STOP People Pleasing

And Find Your Power

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To Aaron,

for teaching me I don't need to be less

to be loved.

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INTRODUCTION

It was mid-August in Boston. The sun was unrelenting as I stood on the sidewalk of a busy thoroughfare, my arms filled with brown grocery bags. All I wanted was to return to my apartment and sit in front of the air conditioner, but instead, I strained to hear the Greenpeace canvasser who had stopped me ten minutes earlier to tell me about the plight of the polar bears.

I did my best to maintain an appropriately concerned expression as sweat dripped down my brow. I liked polar bears—who doesn't?—but I didn't have the time, or the money, to spare. I had a phone meeting in thirty minutes, and I was certain to be late. But I was rooted in place by politeness. I didn't want this stranger I'd probably never see again to think I was rude.

When she finally made her ask—"So, do you have thirty dollars to spare to keep our furry friends alive?"—I reached for my wallet, unable to resist the tug of guilt. Just then, my grocery bag split, and canned goods cascaded to the sidewalk. I apologized profusely, and when I finally collected the last of the cans, the canvasser had already moved on to someone else.

Let me paint you another picture.

A few weeks later, I was at a music venue where my friend's band was performing. But I was stuck at the bar. It had been thirty-five minutes—I'd been glancing at the clock every five, so I was certain of it—and a man I didn't know was *still* talking to me, in excruciating detail, about his

twelve guitars. For the first few minutes I'd given him my full attention—I was always happy to have a brief chat with a friendly stranger—but by the end, I was using every cue I could think of to convey my disinterest. I glanced at my phone. I looked around the room. I gave one-word answers. Still, he went on.

I was not intimidated or threatened by this man; by all measures, he was harmless. But somehow, I couldn't muster the courage to say, "It's been nice talking to you, but I'm going to listen to the band now."

I couldn't find my voice. Instead, I waited for him to set me free.

A month or so later, I went on a first date with a man I'd met online. Right away, I knew that we weren't compatible. He didn't look like the photos in his profile. We shared few interests. He interrupted me constantly. Over dessert, I received a long lecture on the intricacies of the stock market.

When the date finally ended, I climbed into my Uber, flooded with relief. *Well, at least that's over*, I thought. Not an hour later, I received a text: **That was really fun. When can I see you again?**

I didn't know what to say. The thought of replying honestly—**Thanks for the date! I didn't feel a spark, but I wish you the best**—felt mean. I simply couldn't do it. I didn't know how. So I didn't reply.

Three days passed. Then another text: **You know, it's incredibly rude for you not to reply to me,** he said. **We had a great dinner—which I paid for, by the way—and you owe me an explanation.**

I didn't stop to question his entitlement. I didn't stop to consider whether this transactional point of view aligned with my feminist ethos. All I knew was: I felt guilty. So instead of answering honestly, I made up an excuse—**So sorry, I've been busy!**—and agreed to meet for a second date. It was four dates until I finally found the courage to bid him farewell.

For most of my life, people-pleasing was the air I breathed. It came so naturally to me that I didn't even have a word for it. When somebody wanted something from me—be they family, friend, lover, or stranger—I gave it, no matter how uncomfortable, exhausted, or resentful I felt inside.

It didn't matter if I was late to a meeting; it didn't matter if I was missing my friend's band; it didn't matter if I never wanted to see them again.

I was a people-pleaser. I put everyone else first. I couldn't say no.

In my romantic relationship, I listened to my partner's choice of music, hung out with my partner's friends, and had arguments on my partner's terms. In my family, I felt like others' emotions were my responsibility; I monitored and tended to them with far more dedication than I did my own. In my friendships, I struggled to share from the heart; convinced that I was "uninteresting," I was far more comfortable being a listener. In my community, I was known as the "happy one" who was "always smiling," and while these labels were intended as praise, they belied a deeper sadness: a painful feeling that nobody *really* knew me, or even cared to.

After years of therapy, I came to recognize the circumstances in my life that led me to become a people-pleaser. But I didn't know how to turn that knowledge *into action* to tangibly break the cycle. My morning journal entries were punctuated by exasperated questions: "How can I speak up for myself?" "How do I stop saying yes when I mean no?" "When am I finally going to put myself first for a change?" And, on one particularly difficult day, the following, written dramatically in angry red pen: "If I can learn to speak up for myself before I die, I will die a happy woman."

I still have this journal entry. I look back on it from time to time when I need a reminder of how far I've come.

Not long after I penned these frustrations, breaking the people-pleasing pattern became my personal mission. I went through a devastating breakup with a partner in whom I'd lost myself completely, and in his absence, I felt a searing clarity that I would never find contentment if I continued basing my self-worth solely on others' approval. I realized—painfully, suddenly, viscerally—that nobody was coming to "save me" from my people-pleasing. *I had to take responsibility for my own happiness.* This wasn't a duty I could outsource to others.

