

Please Try This at Home

Monthly Tips for Increasing the Joy in Your Life

How to Take Offenses Less Personally

“How can I stop taking things so personally?” a reader recently asked me. Since I happened to be in the middle of trying not to take an offense personally, I found that to be a surprisingly tricky question in practice. So naturally, I turned to one of my favorite movies for help because no one is better at giving quality life advice than Hollywood. (Yes, I am joking.)

Still, I think the 1998 movie *You've Got Mail* does shed some good light on this issue. When the arrival of Joe Fox's giant bookstore drives Kathleen Kelly's tiny bookstore out of business, Joe keeps repeating the phrase, “It's not personal; it's business.” Kathleen's character points out that what the phrase actually means is that it's not personal *for Joe*. To Kathleen, the offense feels very personal because her bookstore has been her life's work and a way of keeping connected to her now deceased mother.

What the movie is saying is that from one perspective, the fact that an offense was accidental or “collateral” rather than intentional *does* matter. It means that the other person did not actually *want* us to be hurt, which can be at least somewhat comforting. From another perspective, though, it doesn't matter whether the offense was intended or not. It still hurts in a way that feels very personal.

Personal Hurt = Offense + Belief

So with any offense that one person does to another, there really are two elements: 1) the hurt itself, whatever was actually damaged or taken, and 2) the beliefs that the hurt person takes away from the situation about themselves, the offending person, or how the world works overall. If our goal is to remove whatever pain from an offense that we can, which is what's behind the question of how to stop taking things so personally, we need to keep these two elements in mind because there is only so much that can be done about the hurt itself, but there's often more we can do about what we believe about it.

I'll show you what I mean. Let's say Jim's been planning a camping weekend with his good friend Eli for months. The day before they leave, Eli calls to tell Jim that after giving him the silent treatment for months, Eli's ex-girlfriend is coming back to town and wants to see him. Because it might be his last chance to make up and possibly re-ignite things with her, Eli wants to postpone the camping weekend. Since Jim's been planning this a long time, he's not a big fan of the ex-girlfriend, and this is not the first time Eli's given another relationship priority over a commitment to Jim, Jim's taking this really personally. He's hopping mad.

Obviously, the hurt itself here is that Jim can't have what he wanted this weekend. No matter the reason, his desire to experience an invigorating time in nature with Eli is being cancelled or delayed. But that's really not the personal part, is it? If he didn't get what he wanted because Eli was hospitalized from a car wreck, Jim would be disappointed, but it wouldn't feel personal because he'd know that there was nothing Eli could have done about it. What makes it feel *personal* are Jim's beliefs about Eli, himself, and the world that he has developed based on this situation:

- 1) Eli must not value our friendship as much as I do because otherwise, he'd postpone getting together with his ex instead of canceling the camping weekend.
- 2) Eli can obviously show up for other people like his ex, so it's just me that he doesn't value.
- 3) Eli will always let me down, I can never trust him.
- 4) There must be something boring or irritating about me that makes others not value me or show up for me.
- 5) There aren't really people in this world who would be capable of being the kind of friend I'm looking for.

Do you see how the beliefs that Jim based on the situation do two things? They either 1) focus on *him* personally—thinking it's just *his* friendship that Eli devalues and something about *him* that makes Eli do it—or they 2) take this one situation and draw a much larger conclusion from it—that Eli will *never* be trustworthy and that the *whole world* does not contain a person capable of trustworthy friendship.

For Jim to stop taking things so personally, he needs to identify the beliefs he has based on the situation and then do a bit more research to see if they are true. He needs to ask: Does Eli actually let lots of people down so that it's not just Jim or something about Jim? Or is Eli actually quite trustworthy the great majority of the time and there is more to the situation with his ex that Jim doesn't know about? Are there other people in Jim's life that find him quite interesting and engaging or have proven trustworthy, even though he forgot about them in the moment of his disappointment? Does the world not seem to contain trustworthy friend candidates because Jim is surrounding himself with a particular subset of flaky people and there might be other environments where people are more stable and consistent?

If any of the answers to these further questions prove Jim's original beliefs wrong, that will take some of the personal sting out of the hurt. If Eli lets lots of people down because it's a problem with Eli's character that's not just aimed at Jim, then it might be time for Jim to pull back from the friendship a bit, but at least it doesn't mean that Jim himself is not worth showing up for. If there's more to the situation with the ex, it may be that Eli really does value Jim and this really was an exceptional situation, rather than an overall devaluing of the relationship. If others really do find Jim interesting and come through for him, he may need to spend more time with them, rather than Eli. But then he's lost just one friendship, not his confidence in his ability to have friends. *Any* de-activation of a personalizing belief can reduce the part of the hurt that comes from that particular belief.

The caveat, of course, is that on rare occasions, our further research about a situation confirms all of our initial beliefs about it and it turns out that the hurt really was as personal as it initially seemed. But at least we know that we're not over-personalizing something that wasn't actually aimed to hurt us; we were just right to take it personally and now we can mourn the fact that someone meant to hurt us and also feel confident in our future actions to distance or protect ourselves from that person in the future.

Depersonalizing Offenses in Five Steps

No doubt you can see that this same process can work for just about any situation that we have taken personally. We need to:

- 1) Identify the beliefs we have about the offending person, ourselves, and the world based on the hurt that we experienced.

- 2) For each belief, figure out what additional information we'd need to find to test whether it is true.
- 3) Gather the additional information we need, perhaps by having a follow up conversation with the person to ask for more information, telling them about the hurt and seeing how they respond, or just thinking through other experiences or relationships in our lives to see if they support our belief about this situation.
- 4) Revise our belief based on the new information, either feeling the relief that a negative belief about the person, ourselves, or the world proved false, or increasing our confidence that we were justified in taking the hurt personally.
- 5) If necessary, decide how we can protect ourselves if the situation repeats, either by reminding ourselves of the information we learned or by getting some distance from the person and seeking other forms of support to buffer the hurt.

How I wish that all of us might de-personalize our hurts to the point that Kathleen and Joe did in *You've Got Mail*, discovering a solid, mutual relationship underneath the perceived hurt and living happily ever after. But since we all have to live in reality, rather than Hollywood, I hope that at least the steps above might take out a bit of the sting.

If you or someone you know would like help recovering from some hurts or taking them less personally, feel free to call me at 303-931-4284 for a free 20-minute consultation or email info@jenniferdiebel.com.

Thanks for reading!

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