



COLORADO LAWYER ASSISTANCE PROGRAM

Know a People Pleaser?

“What other people think of me is none of my business.” ~ Wayne Dyer

Attorneys often remark that the practice of law can be “all about appearances.” We need to put on different masks (ie. personality traits) depending on who we are addressing: a judge, a partner in the firm, a client, a paralegal, etc. Assuming we don’t want to cross-examine our families at the dinner table (which we shouldn’t – it’s a very bad idea), we also have to wear different masks when we are around our loved ones and friends. By the end of the day, many of us are exhausted from juggling so many different roles. If, on top of that, we are also people pleasers, the repercussions are even worse than exhaustion: we feel resentful, frustrated, anxious, overwhelmed, and even depressed.

Most of us, unless we are sociopaths or psychopaths, care to some degree about what other people think about us. Part of emotional intelligence is recognizing how the people around us are feeling, and how they are responding to us. The reason we developed empathy, compassion, and understanding was for survival, and we still use it: if we are monopolizing a conversation talking about ourselves, and the other person’s eyes glaze over, we change the topic; if a partner or a judge is frowning at us, we rethink our strategy; if our child’s eyes fill with tears because they don’t understand the math concept we’re trying to explain, we try a different technique; if the jury looks confused and furrows their brows, we use a different metaphor. Adjusting how we explain things for the sake of communication is not only normal, it is a crucial interpersonal relationship skill and a strength. If, however, we alter what would be our authentic communication or behavior in order to keep someone else “happy,” it’s more about people pleasing than effective communication.

People pleasers are not to be confused with narcissists, although they are often found together. Narcissists have low self-esteem and a poor self-concept (they define who they are based on what other people think about them), so how they feel depends on how other people are reacting to them, and their opinions are based on what other people think. People pleasers often cater to needy and demanding narcissists in order to keep them happy, at least temporarily. Being a people pleaser, however, isn’t exclusive to sycophant-type behavior around narcissists. See if you (or someone you know) can relate to any of these people pleasing behaviors:

1. Incapable of saying no (which can lead to resentment, feeling like a doormat, and getting in “over our head” with projects or circumstances);

2. Avoid making decisions or sharing your opinions in order to prevent confrontation or conflict;
3. Put other people's feelings above your own;
4. Fear you will let other people down;
5. Secretly believe you are less than others (less intelligent, successful, worthy of love, lucky, likeable, popular, etc.);
6. Perpetually avoid giving yourself credit or accepting praise for a job well-done; and
7. Neglect to ask for help when you need it.

When we are engaging in people pleasing behaviors, it is usually because we have an external locus of control, meaning that we care more about what other people think of us than about what we need or what we think of ourselves. Ironically, this means that people pleasers are the other side of the same coin as narcissists. The difference is that narcissists demand that the world approves of them, while people pleasers cater to the world to get approval. How can we positively work toward changing people pleasing behaviors?

1. Recognize that your time and energy are just as valuable as anyone else's, and purposely schedule time to take care of yourself and do things that you love.
2. If saying "no" to requests is too hard, try responding "let me think about that and get back to you" to give yourself time alone to think about whether you have the time, energy, and desire to help with the request.
3. Develop your gut instinct, and practice listening to it. When we put other people's needs before our own, we can lose our ability to know what we want.
4. Rather than checking email and texts often throughout the day, limit your exposure as much as is reasonable, and don't respond immediately to requests that aren't emergencies. Remember, just because someone is asking something of you doesn't necessarily make it an emergency!
5. Confrontation and conflict are avoided by people pleasers because they have observed that when people are bossy, rude, argumentative, and disagreeable, it is off-putting, and people pleasers don't want to be off-putting to anyone. Therefore, learning that you can express your opinion without being belligerent or pushy is important.
6. No one can control how someone else is feeling, unless you are a neurosurgeon stimulating various parts of the brain. Spending your time and energy trying to control what other people think about you is like trying to control how they are

feeling. It is a waste of time. Focus instead on controlling how you feel because that is something you do have control over.

As Will Smith said “Don’t chase people. Be yourself, do your own thing and work hard. The right people – the ones who really belong in your life – will come to you, and stay.” Many times we become people pleasers because we are afraid that others will not like who we “really” are. But why would we want to be around people who don’t like us for who we really are? Life is too short for that. In addition, people pleasing behaviors prevent us from taking creative risks that could make positive changes for ourselves and others. Try one of the suggestions above today, and give yourself permission not to worry so much about what others think about you!

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