In the years that followed, I slowly and intentionally connected with my own feelings, needs, wants, and dreams. At first, they were shy with

me—they'd learned through years of neglect that I could not be trusted to take care of them—but the more attention I paid them, the louder they became. The more I tended to myself, the more comfortable I became using my voice with others. The more I respected my needs, the more it felt imperative that I invested in relationships with people who *also* respected my needs. Slowly, I learned the art and craft of boundary-setting, making it clear what I would and would not tolerate in my connections with others.

It was empowering, and liberating, and uncomfortable. I felt awkward asking others to show me care in the specific ways I needed; I felt guilty setting hard boundaries with my loved ones; I felt grief as I outgrew relationships that were not a good fit for who I was becoming. But beneath every growing pain, like a slow and steady drumbeat, was the knowledge that after all these years, I was finally standing up for myself.

As I began to touch a freedom and self-trust I'd never known, I felt certain that I wanted to help others do the same. My goal was to help people who, like me, were ready to turn their desire for change into action: to take tangible, real-life steps to break the people-pleasing pattern.

Coaching, as a discipline, is designed for this. It asks and answers the question: "Where do I *most* want to go—and how, specifically, do I get there?" So I enrolled in a training program certified by the International Coaching Federation. When I graduated a year later, I knew I wanted to help others break the people-pleasing pattern, set empowered boundaries, and master the art of speaking their truth.

In addition to my one-on-one client sessions, I began writing about people-pleasing and sharing my work online. I was surprised by how deeply it resonated with people all over the world. I received messages from recovering people-pleasers in the US, India, Yemen, France, Afghanistan, New Zealand, Sudan, and more. They said, "I thought I was the only one who struggled this way." I told them, "I thought I was the only one, too."

With every new follower and subscriber, I felt a sense of solidarity: *We are in this together. We are not the only ones.*

Five years later, my writing has reached millions, and my workshops on people-pleasing and boundary-setting have welcomed thousands of participants from around the world. *Stop People Pleasing and Find Your Power* is the distillation of years' worth of research, coaching, teaching, and hundreds of one-on-one conversations with recovering people-pleasers. It offers an action-based approach to breaking the people-pleasing pattern, grounded in research and psychology, with practical tools that will help you find your voice and step into your power.

In Part 1: Find Yourself, you will learn how to discover—and prioritize—your own feelings, needs, values, self-concept, and wants. These are your five foundations of self, and only when you consistently tend to them can you confidently self-advocate in your relationships with others.

In Part 2: Stand Up for Yourself, you'll learn how to honor your needs in your relationships, make requests of others, set self-protective boundaries, and reconnect with your own power and agency. We'll also unpack how people-pleasing differently impacts various groups based on their social locations and degrees of privilege.

Part 3: Take Care of Yourself is a companion for the growing pains we all face as we break the people-pleasing pattern. You'll learn how to embrace bravery and become resilient toward guilt, fear, anger, loneliness, and grief; how to navigate the challenges of outgrowing relationships and facing difficult transitions; and how to reframe these challenges as powerful opportunities for growth and transformation.

Part 4: Enrich Yourself shows how breaking the people-pleasing pattern will make your life better. You'll learn how to stop playing small in your relationships with others; how to eradicate people-pleasing from your sex life; how to reconnect with play; how to approach your healing with nuance and discernment; and how to discover the joys of giving from a genuine and self-respecting place.

When I began writing this book, I knew I wanted it to expand the conversation about people-pleasing in two key ways: by offering nuance and acknowledging the inevitable growing pains of this important healing work.

As concepts like people-pleasing and self-care become more mainstream, complex ideas like boundaries are often diluted in ways that ultimately discourage us from building healthy relationships. We're told that if someone doesn't bring us "love and light at all times," we should "cut them out." We're told that if someone disagrees with us, we should leave them behind to "protect our peace." We're told that if someone can't meet *every single one* of our needs, we "deserve better."

These one-dimensional platitudes ignore the reality that human relationships are complicated. They impede our healing by encouraging us to seek an unattainable standard, and they prevent us from looking inward to assess how *we* may be contributing to our own unhappiness or disempowerment.

That's why *Stop People Pleasing* incorporates nuance to help you break the people-pleasing pattern while also encouraging sustainable and realistic relationships. This book takes seriously questions such as: What is the difference between kindness and people-pleasing? How can we have self-compassion for the painful circumstances that led to our people-pleasing while also taking personal responsibility for breaking the pattern? When is it appropriate to compromise on our needs, and when is it appropriate to hold firm to them? And how can we distinguish between when other people are violating our boundaries and when we're violating our *own* boundaries by giving more than we're comfortable giving?

