

THE MAN BEHIND THE SILENCE



D E D E O K E K E

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You Have Been Guessing For Two Years

Every evening you read his face and try to work out what it means. This guide is here so that you can stop guessing and start knowing.

Let me be clear about what this is and what it is not.

This is not a guide that excuses your husband. A man who goes silent for two years instead of saying what is wrong is doing something cowardly, and I will not dress that up in understanding. The cost of his silence has been paid almost entirely by you.

But you cannot interrupt a process you have misdiagnosed. And most women misdiagnose this one in exactly the same way — they conclude that he has stopped loving them, or that he is simply wicked, and both conclusions lead to responses that make everything worse.

So this guide answers one question: *what is actually happening inside a man who has gone quiet?*

THE THING TO UNDERSTAND FIRST

Withdrawal is almost never an attack. It is an exit.

You experience it as something being done *to* you — and the effect certainly is. But from inside him it is not aggression. It is retreat from a place that has become uncomfortable, by a man who has no other tool for discomfort.

That difference matters, because you cannot fight your way through a retreat. Pushing at a retreating man produces more retreat, every time, without exception.

What He Was Taught About Feeling

Your husband was raised, almost certainly, with a very short list of permitted emotions.

Think about the boy he was. Somewhere around seven or eight, he learned that crying had a cost. By twelve he had learned that fear was not to be mentioned. By twenty he had a working system: anger was allowed, humour was allowed, silence was always allowed, and everything else — sadness, shame, loneliness, inadequacy, fear — went into a room with no door on it.

Nobody taught him a vocabulary for what was in that room. Not his father, who had the same room. Not his friends, who compete rather than confide. Certainly not the culture, which told him constantly that a man is what he provides and what he can withstand.

So when something painful arrives in his marriage — and it will, in every marriage — he does not have the equipment to process it. He has three options: convert it into anger, convert it into humour, or go quiet.

Most men, most of the time, go quiet.

What this means for you

When you ask him “what is wrong?” and he says “nothing,” you hear a man refusing to tell you.

Very often what has actually happened is that a man has been asked to produce, on demand, a sentence he does not possess, about a feeling he has no name for, and “nothing” is the most honest answer available to him.

This is why the question fails no matter how many times you ask it, and why asking it more often — which is the natural thing to do — makes him withdraw further. Each time you ask, you are handing him a test he cannot pass, and men avoid places where they fail.

He is not withholding a paragraph. Very often, there is no paragraph. There is a feeling with no name and a man with no practice at naming things.

Why Men Actually Pull Away

In all the years I have done this, the causes come down to five. Usually two or three are running at once.

One. Money shame

This is the most common by a distance, and the most invisible, because he will never say it.

A man who feels he is failing financially will go quiet at home, because home is where the evidence lives. Every bill is a report card. Every time you mention school fees — neutrally, practically — he hears an assessment of him as a man.

He is not withdrawing from you. He is withdrawing from a mirror.

Watch for withdrawal that began within a few months of a job loss, a failed business, a demotion, a debt, or a stretch where your income overtook his. If the timing matches, this is very likely your engine, and no amount of talking about the marriage will touch it, because the marriage is not what is wrong.

Two. Feeling like staff

Somewhere between the children and the bills, the conversation between you narrowed until everything passing between you was a task. School run. Generator. His mother's hospital bill. The gate.

Slowly he stopped experiencing himself as a man someone is glad to see, and started experiencing himself as a function of the household — a driver, a wallet, a repairman with sleeping privileges.

A man in that position does not usually complain. He simply becomes less available, because there is no pleasure in being needed by somebody who never seems glad you exist.

And I want to say plainly: this is rarely the wife's fault. You narrowed the conversation to logistics because you were carrying too much and logistics were urgent. That is not a crime. But he experienced it as demotion.

Three. Chronic correction

If most of what he hears from you concerns what he has done wrong, forgotten, or done badly, he will eventually stop offering himself for inspection.

