

Silencing the Self



SELF-SILENCING: WHAT IT IS, HOW IT AFFECTS WOMEN, AND HOW WE CAN HELP GIRLS FIND AND USE THEIR VOICES

By Lillien Waller

“It is the province of mothers to preserve the myth that we are unburdened with our own problems,” Terry Tempest Williams muses in the memoir *When Women Were Birds: Fifty-Four Variations on Voice*. “Placed in a circle of immunity, we carry only the crises of those we love. We mask our needs as the needs of others.” In this passage, the author reveals one of the many ways women silence themselves: by prioritizing the needs of others over their own, often as caretakers.

Research tells us that self-silencing comes in various forms. But no matter how it shows up, it can cause serious mental and physical harm to women and girls.

Celine Yuan '28

WHAT IS SELF-SILENCING?

Depression. Anger. Anxiety. Social withdrawal. PTSD. These are a few of the mental health impacts for women and girls of self-silencing, but it doesn't end there. Recent research¹ reveals that suppression of emotions over the long term is linked to significant, even deadly, repercussions for women's physical health, placing them at greater risk for a number of outcomes including "chronic pain, insomnia, fibromyalgia, long COVID, irritable bowel syndrome, and migraines." Women account for nearly 80 percent of autoimmune diseases and are twice as likely as men to die after a heart attack.

Described by Dana Crowley Jack in her 1991 book *Silencing of the Self: Women and Depression* as "compulsive caretaking, pleasing the other, and inhibition of self-expression" to maintain intimacy, self-silencing is a response by women and girls to engrained cultural norms. These norms define and delimit women's behaviour in a number of ways, such as the expectations that they be agreeable, self-sacrificing and inhibit their own self-expression in favor of others'.

"How am I creating these feelings about myself? Am I doing it through people pleasing or trying to gain approval from others? Or, am I letting other people's expectations dictate how I feel about myself?"

When you can challenge those things, it just leads to an ability to deepen relationships," explains relationship-expert Dr. Amber Price. After seeing a disturbing pattern of self-silencing behaviours in her own life, Dr. Price pursued a doctorate in Marriage, Family, and Human Development, and focussed her research on female self-silencing. Dr. Price now works with women to help them stop self-silencing and reclaim their identity. Dr. Price points out that when we hear the word self-silencing, we often think of the phenomenon as simply not speaking up, not using one's voice. That's one aspect, she says.

"But it's anything that you're doing that suppresses who you actually are. People pleasing would definitely fall within this category because you're making choices about how to spend your time or what to do—not to please yourself or because it's what you want—but because it's what you think other people want."

Perfectionism is a form of self-silencing, too. "Being agreeable and accommodating in a way that's not natural. I think this is where it can get a little bit sticky," says Dr. Price. "We want to have good relationships with other people. But in order to do that, we sometimes think we have to stifle who we are. Be agreeable. Don't disappoint anyone. Make sure that everybody is taken care of. We spend all of our

time doing that to the point where we lose the ability to know what we want for ourselves, to make decisions for ourselves, to speak up for ourselves, to pursue our own talents or hobbies or interests, to develop who we are. All of that can be encompassed in self-silencing."

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LUNA '31

It's important to recognize that not only can self-silencing take many forms, it can also start early and go unnoticed. It has become particularly prevalent among adolescent girls. A 2023 study of 17,000 girls in Grades 5-12 in the US found that 66% of girls do not say what they are thinking or disagree with others because they want to be liked². York House School students Luna Best and Camille Sinclair, who are both in Grade seven, offer examples of experiences they had when they were younger, although they wouldn't necessarily use the word self-silencing to describe their behaviors.

"When I was in a group or even just at my house," says Luna,

¹"Self-Silencing is Making Women Sick," Maytal Eyal, *Time*, October 3, 2023

²*Ruling Our eXperiences, Inc. The 2023 Girls' Index™: New Insights into the Complex World of Today's Girls. 2023, www.rulingourexperiences.com/research.*



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DR. AMBER PRICE

"I would always say yes whenever someone wanted to sit in the front seat, for instance, because I didn't want to get anyone mad or have any conflict." While Dr. Price primarily studies romantic relationships, she points out that self-silencing in general is inextricably tied to behaviours girls engage because they are trying to preserve relationships with others, so conflict avoidance is common. "I'm not going to speak up with my opinion right now, because I'm worried that I'll rock the boat. So I won't say anything, which kills intimacy."

So does the fear of being judged, a problem Camille experienced a number of years ago when she was in grades four and five, noting that sometimes public speaking would make her actually shake. "I was very

comfortable towards my friends only. But when it came to speaking in front of the class or speaking in front of a lot of people, that's when I would be quiet. I didn't want to talk. I thought, 'What happens if I make a mistake?'"

What helps me now is that I try to think of the positive things and don't think of it as a big picture.

CAMILLE '31

SENDING THE RIGHT MESSAGE

Resentment can be closely tied to self-silencing, Dr. Price points out, because of the anger one feels for not setting boundaries and giving up personal autonomy. If you feel resentment, she says, it's usually a good indication that there is self-silencing happening underneath it. This was the case for Luna, who realized that she was not making her needs clear to her friends. "Sometimes people would give me the option to do things, and I would always just do what they wanted. But then afterward I'd be annoyed because I did what they wanted. So, some of my friendships were hurt from not speaking up when I needed something.

"It made me feel like I wasn't the person controlling what I did. It was everyone else around me. [I felt like] I had no say in everything I did."

As she got older, Luna realized that it "wasn't a big deal" to speak up. And Camille went so far as to develop a personal strategy to help her combat self-silencing. "I had goals for myself to be more confident and how I was going to get there," she says about editing herself in front of her classmates. "I was thinking about how, when we were doing reading groups sometimes, and we had four or five people

in one group. We were just reading articles together, right? [Thinking about it that way] got me comfortable. And then I just had to keep going and keep sharing my thoughts with everyone.

“What helps me now is that I try to think of the positive things and don’t think of it as a big picture. So, ‘Today I’m going to try doing this. Today I’m doing that right.’ I think of how to break it up [into smaller pieces], and I remember that I don’t like going back to where I was.”

ENOUGH WITH “ENOUGH”

Camille and Luna were both able to work through these early episodes of self-silencing. But what are some of the ways girls and young women can feel more confidence in expressing themselves and setting boundaries? A lot of it, Dr. Price explains, has to do with the language the older women around them use to frame their behaviors—that is, enough with “should” and enough with “enough.”

“We have to be careful with the messages that we’re giving to girls, especially because we as women are hearing those same messages and struggling with them ourselves. Anytime we say ‘I should do this’ or ‘I’m supposed to do this,’ we have to question why? Does this feel like the right choice for myself, or am I doing it because I want to be seen as the good friend or the good wife or whatever?

“Also the word ‘enough.’ Am I productive enough? Am I thin enough? Anytime we’re worrying about whether something is enough, we’re tying our sense of self-worth to things outside of ourselves, to other people’s expectations. We have to be careful with what we model to them and the words that we use to describe what a woman is. Because we want women to show up and be their good, powerful selves and bring their best gifts to the table and make the world a better place.” 🌀

Sarah Thompson '27 using her voice in this year's production of Mean Girls