

Please Try This at Home

Monthly Tips for Increasing the Joy in Your Life

Pettiness: The Secret to Lasting Relationships?

Boy, do I hate feeling petty! I don't want to be one of those people who starts internally fuming when people inconvenience me or say prickly things because they're in a bad place. I wanna be one of those magnanimous, mythical Zen people who greet minor offenses with "Hey, it's no big deal," really mean it, and then totally forget that a moment before I had wanted to shake the person until their boogers and personal issues came right out.

I especially don't want to have to tell people who have offended me in small ways over time, "Um, yeah, that little thing you just did (or keep doing) hurt my feelings or irritated me. I need you to stop it because I am not James Bond or the Dalai Lama. I'm vulnerable and human. So I need you to be considerate of me so I don't get all hurt and bitter and want to shake you."

That sounds kinda petty, doesn't it? And weak. And lame. But in light of recent events, I'm renewing my commitment to be more petty.

"I Didn't Want to Inconvenience You, So I Cheated on You Instead."

Recently, I've been helping a bunch of ex-spouses and ex-friends who lost their relationships over a lack of pettiness. It all began with what felt like pretty minor conflicts with the other person. They didn't really want to bring the annoyances up around the time they first happened, even though they were still annoyed a few days later, because it felt like it *should* be no big deal. And they didn't want to seem petty.

Over time, the minor conflicts continued. But because they hadn't addressed them in the beginning, it seemed even more petty to bring them up *now* as if they'd been holding a grudge all this time. So they didn't mention it. Instead, they started to feel more distant from the other person, resentful that the other hadn't read their mind and stopped the irritating or hurtful behavior. They began to feel their needs weren't being met.

Eventually, their frustration led them to blurt out that they were irritated. Often, they chose a not-so-great time and not-so-great way of saying it. The other person heard the anger in their voice that seemingly came out of nowhere. So the other reacted defensively, did not hear the legitimate concern behind the outburst, and did not take it to heart and make a change. The offended friend or spouse then concluded that the other did not really care about them because otherwise, they would have changed, right? So they rationalized that if their partner or friend did not care about their needs, it was okay to pull back from the relationship, at least in part, and respond to offers from other people who seemed oh-so-eager to listen to them and meet their needs.

Because they wanted to appear strong or gracious, not hypersensitive and petty, or because they were afraid they'd trouble the relationship by pointing out an irritation, rather than pretending everything was A-OK, they ended up blowing the relationship to smithereens by

cheating on their partner or cutting out someone who had once been a best friend. Yikes and yikes!

Here's the dirty little secret of long-term happy relationships: Time does *not* heal all wounds. It only heals the ones we are willing to take a good hard look at and then work through with the other person. If something a friend or significant other did to us still hurts or irritates us days or weeks after it happened, it's not gonna magically go away, no matter how Zen we pretend to be, no matter what good fakers we are. It's going underground to cause gradually-increasing distance in the relationship. Months or years later, that distance can erode the relationship to the point of rupture.

If we don't want that to happen, if we want to stay in good, solid relationship with those we care most about, we've got to let them know about our frustrations and see if we can get them to understand why what happened wasn't cool with us and how it can be prevented from happening again.

Now, if we add up the Total time given to the problem + Emotional energy + Risk of troubling the relationship for a variety of ways of addressing relational tension, the approach that causes the least headache and relational risk overall tends to be addressing tension the moment it occurs, or very shortly after, when it still feels pretty darned petty.

Why do insist that we use feeling petty as the indicator that we should confront, rather than waiting for something that sounds more positive or powerful, like "confrontational courage"? Because for those of us who live in fear of being *too* confrontational, petty, or hypersensitive, it turns out that the least offensive, safest time to confront is actually when we still feel we're being petty, *before* we've hit the point of self-righteous anger that feels like the courage to confront. If we wait until we don't feel petty anymore, we've often waited too long and it's gonna be a big ordeal. It's only those people who almost *always* feel the "courage to confront" who need to dial their pettiness down a notch or two. The rest of us need to pay more attention to it.

Addressing Tension ASAP

So how do we get better at confronting the moment tension happens? Often, the first thing we notice when someone has offended us is confusion. Our friend says, "Are you planning to eat *that*?" We feel like they're insulting our eating habits or current weight, but we're not sure. Since we're not absolutely sure what they meant, it feels petty to address it. But that doesn't mean it's not bothering us and creating tension. So our goal for addressing confusing offenses in the moment or soon afterwards is to be ready with one of these simple, genuine questions: "What did you mean by that?" for addressing comments or "Why did you do that?" for addressing actions.

If the offense happened in public where it would be pretty inappropriate to address straight away, we can sidebar with the person right after or call them as soon as we're away from the public place, asking one of the two questions. In the moment or right after, these questions do several helpful things:

1. If the person meant no offense and we were misinterpreting, it lets them explain right then and there so that we're not obsessing about it afterwards. Our friend can tell us that she wanted to eat *that* herself if we didn't want it, not that she meant something about our eating choices. Tension gone!

