

People pleasing – the ‘disease to please’

I think I’m pretty easy to get along with, and others seem to feel pretty comfortable around me. But sometimes when I find myself in a disagreement or have a group decision to make, I find it hard to speak up if someone else is louder or more assertive than me. At the time, I tell myself it’s not that big of a deal and not worth getting riled up about, and I just end up going along with what others want. But lately, I’ve noticed that I usually end up regretting my silence when I’m doing something I don’t really want to be doing. I don’t want to become a bulldozer just to get my point across, but I don’t want to give away the farm either. Is there a middle ground?

Ah, the disease to please, an epidemic in our polite-obsessed culture. We don’t risk saying what we really mean for fear of hurting, disappointing or angering someone else. We place harmony before honesty and go around patting ourselves on the back thinking how magnanimous we are every time we give in and let someone else have their way! Too bad it’s BS.

Think about it for a second. If we only share 50% of what we’re really thinking inside our heads (and that’s probably a liberal estimate – its likely far less), then we’ve created a new reality which is false. For instance, if we think to ourselves, “there is no way in hell that idea is going to work,” but instead choose to say out loud, “I guess it sounds like a good idea,” we’re not being generous or magnanimous. We’re just BS-ing to keep the peace.

And before you start getting all red in the face and telling me that we can’t just go around without filters saying whatever we feel like to whomever we please, don’t panic. I don’t want to live in a culture of bullies any more than you do. But look around. Bullies, while they do exact a hefty toll, are the exception. Of all the people you regularly interact with in a given day, how many would fall into the bully category? And besides that, bullying and honesty are not the same thing and if people suddenly start being more honest with one another, sure, we might have a little more healthy tension to deal with, but we’re not going to end up in anarchy. This kind of worry is like an Olympic athlete who is afraid they’re going to turn into a couch potato. Sure, it could happen. But it’s not that likely.

But here’s the real reason we people-please -

Short-term gain / long-term pain.

The short-term gain you get from acquiescing to everyone else is a feeling of big-hearted harmony with maybe a pinch of ‘Mother Theresa’ thrown in for good measure. Its nice to think of ourselves this way and it feels good when everyone else is smiling. But this short-term gain is just that – short-term. And it leads to the long-term pain of compromised integrity and living out decisions that you don’t really believe in, aren’t aligned with and downright don’t like. A few minutes of feel-good for a lifetime of resentment. You do the math.

The treatment for the ‘disease to please’ is to flip things around and start thinking in terms of -

Short-term pain / long-term gain

The short-term pain comes from acknowledging what’s really driving our so-called big-hearted giving. Conflict avoidance. Because if we’re really honest with ourselves, we can’t stand that feeling when voices are raised, fingers are pointed, eyes are narrowed, hearts are racing and the tension is so thick you feel like

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you could reach out and touch it. The physical, emotional and mental experience of conflict is so uncomfortable that for most people it's very difficult to overcome the compulsion to run away. And that's what we're doing when we give in or stay quiet. We're running away before conflict has a chance to emerge.

Why are we so afraid of conflict? Probably because no one ever 'normalized' it for us before. No one gave us the tools to navigate it properly and like explorers of old, we stand on the edge of the known world, fearful to move forward without the safety and security of a good map. And given this lack of preparedness, hesitation could be considered good common sense. Because without an understanding of how to navigate conflict, there's a good chance we will make things worse.

Learning how to manage conflict more confidently is worth it. That's the long-term gain. Telling the truth makes us feel more alive. Our connections deepen and become more meaningful and we experience a genuine sense of peace and well-being. Sure, the truth is we might lose some people along the way, but when we tell the truth we just feel better. And isn't that worth more than the short-term gain of feeling like Mother Theresa for a few moments?

Here are some 'Conflict 101' tips to help you feel more confident;

1) Take 5.

Have you ever been shocked by something you've said or done in the heat of emotion? Emotional hijacking is almost impossible to avoid in conflict situations. That's when we get flooded with emotions and are unable to think clearly. It's also the time we're most likely to make things worse. Understanding how our emotional brain has evolved to work twice as quickly as our logical brain (a hair-trigger reaction could have saved our ancestors from a sabertooth tiger) helps us to understand why time-outs are so effective for allowing our logical brains to catch up. Bathroom break. Step outside for a moment. Suddenly you're thinking more clearly and you've increased the likelihood of a positive outcome.

2) Understand perspectives

The #1 ingredient in conflict is the failure to remember that no one else sees life the way you do. The more you remind yourself that you don't really know why someone did or said something, the less kindling you'll add to conflict hot spots. Err on the side that it probably wasn't personal and you'll cut your reactions down significantly. Say it with me, "its not personal, its not personal." Cultivate a spirit of curiosity and you'll navigate conflict with a lot more success.

3) Hold differences.

An entrenched and destructive belief that I hear circulating a lot these days is that loyalty means we need to think the same way. This narrow-minded approach may work for short-term military type endeavors, but is not sustainable. Our unspoken resentments will eventually boil over causing a lot of unnecessary drama. Practice being more elastic and tolerant. Try saying things like "I understand and empathize with your point of view, and I respectfully disagree." Or "Let's just agree to disagree." Value the relationship more than being right and conflict won't be as scary.

4) Stay on your side of the net.

We play by these rules in tennis, but how much of the time do you spend over on the other side of the net psychoanalyzing or trying to figure out someone else? One of the most arrogant pastimes we engage in is thinking we know someone's motive and then behaving as though it were true. But unless you can show me your psychic license, get back on your own side of the net. Focus on your game and stick to observable facts – something a movie camera would record. Everything else is volatile conjecture.

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5) Let go!

In conflict, most people become quite rigid, hanging onto their position for dear life. Being right eclipses everything. While this response is relatable, it's incredibly destructive and reveals our lack of faith in the process of positive conflict. The most powerful thing you can do is to let go and leap into the unknown for a few moments. The second you release your position, energy and ideas are free to flow.

If you're tired of paying the price for your people-pleasing ways, I challenge you to put some of these tips into practice so you can start enjoying more long-term gain.