

Relationships

[HAPPINESS IN THIS WORLD]

The Good Guy Contract

A people-pleaser stops worrying about what others think of him.
By Alex Lickerman, M.D.



T

WENTY YEARS AGO, the first woman I ever loved broke my heart. Like many breakups, the end came in stutters and sine waves rather than as an abrupt but mercifully irreversible amputation. However, for reasons I couldn't understand yet quickly began to resent, my ex-girlfriend continued to ask favors of me. And I continued to grant them.

Then one morning while chanting (as part of my Buddhist practice) I found myself ruminating about how inappropriate it was of her to keep asking, and the more I thought about it, the more irritated I became. I finally made a sudden and angry determination that the next time she asked me for a favor, I'd refuse.

At that exact moment, the phone rang.

Sure enough—it was she, asking if I would record a television show for her on my VCR (again, this was 20 years ago). In my mind I said, "No." But then I heard my mouth say, "Yes."

I hung up—and laughed out loud. I was as powerless to refuse her a favor as I was to run through a brick wall.

So I decided to begin chanting with the determination to free myself from my inability to refuse her favors. And one day, months later, I had an epiphany. The reason I remained unable to refuse her requests was that I'd established a Good Guy Contract with her.

DREAMSTIME.COM

I don't need to try to influence others to like me—which has freed up an unbelievable amount of my time.

Until that moment I had no idea what a Good Guy Contract was, much less that it was the standard contract I signed with almost everyone in my life. But in that startling moment I understood not only what it was but why I kept signing it: My self-esteem, which I'd previously believed to be built on things solely internal, was in fact entirely dependent on something external—the goodwill of others.

The Good Guy Contract was simple: I would agree to be nice to you, to advise you, to sacrifice for you—and in return you would agree to believe that I was wise, compassionate, and excellent as a human being in every way. And, most importantly, you would like me.

This was the contract I'd signed with my ex-girlfriend. The only difference was I didn't just expect to be liked; I expected to be loved. And for a while, I was. Unfortunately, once I'd had a taste of that love, it became my ego's addiction, and when she took it away from me I became profoundly depressed—not because, as I originally thought, I'd been left by someone I thought was the love of my life, but because I genuinely believed that without that someone I couldn't be happy.

Why did I keep doing favors for her? Because I couldn't shake the Good Guy habit. If I continued to fulfill my contractual obligations to her, maybe she'd start fulfilling hers again to me. To say I was shocked to discover my self-esteem had been built on such shaky ground would be an understatement.

At the moment I had the epiphany about my propensity to sign Good Guy Contracts with everyone in my life, I stopped doing it. This was proven to me three months later when my best friend came to me asking me why I had become such a jerk to all my friends.

My first reaction was to get defensive and deny it. But then I stopped myself,

realizing that he was absolutely right. I began to wonder why I had in fact become so dismissive of so many of my friends and realized that I'd somehow stopped needing their approval to sustain my self-esteem. I'd torn up the Good Guy Contracts I'd signed with them (these were people, it turned out, with whom I had little in common to bind me to them in genuine friendship). I'd somehow discovered a way to love and value myself without feeding off the love and esteem of anyone else. And most fascinating of all, without my ever discussing this with my ex-girlfriend, she never asked me for another favor again.

I'm not arguing there's anything wrong with wanting to be liked. Nor am I saying I no longer care whether I'm liked or not. But in freeing myself from the need to be liked—in learning to derive my self-esteem from within—I can more easily let go of the dissonance that still occurs when I'm disliked.

Getting rid of Good Guy Contracts has brought me tremendous benefits. I don't need to try to influence others to like me—which has freed up an unbelievable amount of my time.

It's also allowed me to become an effective leader. If your primary concern is to please everyone, you won't make good decisions for the right reasons. I can now contemplate compassionate action moti-

vated only by the desire to add to the happiness of another person and not by the imperative to sustain my self-esteem.

I'm also able to avoid explosions of pent-up resentment. Being unable to say no leads to resentment toward oneself that often gets projected onto others but that paradoxically is rarely expressed (becoming angry at someone would violate the terms of the Good Guy Contract)—until it builds to the point where it must be expressed and then often in explosive and damaging ways.

It's a relief not to be overwhelmed by too much responsibility. I own what's mine and not what belongs to others.

In all honesty, even now, two decades later, I sometimes still feel the tug of the need to please. Though the wisdom I activated all those years ago has never stopped functioning in my life, sometimes it functions less strongly than others, depending on my life-condition. I still have to remind myself consciously not to be overly affected by the opinions of others. But the ability to let go of my need to be liked, even if it sometimes requires conscious effort, is one of the greatest bits of human revolution I've ever accomplished—and worth every bit of suffering it required.

ALEX LICKERMAN, M.D., is a PT blogger and an internist at the University of Chicago.

please stop pleasing

How to Get Rid of Your Good Guy Contract

- **Assess your people-pleasing tendencies.** Do you have difficulty enduring even a mild degree of conflict with others? Do you become obsessed with manipulating the way others feel about you? Are your actions primarily motivated by how they'll cause others to view you? The more you answered "yes," the harder you'll have to work.
- **Practice disappointing people.** That is, when disappointing someone is genuinely necessary, approach it as training for developing self-esteem. If you fail, try again.
- **Keep the payoff in mind.** Remember that appropriate boundaries don't usually lead to being disliked, as we people-pleasers fear, but rather to being respected.