

BACKBONE POWER

THE SCIENCE OF SAYING NO

DR. ANNE BROWN PhD, RNCS

CHAPTER ONE

As anxious as you are to begin learning How to Say No, and as anxious as I am for you to begin to see and feel the results, let's first see what's at stake.

If people-pleasing amounted to nothing more than a series of misguided choices, we could simply add, "Correct them" to our To-Do list. But that's not the case.

The consequences of people-pleasing are severe, and cost us in the domains of health, personal life, finance, relationships, career, and dignity, much like any serious illness. [7]

If you learned you had cancer, you would drop everything to seek treatment. While people-pleasing doesn't carry the same stigma as the C-word, it does come with serious consequences of its own, and requires immediate attention.

So what is this phenomenon of people-pleasing? In essence, it's the need to avoid conflict and make everyone in the world like us. It's an irrational goal that comes with all kinds of serious risks to our emotional and physical well-being.

Emotional Health Risks

Instead of engaging in healthy and relaxing conversation, people-pleasers put themselves through an emotionally exhausting process. Take the following conversation:

Landlord: "You're the worst tenant I've ever had. You make too much noise. I can hear you upstairs. I can hear you in the bathroom. I can hear you on the phone. The lights are always on. I can see them through the crack under the door. You're always washing your clothes.

You're costing me a fortune."

Tenant:

Why can't the tenant respond right away? Because for years, he's suppressed his own ideas. The longer we play the role of people-pleaser, the less likely it is that we know how we feel about anything anymore.

Instead, we revert to behavior we acquired as children, when we did our best to keep dysfunction at bay: parents yelling, hitting, drinking, bullying, intimidating, and/or disappearing.

Before we respond to someone like the landlord, people-pleasers process a series of thoughts:

- *What can I say to ensure that I'll be liked?*
- *What's troubling the other person? (This is otherwise known as mind reading.)*
- *How do I phrase my response so as to avoid any confrontation?*

Then and only then, after having completed this exhausting mental exercise, with what profound and poignant words do we respond?

Tenant: Yes, you're right.

What's even more disappointing is that, in all likelihood, we actually believe it. After all, everyone in our family always told us how horrible we were. Maybe it's true.

Client: Maybe my landlord is right. Everyone in my family told me I was thoughtless, noisy, clumsy, insensitive, and a burden, so it must be true. I've been trying to live quietly in her house, but I guess I'm just incapable.

Therapist: No. Actually, when you pay rent to someone, you have the right to create yourself in that space. You are not horrible! This is simply a toxic environment for you.

It took some time for this client to believe he was not the bad person here. Eventually, he moved out to create his own space with a gracious landlord.

If we're insecure and bullied by toxic people, the tendency is to blame ourselves. But how do we tell a toxic environment from a non-toxic one?

Setting Standards

It has to do with setting standards for ourselves and how we'll be treated. First, we have to be able to recognize when we lack such standards.

Those moments are often epiphanies, highly charged and emotional because they're simultaneously happy and sad. They are the very sorts of memories that when I open my office door each morning, I recall with delight.

I see myself sitting across from a client. He is on a couch; I'm in my chair. There's a coffee table between us, a bowl of chocolates, water, cough drops, certificates hanging on brick walls painted white.

Client: I see what you're saying. I've never had standards for the way people can treat me.

In addition to recognizing that many of us don't have standards, if we're in an environment where standards we set are not honored, it's toxic.

What the domain is doesn't matter: love, health, finances, community service, parents, children. Nor does it matter who the other person involved is. Standards are standards.

For example, many of us accept ill-mannered treatment from a doctor or lawyer because of the status we give that person's job.

In fact, there's a TV commercial dealing with this point: A couple is sitting across from each other at a restaurant, menus in hand. A waiter approaches to take their order:

Waiter: So, do you have any questions? **Woman:** What is the soup of the day? **Waiter:** We have a mulligatawny soup. **Woman:** Do you have any specials?

Waiter: We have a steak special today. **Woman:** Oh, how is that cooked? **Waiter:** It's pan-seared and then

Woman (interrupting the waiter): Does that come with a side dish? Is it grilled? Can I have it steamed? What do you recommend? What kind of pie do you have? Are you an actor? Aren't you from Ohio?

The woman won't let up. She's in an environment where she's comfortable, and it shows. She's comfortable asking questions.

Then the scene switches to the same woman alone with her doctor in his office, sitting on his examination table. The doctor has just finished telling her the diagnosis.

