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# Some people don't stay quiet in arguments because they're calm, they stay quiet because they ran the math years ago and concluded that saying the thing costs more than swallowing it, and they've been paying the cheaper price so long they forgot it was a choice



By Christian Kelly



Silence in arguments is rarely what it appears to be. The quiet party at the dinner table; the one who absorbs the correction that should have landed; the one whose unspoken thought dissolves mid-formation and gets chased down with a sip of water — these people are not, as the common reading would have it, practising some form of hard-won equanimity. They are running a cost-benefit analysis so old and so thoroughly automated that it no longer registers as a calculation at all.

The conventional labels (calm, easygoing, the adult in the room) flatter the behaviour while misreading its origin. Most of these people are none of those things. What looks like

composure is, in a great many cases, the steady-state output of a decision that was made years ago and has been re-executing ever since, without the person noticing the machinery still running underneath.

## The calculation nobody credits them for making

The popular read on the quiet person in the argument is that they have achieved some kind of emotional mastery; non-reactive, regulated, a Zen thing. The assumption is that the stillness reflects an internal state that matches the external one.

What is actually happening, in a great many cases, is a cost-benefit analysis so old and so automatic that the person running it no longer experiences it as a decision. They ran the numbers the first few hundred times. Saying the thing produced a fight, or a sulk, or a week of distance, or a subtle punishment that took three days to identify. Not saying the thing produced a mild ache that faded by Tuesday.

The ache was cheaper, so they paid the ache. Then they paid it again. Then a thousand more times. And at some point the ache stopped registering as a price at all, because the body got used to the transaction.

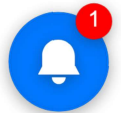
The transaction, it bears noting, never stopped occurring.

## Cost-benefit analysis isn't just for governments

There is a whole academic field devoted to the question of how one values things that cannot be easily priced. Economists argue about it because governments have to decide whether a highway is worth more than a hospital. In **debates over cost-benefit analysis**, economists have made points that apply well beyond public policy: the real question is never whether to measure tradeoffs, but whether to measure them honestly.

Willingness to sacrifice is exactly what is happening inside the quiet one at the dinner table. They are not refusing to calculate; they are calculating constantly. They have simply been doing it for so long that the spreadsheet runs in the background, and like any spreadsheet that runs in the background, it eventually starts producing outputs that the user no longer questions.

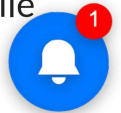
## The asymmetry that creates the pattern



Here is the part that gets missed: these calculations are not irrational. For a period of the person's life, the math was, in fact, correct. Somewhere, for some stretch of time, speaking up genuinely did cost more than staying quiet (a parent with a temper; a boss who held grudges; a partner who punished disagreement by withdrawing affection for days; a friendship in which one person's feelings were always treated as more important than the other's). In those environments, the quiet person was not weak; they were doing what any reasonable agent does in the face of asymmetric consequences. They were minimising exposure to a cost they could not afford. One might argue that this is precisely the definition of rational behaviour, and one would be right – which is what makes the later phase of the pattern so difficult to dislodge. The problem is not that the strategy was wrong; the problem is that the strategy outlived the environment that required it. People who grew up in households where disagreement was expensive often become adults who can afford the argument (the relationship is safe; the stakes are low) but whose nervous systems never received the update. The ledger still reads the way it did when they were ten.

## What emotional suppression actually does over time

The psychological literature calls this suppression, and it distinguishes it from something called reappraisal. Suppression means muffling the emotion, or the expression of it; reappraisal means reinterpreting what it is about. [Research across multiple cultures](#) has found that suppression is generally associated with worse psychological outcomes, while reappraisal is generally associated with better ones.



But the interesting finding is not the headline; the interesting finding is the variance. The cost of suppression appears to be higher in cultures of greater indulgence and lower in cultures with stronger competitive or collectivist norms. In other words, whether silence costs a person depends partly on where the silence is being performed. What this actually means for the person in the argument is that the math they ran years ago was context-specific; it priced in a room they may no longer be sitting in.

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**The hardest thing about healing isn't the work itself. It's the quiet grief of realizing how many years you spent believing the problem was you, when the actual problem was an environment that...**



I'm 66 and my adult son sent me a text last Sunday that just said "thinking of you, hope your weekend is nice" — and I read it four times trying to understand why it had landed so hard — and I...



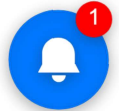
There's a specific kind of quiet people develop after years of being interrupted, and it looks like calm from the outside but feels like surrender from the inside

VEGOUT

## The forgetting is the real injury

The swallowing is not the worst part. The swallowing is survivable, and for a while, it is even adaptive. The injury is the forgetting.

After long enough, the person does not experience the silence as a choice; they experience it as their personality. They describe themselves as non-confrontational, as someone who just does not like drama, as a peacekeeper. These descriptions feel accurate because the original decision has calcified into identity, and identity is much harder to renegotiate than behaviour. A person who thinks they are being strategic can change the strategy; a person who thinks they are being themselves experiences the change as self-betrayal. This is the trap: the cost-benefit analysis disappeared into the self, and now the self defends the analysis.



## Why the room rarely notices

Something worth saying about the people around the quiet one: they are usually not villains. They are just optimised for the arrangement. If one person in a relationship consistently absorbs the disagreement, the other person gets used to a world in which disagreements do not happen. They do not register as domineering because they rarely have to dominate; the terrain under them is already flat. **Highly sensitive people** often take on this flattening role in groups, absorbing emotional turbulence before anyone else has to feel it. The group experiences the calm; the absorber experiences the absorption.



