

What is weaponised incompetence?

Spot the sneaky excuse that can lead to relationship inequality

Writing | Kathryn Wheeler

It's fair to say that things like household chores and daily responsibilities aren't everyone's cup of tea. That said, what needs to be done, *has* to get done. But, sometimes, people have sneaky ways of avoiding those responsibilities – and it might be flying under the radar, until now.

'Weaponised incompetence' is used to describe a scenario where one person leads another to believe they are bad at a task, in order to get out of doing it altogether. The key thing here is that they're feigning the incompetence, and it's likely to be related to unappealing or tricky chores – think using the washing machine, navigating a GP's booking system, or doing a child's hair before school – so that someone else has to pick it up. This dynamic can happen in many different ways, but it's particularly prevalent in long-term relationships.

"Weaponised incompetence can be considered a psychological game played by many couples, to varying degrees," explains

Hannah Beckett-Pratt, a transactional analysis counsellor. "A psychological game is where both partners play out a certain sequence of behaviours together, that repeat patterns with which they have become familiar. This happens outside of conscious awareness, so we usually do not notice we have been playing the game until we wind up with the same end result."

Hannah points out that the partner on the receiving end of the weaponised incompetence can often end up feeling as though they know best, or are more competent, and so do the task – but at the same time feel hard done by and confused. This feeling of frustration is usually what then drives them to complete the task they really want their partner to do, and so the cycle repeats.

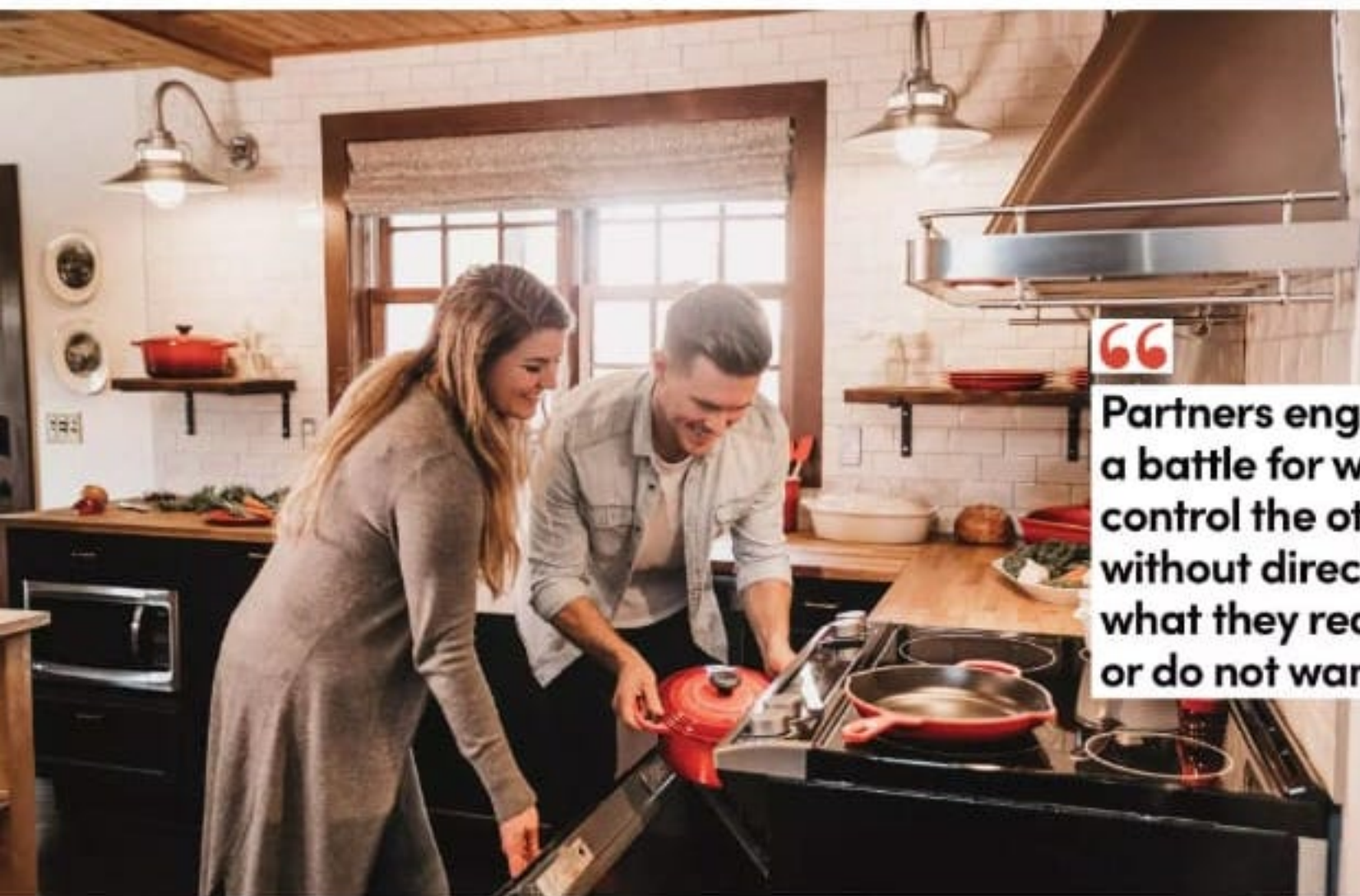
"If we are playing the other side – resorting to manipulating our partner into doing something for us because we 'can't' – we are victimising ourselves, and will likely feel guilty, powerless, and inadequate," Hannah

