



Are you caught in a people-pleasing trap?

Do you so want to be liked you'll say 'Yes' to (almost) anything? Was that a 'Yes' we heard? If so, it's time to break the habit and put yourself first

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The phone call from my editor came at 6.30pm: would I write a feature for first thing the following morning? My children hollered for their bedtime story as visions of the dinner I had yet to cook, the husband I had barely seen all week and the *West Wing* episode I'd hoped to watch later flickered through my mind. As a freelance writer, I was within my rights to decline, and I knew I would benefit far more from taking a break than working until dawn. But I wasn't at all surprised when the instinctive reply came out of my mouth, 'Yes, of course, thanks for asking.'

Be it in my career or my relationships, I am a perpetual people pleaser, and always have been. I am so anxious to be liked that I will do or say almost anything to seek approval and avoid confrontation.

And I am in good company. 'I'm a people pleaser,' model Kendall Jenner recently said. 'I don't like to disappoint or make

anyone feel as if they need to worry about me.' Beyoncé has admitted to much the same thing: 'I always felt it was my job to fix the problem. People pleaser.' And last year, Jessica Alba said, 'My teens and my 20s, I just wasn't sure of myself... I was such a people pleaser.'

We live in an age of apparent altruism: a recent study by University College London found that most people were willing to sacrifice double the amount of money to spare a stranger pain than they would pay to relieve their own. And of the genders, experts say women are more likely to be people pleasers.

'Women have been raised to be care givers and nurturers, which is why the problem is more prevalent for us than men,' says psychologist Dr Susan Newman, author of *The Book of No*. 'We want to please because we think it will make us better people. For some women this becomes a habit, or even an addiction.'

My mother combined her career as

a teacher with raising a family. She put others first and was often exhausted by trying to make everyone happy at work and at home. I followed suit, and as a teen I appointed myself both doormat and clown, running errands for friends and making an idiot out of myself to make them laugh. In my 20s, I was too polite to turn down a man who was interested in me.

By the start of my 30s – I'm now 37 – my self-esteem was higher, but the need to be liked lingered. Trapped between the demands of career and family, I believe that this life stage makes you particularly vulnerable to the people-pleasing trap: the exhaustion of juggling, plus a constant fear of failure, fuels a need for reassurance that we're doing it right. At work, I won't leave an email unanswered for longer than an hour lest I offend the sender, and I constantly apologise for mistakes I haven't made to ease others' discomfort.

I'm aware of how I sound. How, in 2015, can women still be behaving like this? 'The rise of feminism in the '70s may have empowered us to stop worrying about what others thought, but that fearlessness has morphed in recent years into us trying to be all things to all people,' says Dr Elle Boag, a social psychologist at Birmingham City University.

Even some of the most high-profile campaigners for social change now do so without overtly courting conflict. While Germaine Greer's 1970 feminist manifesto *The Female Eunuch* was angry in tone, Caitlin Moran, one of the foremost figures in contemporary feminism, argues her case with humour. 'The main thing is just to try to be nice,' she wrote in an open letter to her daughter last year. 'People will want to move towards you in order to feel happy.'

In their 2014 book *The Confidence Code*, Katty Kay and Claire Shipman argue that hormonal influences are also a factor: oestrogen seems to encourage bonding and connection, while higher levels of testosterone can make men more confident, limiting the average male's need to please.

This rings true for me. The majority of my male friends will casually turn down dinner invitations on the grounds of tiredness and take umbrage with their bosses if they feel the demands placed on them exceed their salary. My female friends? We sign off emails to strangers with kisses, preface reasonable requests with 'sorry to bother you' and balk at the thought of asking for a pay rise.

Our people-pleasing paranoia is also fuelled by Facebook and Twitter. 'We all occupy our own online "fame bubbles" and assess our self-worth on how many "likes" we get,' explains Lucy Sheridan, a life coach specialising in social media and its effect on the psyche.

