

Have you ever been the target of manipulation? It can leave you confused and questioning someone else's motives – were their words and actions innocent, or were they trying to strongarm you in a particular direction without regard to your needs? Your stomach may feel queasy, either at the time or afterwards, leaving you wondering whether you've been 'had'. Shame and doubt wash over you, and you find yourself saying 'Surely not'. You were just imagining things, you suppose.

While they can appear remarkably similar at times, there's a difference between influencing someone, persuading them, and manipulating them. Influence can either be conscious or unspoken and unintended, and is a way that somebody affects how another person feels, thinks, or acts.

Persuasion is a more direct attempt to impact a person and is generally beneficial to all parties. It involves putting forward arguments and presenting facts to effect change in others.

Manipulation, on the other hand, says psychiatry resident Dr Kieran Kennedy, is usually viewed as hitting below the belt to cause someone else to change course.

"With manipulation there's a primary component of deception and control (whether that's fully conscious to the person doing the manipulating or not) where the outcome is a more selfish goal of curbing or controlling another person's beliefs, thought, feelings or behaviour for the benefit of the manipulator," he says.

Attempts are made to shape our behaviour from various sources in modern life – in 2012, Facebook ran an experiment on its users to make them feel either happier or more depressed based on alterations to their Facebook feeds. With often subtle methods such as this employed, how do we realise when someone is toying with our emotions in this way?

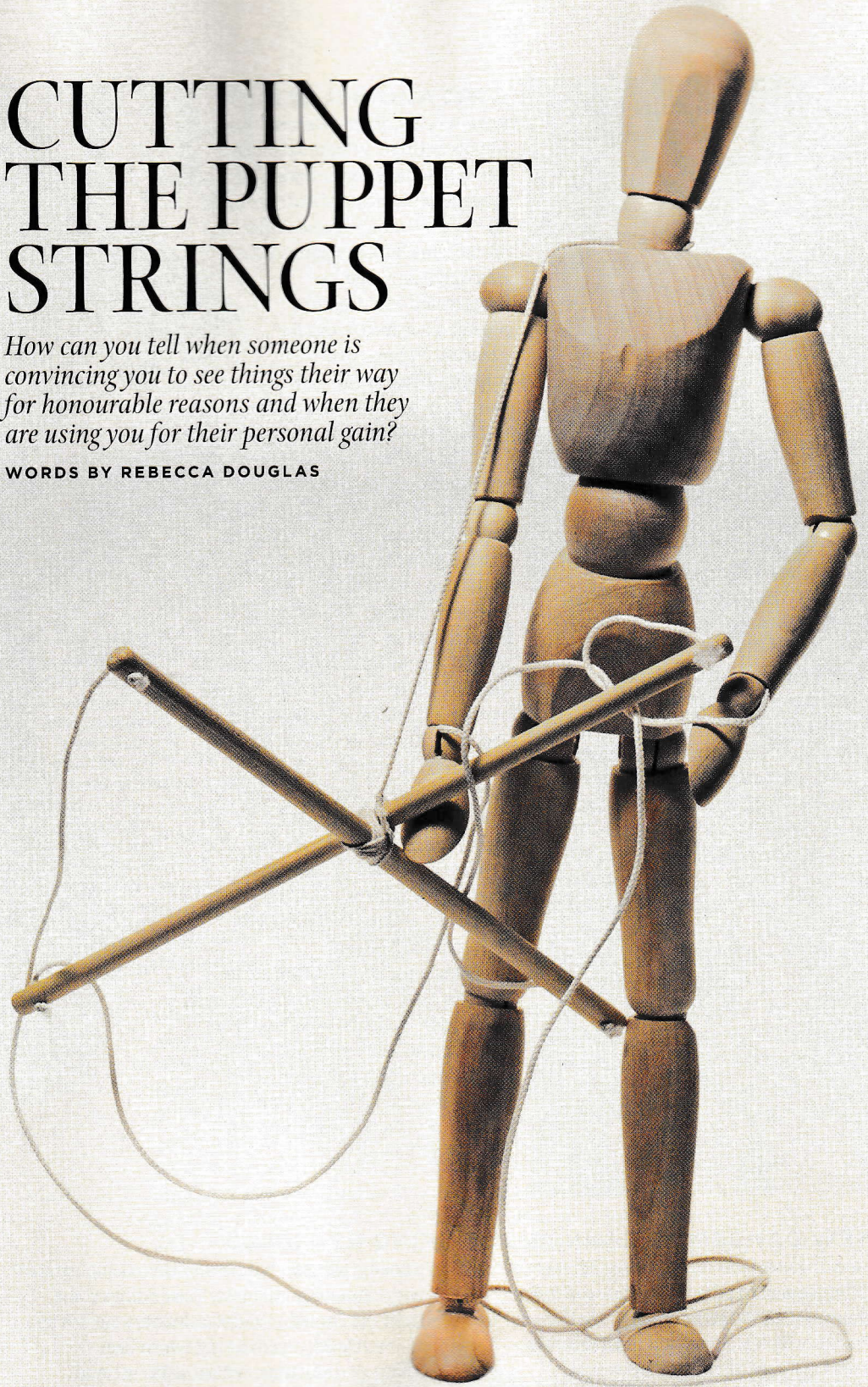
PLAYING ON WEAKNESSES

Manipulation comes in many forms, taking aim at an individual's sensitive spots in a calculated way so they are more likely to do what the manipulator wants. Manipulators can play on: their target's desire to be liked; sense of obligation and compulsion to help others; or fear based on their position

CUTTING THE PUPPET STRINGS

How can you tell when someone is convincing you to see things their way for honourable reasons and when they are using you for their personal gain?

WORDS BY REBECCA DOUGLAS



of relative powerlessness. Character flaws, strengths, and moral standpoints can all be twisted to suit the manipulator's purposes.

