



**Emotional Blackmail
When the People in Your Life
Use Fear, Obligation and Guilt
To Manipulate You**

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Publisher: Harper Collins, New York

Copyright year: 1997

ISBN: 0-06-018757-3

Author bio and credits: Susan Forward, Ph.D., is an internationally acclaimed therapist, lecturer, and author. Her books include the #1 new York Times bestsellers *Men Who Hate Women and the Women Who Love Them* and *Toxic Parents*, as well as *Obsessive Love*, *Betrayal of Innocence*, and *Money Demons*. She lives in Los Angeles.

Author's Big Thought: Emotional blackmail is a powerful form of manipulation in which people close to us threaten to punish us for not doing what they want. Emotional blackmailers know how much we value our relationships with them. They know our vulnerabilities and our deepest secrets. They can be our parents or partners, bosses or coworkers, friends or lovers. No matter how much they care about us, they use this intimate knowledge to win our compliance. This books offers a method to break this cycle for good by giving blackmail targets the tools they need and steps they can take.

Notes:

Introduction

Emotional blackmail is a powerful form of manipulation in which people who are close to us threaten, either directly or indirectly, to punish us to get what they want. Knowing that we want love or approval, blackmailers threaten to withhold it or take it away altogether, or make us feel we must earn it. If you believe the blackmailer, you could fall into a pattern of letting him/her control your decisions and behavior.

Blackmailers create a thick “fog “ that obscures their actions. FOG is a shorthand way of referring to fear, Obligation and Guilt. Blackmailers pump up an engulfing FOG into their relationships, ensuring that we feel afraid to cross them, obligated to give them their way and terribly guilty if we don’t.

Blackmail takes two – it is a transaction. Following clarity comes change. It’s easy to focus on other people’s behavior and to think that if they change things will be fine. The change has to begin with the blackmail target. Our compliance rewards the blackmailer, and every time we reward someone for a

particular action, whether we realize it or not, we're letting them know in the strongest possible terms that they can do it again. The price we pay when we repeatedly give in to emotional blackmail is enormous. It eats away at us and escalates until it puts our most important relationships and our whole sense of self-respect in jeopardy.

PART 1: UNDERSTANDING THE BLACKMAIL TRANSACTION

Diagnosis: Emotional blackmail

The issues may differ, but the tactics and actions will be the same, and clearly recognizable.

1. A demand – it may be direct or indirect and may not even sound like a demand until the blackmailer is set in the course of action and is not willing to discuss or change it.
2. Resistance from the target.
3. Pressure
4. Threats
5. Compliance
6. Repetition

Manipulation becomes emotional blackmail when it is used repeatedly to coerce us into complying with the blackmailers demands, at the expense of our own wishes and well being. When you see other people are trying to get their own way regardless of the cost to you, you're looking at the bottom-line of the emotional blackmailer. There is little interest in compromise or conflict resolution.

The Four faces of Blackmail

Punishers – let us know exactly what they want, and the consequences we'll face if we don't give it to them, are the most glaring. They may express themselves aggressively or they may smolder in silence, but either way, the anger is always aimed directly at us. The closer the relationship, the higher the stakes – and the more vulnerable we are to punishers. When blackmail escalates, the threatened consequences of not acceding to a punisher can be alarming: abandonment, emotional cutoff, withdrawal of money or other resources. Explosive anger directed at us. And, at the most terrifying extreme, threats of physical harm,

Self-punishers turn the threats inward threatening what they will do to themselves if they don't get their way. High drama, hysteria and an air of crisis (precipitated by you, of course) surround self-punishers, who are often excessively needy and dependent. They often enmesh themselves with those around them and struggle with taking responsibility with their own lives. The ultimate threat self-punishers can make is frightening in the extreme: It's a suggestion that they will kill themselves.

Sufferers are talented blamers and guilt-peddlers who make us figure out what they want, and always conclude that it is up to us to ensure they get it. Sufferers take the position that if they feel miserable, sick, unhappy, or are just plain unlucky, there's only one solution: our giving them what they want – even if they haven't told us what it is. They let us know, in no uncertain terms, that if you don't do what they want, they will suffer and it will be your fault. Sufferers are pre-occupied with how awful they feel, and often they interpret your inability to read their mind as proof that you don't care enough about them.

Tantalizers put us through a series of test and hold out a promise of something wonderful if we'll just give them their way. They are the subtlest blackmailers. They encourage us and promise love or money or career advancement, and then make it clear that unless we behave, as they want us to, we don't get the prize. Every seductively wrapped package has a web of strings attached. Many tantalizers traffic in emotional payoffs, castles in the air full of love, acceptance, family closeness and healed wounds. Admission to this rich, unblemished fantasy requires only one thing: giving in to what the tantalizer wants.

