

Are you

Experts reveal four sneaky symptoms of chronic people-pleasing—and the tricks to help you find peace of mind

Think nothing of it! I'd love to! No harm done! Some days you say such phrases so often—and so automatically—you feel like someone is yanking a string in your back. But that's part and parcel of being a good person, right? When a loved one needs you, you're there—even if you're running on empty. If someone makes you uncomfortable, you grin and bear it.

A meta-analysis from Yale University reveals this “put on a happy face” pattern is common among women. While men and women both display neutral facial expressions when alone, women are 66 percent more likely to slap on a smile when having tense conversations, making requests or taking care of others.

“From an early age, girls are taught to be kind, help people and set aside their feelings to put others at ease,” explains Tara Cousineau, Ph.D., a clinical psychologist in Boston. But this habit of putting on a cheery front at our own expense takes a toll: Routinely disregarding personal needs has been linked to an increased risk of depression, anxiety and health issues such as IBS.

And masking our feelings doesn't do our relationships any favors either. “You become like a pot of water on the stove,” explains Tecia Evans, Ph.D., a relationship counselor in Oakland, California. “If you're too busy worrying about others to care for yourself, sooner or later you're going to boil and explode.”

Fortunately, it's possible to break free from the need-to-please hamster wheel. Read on for the signs of being too nice and secrets to reclaiming inner peace.



too nice?



The symptom

Unnecessary apologies

Your colleague failed to submit a budget report, yet you're the one who says sorry when you follow up to find out the status ("Apologies for bugging you, but..."). "We're trying to express, 'I know you may not like what I'm about to say, so I apologize in advance for making you uncomfortable,'" explains Evans. In reality, though, a gratuitous mea culpa can come across as nonchalant, subservient or weak. Others may fail to see how important the matter is to you—or that they might be at fault.

The Rx

Ask, "Would you mind...?"

Framing a request as a question is a polite but direct way to make yourself heard, Evans says. When broaching your colleague about the late assignment, try asking, "Brian, would you mind sending me that budget analysis before lunch? I need to approve it by the end of the day." This query format signals that you are a kind person (never one to bark demands or lob accusations) while delivering a clear statement of your expectations to ensure that your needs are met.

The symptom

Over-sharing

Your reading group is as much about bonding as books. But at last week's meeting, new member Tracey went off on a TMI tangent about her sex life, causing an awkward silence that you hastened to fill with intimate details of *your* marriage. "Reciprocal over-sharing speaks to women's desire to empathize—in wanting the other person to feel understood, we sacrifice our personal boundaries," Cousineau says. "Then later we sort of cringe, like, *Why did I say that?*"

The Rx

Shift the focus to "you"

To show your new friend you feel for her without revealing too much of yourself, keep the focus on her, Evans advises. "You could say something like, 'I hear you. Relationships are challenging.'" Then backpedal into more general territory ("For our next book, maybe we should try that new novel about the married scientists.") Says Evans, "This is a tactful way to change lanes and help an acquaintance get a better understanding of your limits."

The symptom

Automatic "yessing"

Your weekend movie plans went out the window when your sister asked for help painting her dining room. And she's just the latest person who wants a piece of you: the PTA volunteer group, the church choir director... How did your schedule become such a mess of yes? "Women rush to alleviate the tension of 'What will the answer be?' with a pleasing response," says Evans. "We think, *I have to answer immediately, and she'll hate me if I say no.*" So we end up agreeing to everything.

The Rx

Delay, then decline

If only saying no were as easy as, well, saying no. "Research shows the word no produces a physical stress response," Cousineau says. So buy some time by promising to let the person know ASAP, then go back to her with a firm but friendly refusal that omits the word no ("I wish I could, but my plate is full.") And if you've already said yes and need to back out? "Just say you're sorry you won't be able to fulfill the commitment," Evans advises. "You don't need to divulge more than that."

The symptom

Pooh-poohing praise

"Oh, I just followed a recipe off the Internet," you scoff when folks rave about the salted-caramel cake you baked. "Well, I was only doing my job," you laugh at the weekly staff meeting when your manager praises your sales presentation. "We don't want to seem like we're bragging, so we minimize our accomplishments," Evan explains. But it's a habit that has a dual negative effect: "The message you send yourself is, *I don't deserve to be recognized,*" she notes. And dismissing the praise inadvertently disses the judgment of the person who paid you the compliment.

The Rx

Mirror the praise

Bluntly saying thank you in response to someone else's kind words *can* feel a little weird, Evans acknowledges (*Thanks. I know I'm really great*, it seems to imply.) Instead, make a point to cushion your gratitude with a little flattery of your own: "Thank you. That's so kind of you to say," or "I'm so happy you put me on the project. It's been an amazing opportunity!" This will allow you to gracefully accept the pat on the back (and internalize the well-deserved praise) without getting squirmy in the spotlight.