatment when I'm angry.

- Rarely Me       Sometimes Me       Frequently Me

11) I cry, pout, or complain if my spouse doesn't do things right.

- Rarely Me       Sometimes Me       Frequently Me

12) I threaten or give ultimatums.

- Rarely Me       Sometimes Me       Frequently Me

13) I try to appear superior or on top of things, even when I mess up.

- Rarely Me       Sometimes Me       Frequently Me

14) I wish I had more control over what my spouse thinks.

- Rarely Me       Sometimes Me       Frequently Me

15) I have a hard time admitting when I'm wrong. I'm often defensive.

- Rarely Me       Sometimes Me       Frequently Me

16) I can be intentionally affectionate, appealing, and attentive to get what I want.

- Rarely Me       Sometimes Me       Frequently Me

17) When I show disappointment, I can be a little over the top.

- Rarely Me       Sometimes Me       Frequently Me

18) I self-deprecate so someone will encourage me or tell me I'm okay.

- Rarely Me       Sometimes Me       Frequently Me

19) I use sarcasm or criticism to curb my spouse's behavior.

- Rarely Me       Sometimes Me       Frequently Me

# Which answers did you have the **most** of?

## “Rarely me”

Congratulations: Chances are, you’ve discovered how to respectfully ask for what you want or need. It sounds like you’re able to do this without punishing the other person when you don’t receive what you hoped for, or seeking to backhandedly control them. You’re well on your way to becoming a confident, trustworthy spouse in a relationship where you’re both esteemed as individuals made in the image of God.

## “Sometimes me”

Applause for your honesty. It’s not easy to spot our own manipulation. From childhood up, we’ve all acquired healthy and unhealthy ways to obtain what we crave.

Keep moving forward in being truthful (rather than controlling or underhanded). Refrain from penalizing the other person when you don’t get what you wanted. Choose security in God’s image in both you and your spouse as you move toward trusting each other.

Get honest about what’s beneath your desire to manipulate. What fears or desires motivate you to control?

If you’re in a healthy, safe marriage, kind honesty should move you closer to each other. Not sure? You might seek out a wise friend or counselor.

Based on your answers above, decide right now three destructive patterns you’ll choose to break, and positive habits to replace them with, for the sake of loving well.

Read more at [Is My Spouse Manipulating Me?](#)

## “Frequently Me”

Manipulation is hard to admit, but you’ve taken a significant initial step by calling it out into the light.

The longer we’re married, the longer we’ve studied what buttons to push to produce a specific product, so to speak, from our spouse. Certain dynamics in our home of origin, like addiction or other emphasis on appearance, can make us even more prone to manipulating.

But don’t let that shift your freedom to choose change and a different legacy for your home!

Get honest about what’s beneath your desire to manipulate. What fears or desires motivate you to control?

If you’re in a healthy, safe marriage, kind honesty should move you closer to each other. Not sure? You might seek out a wise friend or counselor.

Based on your answers above, decide right now three destructive patterns you’ll choose to break, and positive habits to replace them with, for the sake of loving well.

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# Quiz: For the Spouse

Consider whether any of the following manipulation “warning lights” might be true of you. Answer as honestly as you can.

(Answering options: Rarely me, Sometimes me, Frequently me)

- 1) My spouse is vague in asking for what he or she needs or wants.  
 Rarely Me       Sometimes Me       Frequently Me
- 2) My spouse may say or do something specific to gain a compliment...without actually asking for it.  
 Rarely Me       Sometimes Me       Frequently Me
- 3) My spouse allows me to do something, but later makes me feel guilty.  
 Rarely Me       Sometimes Me       Frequently Me
- 4) My spouse occasionally gives things, resources, or time and expects something in return (even appreciation).  
 Rarely Me       Sometimes Me       Frequently Me
- 5) My spouse doesn't always tell me everything.  
 Rarely Me       Sometimes Me       Frequently Me
- 6) If I don't do what my spouse wants, he or she employs subtle ways to change my mind.  
 Rarely Me       Sometimes Me       Frequently Me



