

THE ART OF NO

The Bulletproof Guide
to Stop Being a
People-Pleaser



Dr. Jack Skeen, Ph.D.

Introduction

In my years as an executive coach, I've had the wonderful privilege of helping guide many people in their personal and professional journeys. One recurring theme that I've noticed for many is the pervasive and often detrimental tendency to put others' needs before their own, commonly known as "people-pleasing." While it's indeed virtuous to be considerate and accommodating, it's essential to strike a balance and ensure that your own happiness and well-being isn't sacrificed in the process.

Ever found yourself mindlessly nodding in agreement, recalling moments when you went to great lengths to keep everyone around you content? Maybe you've taken on extra work tasks, despite being overwhelmed, just to avoid saying "no" to a colleague. Or perhaps you've continually suppressed your true feelings in personal relationships, fearing that expressing your true preferences, feelings or emotions might rock the proverbial boat or disrupt the status quo.

Watch this [YouTube video](#) on the origins of people pleasing.



**Dr. Jack Skeen on
Independence**

In this guide, we'll examine people-pleasing to recognize, understand and conquer the inclination to automatically say "yes" without mindful consideration. With valuable insights, practical tools, and actionable steps, you'll learn how to honor both your needs and those of others without compromising your authentic self.

But before we dive into the practical steps to help recognize and overcome people-pleasing tendencies, let's explore the concept itself—what it entails, the root causes, and why it can be so detrimental to your well-being.

"Be who you are and say what you feel because those who mind don't matter, and those who matter don't mind."

– Dr. Seuss



1. Understanding People-Pleasing

People-pleasing, often referred to as being a "yes person" or constantly seeking external validation, is a behavior characterized by a strong desire to make others happy, often at the expense of one's own needs and desires. It involves prioritizing the expectations and opinions of others to an extent that it becomes a habitual and ingrained pattern of behavior.

As you continue to say yes to others, you may find yourself neglecting your own wants and desires. This behavior can become ingrained, making it challenging to assert yourself and prioritize your well-being. Over time, you might feel drained, resentful, and disconnected from your own identity. People-pleasing can slowly erode your self-esteem and lead to feelings of frustration and emptiness as you struggle to balance the needs of others with your own.

People-pleasers often say "yes" when they mean "no," leading to overcommitment and feelings of burnout. Resentment can build up as you sacrifice your time, energy, and well-being for the sake of pleasing others. This pent-up resentment can cause significant stress and ultimately erode the quality of your relationships.



2. Four Root Causes of People-Pleasing Behavior

Fear of Rejection

One of the primary drivers of people-pleasing is the fear of being rejected or disliked. Many people have a deep-seated desire and need to be accepted, loved, and appreciated by others. This fear can lead to a relentless pursuit of making everyone happy, even if it means suppressing their own needs, preferences and feelings.

Even the simple act of pausing for a brief moment of consideration any time before saying "yes" can be immensely valuable in making a decision that honors your personal preference and well-being.



Low Self-Esteem

Individuals with low self-esteem often engage in people-pleasing behavior as a way to boost their self-worth. By constantly seeking approval and validation from others, they hope to feel better about themselves. Unfortunately, this external validation can become a crutch, and they may never develop a strong sense of self-worth from within.

Avoidance of Conflict

Another root cause of people-pleasing is the avoidance of conflict. People-pleasers tend to go to great lengths to prevent disagreements or confrontations, even when it means compromising their own values or needs. This can lead to inner turmoil and a lack of assertiveness in expressing personal boundaries.

Cultural and Social Expectations

Cultural and societal norms can also play a significant role in reinforcing people-pleasing behaviors. Many cultures emphasize harmony and putting the needs of the group before one's own. While this can foster cooperation, it may also lead to individuals suppressing their authentic selves.

"The greatest gift you can give yourself is letting go of other people's expectations for your life."

– Rachel Hollis, author and motivational speaker

3. The Negative Impact of People-Pleasing

Now that we've explored the root causes of people-pleasing, it's essential to understand how this behavior can have a negative impact on your life and overall well-being.