I believe this nuance is where our true healing lies. By the same token, I believe that we must speak to the emotional nuances of healing: the fact that this inner work is not only empowering and freeing, but also difficult and, at times, deeply uncomfortable. As we break the people-pleasing pattern, we often feel afraid to make requests of others, no matter how reasonable those requests are. We often feel guilty after setting boundaries, no matter how necessary those boundaries may be. We often feel grief when we leave behind toxic relationships, no matter how harmful they were to us.

It's not only normal, but inevitable, that we face these growing pains as we leave people-pleasing behind. If we don't acknowledge them, we

can't soothe ourselves through them—and if we don't soothe ourselves through them, we're more likely to renege on our boundaries and retreat, once again, into silence. For this reason, *Stop People Pleasing* offers practical tools for normalizing, and self-soothing through, guilt, fear, anger, uncertainty, and grief as we step into our power.

Remember that years-ago version of me who stood on that busy Boston street, who listened to that man at the bar, who went on that godawful series of soul-crushing dates?

She would have never, in a million years, believed that, one day, I would be sitting here, typing this introduction on my laptop, really, truly feeling like I've left people-pleasing behind.

Ridiculous, she would have said. *Impossible.*

But it *is* possible. I've witnessed it within myself; I've witnessed it from hundreds of my clients; I've witnessed it from thousands of individuals worldwide who have taken the time to email me and say, "I never thought I could do this, but I did."

This healing isn't a one-time event; it is a process of rededicating ourselves *to* ourselves, over and over again. Every time we redirect our attention back to our feelings, our desires, and our dreams, we are healing. Every time we soothe ourselves through our guilt instead of reacting to it, we are healing. Every time we use our voice where we would have once stayed silent, we are healing.

I owe my thanks to the hundreds of recovering people-pleasers who gave me permission to include their personal stories in this book. While names, ages, and other identifying information have been changed to preserve their privacy, the vignettes you'll read are real stories from real people around the world.

I hope that *Stop People Pleasing* serves as your companion, support, and cheerleader as you break the people-pleasing pattern. This work is not easy, but I can assure you: it is worth it a hundred times over.

—Hailey Magee, Seattle, WA

1

FIND YOURSELF

1

PEOPLE-PLEASING: WHAT IT IS, WHERE IT COMES FROM, AND WHY WE'RE LEAVING IT BEHIND

People-pleasing is the act of chronically prioritizing others' needs, wants, and feelings at the expense of our own needs, wants, and feelings. As people-pleasers, we struggle to speak up for ourselves in our relationships. We give past our limits to be liked by others; have immense difficulty setting boundaries; struggle to identify and leave toxic environments; and become involved in many one-sided relationships that are all give and no take. Often, we feel defined by how helpful, useful, and supportive we can be to other people.

Though people-pleasing manifests in our relationships with others, it stems from a disconnected relationship with ourselves. You might think of it as a form of self-abandonment. *Even in the absence of others*, many of us avoid tending to our basic needs; discount our own emotions; feel uncomfortable in our own company; and become disconnected from play, creativity, wonder, joy, and delight. Cut off from a sense of self-worth, we may engage in perfectionism, self-shaming, and self-judgment; struggle with distress tolerance, self-soothing, and

emotional regulation; or even engage in compulsions or addictions to avoid feeling our emotions.

People-pleasing is a pattern of behavior, not a mental illness or diagnosis. For most, it isn't a conscious choice moment to moment, but an ingrained way of interacting with others that was instilled in childhood. In this chapter, we'll explore where the people-pleasing pattern comes from; how it affects our relationships; what differentiates it from kindness; and how we can use this knowledge to begin to break the pattern.

FOUR PORTRAITS OF PEOPLE-PLEASING

The people-pleasing pattern affects people of all genders, ages, ethnicities, and income brackets, but it doesn't manifest the same way for everyone. Some feel completely confident and authentic at work, but become passive in their romantic relationships. Others have no trouble speaking up for themselves with friends, but struggle to set boundaries with family members. Still others feel that people-pleasing colors every area of their lives: work, romance, friends, family, and community.

People-pleasing can look like:

Tanya

Tanya, forty-five, is a corporate lawyer in New York City. She is fierce and uncompromising in the courtroom, but in her personal relationships, she feels inconsequential and powerless. She resentfully subsidizes her unemployed partner's expenses while he seeks work at a snail's pace. Each weekend she travels upstate for a long visit with her recently widowed mother, whom she describes as "narcissistic and overbearing." She has a couple of casual friends in the city, but their coffee dates quickly turn into therapy sessions when her friends dump their personal problems into her lap—and show no curiosity in return.