- 7) Instead of setting boundaries or saying no, my spouse may try to communicate in other ways. It could be to get people's permission or encouragement to do what he or she wants.
- Rarely Me       Sometimes Me       Frequently Me
- 8) Sometimes my spouse fibs about how things went down.
- Rarely Me       Sometimes Me       Frequently Me
- 9) My spouse withholds something I want—like sex, affection, money—to get what he or she needs.
- Rarely Me       Sometimes Me       Frequently Me
- 10) My spouse gives me the silent treatment when angry.
- Rarely Me       Sometimes Me       Frequently Me
- 11) My spouse cries, pouts, or whines if I don't do things right.
- Rarely Me       Sometimes Me       Frequently Me
- 12) My spouse threatens or gives ultimatums.
- Rarely Me       Sometimes Me       Frequently Me
- 13) My spouse tries to appear superior or on top of things, even when he or she messes up.
- Rarely Me       Sometimes Me       Frequently Me
- 14) My spouse has a hard time admitting when he or she is wrong. He or she is often defensive.
- Rarely Me       Sometimes Me       Frequently Me
- 15) My spouse can be intentionally affectionate, appealing, and attentive to get what he or she wants.
- Rarely Me       Sometimes Me       Frequently Me
- 16) When my spouse shows disappointment, he or she can be a little over the top.
- Rarely Me       Sometimes Me       Frequently Me
- 17) My spouse self-deprecates so someone will encourage him or her, telling him or her essentially, "You're okay."
- Rarely Me       Sometimes Me       Frequently Me
- 18) My spouse uses sarcasm or criticism to curb my behavior.
- Rarely Me       Sometimes Me       Frequently Me

# Which answers did you have the **most** of?

## “Rarely me”

Congratulations: Chances are, your spouse respectfully asks for what he or she wants or needs. It sounds like he or she is relatively able to do this without punishing when he or she doesn't receive what was hoped for. Nor do they seek to backhandedly control you. Your marriage is on the way to a partnership of confident, trustworthy individuals, where the image of God is esteemed in both of you.

## “Sometimes me”

Applause for your honesty. It's not easy to spot manipulation. From childhood up, we've all acquired healthy and unhealthy ways to obtain what we crave.

Keep moving forward in modeling truthfulness, encouraging your spouse to see you as a safe place where he or she doesn't have to control or be underhanded. You may have to help him or her reframe desires in ways that are forthcoming, without penalizing you when they don't get what they want. As a spouse, you possess a unique capability to establish your spouse's security in God's image and unconditional love (see Ephesians 3:16-19), rather than in his or her ability to control or gratify others.

As you move toward trusting each other, gently help your spouse discover what's beneath the desire to manipulate. What fears or desires motivate him or her to control?

If you're in a healthy, safe marriage, kind honesty should move you closer to each other. Not sure? You might seek out a wise friend or counselor.

Based on your answers above, decide right now three destructive patterns you'll choose to break, and positive habits to replace them with, for the sake of loving well.

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Manipulation is hard to admit, but you’ve taken a significant initial step by calling it out into the light.

The longer we’re married, the longer we’ve studied what buttons to push to produce a specific product, so to speak, from our spouse. Certain dynamics in our home of origin, like addiction or other emphasis on appearance, can make us even more prone to manipulating.

But don’t let that shift your spouse’s freedom to choose change, and a different legacy for your home!

Model truthfulness for your spouse, diligently creating a safe place where he or she doesn’t have to control or be underhanded. (You may have to state this, and even dialogue about why they may not feel safe.) Ask thoughtful, confident questions when you suspect your spouse is manipulating or penalizing you when he or she doesn’t get what they want. As a spouse, you possess a unique capability to establish your spouse’s security in God’s image and unconditional love (see Ephesians 3:16-19), rather than in his or her ability to control or gratify others.

As you move toward trusting each other, gently help your spouse discover what’s beneath the desire to manipulate. What fears or desires motivate him or her to control?

If you’re in a healthy, safe marriage, kind honesty should move you closer to each other. But you might need help, because manipulative patterns run deep, and can create deep fissures undermining trust in your relationship. You might need to seek out a wise friend or counselor.

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