

Please Try This at Home

Tips for Increasing the Joy in Your Life

Where You Can Be Different, There You Are Free

How do you react to acquaintances, friends, or family with whom you have very little in common? If you try to keep things as smooth as possible by acting similar to them, being super friendly, or beating yourself up internally by thinking you should be more like them than you are, I'm writing to you today.

Not quite sure if that describes you? Here's some examples of what that can look like. See if they sound familiar.

1. Hank comes along to a buddy's party, only to realize that everyone there is an avid hockey fan. They are all discussing the upcoming game. He knows practically nothing about hockey, having no interest in it. Not wanting to appear the odd man out, though, he spends the party being quiet, pretending to like hockey, and laughing along to references he doesn't understand. He promises himself he'll study up on hockey before the next party so the other guys won't find him out.
2. In high school, Ellen had a ton in common with Anita. Twenty years later, not so much. Every time they get together now, she finds herself doing things and talking about things that Anita's interested in, rather than mentioning any of her own current interests and experiences.
3. Alex gets a gift certificate to a fancy restaurant. The certificate will only cover an entrée and dessert. It would be super tight on his current budget to add in wine and an appetizer. The waiter cocks an eyebrow and stiffens his tone when Alex orders, though, and so he goes ahead with the appetizers and wine.

If we can imagine doing what these three folks are doing, somewhere we must have gotten the message that revealing our differences and uniqueness to those who are not like us causes too much tension. Rather than risking that unpleasantness, we learned to do what it took to get along well with everyone, and if possible, get them to like us. We learned to change our behavior and preferences to minimize differences and emphasize commonalities. We may even have developed the ability to manufacture excitement and super friendliness with people who actually are not at all exciting to us, just so that they would feel like a close friend with whom we have lots in common.

Just Gotta Be Liked? You've Been Owned.

Of course there's nothing wrong with being liked by people we respect, with which we have important things in common. That can feel deeply restful and joyful. Setting aside differences to complete a task with someone we would not ordinarily have handpicked as a coworker also makes sense. We've gotta make certain compromises to be effective working and relating with other people.

But we get ourselves in trouble when we *have to* feel that we have strong commonalities and a close connection with everyone just because they're family, a powerful person, a dating

possibility when we've been lonely for a long time, or (for some of us) just because they have a pulse. There's just no way that our personalities, experiences, and preferences are going to overlap with everyone else's. If we can't stand it when others feel neutral about us, just don't understand us, or actually dislike us, then we end up *frequently* suppressing aspects of who we are to maintain a false perception of commonality and closeness with them.

Using our above scenarios, we can't be not at all interested in hockey and feel "buddy-buddy" with those whose lives revolve around hockey. The "bored to tears with hockey" part of us has to be set aside and hidden. We can't be on a tight budget and spend a bunch of money to dodge the shame of not being rich without paying for it through the stress of debt and overwork.

When we frequently set aside parts of us that are true and valuable in order to appear to have in common with someone something that we don't, we make ourselves a slave to them. We may appear liked, we may feel less tension in the moment, but ultimately, we become less and less free.

The Freedom of "Not My People"

Am I saying we should never inconvenience ourselves for others? That we should never withhold a dissenting opinion to smooth over a social interaction or make someone feel less uncomfortable? Of course not! It's no good falling off the other side of the horse and making ourselves disagreeable just to prove that we are in fact individuals and we will not be dominated by anyone or anything. I'm not going anywhere near that.

What I'm saying is that we may need to decide which people are "our people" and which ones are not. When someone is "our person," it means we actually have important things in common, things like values, world view, interests, activities, personality traits, life experiences. When we are with them, we have a sense of safety, respect, and mutual delight *without having to set aside important parts of ourselves*. These are the people whose respect should actually matter to us. These are the relationships it's worthwhile to fight to keep. In these relationships, when we sacrifice something, we're doing it because we are also getting genuine, valuable things in return. We're not sacrificing just because we fear what will happen if we don't conform.

Those who are not "our people" may be amazing, powerful, lovely, or closely related people. The difference is that they don't actually get us in any important way. There's nothing significant in common between us to build a relationship on. It may be pleasant to learn about who they are, but there is really no reason to set aside important parts of who we are to get them to like us. With these folks, it would be okay to say, "I'm glad you are so excited about hockey. It's not something I know much about." Or, "I know we used to go clubbing together till 2 AM, but I'm at a stage of life where getting rest has become really important. Could we go on a hike instead?" Or, "I'm skipping the wine tonight, thanks." Great freedom may be found in allowing some people to be "just not our people." We may continue to be kind to them, but we don't have to change who we are for them.

Are you starting to feel a bit anxious? Perhaps feeling bad for all those you are mentally labelling "not your people"? Well, let's not forget that we might actually not be their people either. Even though some people can be amazingly friendly to almost everyone they meet, what I've seen over time with extremely extraverted, optimistic people who are instant "friends" with everyone is that they really only have a lasting connection with 1 in 20(ish) people that they get to know. For the rest of us, it's probably more like 1 in 50 or 1 in 100. Most people are not going

to genuinely connect with us, even if they are friendly. And when others really do “click” with us because we have significant things in common, as they learn about the ways we differ from them, that will add interest to the friendship rather than driving them away. Very few people want a friend who is an exact carbon copy of them.

Increasingly Tolerating Our Dissimilarities

So let's say in the past we have been frequently guilty of hiding key parts of ourselves or trying to change to not offend people who are not even close to being our people. What do we do from here?

1. **Decide on Our People:** We can start by thinking through the people we know to consider who we really do respect, who really matters to us and gets us. When we have that list of our people, that means everyone else is currently not our people.
2. **Assess What We've Been Sacrificing:** Thinking through the ways that we interact with those who are not our people, we can ask ourselves: Are the compromises we make to associate with them just small, occasional inconveniences, or do we feel stifled and shut down after meeting with them because 1) the “self” we brought to meet with them is so far from who we actually are and 2) we're spending way too much time overall being who we're not?
3. **Set Tiny Goals:** If we feel we are compromising too much, losing too much of who we are to be liked, we need to set very small, gradual goals for being more of who we are in the relationships that have been the hardest to do that with in the past. Perhaps we aim to share one piece of information about ourselves when we normally do all the listening. Perhaps we make one request for a different way of hanging out than is typical, something that suits us a bit better. Maybe it's just stating 3 more opinions per day with whomever we encounter. Think small goals and then build from there.
4. **Measure Progress Long Term:** It can help to do a before and after record of the particular relational interactions we'd like to change, ranking on a 1 (easy) - 10 (impossible) scale how difficult it was to be ourselves in that interaction. We can check back in a year or so to see how that ranked difficulty changed as we continued to take small steps toward being more and more our genuine selves in those relationships.

My best to you as you courageously seek to be your authentic self—areas of difference included—both with those who can see and value that and with those who can't!

If you or someone you know would like help cutting down on the number of people you feel *have to* like you, 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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