Doctor: Any questions?

Woman:

She's about to ask a question but instead shakes her head, then waves the doctor away. Clearly, she's out of her comfort zone. The narrator takes over.

Narrator: Ask questions. Questions are the answer.

The ad is sponsored by the federal Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality and the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. Its point, of course, is that we shouldn't feel intimidated, nor should we feel as if we're being difficult. In short, it's OK to question.

Of course, the higher our standards, the more likely it is that we'll find ourselves in conflict with others. Likewise, the lower our standards, the less likely there'll be conflict.

Yet the need to avoid conflict is the most common thread among people-pleasers. You can see the conundrum. If we lower our standards and try to please everyone, we raise the likelihood that there will be consequences:

- *Lack of self-confidence* • *Judgmentalism* • *Anxiety* • *Lack of self-knowledge*

• *Physical danger* • *Depression* • *Lack of Self-Confidence*

People-pleasing elevates others to a place of power and fuels their self-confidence. In turn, where does that leave us?

We revert to our childhood, when we hid our needs and desires from maladaptive parents unwilling to acknowledge us as anything more than a burden, people who seemed hell-bent on compromising whatever beauties and abilities we may have been blessed with. Our self-confidence wilts [8].

Client: Every time I told my parents what was important to me, they'd say no. I wanted to play soccer. They made me do debate. I wanted to be in 4-H. They made me do track. Eventually, I stopped asking.

In many cases, parents like these weren't just controlling but hurtful as well.

Client: I'm terrified to make requests. All it does is give the other person information to hurt you with.

Therapist: No matter what damage was done to us as children, we must give ourselves permission to share our needs, desires, and opinions. What we need to do is pick people to be in our lives who will honor those needs, desires, and opinions [9].

Client: I've buried my needs with mental cartwheels so I could convince myself I didn't have any. It's scary as a child to know your needs won't be met. It's even scarier to have someone hurt you with the information you gave them because you thought they would take care of you. Now, I'm at the point where I feel like I've risen above having any needs. I can take anything anyone can dish out, and I never ask myself how I feel about what is happening.

By adulthood, people-pleasers often become arrogant about how accommodating and "nice" they are, compared with other people who are more "difficult."

Judgmentalism

People-pleasing fuels our judgmental side. In fact, there is a direct relationship between the degree to which we people-please and the judgments we make about others.

In our desire to avoid conflict, it's easier, of course, to pass judgment than it is to confront a person or situation directly. But that's not the way of the warrior. Imagine if the Sioux had had hair salons, therapists, and telephones:

Client: I hate what my hairdresser did. Look at it. I don't know what to do. The color is horrible. I look like a trollop. Actually, I do know what to do. I told everyone what a horrible job she did, and to never use her.

Therapist: What about calling the hairdresser? Hi, this is Wind in Her Hair, and, well, you colored my hair the other day, and I've tried living with it, but I'm just not happy with the results. I was wondering if we could discuss ways to make it look more like what I had in mind, something less trollopy.

Hairdresser: Yes, come in this afternoon, and let's talk about how to fix it.

When we go to the source of our upset, we speak authentically and honestly. Of course, in real life, your hairdresser may very well tell you, "Too bad," in which case you simply don't go back.

You are not an awful person because you registered your upset. Remember, you can only make the request. You cannot control its outcome. But you've got to make that request. Otherwise, you'll just build up resentment, and that, in turn, will lead to being overly judgmental.

Client: I just found out my new boyfriend can't come up with his share of the rent. I swear, this is the story of my life. Everyone I've talked to says we're moving too fast and he's just using me. I just think about him and I get that gnawing feeling of resentment.

Therapist: Who do you need to have this conversation with, other than "everyone"?

Client: I need to talk to my boyfriend. But what if he can't? What if he won't? What if he gets upset with me?

Therapist: Who's upset now?

Client: Me.

Therapist: So why is it standard operating procedure for you to be upset with the people you see taking advantage of you and yet you're terrified to upset them?

Client: It's like a double standard. I'll take whatever someone dishes out, but I can't handle the idea of upsetting that certain someone. What is that about?

Therapist: At the risk of sounding like a therapist, I'm going to speculate that:

- . 1) Confrontation was scary for you as a child.
- . 2) You're accustomed to getting the short end of the stick.
- . 3) The victim role is one you've not only become accustomed to but also one that actually brings a level of comfort.

