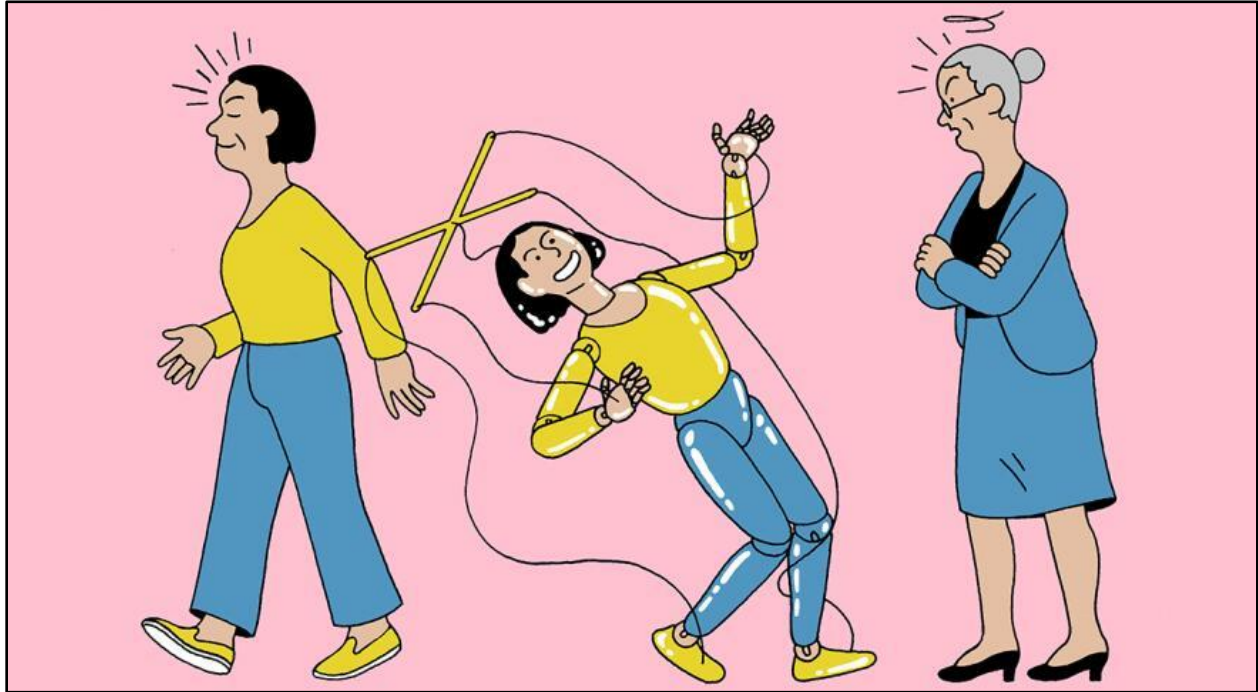


How I Finally Stopped Being a People Pleaser *And started living my truth.*

By [Maria Olsen](#)



Peter Gamlen

Most of us were conditioned as young girls to be compliant. I was successful in school, in large part, because I was well-behaved and I knew how to give my teachers what they wanted. I was chameleonlike and did not express my outside-the-box ideas or many of my true feelings until later in life. My early success snowballed into a continual seeking of outside affirmation as a barometer of my self-worth.

In other words, my self-esteem was largely connected to what others thought of me. And this behavior is not healthy.

“Being a people pleaser is a behavior that many people develop in early life to gain approval and get what they want,” says Anita Gadhia-Smith, a psychotherapist in Washington, D.C., who specializes in addiction, recovery and relationship issues. “It can come at a high price, including a loss of self, lowered self-esteem and difficulties in relationships.”

One of my oldest friends underscores this observation. She remembers her

now-discarded people-pleasing habit as one that “chiseled away at my truth so that people didn’t get to know the real me.” When she turned 60, she gave herself that gift of truth: “I vowed that I would no longer do anything just because I wanted to win someone over. The most important person to please is me.”

Feeling a need to hide our true selves is one that is familiar to me: I am biracial, divorced, a decade sober and kept many secrets. I finally let go of caring so much about what others would think of me if I spoke openly about these experiences.

I had to do a lot of work to drop my people-pleasing habit. I had to believe in my own self-worth. I had to understand that no one else was responsible for my happiness. I had to learn to be confident about just being in my own company.

I used to walk into a room and try to impress everyone I met. I finally learned that not everyone will like me. So now I walk into a room and hope I find someone I like.

Lauren Rubenstein, a clinical psychologist in Chevy Chase, Maryland, explains that people pleasers have “a need to be who we perceive others want us to be, for fear that if they really knew us, they wouldn’t like or accept us. ... The tragedy of living this way is that you can never be fully known or understood.”

It took me almost half a century to live a life that is true to who I am, and to my values. About a decade ago, when my therapist asked me what brought me joy, I had no answer other than my children. I was so busy pleasing everyone else that I did not know at that time what would please me. If my children were happy, I was happy. I learned that there is a name for this behavior: codependence. I attended Co-Dependents Anonymous meetings for a time and read books on the subject to combat this problem in my life.

It also took me a long time to learn how to say no to things I did not genuinely want to do. I lived in fear that the people asking would not like me if I turned down their requests. Now I only say yes to things that are

serving me and bringing me closer to who I want to be. I can answer with “I have another commitment.”

That commitment can simply be replenishing my energy, and I do not owe anyone any lengthy explanation. Time is our most valuable commodity. We do not know how much we have, and we cannot get it back if we use it unwisely.

Like a dependence on drugs or alcohol, depending on constant approval and applause is debilitating to our health and longevity.

In her book *From People Pleaser to Soul Pleaser*, Tracy Secombe notes that people-pleasing behavior can be as addictive as drugs. As she writes: “I discovered my drug of choice at a very young age. It was ‘Praise.’ ... I learned early on that my parents were happy when I did what they wanted me to do — and what their peers approved of. There was a very clear message of what made a ‘good girl’ and I was soon addicted to the kind of feedback that behavior brought me.”

A gift of aging is self-acceptance and an increased ability to let go of what we cannot control. We learn to stop giving our power away. We can grow out of what happened in our childhood, when we were taught to be good little girls. We need to.

“Conserving and channeling our energy in productive areas is all the more important as we mature,” observes Nicole Cutts, a clinical psychologist and success coach in Washington, D.C. “While it may be a hard habit to break, the rewards that come from doing so are worth it. When we honor and respect our true selves and stop sacrificing them on the altar of popularity, we gain self-love, self-respect and a sense of mature confidence and contentment.”