A sense of obligation and resentment pervades all of Tanya's relation-

ships. She over-gives and under-receives in every single one of them, but she doesn't know how to shift this dynamic.

Aaron

Aaron, thirty-five, is engaged to be married, but family complications are threatening his engagement. His father died when he was a child, and ever since, Aaron has been very close to his mother, Jada. Whenever Jada needs anything, he's there in a flash to provide it. She calls him multiple times a day to chitchat about everything from the weather to the recent football game. Even when Aaron and his fiancée, Issa, are on dates, he steps away to take phone calls from his mother.

He feels smothered by his mother's insistent presence, and even Issa has expressed hesitation about becoming the third wheel to Aaron and Jada's enmeshed relationship. But ever since his father died, he has felt responsible for his mother's emotional well-being. He wants to create space, but he doesn't know how—and he's terrified of hurting her feelings.

Lena

Lena, twenty-nine, was born into an Orthodox Jewish family. As she's gotten older, she's become uncomfortable with certain aspects of her faith—particularly its rigid gender roles—and after many months of reckoning, she decides that she can no longer participate in the religion and disaffiliates.

Newly uninvolved in the Orthodox community, she notices how much her upbringing has prevented her from finding and using her own voice. In social situations, she always defers to the men in the group; in conflicts with friends, she immediately becomes passive and accommodating. Without a religious community to guide her, she has no idea what she wants, what her dreams are, or who she is. Lena wants to follow her inner compass, but she doesn't know where to find it.

Zoe

Zoe, a nonbinary twenty-four-year-old, is a lively, talkative graduate student in a theater program. Zoe makes friends effortlessly; their social calendar is always filled with coffee dates, happy hours, and weekend adventures. But despite their many friends, Zoe feels disconnected and fundamentally unseen.

At a young age, Zoe learned that being permanently cheerful was a surefire strategy to get attention from their distant parents, so they use the same method now to make friends in adulthood. Zoe is always bubbly and agreeable, and though they make fast friends, those friendships never deepen; Zoe never shares when they're going through a difficult time, and never asks anyone for support. They crave connection and wish to be seen and known—but their people-pleasing prevents them from building intimate friendships.

Tanya, Aaron, Lena, and Zoe may have different backgrounds, but they share the struggle to speak up for themselves and the desire to express themselves authentically in their relationships. All four want to identify and assert their needs, set healthy boundaries, and make decisions based on their own values and priorities.

The first step in breaking the people-pleasing pattern is understanding its origins in our own lives. Doing so helps us develop both self-awareness and self-compassion as we learn how we originally developed this pattern as a coping mechanism to stay safe.

THE ORIGINS OF PEOPLE-PLEASING

We develop the people-pleasing pattern as a way to manage our experience of unsupportive, unsafe, or unpredictable environments. Many of us learn to people-please in childhood in order to get safety or affection from preoccupied, unavailable, or abusive caregivers. For marginalized groups—such as people of color, LGBTQ+ people, or neurodivergent

people—people-pleasing can also be a survival strategy to avoid stigma, harassment, or harm.

Trauma

Those who have experienced trauma are more likely to develop the people-pleasing pattern. In 2003, psychotherapist and trauma expert Pete Walker expanded the well-known "fight, flight, or freeze" stress response model to include a fourth addition: fawn. When threatened, a person with the fawn response will try to please, gratify, or accommodate the source of threat instead of fighting back, running away, or shutting down.

The fawn response is particularly common among those who experienced childhood abuse. Walker explains that, in childhood, these people likely learned that protesting mistreatment led to even more severe retaliation, so they "relinquished the fight response, deleted 'no' from their vocabulary, and never developed the language skills of healthy assertiveness."

If fawning helped someone avoid harm as a child, they may cling to this coping mechanism long after it stops keeping them safe. As adults, when confronted with situations that provoke fear or anxiety, they may behave in ways that they think will earn others' approval: appearing kind and lighthearted, giving compliments, or even agreeing to activities they have no interest in. Walker explains that those who fawn "seek safety by merging with the wishes, needs, and demands of others. They act as if they unconsciously believe that the price of admission to any relationship is the forfeiture of all their needs, rights, preferences, and boundaries."

Trauma can also lead people to develop lifelong hypervigilance, carefully monitoring others' moods for subtle shifts and signs of danger. Often, survivors of trauma become experts at reading others' emotions, but struggle to identify their own. Over time, many become completely disconnected from their own inner worlds. In this way, trauma's long-term effects can leave a person less able to access their feelings and needs, say no, and practice healthy assertiveness in moments of stress.

How We Were Parented

Not all people-pleasing has its origins in trauma. Sometimes, we develop the pattern as a result of how we were parented.