This is what makes the pattern so durable. Everyone benefits from it except the one person carrying it, and that person has trained themselves not to notice they are carrying anything.

It bears noting that the skill required to absorb disagreement is the same skill observed in **the adult who can read a room's mood shift three seconds before anyone else**. The quiet-in-arguments person is often the same person; the skill they developed to avoid the fight is the same skill that now prevents them from having it.

## EDITORS' RECOMMENDATIONS



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EXPERT EDITOR



**The hardest person I ever had to deal with used all 7 of these phrases — and I didn't recognise the pattern until it was too late**

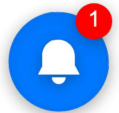
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## The price gets paid, just not where you can see it



The myth of swallowing is that it disappears. It does not; it relocates. Sometimes into the body (tension, insomnia, the stomach that knots before a phone call); sometimes into the relationship itself, where resentment builds slowly and without direct cause, until one day the person detonates over something small and the other party is genuinely baffled; sometimes into other relationships entirely, where the unsaid things get displaced onto people who did not earn them.

And sometimes into the dullest place of all, which is the gradual disappearance of the person's own sense of what they actually think. Spend two decades not saying the thing, and eventually the certainty that there was a thing begins to erode; the thought stops forming at all. That is the real price, and it does not show up on any ledger.

Silicon Canals has explored how **people who seem impossible to offend have often made a similar trade** — deciding that visible hurt is a map they will not hand over. The quiet-in-

arguments pattern is a close cousin; different mechanism, same underlying equation. Protect the surface; eat the cost internally.

## Decision fatigue and the path of least resistance

There is a more mundane reason the pattern holds, which does not get enough attention: running the argument is cognitively expensive, and the brain is always looking to conserve. Studies have shown that after a day of choices, people gravitate toward whatever requires the least further deciding. For someone whose default is to swallow, the default is the cheap option by definition; silence is not chosen, it is what happens when no choice is made.

This is why the pattern tends to get worse with age, not better. Every year the person is tireder; every year the case for having the argument has to clear a higher energetic bar; and every year, fewer of the potential arguments clear it.

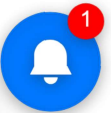
Running a business teaches a version of this in a different register. The difficult conversation with a client, the invoice that needs chasing, the scope creep that needs naming — all of it is cheaper in the moment to avoid. The price simply shows up six months later, compounded. The nervous system would rather pay it in instalments than face the lump sum of a direct conversation.

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## What changes the math

The pattern does not break because someone decides to speak up more. That is the surface layer, and the surface layer is not where the decision lives.

It breaks through auditing the ledger; going back and asking what the actual cost of speaking up was, the last ten times the speaking did not happen. Not the imagined cost; the real one. For a great many people, once they look closely, they find that the cost they were bracing for has not existed in years. They have been pricing in a rate that expired when they left home, or changed jobs, or ended the relationship. The tariff is still being collected on behalf of a country that no longer exists.

The **New Zealand Treasury built a whole toolkit** called CBAX to help public agencies update the assumptions in their cost-benefit models, because it turned out that most agencies were using inherited values nobody had revisited in years. The institutional problem is exactly the personal one: old numbers keep driving new decisions, and nobody notices the inputs are stale.

Updating one's own CBAX is less complicated than Treasury's, but it is not easy. It requires a willingness to discover that years of accommodation were paid into an account that no longer exists.

## The part that isn't about speaking up

A caveat is warranted here, because the takeaway is not that everyone should start saying every difficult thing they have ever swallowed. Some of them genuinely were not worth it: some relationships really do punish honesty, and the math really is still current. Not even silence is a mistake.



The move is smaller than that, and harder. It is noticing the silence as a decision. It is restoring the awareness that *I chose this* where the thought *this is just how I am* has been living. The restoration itself changes something, even if no behaviour follows, because a choice one can see is a choice one can re-evaluate. A personality, one cannot.



The quietest people in the room are not, most of the time, the calmest. They are the ones who have been running a thirty-year spreadsheet on a machine they no longer remember turning on. The first step is not to speak; the first step is to find the machine, and then to ask, with honesty this time, whether the rate it is charging still reflects the world they are actually living in.

Feature image by cottonbro studio on Pexels

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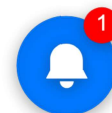
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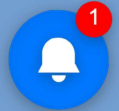


## Christian Kelly

Christian Kelly spent his twenties and early thirties working in corporate communications, where he learned firsthand how organizations actually function: the politics, the gap between what companies say and what they do, and the unspoken rules that govern who gets ahead. He left to run his own consultancy before eventually burning out on client work and realizing that the part he actually enjoyed was the thinking and writing, not the deliverables. Now he writes about culture, psychology, and policy for Silicon Canals. His background gives him a particular lens on current events. He is less interested in what happened than in why it happened, who benefits from the narrative, and what incentive structures are driving behavior behind the scenes. He draws on behavioral psychology, institutional analysis, and a healthy skepticism toward anyone claiming simple answers to complicated problems. Christian lives in Dublin, where he spends his non-writing hours working out, traveling, and reading nonfiction about history, politics, and psychology. He was married for eight years, divorced amicably, and considers the experience one of the things that taught him the most about understanding his own patterns rather than just analyzing everyone else's.



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