Loss of Authenticity

One of the most significant drawbacks of people-pleasing is the loss of your authentic self. Constantly catering to the expectations of others can lead to a disconnect from your true desires and values. Over time, you may find it challenging to distinguish what you want from what others want for you.

Resentment and Burnout

People-pleasing can create resentment and burnout in a number of ways. Firstly, constantly putting others' needs before your own can lead to feelings of neglect and frustration. When you consistently prioritize others over yourself, you may start to feel unappreciated and taken for granted. Additionally, saying yes to everyone's requests can lead to an overwhelming workload and a lack of time for self-care. This can result in physical and emotional exhaustion, contributing to burnout.

Moreover, continually seeking external validation and approval through people-pleasing can be emotionally draining. If you don't receive the validation you crave, it can lead to feelings of inadequacy and disappointment.

Over time, the buildup of resentment from neglecting your own needs and the exhaustion from constantly striving to please others can culminate in burnout. This can manifest in a number of ways: fatigue, irritability, and a sense of disillusionment with relationships and responsibilities.

Stunted Personal Growth

When you prioritize the needs and desires of others over your own, personal growth can take a backseat. You might miss out on opportunities for self-discovery, pursuing your passions, and expanding your horizons. Stagnation can become a common theme in the lives of people-pleasers.

Erosion of Self-Esteem

Relying on external validation for self-worth can be a fragile foundation. The more you depend on others' approval, the more your self-esteem becomes contingent on their opinions. Any criticism or disapproval can have a disproportionately negative impact on your self-esteem.

Dysfunctional Relationships

People-pleasing can lead to imbalanced and unhealthy relationships. You may attract individuals who take advantage of your accommodating nature or become involved in one-sided relationships where your needs are consistently overlooked.

Failure to Set Boundaries

A lack of clear boundaries is a common byproduct of people-pleasing. When you're unable to set and maintain healthy boundaries, you become vulnerable to exploitation, overcommitment, and may find it challenging to prioritize and assert your own priorities, needs and desires.

Conclusion

In summary, people-pleasing, while typically driven by good intentions, can lead to a variety of negative consequences that can impact many aspects of your life. Recognizing these pitfalls is the first step in breaking free from this pattern and reclaiming your authenticity and well-being. In the following sections, we will continue to explore strategies to overcome people-pleasing and cultivate a healthier, more balanced approach to your relationships and personal growth.

In what areas of your life do you see people-pleasing tendencies?

In which instances do you say "yes" when you should say "no"? List a few examples below:

In what ways does people-pleasing negatively impact you?

List a couple ways below:

4. The Journey to Self-Discovery

The path to understanding your behaviors and emotions isn't always straightforward; it's more like a winding road filled with memories, experiences, and occasionally, old wounds. As you navigate this path, you'll encounter resistance, moments of clarity, and profound insights waiting to be acknowledged.

Think of it as a detective story where you're the lead investigator, and the mystery you're solving is your own behavior. Just as you wouldn't just paint over a water stain on your ceiling without investigating the source of the leak, addressing your behaviors and emotional reactions requires you to look beyond the surface and find their source.

"Do not confuse being kind with being a people pleaser.

A kind person is like a rechargeable battery; their energy is regenerated when they give it away.

A people-pleaser is like a battery that is depleted by recharging others.

– Adama Coulibaly

Looking Inward: The Importance of Identifying the Root Cause

Every behavior, emotion, or thought pattern has an origin. Sometimes it's apparent, while other times, it's deeply rooted in past experiences, making it challenging to discern. Identifying the root cause is akin to solving a complex puzzle, where each piece reveals a part of the bigger picture.

When you act without understanding the "why" behind your actions, you often resort to quick fixes. For example, if you struggle with anxiety before public speaking, you might avoid such scenarios altogether. But what if you could understand that this anxiety is rooted in a childhood experience where you were ridiculed in front of a class? By addressing the trauma, you might conquer the fear.

Steps to Understanding the Root Cause

Self-Reflection and Introspection

Begin your journey by setting aside dedicated time for self-reflection. Ask yourself why you feel a certain way or why you act in a particular manner. Often, the initial answer is only the surface; dive deeper by asking "why" multiple times until you reach the core reason.

