There’s Still a Pandemic Happening. It’s OK Not to Please Everyone.

By Anna Goldfarb

The desire to make others happy can undermine our safety. Don’t let it.
As many states continue the rocky path to reopening — and, in some cases, reverse course — some people might feel pressured to attend gatherings and events during the coronavirus pandemic before they’re ready. Declining invitations and setting boundaries around personal comfort can be especially fraught for people-pleasers, who already struggle with saying no, according to experts.

Maybe you grudgingly agree to attend a family member’s birthday party when you’d prefer to stay home, or a friend insists on meeting for brunch when you’re not yet ready to dine at a restaurant. Guilt — *It’ll break your brother’s heart if you don’t show up* — and flattery — *Seeing you will lift my spirits. Just stay for one mimosa!* — can sometimes be used in these scenarios to nudge people-pleasers in a certain direction or to convince them to agree to something they’re not comfortable with, experts say.

“When we get honest about the ‘why’ behind our actions, it becomes clear how
unhealthy it is,” said Natalie Lue, an author, podcaster and founder of Baggage Reclaim, a self-help blog. Ms. Lue, who calls herself a recovering people-pleaser, said the “why” could be “because we’re trying to control how others perceive us, we’re hoping to get something in return, or because we feel afraid, obliged and guilty.”

No one is born a people-pleaser — it’s a coping mechanism learned over time. Perhaps this behavior was adopted as a survival strategy, said Morgan McCain, a psychologist. She said sometimes the thinking goes, *If I can anticipate people’s needs, I can sidestep their becoming angry, upset or disappointed with me.* For others, it might be a pattern they fell into, thinking that if they made themselves likable enough, then they would be accepted. People-pleasing might also be a strategy to avoid vulnerability. The idea, Dr. McCain said, is that if you keep the attention on other people’s needs, you won’t have to reveal too much about yourself.

“There’s nothing wrong with being kind to other people,” said Toru Sato, a psychology professor at Shippensburg University in Pennsylvania. “It’s just a matter of, Are we doing that out of a compensation for a lack of self-love or self-esteem, or are we doing that purely out of kindness?”

People-pleasing behaviors can include:

- Offering to help someone even if you’re stretched thin.
- Being quick to apologize for small things that aren’t your fault.
- Feeling responsible for other people’s emotions.
- Eating foods you don’t want to eat in an effort to make others more comfortable.
- Feeling excessive guilt or anxiety when you can’t help someone.
- Avoiding conflict and dreading that someone is angry at you.

This type of personality trait, where one is overly dependent on others for personal satisfaction, is what social psychologists call sociotropy. Studies show that those who exhibit sociotropy tend to be women and that these individuals are at a higher risk for depression.

Even though tension and resentment can simmer underneath the surface when people-pleasers agree to do something they don’t want to do, it can be scary to for them to assert themselves and break these patterns. But it’s worth examining. Challenging these long-held habits will allow you to reclaim your time, protect your health and strengthen the important relationships in your life.

**Recognize you’re good enough already.**

The first thing people-pleasers need to do is reorient their relationship with themselves. “You are lovable and you’re worthy of being cared for exactly the
way you are,” Dr. Sato said. “You don’t have to do something, or be somebody else, to be worth loving.”

In an effort to get her clients to recognize their inherent value, Akeera Peterkin, a psychotherapist, often tells them that they are a diamond and that not everyone can afford them.

“People need to earn your worth,” she said. “It’s OK to not sell your diamond to every customer that comes to your shop.”

Commit to being a more authentic person.

People-pleasing is ultimately an act of deception. Not only do people-pleasers mask their needs and feelings, but they’re essentially lying to themselves and others, Ms. Lue said. These falsehoods — agreeing to eat birthday cake with your family when you would rather stay home — damage the integrity of close relationships.

She encourages us to push through our fear and be transparent. This way, Ms. Lue said, we’ll reduce anxiety and stress, and enjoy increased agency in our lives. We also learn that “the sky doesn’t fall down when we say no when we need, should or want to,” she added.

Listen to your body.

When you receive an invitation or offer, Ms. Peterkin suggests scanning your body for a response. If your body is saying “I’m too tired,” then decline and rest. If your mind is saying “I’m not ready,” give yourself more time.

“If your body, mind and spirit is saying no, then there’s too much risk for you to defy your needs,” Ms. Peterkin said.

Try to prioritize invitations from people who give you the same love and respect you bestow on them, she added: “If someone’s only giving you a dollar, why are we giving them a hundred dollars? How is that equal?”

Instead, Ms. Peterkin said, we should be more willing to invest in those who are invested in us.

Accept that you may disappoint people.

“In an ideal world, people would just know what isn’t workable and not even ask, but that’s not real life,” Ms. Lue said. There might be blowback when you assert yourself and turn down invitations. This is crucial, Ms. Lue said, because any negative reaction you receive — guilt trips, pouting, a nasty attitude — will illuminate the truth about some of your relationships.

“If someone loses it with you because you said no, it’s a sign that your ‘no’ was very overdue and necessary,” she said.
People-pleasers should know that “we can’t control how people feel nor are we responsible for others’ feelings,” Dr. McCain said. Accepting this, she said, can help reduce people-pleasing behaviors in the future.

**Decline gracefully.**

Ms. Lue suggests these responses when declining an invitation:

- I won’t be able to attend, but thanks so much for the invite.

- Thank you so much for the invitation, but I’m not ready to attend gatherings yet. How about we do it at a future date?

- As much as I’d love to see everyone, I’m not ready yet.

- I know I typically say yes to your invitations, but on this occasion, I can’t.

- I understand you’re disappointed, but I’m not comfortable attending. I know everybody is eager to get back to normal, but it feels too soon for me.

If you’re nervous, practice your response or role-play with a loved one beforehand so you’ll sound more confident.

**Consider yourself a work in progress.**

You may not squash these internalized people-pleasing habits within a day, a week or even a month, but it doesn’t mean you should give up. Keep working on living a more authentic life. If you’re struggling with constantly putting other people’s needs ahead of your own, talk with a medical professional to learn how to establish boundaries.

“The more you practice saying no, the easier it will become,” Dr. McCain said. “Be gentle with yourself as you are trying it out and you will eventually see the benefits.”