Perversely, another way we garner approval is by going online to express outrage at the behaviour of the likes of Katie Hopkins. By showing our disapproval, we are 'virtue-signalling', a term recently coined by the author James Bartholomew: we clamour to show how

virtuous we are. But at the same time, our readiness to say anything that might draw criticism is vanishing. The writer Polly Vernon has labelled this 'FOGIW' (fear of getting it wrong).

A rare celebrity who genuinely doesn't seem to care how she is seen is Kate Moss, 41, who recently refused to apologise after reportedly calling an easyJet air hostess a 'basic bitch', and has said, 'When I see people are writing s— about me, I don't care.' It is this indifference, as much as her looks, that makes Kate so fascinating.

Of course, pleasing others can be self-serving. I enjoy impressing people and I like the adrenalin rush that comes from being busy and needed. I flatter my friends because their gratitude makes me happy. But those benefits are outweighed by the impact on my mental health. I am stressed and anxious and take it out on my husband and children – ironically, the very people I should be trying to please the most. 'Once we have thrown ourselves at the mercy of others to validate our self-

'I constantly apologise for mistakes I haven't made'

Seven signs you're a people pleaser

- You stay late at work to finish a colleague's project, then email her with 'Hope it's OK...'
- When your friend's child breaks a vase, you say it's your fault for leaving it out on the mantelpiece.
- You've got a history of staying in relationships and jobs way past their sell-by date to avoid hurting feelings.
- Your friends, family – hell, even strangers – say you're the nicest person they know.
- You haven't been to yoga in weeks because you're too busy ferrying your kids to netball and ju-jitsu.
- You've never sent a cold/over-salted/downright inedible dish back in a restaurant.
- That thing about putting your own oxygen mask on first? They're having a laugh, right?

worth, we are on an addictive, slippery slope,' says Sheridan. 'If we don't get the approval we seek, we feel disconnected and doubt ourselves more than ever.'

I'm also coming to realise that focusing on what others want has robbed me of my own identity. 'Saying yes all the time obliterates all boundaries – you're not protecting yourself,' says Dr Newman. She suggests that the next time I am asked to do something, I should pause and ask myself if I have the time, and if I will feel upset if I do it – either at myself, or the person asking. Dr Boag gives me another pep talk. 'Be realistic about what you can achieve, learn to say no and prioritise what's important. Remind yourself of what you have to offer, so you're not reliant on others for praise. Think of three things you're proud of daily.'

Could it really be that easy? The next morning, I remind myself of three of my best qualities – I am a hard worker, a good mother and a loyal friend – and when an editor calls with work and I am up to my eyeballs, I cut him off in mid-sentence, simply saying I am unavailable. It takes resolve not to reel off a string of apologies, but afterwards I am filled with pride.

Later, I tell a friend I'm too busy to meet for coffee. Instead of renouncing our friendship (my former assumptions are fast seeming ludicrous), she sends a sweet reply saying she understands. It seems I have been inflating my own sense of importance. ('We worry about what people think of us but as soon as you turn someone down they're not thinking about you any more – they have moved on,' Dr Newman tells me.)

That afternoon, I question a friend's comment on Facebook that I think is unkind and resist the urge to delete my words afterwards. But rather than the frosty stand-off I envisaged, we continue just as before.

And then, the real test: someone emails to say they won't be paying money I am owed. I steel myself, and write back: 'This is unacceptable.' I feel sick as I hit send. They don't back down straightaway, but I stand my ground, continuing to send unapologetic demands for payment and feeling increasingly defiant.

That I can engage in conflict and not crumble is a revelation. Removing my people-pleasing mantle won't be easy, but I've realised I am more likely to get respect if I stand up for myself. And besides, it's not what other people think of us that's important – it is the relationship we have with ourselves. ☐



Self-confessed people pleasers, from top: Kendall Jenner, Beyoncé, Jessica Alba