

MANAGING JEALOUSY

By Ginger E. Blume, Ph.D.

That green-eyed monster, called jealousy, has a reputation for destroying important relationships. People hate to admit it, but jealousy can rise up like a sudden surge of overwhelming feelings that prevents them from behaving in a rational manner. Have you ever found yourself obsessed with what your loved one is doing when s/he is absent? Have you ever felt upset that your best friend won an award and you didn't? Most people think jealousy is primarily associated with a lover, but it is just as frequently experienced in other types of relationships, as well. Jealousy that occurs in the context of a friendship will be the focus of this article.

The causes of Jealousy

Let's examine this often-feared emotion, called jealousy. It is an emotion that many people are ashamed to admit they feel. I guess if we were perfect, we'd never feel jealous, especially of a loved one or other significant person who we care about. Yet, consider that jealousy emerges from some pretty powerful, underlying emotions, such as:

- Fear of rejection
- Fear of abandonment
- Fear of inadequate

When these fears get triggered, either by some external event or by an internal thought (i.e. "He thinks he is better than me."), we oftentimes push them away and deny that we feel them. They are painful emotions, so we don't want to acknowledge their presence. And that is what causes an additional problem.

Denial is the culprit

The minute we deny feeling jealous, we are very likely going to act out this feeling in various negative and undermining ways. For instance, if we feel jealous, we may become very possessive and start suffocating our loved one with our over-protective behavior. If we feel jealous of our friend's talent, we might ignore their successes and hurt their feelings. A female client of mine had a best girlfriend who played guitar and sang beautifully. Sometimes, at parties, her friend becomes the center of attention when she was asked to perform. She was very talented and people give her a lot of praise---except for my client who would often leave the room or ignore the performance.

My client couldn't bring herself to praise her friend because her jealousy prevented her from behaving normally. She denied that she felt jealous and so she unconsciously acted out these feelings by pretending to be disinterested whenever her friend sang. Her friend felt deeply hurt. However, once my client acknowledged in our session how competitive she felt with her girlfriend's success, she was able to be in control of her formerly rude behavior. The key to remember is that friendships don't suffer from competitive feelings, but rather, from the denial of them. My client also had to learn that jealousy is just one of many normal emotions. We aren't responsible for the emotions that arise. We are responsible for what we do or don't do with those emotions in everyday life.

As human beings, competition is a normal emotion. Were it not for healthy competition, innovations and progress wouldn't happen. Competition only causes problems when it

goes underground (out of conscious awareness) and is denied. Most people have some childhood memories of being in competitive situations that turned out poorly. If they were particularly painful events, they may have set in motion a deep sense of inadequacy and envy toward others who experience successes in life. Sometimes, our parents reinforced a sense of jealousy by constantly comparing our performance to that of other siblings or friends. Ideally, children excel at things they love by being encouraged to surpass their own past performance rather than being compared to the performance of others.

In addition to historical events, our tendency as adults to continually feel envious or jealous of others is usually colored by several factors, such as our current support system, our access to enough positive rewards and our history of friendships. When we feel lacking in any of these key areas, we are more likely to view the world through a “deficit mentality,” and believe that another person’s success is always our failure. In other words, jealousy usually involves a form of black or white thinking that is unrealistic.

Putting Jealousy into Perspective

We’ve all had moments of feeling jealous, especially when someone was in direct competition with us, for example, in business. If your competitor excels and you don’t, it is easy to deny feeling upset, envious, or even angry. As stated before, this will only result in a negative outcome for both of you: harboring negative emotions will create internal stress for you and the person whom you envy will feel alienated and mistrustful.

It is very helpful to remember that success is almost always hard won. Many times, we don’t consider all of the time, practice, and hard work that someone put into their eventual success as we’re observing it. When we recognize this reality, it is easier to set aside our negative feelings and behave appropriately.

We can certainly appreciate someone’s talent and success when we realize that they’ve worked hard to realize their dreams. Once we adopt this understanding and accept that we, too, would like to feel as successful as we imagine they feel, we can move forward in a positive direction. We might ask ourselves, “What can I learn from this role model?” rather than mentally shred them apart due to out-of-control jealousy!

Realize, also, that no matter how successful other people have been, they still appreciate being acknowledged for their talent(s) and skills. People never grow tired of praise. Praise and appreciation are gifts you can freely offer when jealousy no longer rules your secret, inner world. So don’t hide your green-eyed monster in the closet. Instead, remember s/he exists and keep him/her on a tight behavioral leash so you too, can become a best sibling, friend or colleague.

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