

WHY CAN'T I MAKE THAT PERSON LIKE ME?

By Ginger E. Blume, Ph.D.

“Why Can’t I make that person like me,” is a plea frequently asked by people of all ages. **For instance, a female teenager says:** “I’ve tried everything. I bake his favorite cookies. I act friendly, but not too friendly. I offer to help with homework assignments, etc. I have many friends, so I know I’m okay and there are other guys who show interest in me, but this guy just ignores me. What can I do?”

Perhaps, she tries too hard. Maybe the guy is interested in someone else, or he is shy or feels intimidated. Whatever his reason, she needs to understand that she is embarking on a journey that can only lead her to further frustration, disappointment and feelings of rejection. She must learn that she can’t force anyone’s interest in her. It is not for her lack of effort. Having friends and other interested "suitors" is objective proof of her acceptability.

We cannot make everyone like us or accept us. Everyone has their own set of values, tastes and preferences in the opposite sex. Some people may reject us because our style doesn’t appeal to them. They may have had a bad experience with someone who reminds them of us. In short, there is no way to know why someone hasn’t responded to your advances or show of interest. When this happens, it is best to let go and accept that the match you seek is not likely.

Similar to the teen, an older couple laments: “We’d like a good relationship with our daughter-in-law. We live in the same neighborhood. When we meet by accident, she appears friendly, but she rarely attends our small family events. Her absence hurts us, especially during holidays and birthday celebrations. We don’t understand what we have done to provoke her rejection. We have shown her warmth, acceptance and have been generous. She has never acknowledged our gifts. Our son makes excuses for her absence. ‘She’s too busy with work. She had another engagement.’ She has never called to apologize for her non-attendance. Our other adult children are friendly, successful professionals and have also experienced rejection from her.”

The couple explains further: “Our son goes to her family functions and visits with her friends out of state, but she will not visit our family just a few streets away. Our home is well kept, comfortable and attractive, but not ostentatious. There is nothing shameful in our background. No family member is addicted to drugs or alcohol or smokes, including the daughter-in-law. No dietary restrictions impede her attendance. When her parents are in town, they accept our dinner invitations, but she does not join us.”

I tell them, perhaps they’ve treated their daughter-in-law with more consideration than her own family has—which may be the source of the problem. Unconsciously, she may be playing out her hostility towards her husband, her siblings or her parents-- replacing them with her in-laws with whom she has not developed close ties. It is possible she may unfavorably compare her parents with her in-laws.

This questioning couple wanted to tell their daughter-in-law how hurt and rejected they felt and to ask if they have done something to cause the situation. They were advised to first discuss this plan with their son. He urged them to leave his wife alone given she is very "temperamental."

Since I've not consulted with the daughter-in-law, I can't fully assess her psychological condition, but her behavior suggests she may have low self-esteem. Thus, she may doubt the sincerity of her in-laws' interest and kindness. It is also possible that she may not be aware of her own power to hurt them deeply.

The older couple has agreed that when they encounter her in the neighborhood, they will continue to be cordial and say something casual like, "We missed you at John's birthday party. Sorry you missed the fun."

It is sad that some people, because of history and experience, may reject and hurt others because they represent people who have hurt them in the past. If the daughter-in-law would agree to attend family therapy sessions, there might be a better chance for a rewarding extended family life.

It is difficult for the above teen or elderly couple to accept their powerlessness in this situation. And yet, the AA serenity prayer is apropos here: "God, grant us the serenity to accept the things we cannot change, courage to change the things we can, and wisdom to know the difference."

Note: The above examples represent a composite of many clients seen in treatment over the years and does not describe a particular individual or couple.

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