Our caregivers teach us how to interact with the world. They teach us whether our emotions and needs are acceptable; they teach us whether we deserve love, and under what conditions. In the 1960s, clinical psychologist Diana Baumrind identified four distinct parenting styles: permissive, neglectful, authoritative, and authoritarian. Both authoritarian and permissive parenting can lead children to develop the people-pleasing pattern.

Authoritarian parents are punitive, controlling, and have unreasonably high expectations of their children. Though they meet their children's material needs, they rarely provide affection or emotional support. Authoritarian parents offer few explanations for their rules and offer no room for compromise: their control is paramount. Having such rigid rules in an emotionally barren environment leads many children to believe that the only way to gain others' approval is to do everything right. They become externally motivated, anxiously seeking their worth in the validation of their parents, teachers, and peers. Terrified of disapproval, they tend to be chronically anxious and extremely critical of themselves. Many grow up to be perfectionists who can't tolerate making mistakes. So preoccupied with meeting others' expectations, they struggle to identify their own feelings and desires. Though many become hardworking and successful adults, they often enter therapy seeking help for low assertiveness, guilt, depression, anxiety, and low self-esteem.

On the opposite side of the spectrum lie permissive parents: those who are highly responsive to their children emotionally, but inconsistently enforce expectations, rules, and consequences for unruly behavior. Some permissive parents act less like parents and more like friends to their children. They may overshare intimate details of their lives, inappropriately demand their children's emotional support, or position their children as allies during parental conflicts. This reversal of roles often

results in parentified children who assume more responsibility than is appropriate for their age. These children learn that the love they get is based entirely on how emotionally supportive they can be—a mentality that often pervades their relationships in adulthood.

When children play the role of supporter and confidante for a parent, they often struggle to develop their own sense of identity. It's easy for them to see their parents' needs and feelings, but they have a hard time identifying their own. As a result, adult children of permissive parents often find themselves playing the role of savior, helper, fixer, or martyr in their adult relationships.

Likewise, emotionally immature caregivers—those who can't regulate their own emotions—struggle to recognize, validate, and be present with their children's emotions. These children never learn that their feelings and experiences are meaningful; their inner worlds go unacknowledged. Children of emotionally immature parents learn to neglect their own feelings and needs, often becoming chronic listeners, helpers, and fixers as adults.

Finally, caregivers may also instill people-pleasing in their children by role modeling people-pleasing themselves. As children, we learn what's normal behavior by watching our caregivers. We notice their mannerisms, their decisions, how they spend their time, and how they treat and speak to themselves. If we had a caregiver who was deferential, passive, self-sacrificial, or unable to set boundaries, we may unintentionally replicate these behaviors as we get older.

Being Raised alongside Addiction

Sometimes, caregivers' emotional limitations prevent them from giving their children the support they need. However, caregivers struggling with addiction—or preoccupied by another family member's addiction—may also fail to offer their children adequate support, presence, and encouragement.

Typically, families containing addiction become hyper-focused on

the addict. Family members monitor the addict's behavior, urge them toward recovery, try to manage their erratic moods, and grapple with the fallout of their unpredictable behavior. Children learn that tending to the addict is their primary responsibility, and they don't receive the support they need to identify or communicate their own basic feelings and needs.

Many children raised alongside addiction become hyper-independent and hyper-responsible adults. They believe that they're worthy of love *to the extent that they can be of value to others*. Research shows that adult children of alcoholics tend to feel personally accountable for any negative occurrence at home or in the workplace. As they did when they were children, they feel responsible for managing everyone around them. Strangers even to themselves, adult children of addiction frequently surround themselves with addicts or emotionally unavailable partners, inadvertently re-creating dynamics from their childhood.

A Response to Gender Norms

Family dynamics often plant the seeds of people-pleasing, but gender norms can also play a major role. Despite significant advancements toward gender equality within the last century, women are still seen as the caretakers of our culture. Jobs with nurturing at their center—like nursing, teaching, and social work—are disproportionately done by women. In the home, women perform four hours of caretaking and household work daily compared to men's two and a half hours. Psychologist Marshall Rosenberg writes: "For centuries, the image of the loving woman has been associated with sacrifice and the denial of one's own needs to take care of others. Because women are socialized to view the caretaking of others as their highest duty, they learn to ignore their own needs."

Even in interpersonal relationships, women are still encouraged—implicitly or explicitly—to prioritize others first. Women, more often than men, find themselves responsible for emotional labor: the unpaid and undervalued work of maintaining relationships, managing people's

emotions, and keeping people happy. Research shows that women apologize far more often than men, and are more likely to label their own behavior as offensive or apology-worthy. Women are even more likely to be called "bossy" when expressing confidence or assertiveness.

These days, it's less common to *explicitly* instruct women to be silent and self-sacrificial, but these norms are deeply embedded in our culture. We may not always say them aloud, but they continue to play a significant role in our society's expectations of women and women's expectations of themselves.