Action Item: Dedicate at least 10 minutes daily to introspection around people-pleasing. It can be helpful to use a journal or notebook to record your feelings and thoughts.

Analyzing Patterns

Look for recurring patterns in your behaviors or reactions around people-pleasing. Are there specific situations that consistently make you anxious or certain people who trigger defensive responses? Recognizing these patterns can provide valuable insights into underlying issues.

Action Item: Consider keeping a behavior log for a month, noting specific reactions and the situations that trigger them, specifically when you feel anxious or stressed.

Seek Feedback

Sometimes, you might be too close to a problem to see it clearly. Trusted friends, family, or colleagues can offer insights into your behaviors or patterns that you might miss.

Action Item: Engage in an open conversation with someone you trust about your behaviors or reactions. Ask for their honest observations and feedback about ways in which your people-pleasing tendencies may negatively impact you.

Professional Guidance

Coaches, therapists and counselors are trained to help individuals uncover and understand the root causes of their feelings and behaviors. They can provide you with tools, techniques, and a safe space for exploration.

Action Item: Consider scheduling a session with a coach, therapist or counselor. Even if you feel that there isn't a significant issue, they can offer valuable insights. I'd be happy to provide any guidance or support that I can; you can schedule a discovery call with me [here](#).

Benefits of Understanding the Root Cause

Informed Decision Making

When you understand the *why* behind your actions, you can make decisions based on *insight* rather than *impulse*. This clarity of knowledge can lead to more positive outcomes in both personally and professionally.

Personal Growth and Development

Understanding the root causes of your behaviors can lead to personal breakthroughs. By addressing and resolving deep-seated issues, you pave the way for growth and personal evolution.

Improved Relationships

Many interpersonal conflicts arise from misunderstandings or reactions rooted in unresolved personal issues. By addressing these issues at the root, you can foster healthier, more understanding relationships.

Emotional Well-being

Addressing and understanding the root causes of emotions like anxiety, anger, or sadness can lead to improved mental health and emotional well-being.

"Authenticity is a collection of choices that we have to make every day.

It's about the choice to show up and be real. The choice to be honest. The choice to let our true selves be seen."

– Brene Brown

**Case Study:
Addressing External Resistance to Overcoming
People-Pleasing**



Meet **Sarah**, a dedicated people-pleaser who has decided to break free from her habit of saying "yes" to everything and prioritize her own well-being. She's been making positive changes in her life, such as setting boundaries and learning to say 'no' when necessary. However, Sarah encounters external resistance from her long-time friend, **Lisa**, who is accustomed to her people-pleasing behavior.

Scenario:

Lisa, who is used to Sarah always accommodating her requests, invites her to help organize a charity event on a weekend. Sarah knows that she needs to focus on her self-care and work on her personal projects during that time. She feels torn between her commitment to change and her fear of disappointing Lisa, who has come to expect her assistance.

Addressing External Resistance:

Honest Conversation: Sarah decides to have an open and honest conversation with Lisa. She shares her journey to overcome people-pleasing and explains that she needs to prioritize self-care and her personal goals to grow as an individual.

Express Empathy: Sarah shows empathy by acknowledging Lisa's expectations and thanking her for valuing their friendship. She emphasizes that her decision is not a rejection of Lisa but a commitment to personal growth.

Offer Alternatives: Sarah suggests alternatives, such as helping Lisa find someone else to assist with the event or offering support on another occasion. This demonstrates her willingness to maintain their friendship.

Maintain Boundaries: Sarah reinforces her boundaries firmly but kindly. She reminds Lisa that it's essential for her well-being to stick to her commitment and maintain her boundaries.

Reaffirm the Friendship: Sarah concludes the conversation by expressing her gratitude for their friendship and reminding Lisa that she values their relationship. She assures Lisa that her decision doesn't change her feelings towards her.

Outcome:

Lisa, initially surprised by Sarah's response, eventually understands and respects her decision. She appreciates Sarah's honesty and courage to prioritize her personal growth and well-being. Their friendship deepens as they both learn to adapt to the changes, and Lisa recognizes the value of a healthier, more authentic connection with Sarah.