Each type of blackmailer operates with a different vocabulary, and each gives a different spin to the demands, pressure, threats and negative judgments that go into blackmail. There are no firm boundaries between the styles of blackmail, as they can be combined.

A Blinding FOG

Emotional blackmail flourishes in a cloud just below the surface of our understanding. Our judgment becomes hazy. In the midst of the FOG we're desperate to know: How did I get into this? How do I get out? How do I make these difficult feelings stop? When blackmailers pressure us, there is practically no time between feeling discomfort and acting to get relief.

The Real F-Word: Fear

Blackmailers build their conscious and unconscious strategies on the information we give them about what we fear. The blackmailers fear of not getting what they want becomes so intense that they become tightly focused, able to see the outcome they want in exquisite detail but unable to take their eyes off the goal long enough to see how their actions are affecting us. At that point, the information they've gathered about us in the course of the relationship becomes ammunition for driving home a deal that's fed on both sides by fear. One of the most painful parts of emotional blackmail is that it violates the trust that has allowed us to reveal ourselves.

Obligation

Often our ideas about duty and obligation are reasonable, and they form an ethical and moral foundation for our lives. Sometimes these are out of balance. Blackmailers never hesitate to put our sense of obligation to the test. Reluctance to break up a family keeps many people in relationships that have gone sour. Most of us have a terrible time defining our boundaries – when our sense of obligation is stronger than our sense of self-respect and self-caring; blackmailers quickly learn to take advantage.

Guilt

Guilt is an essential part of being a feeling, responsible person. It's a tool of conscience, in its distorted form, registers discomfort and self-reproach if we've done something to violate our personal or social code of ethics. One of the fastest ways for blackmailers to create undeserved guilt is to use blame, actively attributing whatever upset or problems they're having to their targets. Once blackmailers see that their target's guilt can serve them, time becomes irrelevant. There is no statute of limitations. Guilt is the blackmailer's neutron bomb. It can leave relationships standing, but it wears away the trust and intimacy that makes us want to be with them.

Tools of the Trade

The tools are a constant that runs through the endlessly varied scenarios of emotional blackmail, and all blackmailers, no matter what their style, use one or more of them.

The Spin

Blackmailers see our conflicts with them as reflections of how misguided and off base we are, while they describe themselves as wise and well intentioned. They let us know that they ought to win because the outcome they want is more loving, more open, more mature. Any resistance on our parts is transformed from an indication of our needs to evidence of our flaws. In addition to discrediting the perceptions of their targets, many blackmailers turn up the pressure by challenging our character, motives, and worth. We may be labeled heartless, worthless or selfish in any relationship with a blackmailer, but those labels are especially difficult to withstand when they're coming from a parent who can wipe out our confidence faster than anyone else.

Pathologizing

Some blackmailers tell us that we're resisting them only because we're ill or crazy. This is called pathologizing. The experience of being pathologized can be a devastating blow to our confidence and sense of self and is therefore an especially toxic and effective tool.

Pathologizing often arises in love relationships when there's an imbalance of desires – more love, more time, more attention, more commitment – when it's not forthcoming, he/she questions our ability to love. Like the spin, pathologizing makes us unsure about our memories, our judgments, our intelligence, and our character. With pathologizing the stakes are higher, and can make us doubt our sanity.

Enlisting Allies

When single-handed attempts at blackmail are effective, blackmailers call in reinforcements (family members, friends), to make their case for them and to prove that they are right. They may turn to a higher authority such as the bible.

Negative comparisons

Blackmailers often hold up another person as a model, a flawless ideal against which we fall short. Negative comparisons make us feel suddenly deficient. We react competitively.

The Inner World of the Blackmailer

Emotional blackmailers hate to lose. Blackmailers can't tolerate frustration. To the blackmailer, frustration is connected to deep, resonant fears of loss and deprivation, and they experience it as a warning that unless they take immediate action they'll face intolerable consequences. These convictions may be rooted in a lengthy history of feeling anxious and insecure. Complementing and reinforcing possible genetic factors are powerful messages from our caretakers and society about whom we are and how we are supposed to behave. Blackmailers believe that they can compensate for some of the frustrations of the past by changing the current reality.

The potential for blackmail rises dramatically during such crises as a separation or divorce, loss of a job, illness and retirement, which undermine blackmailers' sense of themselves as valuable people. Often people who have had everything and have been overprotected and indulged have had little

opportunity to develop confidence in their ability to handle any kind of loss. At the first hint that they might be deprived, they panic, and shore themselves up with blackmail.

Usually blackmailers focus totally on their needs, their desires; they don't seem to be the least bit interested in our needs or how their pressure is affecting us. They often behave as though each disagreement is the make-or-break factor in the relationship.