Men face different gender norms, but those norms can also foster people-pleasing by encouraging men to suppress their emotions, show no weakness, and give past their limits. Across the board, men are still expected to be stoic, unfeeling, and emotionally unexpressive; a 2019 study found that 58 percent of men feel like they're expected to be "emotionally strong and to show no weakness," and 38 percent have avoided talking to others about their feelings to avoid appearing "unmanly." This caricature of the Unfeeling Man creates two painful disconnections. First, many men become cut off from their *own* feelings and needs because they've been discouraged from having any at all. Second, many men become disconnected from *others* because it's difficult to build intimate, supportive connections if you were never allowed to be vulnerable.

Many men also feel pressure to give past their limits at work. Despite women's surging participation in the workforce, many men still feel obligated to prove their worth by playing a traditional breadwinner role in their families. Denying their own needs for rest and restoration, many men find themselves overworking to attain this masculine ideal, suffering elevated stress levels and reduced sleep along the way. Gender norms can prohibit men from embracing their emotions, building intimate connections, and honoring their own needs for rest and recuperation.

A Response to Culture

Behavior deemed "people-pleasing" in one culture may be commonplace and celebrated in another. Ultimately, what constitutes a healthy versus unhealthy amount of giving is culturally determined.

Individualistic cultures, like the United States, the United Kingdom, and South Africa, encourage people to set self-directed goals rather than fulfill others' goals for them. (Though, as we saw in the previous section, women and marginalized groups still face societal pressure to subjugate their own needs to care for others.) Individualistic cultures place less emphasis on family and group affiliations and more emphasis on autonomy, individuality, and self-actualization. As a result, some members of these cultures feel a sense of freedom and agency; others feel unmoored and disconnected.

Meanwhile, collectivist cultures, like China, Korea, Japan, and India, encourage members to prioritize the group or family above the individual. (Many organized religions also operate as collectivist cultures.) Emphasizing conformity, obedience, and loyalty, collectivist cultures assert that family and group affiliations are of the utmost importance. As a result, some members of collectivist cultures feel a sense of belonging and security; others feel restricted and confined.

Some from collectivist cultures—especially those who immigrate to individualistic cultures—feel conflicted between their culture's ideals and their personal desire to prioritize their own needs, passions, and dreams.

A Response to Stigma and Oppression

For many marginalized groups, people-pleasing, shape-shifting, and masking one's authentic self are methods for survival. If your society taught you that people like you weren't worthy of basic care, dignity, and respect, acting deferentially—especially toward those in authority—can be a way to protect yourself from harm. When acts of violence and harassment against members of your identity group

are commonplace, becoming as small and unnoticeable as possible is a survival strategy.

Various marginalized groups face distinct pressures to people-please. This topic is broad and deserves a chapter of its own, so we'll discuss how systemic oppressions impact individual people-pleasing patterns in chapter 13.

Safety Is the Common Thread

Though the people-pleasing pattern has many origins, a common thread connects them all: the pursuit of safety. Safety doesn't necessarily mean safety from physical harm or violence, though it can. It can also mean safety more broadly:

- **Social safety:** "I belong" or "People approve of me."
- **Emotional safety:** "I am known and understood" or "I am loved" or "I matter."
- **Material safety:** "My basic needs are met."

People-pleasing may have kept us safe in childhood, but now, as adults with agency and independence, using our voices—not silencing them—becomes a far more effective strategy to ensure that we get what we want and need in our lives.

People-Pleasing in Psychology

While people-pleasing is not a formal mental illness or diagnosis, many schools of psychology examine the pattern of neglecting the self to put others first—and various forms of therapy provide helpful interventions to break the pattern.

Aaron Beck, the founder of cognitive behavioral therapy, coined the term *sociotropy*: a personality trait characterized by over-reliance on others' approval and an excessive investment in one's relationships. People who

score higher on the sociotropy scale feel the need to please others; are nonassertive and overly nurturant; have trouble asserting their needs; and fear criticism and rejection. Sociotropic people are more likely to develop depression, and cognitive therapy—which challenges negative thought patterns about the self and the world—has been shown to mitigate these depressive effects.

Meanwhile, the Bowen family systems theory promotes the concept of *differentiation*: the ability to know where we end and others begin. Highly differentiated people have a strong and independent sense of self, while less differentiated people rely heavily on the approval of those around them. People who are less differentiated tend to adjust their actions to please others; avoid saying no; and struggle to maintain their own opinions in the face of difference. Bowen family therapy helps people increase their level of differentiation and create healthy boundaries so that they can better manage their relationships.