In this example, Sarah effectively addresses external resistance by having an open conversation, expressing empathy, offering alternatives, maintaining boundaries, and reaffirming the importance of their friendship. This approach helps maintain a positive and respectful relationship while allowing Sarah to prioritize her personal growth and well-being.

5. Setting Boundaries

I've had countless coaching conversations with people who have felt drained, overwhelmed, or even taken advantage of in various aspects of their lives. These feelings often trace back to a common issue: the lack of clear boundaries. Just as fences mark property lines, personal boundaries delineate where your emotional, mental, and physical limits lie. Recognizing and setting these boundaries is crucial for your well-being and for fostering healthy, respectful relationships.

You might be thinking, "Isn't setting boundaries selfish?" or "I don't want to push people away." I've heard these concerns many times, and I'm here to guide you through this transformative process. Setting boundaries isn't about isolating yourself; it's about giving yourself the space and respect you deserve.

Why Boundaries Matter

Consider boundaries as invisible lines of protection around your soul. They prevent unwanted intrusions and ensure that relationships, both personal and professional, remain respectful and nurturing. Without these lines, it's easy for others, even unintentionally, to overstep or for you to over-extend.

"The only people who get upset about you setting boundaries are the ones who were benefiting from you having none."

– Unknown

Steps in Setting Effective Boundaries

1. Self-Reflection and Assessment

To set boundaries, you first need to understand your limits. Reflect on past experiences. When did you feel uncomfortable, resentful, or overwhelmed? These feelings are signals, indicating where your boundaries might have been crossed.

Action Item: Spend some time journaling about instances where you felt your boundaries were tested or violated. This will help you pinpoint areas needing attention.

2. Clearly Define Your Boundaries

Once you've identified where you need boundaries, define them clearly. Whether it's needing personal time after work, not discussing certain topics, or asking for respect in conversations, be specific.

Action Item: Create a list of your boundaries in different areas of your life: personal, professional, emotional, and physical.

3. Communicate Effectively

Having boundaries is one thing; communicating them is another. It's essential to express your boundaries assertively, clearly, and calmly. Remember, setting boundaries is a right, not a favor.

Action Item: Practice assertive communication techniques. Role-play different scenarios with a trusted friend or family member where you communicate your boundaries.

4. Stay Consistent

Consistency is key. Once you've set a boundary, it's crucial to maintain it. While it can be tempting to make exceptions, doing so can dilute the effectiveness of your boundaries.

Action Item: Regularly review your boundaries. Make sure you're upholding them consistently and adjust as needed based on life changes or new insights.

5. Seek Support

Setting and maintaining boundaries can be challenging, especially if it's a new practice for you. Surrounding yourself with supportive individuals or seeking guidance from professionals can be invaluable.

Action Item: Consider joining a support group or working with a coach or counselor, where you can discuss challenges and gain insights into setting and upholding boundaries.



In which areas of your life could effective boundary setting create space and freedom?

List a couple examples below:

6. Self-Reflection and Adjustment

In the journey of personal growth and self-improvement, one's path is rarely linear. Life's complexities, changing environments, and evolving personal and professional roles often necessitate a continuous cycle of reflection and adjustment.

For those grappling with people-pleasing tendencies, this iterative process becomes even more critical. By regularly taking stock of your actions, reactions, and feelings, you can identify patterns, celebrate progress, and recalibrate your strategies as needed.

How Continuous Self-Reflection Helps

Recognizing Patterns

Every action, decision, and reaction tells a story. By reflecting on these, you can see a picture and start to discern patterns, both beneficial and detrimental. Recognizing recurring scenarios where the urge to please takes precedence can be the first step toward change.

Measuring Progress

It's easy to lose sight of how far you've come when you're focused on daily tasks and responsibilities. Setting aside time for reflection allows you to see the bigger picture, acknowledge your progress, and celebrate small victories.

Adjusting to Life's Changes

As the saying goes, the only constant in life is change. Regular reflection ensures that you remain adaptable, making necessary adjustments in response to life's evolving challenges and opportunities.