Blackmailers frequently win with tactics that create an insurmountable rift in the relationship. Yet the short-term victory often appears to be enough of a triumph – as if there were no future to consider. Most blackmailers operate from an I-want-what-I want-when-I-want it mind-set. Any logic or ability to see the consequences of their actions is obscured by the urgency blackmailers feel to hold on to what they have.

The most important thing to take away from the tour of a blackmailer's psyche is that emotional blackmailer sounds like it's all about you and feels like it's all about you, but for the most part it's not about you at all. Instead it flows from and tries to stabilize some fairly insecure places inside the blackmailer. Many times it has more to do with the past than the present, and it's more concerned with filling the blackmailer's needs than with anything the blackmailer says we did or didn't do.

It takes two

Blackmail cannot work without the target's active participation. The target gives it permission to occur. You may be aware of the blackmail but feel as though you can't resist it, because the blackmailer's pressure sets off almost programmed responses in you, and you're reacting automatically or impulsively.

Blackmailers may be aware of your hot buttons. Faced with resistance, blackmailers' fear of deprivation kicks in and they use every bit of information to ensure that they prevail. The protective qualities that we have that open us up to emotional blackmail are:

- An excessive need for approval
- An intense fear of anger
- A need for peace at any price
- A tendency to take too much responsibility for other people's lives
- A high level of self-doubt

When kept in balance and alternated with other behavior, none of these styles dooms you to the status of 'preferred target' of an emotional blackmailer. Emotional blackmailing takes training and practice. Emotional blackmailers take their cues from our responses to their testing, and they learn from both what we do and what we don't do.

The Impact of Blackmail

Emotional blackmail may not be life threatening but it robs us of our integrity. Integrity is that place inside where our values and our moral compass reside, clarifying what right and wrong for us.

- We let ourselves down

- A vicious cycle ensues
- Rationalizing and justifying

The impact on our well –being:

- Mental health
- Physical pain as a warning

We may betray others to placate the blackmailer

It sucks the safety out of the relationship. We may shut down and constrict emotional generosity.

PART 2: TURNING UNDERSTANDING INTO ACTION

To change, we need to know what we have to do and then we have to act. If you're willing to take action now and let your feelings of confidence and competence catch up with you, you can end emotional blackmail.

The first Step:

Three simple tools:

1. A contract
2. A power statement: I CAN STAND IT
3. A set of self-affirming phrases

Step One -: Stop

You don't make a decision about how to respond the moment a demand is made. Give yourself time to think.

Step two: Become an Observer

Gather the information you need to respond to the blackmailer.

Understand what really happening:

What are you thinking?

What are you feeling?

What are your flashpoints?

Keep observing until you begin to make connections between your beliefs, feelings, and behavior.

A Time for decision

There are three categories of demands:

1. The demand is no big deal.
2. The demand involves important issues, and your integrity is on the line.
3. The demand involves a major life issues, and/or by giving in would be harmful to you or others.
 - Stretch out your decision making process, carefully considering how much each option will affect your life and your integrity.

When you make decisions based on criteria that are your own rather than the blackmailers, you have dealt a crippling blow to the emotional blackmail cycle.

Strategy

For relationships that are physically abusive, don't go it alone.

Strategy 1: Non-defensive communication Do not defend or explain your decision or yourself in response to pressure. Use phrases like: I'm sorry you are so upset, Really? I can understand how you might see it that way. Without fuel from the target, the blackmail attempts that worked so well in the past fizzle.

Choose time and place carefully. lay down conditions for the meeting announce decision and stand by it – offer a suggestion that they nor respond immediately.

Anticipate their answers. Practice or role play.

The book provides suggestions on how to respond to the person's:

1. Catastrophic predictions and threats
2. Name-calling, labeling and negative judgments.
3. The deadly whys and hows – demanding explanations and a rationale for your decision.

For silent angry people, stay non-defensive.

Strategy 2: Enlisting the blackmailer as an ally

When emotional blackmail reaches an impasse, it's often helpful to shift the conversation by involving the other person in your problem-solving process. Approach with curiosity and a willingness to learn. Use the "wonder tool". "I wonder what would happen if..."

Strategy 3: Bartering

When you want another person to change his or her behavior, and at the same time you acknowledge that you need to make changes of your own, barter may be in order. It's win/win. It enables resentments to be put to one side.

Strategy 4: Using Humor

In a relationship that is basically good, humor can be an effective tool for pointing out to the other person how their behavior looks to you.

Reviewer's recommendation: I found this book fascinating and recognized many scenarios either of my own or shared with me by friends and clients. An important read for those who listen to others and their issues.

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Many CEO's find themselves asking "What now?" to sensitive situations that only an experienced former CEO can understand. Frumi is brought in to solve problems and often remains to work with you, as your confidante and secret weapon. She has an uncanny knack of getting to the heart of your corporate climate and maximizing your team's performance, profitability and sustainability.

To schedule a free *Break From the Pack to Success* consultation email
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