adds. "It can appear that the partner weaponising their incompetence is only affected in beneficial ways, but actually, these behaviours are reinforcing their own helplessness, and also driving a wedge between them and their partner."

Hannah explains that this behaviour might stem from low self-esteem, difficulty with boundaries and control, or could perhaps be a leftover tool of getting out of boring chores in childhood. Alternatively, she points out that they might be overcommitted in other areas of their lives, but find it hard to communicate that directly.

"Whatever the reasons underling the game of weaponised incompetence, neither partner is acting as an autonomous adult, responsible for their own needs," Hannah concludes. "Instead, partners engage in a battle for who can control the other one, without directly stating what they really want, or do not want, to do."

Weaponised incompetence lays the foundations for an unequal



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Partners engage in a battle for who can control the other one, without directly stating what they really want, or do not want, to do

relationship. So, what can you do to address this? The answer is rooted in communication, and Hannah has some tips for navigating it.

“When it comes to conflict within a relationship, I love the analogy of being on the ‘same page’ as our partner,” she explains. “Arguments around weaponised incompetence, or shared division of labour, usually result in a ‘me vs you’ dynamic. It’s like standing on opposite sides of a mountain, arguing about who put it there, both of you struggling to be heard.

“Instead, try considering the weaponised incompetence as a relational issue between you, rather than a problem with one of you. Imagine you and your

partner side by side, facing the mountain, and forming a plan together of how to climb it. Be curious about how this dynamic has been created between you, when it appears, and how you each contribute. This mimics the non-judgemental dynamics of couples therapy, and gives you the best chance to work on the issue together.”

Hannah rightly points out that in abusive relationships, where one partner is deliberately manipulating the other to exploit or bully them, professional help is needed. But, often, approaching problems with curiosity and patience is the key to making progress.

“When we have a fair or equal relationship, we show our

partner we respect them, and are committed to the partnership,” Hannah says. “This is the basis of the trust, and teamwork, that happy relationships depend on.”

Communication doesn’t have to be a chore. Call it how it is, but do it with care and compassion, and – together – you could be laying the way to a more equal, and more fulfilling, relationship. **■**



Hannah Beckett-Pratt is a relational transactional analysis counsellor. Find out more by visiting [counselling-directory.org.uk](https://www.counselling-directory.org.uk)