Attachment theory can also help us understand the people-pleasing pattern. It asserts that our childhood relationships with our caregivers affect how we interact with others as adults. People with an anxious attachment style generally had caregivers who inconsistently tended to their needs. As adults, they tend to feel uncertain about the state of their relationships, crave deeper intimacy, and seek excessive reassurance from their partners. More than anything, anxiously attached individuals fear being abandoned and are hypersensitive to threats to the relationship. Fueled by insecurity and low self-esteem, anxiously attached people anticipate rejection and will go to great lengths to avoid it—including sacrificing their own needs, wants, or feelings. Attachment-focused therapy helps clients understand their attachment style and modify their behaviors in their relationships.

Finally, the addiction field offers the concept of codependence. Originally popularized in the 1980s to describe the self-sacrificial characteristics shared by many spouses of alcoholics, the term *codependent* has evolved to describe any person—involved with an addict or not—who chronically self-neglects and over-prioritizes others. Codependents tend to have trouble identifying their feelings; avoid communicating their needs; struggle

to make decisions; remain in harmful relationships for too long; and believe others are incapable of taking care of themselves. The twelve-step program Co-Dependents Anonymous was created to help people recover from codependency, and many addiction treatment centers offer codependency recovery programs as well.

Those with depression, anxiety, social anxiety, and various forms of neurodivergence may also struggle with people-pleasing. Though no data exists on the prevalence of people-pleasing specifically, the ubiquity of trauma, addiction, depression, anxiety, social injustice, and the pattern's other origins indicate that it affects millions of people around the world.

Despite how common people-pleasing is—and how many frameworks exist for addressing it—many still hesitate to label their chronic over-giving or self-sacrifice as people-pleasing. Some say, "Prioritizing others' feelings and needs sounds like something everyone should do. . . . That just sounds like kindness to me." And they're right; caring about others' needs and feelings *is* a form of kindness. But kindness becomes people-pleasing when we chronically neglect ourselves in the process.

KINDNESS VS. PEOPLE-PLEASING

On its face, people-pleasing may resemble kindness. After all, generosity, loyalty, compassion, and dedication are cornerstones of healthy relationships. But there's a difference between people-pleasing and being kind.

Psychologists have found that kindness (which they call "healthy altruism") and people-pleasing (which they call "pathological altruism") have entirely different motives. The very same action that's people-pleasing for one person might be kindness for another; it all depends on why you're doing it and whether it negatively impacts you.

Psychologists define pathological altruism as "the willingness of a person to irrationally place another's perceived needs above his or her own in a way that causes self-harm." Pathological altruists often neglect themselves in pursuit of others' well-being, and researchers have found that their actions are motivated by the desire to gain others' approval and avoid rejection.

At their core, people-pleasing behaviors are rooted in:

- **Transaction:** "I'm giving you this so you will give me something back."
- **Obligation:** "I'm doing this because if I don't, I'll feel guilty."
- **Compulsion:** "I'm doing this because I have no idea how *not* to do this."
- **Loss-aversion:** "I'm doing this because if I don't, I fear I'll lose you."

For many, this pattern is based upon a covert contract or unspoken agreement: "I will over-give and trespass my own boundaries for you, and in return, you will make me feel loved, wanted, and needed." The problem is that others never agreed to this transaction. We may over-give and cater to others' needs believing they will then be obligated to give us the love and attention that we crave. This transactional mentality imbues our relationships with piles of invisible debt.

After over-giving, people-pleasers often feel exhausted, frustrated, and resentful. When others don't respond to our giving as we wish they would, we might even demonize them as "rude," "self-centered," or "taking advantage of us." As a result, people-pleasing often leaves us feeling disconnected from the very people we're trying to "help."

Gwen is moving out of her apartment. The night before she's scheduled to move, she texts her friend Hazel and asks if she's available to help the following day. When Hazel receives the text, she's immediately overwhelmed: she's on a tight work deadline and already has plans the following evening with friends. She doesn't *really* have the time to help, but she feels guilty telling Gwen no; she doesn't want to fall out of her good graces. So instead, she agrees and tells Gwen she'll be over tomorrow at 10:00 a.m.

For the rest of the night, Hazel feels stressed and resentful. *This is a huge ask to make of a friend less than twenty-four hours beforehand*, she thinks. *I can't believe I have to spend tomorrow moving heavy boxes instead of making progress on my deadline.*

Hazel's agreement isn't kindness, but people-pleasing; she agrees to help from a place of obligation ("I'll feel guilty if I say no") and loss-aversion ("I don't want to fall out of Gwen's good graces"). As we'll explore more in the following section, the subsequent resentment that Hazel feels is a clear sign that she's giving past her limits.

