

Please Try This at Home

Monthly Tips for Increasing the Joy in Your Life

Setting Yourself Free from Being Liked

Thinking back over your life, what have you done to be liked? Have you said things you didn't mean? Gone broke shopping to look just right, own the right stuff, or give enough gifts so that others couldn't help but appreciate you? Pumped iron until you wanted to throw up? Said goodbye to things you really enjoy because they weren't cool with those you wanted to get in with? Broken the law or your own moral code? Or even intentionally turned yourself into a totally different person? It's amazing what we will do to get other people to think well of us. For some of us, it's a phase that comes and goes with high school, or a new job or relationship. For others, it's a lasting lifestyle. We can't stand to be disliked, even by people we don't respect at all.

Now, I'm not knocking being liked. We are biologically hardwired to need relationship. So relational tension or rejection is distressing even to those of us who'd like to pass for The Lone Ranger. And is there anything like the high of feeling genuinely enjoyed and delighted in by people who matter to us? It seems only natural to want that feeling from as many folks as possible as often as possible. Most folks turn to other addictions only after being genuinely enjoyed in a wide variety of relationships doesn't work for them.

Being liked is a problem only when we find ourselves sacrificing the things and people who are most dear to us—our dreams, values, family, real friends, integrity, spirituality, health, or sanity—to make sure that we feel liked either by everyone, or a certain set of people we've decided we can't disappoint. That's when being liked stops being life giving and starts draining and imprisoning us instead.

What Happens When We Have to Be Liked

Here's how a lifestyle of having to be liked might look. For two years, Alistair has been dating a woman who constantly demeans him and flirts with other guys. Each time he tries to break up with her, she implies that he will be abandoning her “just like all the other horrible men out there.” Because he can't stand the idea of being just like those other men, he can't bring himself to effectively separate from her, even though he is miserable and the relationship doesn't seem to be helping her to grow or flourish either.

Marta grew up hearing that she had to be generous with anyone who needed anything or she'd reap punitive spiritual consequences. In her thirties, she finds herself surrounded by “friends” who spend more than they earn and then ask her for help. Even when she feels taken advantage of or desperate, she finds herself paying the meal bill for the whole group or paying their phone or utility bills when they fall short. She's running out of money and none of her “friends” seem to be learning how to provide for themselves.

Jimmy enjoys the fact that his boss seems to prefer him to other employees, stopping by to chat with him and including him in company decisions. Not wanting to lose this preferential treatment, he can't say “no” when his boss repeatedly asks him to take on more work, even though that means working through the weekend and missing out on being with his family and friends.

Though exhausted, he just can't stand losing his “favorite” status with his boss.

Why We Get Stuck Having to Be Liked

If having to be liked or approved of, even though it costs us dearly and repeatedly describes our lifestyle, how do we get out of this gilded prison? For starters, it's important to understand that having to be liked is a mechanism for regulating anxiety about our worth.

Likely, somewhere along the line, we encountered circumstances or relationships that made us doubt our value as people. A parent obviously preferred our sibling over us. We flunked the popularity contests of middle or high school. Someone abused us and we thought it was our fault. Whatever it was, something stole our confidence that we could be loved or respected just as we are. Some time after that, when we were feeling anxious, depressed, or unloved because of it, we were able to do something to get someone to like us. Maybe whatever we did fit with who we were, or maybe we had to compromise in some negative or uncomfortable ways to get that approval. Whatever it was, though, it made someone think well of us, so in that moment, we felt worthwhile and effective again. The anxiety about being unloved or “less than” vanished for a moment. So the next time we felt low and worthless, we did it again. And pretty soon, just like having another drink or joint, we developed an addiction to doing things to get liked to feel less anxious, depressed, or worthless.

If the need to be liked is about getting rid of anxiety about our value, then freeing ourselves from the obligation to do whatever it takes to be liked is about gradually increasing our tolerance for that anxiety. The anxiety we have to face may still be about feeling worthwhile, or by now, years removed from those initial circumstances, it may just be nervousness about breaking the knee-jerk habit of reacting to *any* kind of tension by trying to get liked.

Either way, the following process can help to identify the areas you'd like to change and increase your ability to do so over time.

Eight Steps toward Being Disliked for Your Own Good

1. Pick one situation in which you repeatedly regret what you end up doing to be liked, and list the reasons why you want to change how you behave in that kind of situation.

Jimmy's Work Example: I'm always saying “yes” to my boss' requests that I take on additional work when I'm already overwhelmed. My inability to say no to him is making my family and friends suffer and I am always a stressed out wreck!

2. Decide what you would ultimately like to be able to do instead of your habit.

I'd like to be able to say, “No, I can't do that, I have too much to do already,” without apologizing or feeling bad about it.

3. Think through the fears you have about what would happen if you did your desired action rather than following your “have to be liked” habit.

I'd be afraid I'd stop being my boss' favorite and not be included in important company decisions or promotion opportunities.

4. Identify the ways in which you and those who really matter to you will continue to be able to see you as valuable, even if what you fear about the situation comes true.

I could still feel proud of myself for doing my basic job tasks well. I make enough money to live on right now, so I don't have to be promoted to make ends meet. My kids don't care if I keep getting promoted. They just want me to be there for them. My friends would appreciate having me around more. I don't actually respect others who can't say no, so I'd be able to respect myself more.

5. Rather than starting with the behavior change you'd ultimately prefer, see if you can identify the smallest step in that direction to try next time the situation arises.

Next time my boss gives me a list of tasks, I could say, "I can do this one, but not that one," so it's only a partial "no" at first.

6. After practicing that small step toward your goal, notice what your anxiety feels like. What are you tempted to do rather than sitting with it? Where do you feel it in your body? How bad is it on a 1 (not at all painful) to 10 (excruciating) scale. Really feel it and sit with it. Don't do anything to make it go away for as long as you can possibly stand.

I really want to run after my boss and say "Never mind, I can get it all done this weekend." I feel it in my chest and throat and it's about an 8 on the anxiety scale. It's really hard to feel like I'm letting him down, like he's not thinking well of me. But I think I can go 5 more minutes without tracking him down to take on more work.

7. As you are feeling it, remind yourself about everything that is still valuable about you and about those who really matter to you. Reassure yourself that this anxiety is temporary pain from breaking an old pattern that will pass with practice, and that the pain you feel is good growth pain, not "actual warning sign of impending doom" pain.

I will come home tonight and my family will still be happy to see me. I can tell them I can make the soccer game tomorrow. I am still a kind, responsible person. Over-committing is a habit I want to break and this anxiety is helping me break it.

8. Continue to practice steps 5 – 7, gradually getting nearer to the behavior you'd like to like to do in these situations where you are tempted to be liked at any cost. Over time, note on that 1 to 10 scale the gradual decrease in anxiety and your increased ability to tolerate not being liked in situations where being liked hurts you or those who are most important to you.

That time, I was able to say "no" to one task and get a later deadline on another. My anxiety only lasted an hour and it was a 5 at the worst point. Plus, I won't have to do any work at home tonight. I'm getting better at this!

If you or someone you know would like help getting free from having to be liked, I'll be back from maternity leave in July and available at 303-931-4284 for a free 20-minute consultation. Until then, I'd be happy to direct you to another great therapist who can help.

Thanks for reading!

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