

## JEALOUSY AND HOW TO DEAL WITH IT

**A good working definition for jealousy is a strong feeling of possessiveness, often caused by the possibility that something which belongs, or ought to belong, to you is about to be taken away.**

The word can be used in a positive sense (e.g., the jealousy of God), meaning God's passionate commitment to something which rightly belongs to Him. (Example: When speaking of God's desire to protect His people against their enemies, the Scriptures record, "The Lord is a jealous and avenging God who takes vengeance and is filled with wrath against His enemies." [Nahum 1:1-3]). It can also be used in a negative sense (e.g., human jealousy), to mean a self-destructive human emotion or chosen course of action.

Jealousy is predictable and age-appropriate for infants and those who have not yet developed much impulse control. It is part of the survival instinct. If a nursing baby is taken away from his mother's breast, he rightly fears starvation and cries. A young child at play would fuss if a favorite toy were taken and given to someone else in his presence. The point at which jealousy becomes inappropriate and dangerous is when it is manifest in persons who can control their responses to stimuli, *e.g.*, older children, adolescents, and adults. At some point, jealousy is no longer an unconscious or uncontrollable drive to preserve life and well-being. When you knowingly allow yourself to be controlled by jealousy, you are committing an act of selfishness and pride.

Envy, while related to jealousy, is somewhat different. Classically defined, **envy is being disappointed at the success of one's enemy and/or taking joy in his failure.** It is jealousy that leads the writer of the Song of Solomon to say, "Jealousy is as cruel as the grave." By its very nature, jealousy can take the very life out of something that would otherwise be life-filling and life-supporting. Jealousy for the single, carefree life, for example, has led some to abortion; jealousy for a would-be or past sweetheart has led many to verbal and physical violence. It is possible for jealousy to lead one to envy and *visa versa*; this is why both vices should be avoided.

Still another emotion/desire that bears addressing here is covetousness, equally as dangerous and forbidden by the Tenth Commandment. (Exodus 20) My favorite definition of **"covet" is wanting something so badly that you're willing to break another commandment to get it.** For example: I can admire your earrings all day long, but as soon as I want them enough to contemplate stealing them...BINGO. Covetousness! I can admire your wife or husband as the case may be, but when I entertain thoughts of procuring them for myself or fantasize about a relationship with him/her, there I go.... Covetousness again! Admiration says, "I like what you have or what you might get someday. In fact, I'd like some of it, too." Covetousness says, "I want what you have, and until I have it, you shouldn't have it either." Covetousness, therefore, is more dangerous because it is a combination of envy and jealousy. A covetous person is not simply focusing on what he wants, but he's also very concerned with holding another person back or depriving him of something he has, could have, should have, or might have. This is why I argue that what the world calls "jealousy," when manifested in adults, is really a combination of all three vices: jealousy, envy, and covetousness. And, as a result, is all the more dangerous.

Theologically, we are called to love our neighbors as ourselves. This is the second part of what Jesus calls the "greatest commandments" when asked by the Pharisees in Matthew 22:36-40. The Pharisees ask, "Teacher, which is the greatest commandment in the Law?" Jesus replied: "'Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.' This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.' All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments." (Matthew 22:36-40) If I truly love my neighbor as myself, it is impossible for me to wish harm on another or to covet that which he has. Understood in this way, it is no wonder that envy/jealousy has been listed for centuries as one of the Seven Deadly Sins." That said, none of us are totally exempt from this "green-eyed monster!"

Why do people get jealous? That's a great question. In my experience I have found the following to be the most common roots of jealousy in my practice as a counselor and a minister:

1. Lack of self-confidence. If I believe that I am not as good as someone else for whatever reason, then it is predictable that I will also believe that I am not going to be entitled to the benefits of what that person's "goodness" have earned him: that person's possessions and achievements. Feeling hopeless from lack of confidence and resentful from the lack of those possessions and achievements, I may respond negatively.
2. Poor self-image. People who are unhappy because they believe they are ugly, too fat or too thin, or that there is something basically wrong with them emotionally, intellectually, or physically are much more prone to exhibit symptoms of jealousy than others who are more "at home" with who they are and what they look like.
3. Fear. People who tend to be afraid of the world around them and the situations they find themselves in are more prone to jealousy than those who are comfortable with their surroundings. The fear of being alone, unwanted, unknown, rejected, etc., are often dynamics in the thinking of those plagued by envy and covetousness.
4. Insecurity. People who worry about not having those things in life that are needed for health and well-being—income, supportive families, money to meet daily expenses, the hope of one day being in a better situation than they are now—are also more apt to feel the presence of the "green-eyed monster" on their doorstep. Faced with the potential uncertainty of acquiring life's necessities, ~~one~~ they can be frustrated by who already seem to have what they need.
5. Mental Illness. Those who suffer with depression and/or anxiety disorders and other neuroses, even paranoia and other psychoses, are also predictable victims of jealousy. Chemical imbalances within the brain itself, life situations, family-of-origin issues, and other psychological and emotional difficulties are frequently contributors to the thoughts and behaviors of jealous people.
6. Other factors.

While there are many other reasons that people get jealous and act on it, **the above** are the most common in my experience. Now, what do you do about them?

