

Don't Be Too Nice!

Just Being *Real* Works Better

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“IT’S NICE TO BE NICE”, some people say. Not always true. It can be overdone.

In fact, you may find it enlightening to look up the origin of the word, “nice”. Being nice is not always an altruistic endeavor, an act of generosity without expectation of reward. In its original root, “nice” didn’t signify being agreeable, kind, and thoughtful. These are additional meanings that evolved over the centuries since the Romans. The original word “nice” originates from the two Latin words *ne scire*, which mean “not know”. In other words, it denotes being *foolish* or *ignorant*. It implies that we behave in a way that suggests we’re not dealing effectively with the real facts. It doesn’t suggest the enlightened and noble generosity of spirit we assume nowadays.

Sure, it tends to go against our grain when we think of people who are “not nice”. We’re taught at a very early age to be nice. We all carry, to varying degrees, a sense of compliance or accommodation, of doing things to “get along” with others.

EARLY START! Such thinking seems to have its roots in behaviors we learned back in kindergarten. The teachers called it “socializing” the youngsters (that included you and me). You know, “playing nice” with the other kids—not taking toys, taking turns--that kind of thing.

So we need to be reasonably accommodating, just to make the world go around. What I’m getting at, however, is not *overdoing* “nice”. You know, being *too* agreeable, tending often to do something that pleases someone while you get less of what you want.

Examples:

- Engaging in some kind of activity you really don’t relish, because someone you care for wants you to participate—like visiting someone whose company you don’t particularly enjoy.
- Helping someone in need who really does have the capacity to solve his or her own problem by exerting more creative effort.

You can surely add to the list from your own experiences over the years with family, friends and co-workers.

In such cases, thinking we’re being really *nice* actually means that our *true* feelings are running counter to what *seem* to be our motivations. We are probably doing something:

- We really don’t want to do, or really shouldn’t do because it’s unwise
- For someone we really don’t want to do that thing for, or shouldn’t

- Possibly prompted by a third party with his or her own agenda
- Perhaps originating in a sense of obligation
- Under circumstances which we feel are compromising

In any case, we all seem to instinctively know when we're being "too nice"—which means, in order to be emotionally healthy, we need to modify our behavior somehow. True, we all need to be reasonably socialized to get through life and to avoid anarchy. But being extremely accommodating can be too much of a good thing! If we get too good at bending to the presumed needs of others, we may also get too good at ignoring our own real needs.

YOU COME UP SHORT IN THE EXCHANGE. When you "do the math" in such a transaction, the recipient of our generosity gets a "plus" from your personal inconvenience (or even loss, say, of money and/or time). In any case, the recipient's "plus" is obtained from your "minus". And, darn it all, you *knew* that *going into* the deal! You just decided not to listen to that wee, small voice inside your head!

You can absorb a few of these situations from time to time, and move on. However, if you get into the habit of being very generous and accommodating, then long-term, a whole string of transactions like that deplete your energy, enthusiasm, and good will.

We all know the results of that, because we've all done it at one time or another. We start to feel irritated somewhere deep inside. Whether we admit it or not, we become resentful because our own needs are not adequately fulfilled while we attend to the comfort and pleasure of others. And the bad feeling can evolve into a kind of self-pity, like: "I'm always being taken advantage of". Digging a little deeper, we become angry with ourselves for yielding to others' desires rather than to meeting our own. (Maybe that's where the ancient root of the word, the idea of being foolish, comes in.)

THERE'S ANOTHER IRONY to overdone kindnesses. Gratuitously doing nice things for others is also not always healthy for the recipient of the overly generous act, either. The recipient, if he or she has any sense at all, may sense that over-the-top kindnesses may imply that he or she:

- Can't cope
- Is being patronized or manipulated
- Is about to be burdened with an obligation to return the favor someday

SO, LET'S CONSIDER A BETTER ALTERNATIVE. Rather than too frequently downplaying our own wants and needs in favor of the wishes of others, why don't we, as a general rule in dealing with others, just "give as good as we get"? Let's call it *equivalency*. *Quid pro quo*.

In such a case, I do something:

- That I deliberately choose to do
- For someone I want to do it for

- With no undue external influence or pressure from within myself or from others
- And with a full understanding of the circumstances

Equivalency makes for healthy relationships. Nobody feels cheated or taken advantage of. Nobody feels compromised or patronized during or after the action. Each party manages his or her own boundaries with conscious awareness.

Equivalency is not a cake walk. It takes work. Each party needs to constantly make trade-off decisions about how to honor the real needs of another while honoring his or her own best interests. At times this can cause disappointment, disagreements, even conflicts. However, if we have a healthy relationship, we can process one another's differences and both come out of the exchange feeling whole and uncompromised.

THIS DOES NOT MEAN that, when a situation warrants, we don't do truly—even courageously--generous things for others. As we go through life, we frequently encounter situations where, in our judgment, another individual really, obviously, needs help, and we have the resources to give it. In such a situation, we tend to place the need of someone else higher than our own at that moment, and act accordingly.

These situations usually arise when another individual has fewer resources than we do, and his or her need is specific and pressing. In such a pressing situation, we make a conscious and deliberate choice to defer our own interests for the benefit of a respected and deserving other. We can do it freely, without an expectation of any recompense. However, if we wish to attach conditions to our generous act, we can do so explicitly before the fact, so there are no guessing games about obligations, after the fact.

If we can manage our interpersonal affairs in such a balanced manner, “getting along” becomes a lot cleaner process, and doesn't carry a lot of emotional, economic or other baggage. Such behavior doesn't always make for “nice”, but it sure does make for “real”.

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