For someone who is starved of love, being ignored is almost unbearable, and therefore it is an effective tactic that can be used against them.

"A common form of manipulation in relationships is to ignore the child or partner when they are not doing what you want," says clinical psychologist Renee Mill. "Desperate

for love, the person will give in to the demand." Bullying and playing the victim are also common tactics. The bully uses aggression as their tool of choice, while a 'victim' invokes guilt in their target to make them bend to their will. This latter tactic draws in 'rescuer' types who think they are doing a good thing by riding in on their white horse. Showering someone with gifts can also be manipulation, a more slippery form of bribery. If you refuse these strings-attached presents,

WHERE TO GET HELP

If you need help dealing with psychological or emotional abuse, visit: healthdirect.gov.au/emotional-abuse

you can be accused of being ungrateful, when it is possible the giver may be doing it to create a sense of guilt and obligation on your part to give in to their needs later.

Other techniques a manipulator might employ include excluding someone from a group, or issuing threats such as saying they will kill themselves if you break up with them. They could try to punish you in some way if you say 'no' or set a boundary with them, or perhaps say that you'll lose your job if you don't lie to cover for them at work.

Clues that all might not be as it seems include feeling sad, angry, and misused. You might be 'battered up' to feel good about a decision initially, but once you walk away, you begin to feel uncomfortable.

SCAMS AND SCHEMES

Certain categories of people are particularly likely to be targets of manipulation, given factors such as their age and lack of knowledge or experience in a given situation. Seniors, for example, are often a primary target of scams and high-pressure sales, and people experiencing poverty are at increased risk of falling prey to loan sharks.

It can help to be aware of some of the tactics used in sales environments, which might also be used in other settings. The foot-in-the-door tactic, for example, is asking for a small favour or easy question to establish rapport before going in for the kill with a more sizeable request. By this stage, a connection has been established and the target might feel more likely to keep saying 'yes'.

The door-in-the-face approach is the opposite and is commonly used in negotiating – asking for something big up front in the hopes that after it is turned down, the follow-up request will be accepted because it seems comparatively reasonable.

These are useful approaches to recognise so you don't get talked into actions you'll regret, even if they are often used legitimately and legally. Scam artists take manipulation one step further by scaring their targets, rushing them into a decision to act, and engendering a false sense of trust to encourage them to release their PIN or other personal information such as bank account details.

"First, they use fear: 'We are from the bank and someone has made a purchase of \$5,000 on your credit

KNOW THE SIGNS

Clinical psychologist Dr Kirsten Keown shares the signs to look out for if you suspect someone is pulling your puppet strings. Manipulators will often:

- Leave you feeling confused or thinking you're irrational or 'crazy'
- Diminish your sense of agency and undermine your confidence
- Make you feel guilty about taking the course of action you really want
- Complain about you or compare you to other 'ideal' characters
- Lie, deny, minimise, or feign ignorance about their culpability
- Unfairly blame you or make you feel responsible for things
- Make you give up things that matter to you

"SHOWERING SOMEONE WITH GIFTS CAN ALSO BE MANIPULATION, A MORE SLIPPERY FORM OF BRIBERY."

card," says Mill. "Then they use the time-limited rush: 'We have one hour to reverse the fee otherwise there is nothing we can do. You do not have the correct insurance.' Then they pretend to be your friend: 'I am calling you because it happened to me once and I prioritised this so you do not lose your money.'"

One way to cushion yourself from being manipulated is to pay attention to the people you choose to associate with and make sure they are more interested in supporting people than tearing them down.

"It is very helpful to form authentic relationships with sincere people who want the best for you. If you are moving in a circle of people who play games with other people's feelings, talk behind their backs, are acquisitive, greedy, and selfish, then think about changing friends," advises Mill. "Otherwise, you are setting yourself up to be used, toyed with and gossiped about like they do with others."

HALTING THE PROCESS

Once you're aware that something is wrong, it's best to nip it in the bud before it snowballs into a bigger problem, says occupational psychiatrist Dr Frank Chow. "Manipulation is a slippery slope and while victims of manipulation may find the behaviour not as intrusive or disruptive at first, it's important to identify and disengage as soon as you're aware of it, before it escalates," he says.

There are some key ingredients to an effective response to potential manipulation, according to clinical psychologist Dr Kirsten Keown.

Firstly, be aware of your pressure points and scenarios that make you vulnerable to attack, including being alone with the manipulator or communicating with them when you're not at your strongest, such as when you're tired or relaxed.

Next, buy yourself some time by saying you need to think about it, and if they keep pressuring you to commit, avoid giving justifications that they can attempt to refute and just keep repeating that you'll get back to them.

Remember, if you do agree to something you later regret, it's not a crime to change your mind and it's often unfair of others to make you feel guilty about doing so.

"Humans change their minds and you're allowed to also," says Keown. "You're perfectly entitled to tell someone that you hadn't considered all the implications when you made your decision and that now things are different."

As for making sure you don't slip into the practice of manipulating others, it's vital to be aware of our motivations and those of others, and test what's driving our desire to point somebody in a particular direction.

"Stopping to place ourselves in the other individual's 'mental shoes' is an important way to curb the temptation to manipulate another – by acknowledging how someone else might be feeling, thinking and what they might be getting (or losing) in a situation, there's a chance to put a stop to behaviour that is solely self-interested," says Kennedy.

Overall, maintaining an awareness of the push and pull of relationships around you is a vital life skill that can help extract you from some sticky situations whenever they arise.

"It is important to understand the difference between manipulative, influential, and persuasive behaviour in your personal and work life to learn how to interact with people of all different personalities in all [areas] of life, whether this be in a courtroom, in sales, at work, and in relationships," says Chow. 🗨️



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