Again — correction is what exhaustion sounds like. You were probably the only adult holding the household together, and

the corrections were true. But a man who is corrected forty times a week does not think *I should improve*. He thinks *I am failing here*, and he goes where he is not failing: work, the boys, the phone, or someone who has never had to correct him because she does not live with the consequences.

Four. An unhealed injury

Something happened, and it was never properly closed. A betrayal. A humiliation in front of his family. A miscarriage or a death you both handled by not speaking. Something you said in a fight six years ago that landed somewhere permanent.

He never raised it, because raising it would have required the vocabulary he does not have. So it went underground, and underground it turned into distance.

The signature of this engine is a withdrawal you can date almost exactly — women can often name the month — and which has no financial or practical explanation.

Five. Someone else

Sometimes it is simply this. And it is worth understanding that in most cases the other relationship did not cause the drift — it moved into a space that was already empty, which is why so many affairs are with someone entirely unremarkable. She was not better. She was available in a house that had gone quiet.

FINDING YOURS

Ask one question: *when did it start, and what else was happening in his life that season?*

Most women, sitting still for ten minutes, can name the season. And nine times out of ten, the engine is standing right there in it.

What He Cannot Say To You

If your husband could speak plainly, here is roughly what most withdrawn men would say. Almost none of them ever will.

"I feel like I am failing and I cannot say it, because the moment I say it out loud it becomes true and then you will know."

"I do not know what you want from me any more. Whatever I do seems to be the wrong one, so I have stopped trying to guess."

"When you ask what is wrong, I feel a test starting, and I already know I will fail it."

"I miss us too. I do not know how to start, and it has been so long now that starting would mean admitting how long it has been."

"I know I am doing this. I do not know how to stop, and every week I do not stop makes it harder."

That last one is the truest and the most common, and it is the reason drifts accelerate. Shame about the distance becomes a reason to maintain the distance. He knows. He knows exactly what is happening. He simply cannot see a door back

that does not require him to walk through a room he has spent his whole life avoiding.

What this does not mean

It does not mean you should wait patiently while he finds his words. Some men never do, and a woman can lose ten years being understanding.

It does not mean the silence is acceptable. It is not. He is a grown man and the effect of his silence on you is real regardless of what he intended.

What it means is narrower and more useful: **pressure will not open him, and pressure is what you have been applying.** Not because you are foolish, but because it is what any reasonable person does when someone they love goes quiet.

What Reaches Him, And What Never Will

You cannot make a man speak. You can change the conditions so that speaking becomes possible.

What never works

- **Asking “what is wrong?” repeatedly.** It is a test he cannot pass, and he will avoid the room where the test happens.
- **Explaining how his behaviour makes you feel, at length.** A short version reaches him. Twenty minutes becomes a verdict, and he defends rather than listens.
- **Comparison.** “Chinedu takes his wife out.” This confirms his worst private belief about himself and guarantees retreat.
- **Involving his mother or his friends.** Humiliation never yet produced intimacy.
- **Waiting silently for him to notice.** He will not notice. That is the entire problem you are trying to solve.

What actually works

Side by side rather than face to face. Men talk while driving, while walking, while doing something with their hands, in the dark. Direct eye contact across a table feels like an interview. The car is where more marriages have been rescued than any counsellor's office.

Naming, not asking. Instead of “what is wrong?”, try “this year has been hard on you.” A statement he can simply agree with costs him nothing, and agreement is the smallest possible first step into a conversation.

Specific questions rather than large ones. Not “are you happy?” but “what was the most annoying part of today?” Small doors open. Large ones are too heavy.

Silence held longer than is comfortable. After you ask, wait. Count to twenty in your head. Most women fill the silence at about four seconds, and the filling is precisely what prevents the answer — he needs the empty space to find words he does not have ready.