2. If there was actually a subtle jab intended, these questions let us avoid having to go all the way to calling the person on it. But we're still letting them know that we felt something was off and we're giving them the chance to bring it up directly and clearly, rather than passive-aggressively. Your friend could say, "Oh, I remembered that you had said you wanted to lose some weight last time we got together. I didn't know if you still wanted help with that. Sorry, I should have just asked you about it."
3. If the person meant to put us down, but is too scared to talk to us about it directly, it allows them to say, "Oh, I didn't mean anything by that. It was just a comment." However, after we've asked them these questions several times over the course of a few encounters, they will realize that we notice what they are doing and we have the courage to address it directly. If they want to avoid a direct conversation with us, they are likely to stop making the irritating passive-aggressive comments or doing confusing, inconveniencing things because our asking them about it makes them uncomfortable.

If we're not confused and we know for certain that our friend or significant other was doing or saying something irritating or hurtful, rather than using the two questions, it's best to address it with a phrase like this: "When you did/said _____, I felt _____. I'm not sure whether you meant to make me feel that way, but in the future I'd like you to do/say _____ instead because you are important to me and I want to feel safe with you."

This phrasing, or something similar is much more likely to be effective than other approaches for several reasons:

1. It focuses on the way we felt, rather than accusing the other of *meaning* to hurt us. When people feel accused of being buttheads, even in minor ways, they tend to react defensively to preserve their own view that they are an okay person (even if they are, in fact, a butthead). Along the way, they tend to completely miss the point we are actually trying to make. Giving the person the benefit of the doubt about what they intended for us to feel gives them a chance to clarify what they really meant, if they choose to, or to apologize if they are able to.
2. It includes the fact that they are important to us and we want a future with them. When people hear a change request that comes from a desire to stay in good relationship with them, they tend to respond a lot better than if they feel the change request is part of our belief that they are deficient and nasty and we'd rather not be with them if we had the choice.
3. Compared to saying, "You always do _____" or "Why do you have to be such a ___(insert negative label/insult)___," this way of addressing conflict limits the change request to one single instance or one single pattern of the offense. It's much easier to accept the need to change one thing or one pattern than to stop being a "butthead" or stop doing something we "always" do.

When We Missed the Moment...by About a Year

Okay, so these are good ways to bring up the tension ASAP. But what if we missed ASAP? Because sometimes we don't even really notice that we're irritated or uncomfortable until way after the fact. Then, we have to decide whether or not it's worth it to bring the subject up with the person. So how do we know which offenses really will just *POOF* themselves out of existence if we don't address them, never troubling the relationship, and which ones will fester and cause long-term relationship conflict?

The first thing to remember is that our feelings have a lot to do with what's going on in our bodies: how much we've slept, whether we've eaten recently, whether we have PMS, and what kinds of stress we're dealing with in the rest of our lives. After we've had a meal or a good night's sleep, it's amazing how differently we can feel about things we were all fired up about hours before. So a good first test for whether we actually can forgive and forget without confronting the other person is to see if we still feel irritated about the offense after about 24-48 hours. If so, that typically means it's not actually "petty," it's really worth bringing up with the person.

The second thing to check would be how we feel the next time we are with them. Sometimes, an offense is out of sight out of mind two days after it happened, but the next time we see the person, the irritation it caused returns. If that happens, that also means the offense is not actually petty and it's going to stay there until we address it or it does long-term damage.

Whenever we notice it's still irritating us, the trick is to bring the topic up with them just as soon as we realize it's not going away. And that's awkward, right? I mean, it is super weird to call someone up and say, "You know a year ago when you said _____? Well, that made me feel _____ and I'd like you to _____."

But guess what happens when we do that? We signal to our own brains that it is okay to address conflict with people who are important to us *even a year later*. And our brains start going, "Oh, well if it's okay to address conflict, even waaaaay later, then maybe it's okay for me to let myself be aware that I was hurt or offended a little sooner." So the next time, we tend to notice that we were hurt sooner and have the opportunity to address it with the person sooner. When we dedicate ourselves to the practice of shortening the lag time between the occurrence of the offence and when we notice and address it, we gradually train our brains to recognize our feelings in the moment. We also develop courage and confidence that makes addressing things in the moment or very soon after *much* easier over time.

Is this process a piece of cake? No way! Does it involve facing a lot of fears and overcoming a lot of emotional laziness? You bet! But it's *immeasurably* easier than the regret and profound loneliness that comes from losing the people who matter the most to us. So let's get our "petty" on and save some relationships, one annoying conflict at a time!

Future Newsletter (In)Frequency

Hi readers! Many of you may know that right now I'm trying to be a great therapist and also a great mom of an 11-month-old kiddo. The kiddo is napping less and less and when awake, she's not a big fan of giving mommy the kind of uninterrupted chunks of time required to write even sorta profound or helpful things. Since I also need time for my own self-care, something's gotta give.

So rather than writing every month or two as I've struggled to do this past year, I'll probably be writing only when a topic feels so pressing that I just gotta get it out. Maybe every three months, or six, or when she starts kindergarten. Meanwhile, if you miss me, you can read all my past articles here: http://www.jenniferdiebel.com/Helpful_Resources.html Thanks for reading and for the encouragement so many of you have sent my way over the past few years! You guys are the best!

Jennifer Diebel, MA, LPC is a Licensed Professional Counselor who works with individuals and couples in her private practice in Boulder, Colorado. For more information about her areas of expertise, background, and methods, as well as additional helpful resources and past newsletters, go to www.jenniferdiebel.com.

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