I think that the best way to deal with jealousy—whether it manifests itself in you or in a person you have to deal with—is what I like to call "Cognitive Jealousy Therapy." Cognitive Behavior Therapy (CBT) as a specific clinical psychotherapy was developed by Psychiatrist Aaron Beck in the 1960's. It tries to help the afflicted person overcome difficulties by identifying and changing dysfunctional thinking, behavior, and emotional responses. This usually involves helping wounded people develop skills for modifying beliefs, identifying distorted thinking, relating to others in different ways, and changing behaviors. What follows, then, are some strategies that help the person dealing with jealousy better understand what jealousy is and how it effects one's thinking, evaluate how jealousy is manifesting itself (or, your words), and, if necessary, change behavior patterns. The first three strategies are designed as "homework" that you should do **before** you start to put the Acute Strategies" into practice. These steps will benefit both the jealous person and the victim of his jealousy. Step 7 and those that follow are designed specifically for people who have been affected by gossip. Adapt these strategies to your own situation as need be.

#### **PREPARATION (HOMEWORK) STRATEGIES**

1. Understand the nature of jealousy. Reread the definitions above (**in green**) for jealousy, envy, and covetousness, and identify which ones are operative in the situation that faces you.
2. Look up the Ten Commandments ([Exodus 20](#) or [Deuteronomy 6](#)) and meditate on why covetousness is so destructive and must be combatted. Do a Google search on "jealousy in the

Bible” and see what this demonic affliction has done to some who have been victims of it. Here’s a good link to get you started: [http://www.openbible.info/topics/envy\\_and\\_jealousy](http://www.openbible.info/topics/envy_and_jealousy)

3. Identify one or more of the above numbered and underlined causes of jealousy may be operative in your situation. Ask yourself, “What event(s) in the past might have made me think/act the way I do now when jealousy rears its head?” Or, if the jealousy is perpetrated against you by another, ask yourself “What must have happened in the past of the person who is jealous to make them think or behave in that way?”

#### ACUTE STRATEGIES

4. When jealousy creeps into your world, **NAME IT!** When God told Adam to name the animals in the Garden of Eden, He told him that he would have control over them. ([Genesis 2:19](#)) Naming something—calling it what it is—is the first step in controlling it no matter what it might be.
5. At the first hint that jealousy may be creeping close to you, **STOP AND BE SILENT FOR TEN SECONDS.** Then, consciously **REMINDE YOURSELF THAT JEALOUSY IS A TEMPTATION TO SIN,** to go against God’s plan for your life. Finally, say aloud or silently to yourself what Jesus said when He was tempted: “**GET THEE BEHIND ME, SATAN! DON’T LET JEALOUSY HAVE POWER OVER ME. GRANT THAT I MIGHT HAVE POWER OVER IT.**” This will work for both the jealous person and for the victim of that person’s jealousy.
6. **SAY A QUICK PRAYER** for the jealous person and the victim asking God to remind them that, with His love, they have all they need. When we realize how much God has given us, it’s pretty hard to be angry over that which God has given someone else.

#### STRATEGIES FOR THE VICTIMS OF JEALOUSY

1. **MAKE STEPS 4-6 SECOND NATURE.** These strategies will not work automatically; they take practice. Repeat them and practice them so that you can do them without thinking; make them automatic in your mind so that you don’t have to spend a lot of time thinking and dwelling on the jealous person and his actions against you. Dwelling on the person and your hurt will only make you angry. Get to the **Steps** as quickly as possible.
2. **DEVELOP EMPATHY FOR THE JEALOUS ONE.** Empathy is the ability to get inside another person and appreciate what they’re feeling. The American Indians had a saying that said, to really understand the actions or thoughts of another; you had to “walk a mile in their moccasins.” This is what empathy is all about.
3. **DON’T GOSSIP.** Talk to God about the problem rather than to all your friends. Public knowledge of jealousy tends to make the jealous person more difficult to deal with than if the jealousy is dealt with privately. When jealous people are confronted, they tend to lie. This only makes dealing with jealousy all the more difficult.
4. **COMBAT EVIL WITH GOOD.** Whatever you do, do not try to get even or retaliate against the person whose jealousy is causing you grief. The Scriptures are clear on how to combat evil. St. Paul, knowing that the Church in Rome was apart by jealousy and pride, wrote them some good advice. Basically he told them that when you get into the muck and mire of fighting with evil, some of the evil rubs off on you. Here’s his advice from [Romans 12:14-21](#), excerpted....

*Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse. Rejoice with those who rejoice; mourn with those who mourn. Live in harmony with one another. Do not repay anyone evil for evil. Be careful to do what is right in the eyes of everyone. If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone. Do not take revenge, my dear friends, but leave room for God’s wrath, for it is written: “It is mine to avenge; I will repay,” says the Lord. On the contrary: “If your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty,*

*give him something to drink. In doing this, you will heap burning coals on his head.” Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.*

This last one is a hard one: **SUPPORT THE PERSON WHO IS JEALOUS OF YOU**. Find little ways to show him the love that you would like to be shown yourself. Strangely enough, I know of a man who took a man to lunch who had been pursuing his wife. That generous man did not know about nor did he suspect his co-worker’s evil intentions, but because things had gone poorly for his co-worker in the office that day, he took his co-worker to lunch. This act of kindness made such an impression on the prospective adulterer that whose husband was the very man who had been kind to him. To this day, that woman's husband who bought him his lunch doesn’t know the whole story. The husband thought he was just doing something nice for a co-worker. In reality, the husband's kindness and act of love convicted the heart of his would-be adversary. Paul was right: combating evil with good works much better than trying to do battle with evil on its own terms.