Being genuinely occupied. A man who has grown used to a wife who watches him will notice a wife who is busy with her own life. Not as a trick — because the room is actually different, and human beings turn towards life.

Usefulness. Ask him to do something only he can do. Take his advice on something real. A withdrawn man is usually starving for the sense of being of use to you, and small requests he can easily meet do more than any conversation.

THE TWO SENTENCES

If you remember nothing else from this guide, take these.

“This year has been hard on you.” — then be quiet.

“I miss you. Not the house, not the help. You.” — then be quiet.

Neither asks him for anything. Neither can be failed. Both say the thing he has privately wondered and could not ask.

And what is not yours to fix

I want to end here, because this is the part women skip.

Understanding why he withdrew is useful. It is not a repair job you have been assigned.

You did not build the room with no door in it. You cannot go in there and do the work he will not do. And there is a version of this guide's knowledge that becomes a trap — the woman who understands her husband so thoroughly that she spends another five years being patient with a man who has decided to stay silent.

Understanding is for one purpose: so that you stop applying the wrong medicine and stop concluding that his silence is a statement about your worth.

After that, the responsibility is his. He is a grown man. He can

be helped, invited, given every possible opening — and if he still will not walk through, that is a choice he is making, with full knowledge, every single week.

Understand him completely. Then hold him fully responsible anyway. Those two things were never in conflict.

— Dede Okeke

QUESTIONS

The Questions Women Ask Me Most

The same eight questions, in almost the same words, for years. Here are my honest answers.

“Does he still love me?”

Usually yes, and I want you to notice how little that helps.

Love is not what is missing in most drifted marriages. Effort is. A man can love his wife genuinely and still spend two years failing to turn towards her, because love is a feeling and turning towards someone is a practice, and he was only ever taught the first one.

So do not organise your decision around whether he loves you. Organise it around what he does.

“Is it my fault?”

You have a part. It is not a cause.

You probably narrowed the conversation to logistics, corrected him often, and were too exhausted to be delighted by him. Those are real contributions and it is worth seeing them honestly.

But you did not choose silence as a response. He did. Two people made a cold house; one of them decided not to

mention it for two years.

“Should I just wait? He might come round.”

Some men do. But waiting is not neutral — it costs you a year at a time, and it teaches him that the marriage requires nothing from him.

Wait with a date on it, or you are not waiting. You are drifting alongside him.

“Why can he talk to everyone except me?”

Because everyone else is not carrying his failures. With his friends he is funny and competent. With you he is the man who has not fixed the thing, has not earned enough, has not been present. Home is where the account of his shortcomings lives.

That is not an excuse. It is the mechanism, and it explains why lowering the shame in the house does more than any amount of asking.

“If I leave him alone, won't he just drift further?”

This is the fear behind the chasing, and it is the right question.

The answer is that leaving him alone is not the same as leaving him. You stop pursuing; you do not stop being warm.

He experiences the absence of pressure, not the absence of you. That combination is what opens men. Pressure never has.

“He says he will change and then does not. Why?”

Because he meant it in the moment and had no plan. Men in a difficult conversation will promise almost anything to end the difficulty, sincerely, and then Monday arrives with no structure attached to the promise.

This is why you should never seek a promise in the Opening. Watch for a change of behaviour instead, over weeks, and treat promises as weather.

“Can a marriage really come back from this?”

Yes. I have seen it many times, and always slowly, and always because somebody stopped waiting and started deciding.

What I have not seen is a marriage come back while both people continued to say nothing. Not once.

“How long do I give it?”

Long enough to be fair and short enough to still be yourself at the end. Six months of real, honest effort — the seven steps, properly done, not a fortnight of trying — tells you what you need to know.

If a man has been told plainly that his wife is lonely, has been given six months of warmth and clear words, and has chosen to do nothing at all, he has answered you. Not with cruelty. With silence, which is the only language he ever used.

You are allowed to believe him.

— *Dede Okeke*