Let's see what will happen if you go to your boyfriend and let him know how you feel. What do you think you'll be able to say to him?
[10]

Client: I want to work out an agreement that won't lead me to feel resentful, so I need to figure out what it is I want from him in the area of money and chores, things like that.

Therapist: Sounds good. Here's the following week's session:

Client: I drew up a contract with a list of all the things he's responsible for and all the things I'm responsible for. I feel great. In the past, I'd have let this unfairness go on forever because "life wasn't fair to me as a child." I realized that a big part of my identity with people is how unfair life is for me.

Drawing up this contract took one hour. We both agreed, and now,

we both feel great. I'm starting this relationship with no resentment, which is a first. I can see myself starting to say No to my legacy of people who take advantage of me, which just leads to my feeling used.

Therapist: You're right. We can help you become a warrior. Have you seen the movie *Dances With Wolves*? [11]

Anxiety

People-pleasing creates anxiety. Since we've only told people what we think they want to hear, there is anxiety about trying to remember what we've told everyone.

Then there's anxiety about not telling the truth, and the possibility of being found out.

And there's anxiety about ultimately hurting someone—or everyone, for that matter—if and when the truth is finally exposed.

Seven-year-old Julie tells her mom: I don't want Alison to spend the night. She's so bossy. (Alison's mom tends to look for babysitting from people-pleasing moms).

Julie's mom: OK, honey.

The next day, Alison's mom says to Julie's mom: I was so hoping Alison could spend tonight with Julie at your home. She's been begging me all day.

Julie's mom: Sure, of course. (At the moment Julie's mom is trying to please Alison's mom, she

really may not remember her promise to her own daughter).

Julie, upon finding out: "Mom, why can't you stand up to Alison's mom?"

Julie's mom, to herself: Good question. Here's what happens in the therapist's office:

Client (Julie's mom): I made a mess, and my daughter is upset

with me. What can I do now?

Therapist: Take a deep breath, call Alison's mom, and say, I made a mistake. Thank you for asking about the overnight, but it's not going to work for us to have Alison spend the night. (And be firm even if Alison's mom comes back with, "But she's made plans; what is she going to do?") Then apologize to Julie.

Client: I'm starting to see how if I don't have boundaries for myself, I can't properly care for the people I love.

Depression

The greatest tragedy that people-pleasers experience is the absence of any authentic relationship with themselves. The result is an ill-defined person, someone without a strong sense of self. Here's an example from one end of the spectrum:

When I was working as the evening charge nurse at an inpatient psychiatric unit, we admitted a woman suffering from depression. She told us horror story after horror story about how abusively her family had treated her.

When we explained how visitation worked, we let her know that she could veto anyone's visitation privileges. She decided to ban her family from visiting.

To our dismay, however, we watched her become more and more depressed, to the point of becoming suicidal. As bad as her family members were, without them, she felt worse. [12]

The role this patient had always played was that of the victim: "Look how poorly I'm being treated." But as bad as it is having the identity of the victim, it can feel better than having no identity at all.

Lack of Self Knowledge

We require identity and self-knowledge, or at least the perception of it. On the opposite end of the spectrum, many people-pleasers are very competent "out in the world," and are able to take on the identity of "success," in spite of the fact that they struggle to have

success in their personal lives.

Client: When I'm on my own at home, I feel totally ungrounded. I'm depressed, unmotivated. When I'm at work, I've got direction.

Those around him determine this man's sense of self. When he's at work, he's one person. When he's at home, he's another.

As a child, it was the same. Outside his home, he was the best athlete, best student, great friend, etc. But at home, he was constantly criticized, shamed, and beaten down—the black sheep of the family. He taught himself to overachieve in the outside world and people-please the bad guys at home! Unfortunately, he may not believe he can be successful without a toxic home.

When we do not develop our authentic selves, or if we we're never given the opportunity to do so, we may also settle for toxic situations. Why? Because it's better than being alone, or we believe we need these situations.

We can get by as long as there are other people around. In fact, we may even overachieve at work and in social settings. In the case of this particular client, he continued his legacy of abuse at home with one critical, cold, and controlling relationship after another.

The people-pleasing, always-accommodating, victimized son became the people-pleasing, always-accommodating, victimized boyfriend, and ultimately, the people-pleasing, always-accommodating, victimized husband.

The reality is that as he continues to feed his poor self-esteem in this way, emotionally, he's more like the woman on suicide watch at the psychiatric unit, despite his highly successful career.

