

COMPULSIVE ACCOMODATION

By Ginger E. Blume, Ph.D.

Many women have it. Yet, it isn't an official diagnosis. We all know it when we see it. A lot of people take advantage of it. What is it? This article will explore the downside to women adhering to one of our cultural stereotypes for little girls. The prescription for girls to develop an accommodating demeanor in all that she is and does has created a lot of pain and suffering for adult women.

Most of us like to please others and enjoy pleasant, social interactions. It gives us great pleasure to be helpful to others, agreeable, considerate, thoughtful and to be recognized for our kindness. In fact, you might pride yourself on being sensitive to other's needs, easy to get along with, etc. But too much of a good thing is often a recipe for creating something "bad." Being nice and accommodating has its downside. Let's consider why something positive (i.e. be aware of other's needs) has created so many problems for women in our culture.

Accommodation as a "should"

Not unlike other "shoulds," this behavioral expectation for women to behave in an accommodating fashion is destructive because it is oftentimes pushed to the extreme. It is not taught as a behavior to be used with discrimination, but rather, a behavior to be used regardless of the situation. When I treat women in therapy, they seem unaware that they must use this technique with discretion. They apply it across the board and wonder why they are so unhappy in their relationships, at work, in the marriage, with their children, relatives, and with friends. They oftentimes present in therapy as depressed.

To accommodate to the needs of others at the appropriate time can be a rewarding experience, filled with compassion and grace. For instance, a parent wisely chooses not to battle with her teenage daughter who has had a particularly unsettling day at school and as a result, the daughter later confides in her mother some of her most private concerns. But to accommodate because that is the only behavior that is acceptable for a female to display, can result in disastrous situations. One woman agreed to loan her girlfriend \$500 dollars that she really needed for her own next car payment. She believed she had to help her friend to prove she was a true friend.

So, if being nice is your top priority or "should," you can expect some unpleasant outcomes:

1. Feeling unappreciated
2. Feeling exploited.
3. Feeling as if your own life is on permanent hold
4. Feeling very disappointed when people don't reciprocate in kind
5. Feeling invisible when your self-sacrifices go unnoticed
6. Feeling angry for all of the above
7. Behaving in passive-aggressive ways because feeling angry isn't nice

In other words, it's not always nice to be nice.

What can you do to change?

Psychologist, Dr. Linda Sapaldin says, "If you are frequently rearranging your life to accommodate others, reflect on your options before conceding to what someone else wants. At times you may choose to modify your plans. Other times, however, you may need to keep to your own agenda." Remember that staying focused on your own goals or agenda is being true to yourself---an admirable trait. And yes, this is difficult advice for the chronic accommodator, but it can be mastered. The first step is to realize that you have a true choice. You are not locked into your past way of responding. We are not "stimulus-response animals," unable to change.

If you feel guilty for not engaging in your usual accommodating style, note that this is probably "false guilt." Unlike true guilt that signals we have violated an important personal value or principal, false guilt usually arises when someone else's expectations are not met. You might feel badly for disappointing them, but that is better than seething in anger.

Dr. Sapaldin also recommends that the overworked accommodator "guard against taking on tasks until you're overwrought -- simply to please someone else or to do what you think is the responsible thing. Avoid the inclination to solve others' problems or take over their responsibilities." I suggest you learn to make a distinction between wanting to offer assistance and realizing that you have no control over what others will do with your suggestions. For instance, if you offer advice and the other person doesn't heed it, drop the issue. Don't stew over the fact that they didn't follow through on your brilliant suggestion. You have no control over what they do. It is not your problem. You were helpful, whether they implemented your idea or not.

How do you know when to say "no" to someone's request of your time or energy? A good rule of thumb is this: If you hear yourself wanting to say "no" inside your head, then you probably should listen to your inner voice. Learn to trust your gut rather than some out-dated childhood teachings that say you must always be helpful and please others if at all possible. You must learn to set reasonable limits for yourself. Nobody else can do this for you.

Another targeted area for making a shift in your chronic style of accommodating, is to work on your tendency to over apologize. So often, I notice women highlighting their mistakes by actually focusing on what went wrong and taking responsibility for things that aren't even their fault. When people around you let you "take the fall for their part," you'll end up feeling taken advantage of, and eventually, furious that others aren't care taking you the way you care take them. Yes, this is a difficult lesson: life isn't always reciprocal.

Next time you apologize, be clear and concise about what you are sorry for. If you repeat yourself, it is like using a yellow highlighter on a page. Practice making a simple

apology while looking in the mirror. Keep it short and simple. Then shift your focus to problem solving or segue to a different topic.

Find your life purpose

In closing, I hope my readers don't misunderstand. We need more kind, nice, thoughtful and helpful people in the world. But, don't assume that you have to change your basic style of being a positive force in the world. Instead, stay intact, but begin to draw more personal boundaries around your own needs and interests. Don't ignore yourself or undervalue your life. You can't live for others, nor should you. You have a personal purpose in this life that you were given. Your most important task is to understand your unique purpose and fulfill it to the best of your ability.

© Copyright, 2005, Ginger E. Blume, Ph.D.