Kindness and Healthy Altruism

Psychologists define healthy altruism as the ability to "experience sustained and relatively conflict-free pleasure from contributing to the welfare of others." Healthy altruists gratify their own needs while *also* taking steps to enhance others' lives; they don't sacrifice their own well-being in the process. Research shows that healthy altruism is motivated by the desire for new experiences and personal growth.

Acts of kindness are rooted in:

- **Desire:** "I want to give this to you."
- **Goodwill:** "I'm eager to increase your quality of life because I care about you."
- **Choice:** "I don't *have* to do this—I *want* to do this."
- **Abundance:** "I'm giving you this because there's enough to go around."

When we give out of kindness, it's because we could say yes or no, and choose, of our own free will, to say yes. We aren't necessarily expecting anything in return. Our generosity isn't motived by others' reactions, but by the *internal satisfaction* that comes from acting in accordance with our values. Importantly, how we act publicly aligns with how we feel privately. After giving to others in this way, we may be tired or spent, but alongside the fatigue are typically feelings of happiness, goodwill, and connection.

After Gwen texts Hazel, she also texts her friend Gabriel for help. Gabriel checks his schedule to see if he has time the next day. Right now, his only plan is to meet a friend for pickup basketball at 3:00 p.m.; he's

happy to help beforehand. Gabriel texts back: **Yes—I can help until 2:45. I'll be there at 10 with my truck!**

After Gabriel replies, he feels a sense of satisfaction at agreeing to help a friend in need. His agreement was based on desire ("I want to help Gwen") and choice ("I don't *have* to do this—I *want* to do this"). Because he offered to give to the extent that he was comfortable giving, his actions didn't negatively impact him. He was being kind, not people-pleasing.

Pathological and healthy altruism differ in both the motivation behind the altruistic acts and the extent to which they cause personal harm. Psychologists Scott Barry Kaufman and Emanuel Jauk encourage those seeking to move from pathological to healthy altruism to increase their level of "healthy selfishness": the idea that "it's healthy and even growth-fostering to take care of oneself and enjoy life's little pleasures." We'll discuss how to begin tending to ourselves this way in chapter 2.

HOW PEOPLE-PLEASING HARMS US

A single instance of people-pleasing—like helping a friend move when you don't really have the time—may not cause you any serious harm. But in the long term, these small acts of self-neglect accumulate, negatively affecting our well-being, relationships, and dreams for the future.

After years of people-pleasing, we become strangers to ourselves; we are highly attuned to others' moods and feelings and woefully unmoored from our own. When others ask us what we want or dream of, we may be disturbed to find that we have no idea. Instead of designing our own lives, we become mirrors, reflecting back others' desires.

Chronically prioritizing others' needs leaves us little time or energy to care for ourselves, and as a result, our physical and mental health may suffer. We may neglect our physical needs for rest, healthy meals, or doctor's appointments; neglect our financial needs by lending money we don't have; or neglect our emotional needs by entering relationships with emotionally unavailable partners and friends. These neglects take a toll. Suppressing our own emotions can lead to higher rates of anxiety, depression,

and stress. Research also shows that emotional suppression can contribute to physical illness, increasing the likelihood of heart disease, gastrointestinal health complications, and autoimmune disease.

When we people-please, we struggle to build intimacy in our relationships. True intimacy requires letting ourselves be seen for who we really are, and people-pleasing is like wearing a mask. We are the ever-cheerful ones and the easygoing ones; we are the ones who say yes, no matter what. We don't speak up when we've been hurt, and we aren't honest about what we need. Though these ways of interacting may reduce the potential for conflict in the short term, they are not conducive to true intimacy over time. The more we people-please, the more we feel painfully unseen and unknown.

For many, people-pleasing also breeds resentment. Our resentment stems from the fact that, like Hazel, we're uncomfortable stating our limits and boundaries. Often, we expect others to "just know" our needs, feelings, and limits, even if we've never communicated them before. Instead of saying no when we're overcommitted, we agree when others ask favors of us, smiling on the outside while shrieking on the inside, *They should just know how busy I am!* Instead of telling others when we've been hurt by their behavior, we stew silently, thinking, *They should just know how that made me feel!* Instead of asking for help when we need it, we suffer in quiet frustration when others don't automatically offer it, thinking, *They should just know what I need!* Instead of expressing how we want to be cared for, we hold our loved ones to an invisible standard, feeling angry when they don't attain it: *They should just know how to take care of me!*

In these ways, we outsource our responsibility for our own needs and feelings to other people. Unspoken expectations put our family members, partners, and friends in the unfair position of failing tests they didn't realize they were taking.

Unfortunately, these patterns of behavior often have a ripple effect, and we may model people-pleasing for others without even realizing it. Many of us know this ripple effect all too well from watching our own caregivers model self-sacrifice and self-denial in their relationships. Whether we're parents, bosses, leaders in our communities, or beyond, we have people