While we can survive with nothing more than the perception of a sense of identity, in order to thrive, we require the real deal. We need to take the time to understand who we are, what we believe, and what is important to us, etc.

Homework

Spend time on your own to develop an inner, private life. Find a belief system bigger than yourself, like nature, religion, or spirituality. Develop a practice such as meditation, yoga, prayer, exercise, deep breathing, anything that grounds you. [13]

It doesn't matter what it is as long as it does this in some way and lets you address some of life's big questions, like:

• *Who are you?* • *What do you believe?* • *How does the world work?* • *Why do bad things happen to good people?* • *What should you do when bad things happen to you?*

When the proverbial you-know-what hits the fan, you will be ready. You will have a reserve of emotional strength. You will be grounded, a warrior ready for action.

Although many people use addictions during times of crisis, addictions do not and should not qualify as grounding practices.

On the other hand, if you believe there is something bigger than you, and if you develop practices to support your relationship to whatever that is for you, then you never have to feel alone in the world.

Some people even prefer a spiritual base to having a partner, while others need that partner.

Client: I have a good person in my life, and I'm practicing setting healthy boundaries. The person isn't critical and cold, which is a first for me, and I'm standing up for myself, which is also a first.

Practically speaking, this relationship is premature for this person, but he felt he simply could not continue to live alone. Nevertheless, though, he's practicing new behaviors and learning, and while it's not the ideal situation for self-improvement, it's not a detriment either.

We were able to fashion his experience with his new partner in such a way that it not only benefited my client but also allowed his partner to see individual growth in directions she was hoping to

take too.

Unfortunately, however, the need to be with a partner sometimes trumps everything else, even the relationship with one's therapist. I've had clients who rather than leave a bad relationship, opted to leave therapy instead. Fortunately, on occasion, they return.

Client: He was married. I knew I needed to get out of being a married man's girlfriend. But I just wasn't ready. I was dreading our sessions. I'd see them in my Day-Timer and instead of looking forward to them, they were only a constant reminder of what I knew I needed to do. But I wasn't ready.

Homework

Sometimes, it's OK to put off change—temporarily. If you find yourself complaining about the same situation over and over and yet you can't leave, it may not be time to leave. But it may very well be time to stop complaining. Your friends are probably tired of hearing about it.

You are choosing to stay by choosing not to leave, so ask yourself, what is the learning for me? While it may not sound like it, there is opportunity to make the most of it even when you're stuck. Make it work for you. Sometimes, you need to build your self-confidence and get your ducks in a row before you leave.

Client: I know my fears, and I get so tired of hearing myself complain—about the relationship, the drama, my own pathetic inability to change it. I see where my stubborn loyalty keeps getting me in trouble. I'm not blind to the abuse, and I'm not blind to the self-sabotage. It's just that staying with the familiar is less scary than braving the unknown. But now I'm ready.

Physical Dangers

Sorry to be the bearer of bad news—and sorrier still if you already knew this from first-hand experience—but people-pleasers are not equipped to deal with life's darker challenges:

- *Abusive relationships*
- *Child molestation* • *Internet predation* • *Rape* • *Kidnapping*

It is difficult to determine the prevalence of abuse because definitions differ, and there are so many places where abuse can take place, e.g., families, workplace, elder care, churches, schools, child-care facilities, etc. But I think it is important to understand that it is far more prevalent than we would like to believe.

Each year, 1 million children in North America are confirmed as victims of child abuse or neglect, and over 1,200 die as a result of parental mistreatment. Overall, the reported rate of child abuse has increased by more than 300 percent since 1976. [14]

In addition, it is clear that the Internet facilitates pedophilic activity by providing anonymity, convenience, ability to organize, and access to victims. [15]

The U. S. Bureau of Justice Statistics reports that 75.6% of rapes were committed by persons known to the victim. [16]

Abusive Relationships

If you are already involved in a physically abusive relationship, there is no choice but to leave. If there were other choices, I would tell you. There are not. Do not make excuses. Do not think it will stop. Do not blame yourself. Leave! If your abuser is under the influence of drugs and alcohol, do not rationalize. Leave! If he is remorseful, apologizes, and says it will never happen again, Leave!

It is much easier if you leave the first time the abuse happens, but it is always better late than never. It is rare that someone who hits once will never hit again. Likewise, it is rare that someone who hits is not already being verbally and emotionally abusive.