7. Challenges and Overcoming Them

Regression

It's natural to have moments where you revert to old patterns, especially in high-stress situations. Instead of viewing these as failures, consider them learning opportunities.

Action Item: After a moment of regression, analyze the situation. What triggered the old behavior? How could you handle it differently next time?

External Resistance

People accustomed to your people-pleasing tendencies might resist the changes they observe. Stay firm in your journey, understanding that it's about personal growth, not rejection of others.

Action Item: Prepare a mental or written script to address comments or resistance from others, reaffirming your commitment to personal growth.

Conclusion

The journey to stop being a people-pleaser and unmask your authentic self is a profound one. It involves introspection, the setting of boundaries, continuous reflection, and the courage to overcome challenges and regressive behaviors.

Remember, it's not about being selfish; it's about honoring your own well-being while still maintaining positive and healthy relationships with others.

I wish you all the best along your journey.

Jack

Self-Assessment Quiz: Are You a People-Pleaser?

Here's a short self-assessment to help determine if you might have people-pleasing tendencies. Answer each question honestly with "Yes" or "No."

- 1.** Do you often say "yes" to requests or tasks, even when you're already stretched thin?
- 2.** Do you find it challenging to express your honest opinions or preferences to avoid conflict?
- 3.** Are you more concerned about making others happy than prioritizing your own well-being?
- 4.** Do you frequently apologize, even when you believe you're not at fault, just to keep the peace?
- 5.** Have you ever sacrificed your needs or desires to accommodate someone else's wishes?
- 6.** Do you avoid sharing your true feelings or concerns with friends, family, or colleagues to avoid disappointing them?
- 7.** Is receiving praise or approval from others a significant motivator for your actions?
- 8.** Do you fear that setting boundaries will lead to the loss of relationships or the disapproval of others?
- 9.** Are you frequently worried about letting someone down or not meeting their expectations?
- 10.** Do you often go out of your way to help others, even when it inconveniences you?
- 11.** Have you ever neglected your self-care or well-being to fulfill someone else's needs or requests?
- 12.** Do you find it difficult to say "no" when someone asks for a favor, even when it's inconvenient for you?

13. Have you ever felt resentful or frustrated after doing something for someone else, even though you agreed to it willingly?

14. Do you frequently avoid asking for help or support from others because you don't want to burden them?

15. Is the idea of someone being upset with you or disappointed in you a source of significant stress or anxiety?

Scoring: Once you've answered these questions, count the number of "Yes" responses.

0 to 3 "Yes" responses: You exhibit low people-pleasing tendencies.

4 to 7 "Yes" responses: You have moderate people-pleasing tendencies.

8 or more "Yes" responses: You may have high people-pleasing tendencies.

10 or more "Yes" responses: You have very high people-pleasing tendencies.

NOTE: This self-assessment provides a general indication of people-pleasing tendencies and is not a diagnostic tool. It can be used as a starting point for self-awareness and personal growth. If you have identified high people-pleasing tendencies, you might consider exploring strategies and resources to address and overcome this behavior.

The higher the number of "Yes" answers, the more likely you may have people-pleasing tendencies. It's essential to remember that people-pleasing is a common behavior, and recognizing it is the first step towards personal growth and change.



Ending the cycle of people-pleasing starts here.

While typically driven by good intentions, people-pleasing can lead to a variety of negative consequences that can impact many aspects of your life. In this guide, Dr. Jack Skeen, Ph.D., explores the psychology behind people-pleasing, unraveling the complex layers of the behavior, while shedding light on its root causes and the detrimental effects it can have on people's lives. Through practical strategies, self-assessment and actionable advice, this guide empowers readers to break free from the compulsion to constantly seek external validation and approval, guiding them towards setting healthy boundaries, expressing their true selves, and prioritizing their long-term happiness and well-being.



Dr. Jack Skeen is a coach and advisor for people who want to create more success and satisfaction in their lives. His book, *The Circle Blueprint*, is part of a system that includes an online assessment and workbooks that provides all of the tools necessary for anyone to expand his or her life. It is a very cost-effective way for you to grow. You can learn more about Jack at jackskeen.com.