People-pleasers are ideal prey for abusers. Who better for an abuser to seek out than the well-meaning person who:

- *Wants everyone to like her* • *Never stands up for herself*

- *Lacks self-esteem*
- *Transfers power away from herself each time she's engaged in conversation*

Once their intuitive checklist is complete and they've set their sights on a victim, abusers know exactly how to trap their victim and keep her trapped. That's when the emotional abuse begins.

"No one would ever have you." "I see your diet isn't working."

"You can't cook, you can't keep house, and you're a lousy mother."

"You're lucky I put up with you. No one else would have you."

"You want too much." "I never realized how dumb you are."

"You're the reason I didn't get the job. You embarrass me."

"You're lucky to have me."

With his victim fully questioning her own self-worth, the abuser can get away with anything.

Client: My husband is cheating on me. We're pretending to be this happy family, and I'm dying inside. I feel like I'm going crazy.

Therapist: Is this the first time?

Client: No, it's the third, at least that I know of, and each time, he begged me to stay and swore it would never happen again. Now, I wonder if it will ever stop.

Therapist: Why do you think you stay? **Client:** I don't know.

Therapist: Does he subtly put you down, saying things like:

- *You'll never find anyone else;*
- *No one will ever put up with you;*
- *I'm the best thing that ever happened to you!*

Client: How did you know? Now that you say that, he always says he is the best thing that ever happened to me and that no one will ever have me.

Therapist: You offer a great companion for someone. You are bright, attractive, kind, a fabulous mother, a devoted wife, loved by the community, and you are being brainwashed to think otherwise by a subtle form of abuse.

Unfortunately, I don't know how this particular woman fared, as her husband moved the family. It's all too typical, this kind of geographical shift. Ripe with the hope of a fresh start, the family packs up its belongings—along with all its dysfunction—and moves them somewhere else.

Is That It?

Are there alternatives to leaving an abusive relationship? Is it always so cut and dried? You're hit, you leave, no questions.

When I was in Bali, I interviewed a lovely working mother and wife, and we discussed her family and values. She spoke of a family that had a strong spiritual base with daily prayer practices, authentic conversations between husband and wife, co-parenting, and mutual decision-making—overall, a family that I believed was operating with dignity.

I asked her what would happen if her husband hit her. “It depends on the circumstances,” she replied instantly, “if he lost his job, or something horrible happened to someone in his family, like a death. It would depend on what was going on.”

Now, I don't support hitting, and neither did she. If the behavior was an isolated incident, everyone understood that it still was unacceptable, and her partner was willing to talk about how to better deal with his feelings, then a strong family could heal from this deviant behavior.

Child Molestation

On February 8, 2010, Oprah Winfrey interviewed four child molesters with their therapist. I highly recommend this show for everyone, and particularly for parents. Child molesters look for vulnerable, needy children who are afraid to speak up, who need

attention, and whose parents are absent or in denial.

Ninety percent of child molesters are known to the victim and the family. Child molesters do not want a feisty, confident child who will “rat” on them. Nor do they want parents who will believe their child. The pain of having a parent who doesn’t believe you if you have the courage to speak up is almost insurmountable. Heads up!
[17]

Internet Predation

People-pleasing patterns are often established early in life, but, of course, life offers plenty of opportunities to reinforce those patterns. Take teen dating, for example, and its greatest cost: the drama-based, limited discourse that accompanies “serious” dating at this young age.

Teen-dating conversations are about “hooking up,” who slept with whose best friend, oral sex, lying to parents, unchaperoned parties, and secret meetings, all intended to please boys and gain popularity.

On the other hand, a better way to build self-esteem during one’s teen years is to participate in activities like arts, music, sports, politics, and travel, which can teach about the world and help teens develop competences.

It is also a good time to build solid friendships without sex and conversations that revolve around sex. Teens who follow this path are better prepared and have more confidence, wisdom, and seasoning when they do date. And they also have a better chance of developing the self-esteem needed to see through and stand up to Internet predators, who look for people with poor self-esteem, a desire to accommodate, a need for validation, and the inability to say No.

Internet predators know how to say all the right things, to which the all-too-common teen response is, “Finally, someone understands me.”

No, it’s more like, “someone is about to take advantage of you.”

Thank You for previewing this eBook

You can read the full version of this eBook in different formats:

- HTML (Free /Available to everyone)
- PDF / TXT (Available to V.I.P. members. Free Standard members can access up to 5 PDF/TXT eBooks per month each month)
- Epub & Mobipocket (Exclusive to V.I.P. members)

To download this full book, simply select the format you desire below

