

Why Do I Feel Responsible for Everyone Else's Feelings?

Someone is quieter than usual. Their tone sounds slightly different. They haven't replied to your message. There aren't the usual two X's at the end of their text.

You recognise *that look*. And immediately, something shifts.

Are they okay?

Are they annoyed with me?

Did I say something wrong?

Was it what I said earlier?

You start going back through the conversation, searching for the moment when things might have changed. Perhaps you check in with them.

Are you okay? They say they're fine. But they don't quite seem fine. So you ask again.

When we care about someone, noticing that they seem upset is completely normal. We might want to check in, listen or offer support. But for some people, another person's mood can quickly become something they feel personally responsible for.

Caring about someone's feelings and being responsible for their feelings are not the same thing.

When someone else's mood becomes your problem to solve

Feeling responsible for other people can take up an enormous amount of emotional space. You're not only thinking about how *you* feel. You're monitoring how they feel too.

Are they happy? Are they upset? Did something change? Do I need to do something? Are we okay?

It can feel like **thinking for two instead of one**. And that's exhausting. Your own needs can gradually move further down the list because so much of your attention is focused on making sure somebody else is okay. Sometimes you might not even notice that you're doing it.

How did their mood become my fault?

It can happen incredibly quickly. Someone sighs. They're silent. Their expression changes. They answer a question differently than usual.

Perhaps you say something that wasn't intended as criticism, but they seem to take it that way.

Suddenly your mind starts filling in the gaps.

They're angry.

I've upset them.

I shouldn't have said anything.

I need to fix this.

Your body may join in too.

You tense up. Your stomach turns. You feel sick or dizzy. Your mind begins racing through everything you've recently said or done.

At this point, you may not actually know why the other person is quiet.

But emotionally, you're already responding as though **you caused it**.

So you try to make everything okay again

Once we believe we're responsible for somebody else's mood, it makes sense that we'd want to change it. Maybe you apologise. Not necessarily because you believe you've done something wrong, but because you want the tension to disappear. Perhaps you become extra attentive. You agree to something you didn't really want to do. You avoid bringing something up because you know they won't like it. You placate. You keep the peace.

Sometimes the question stops being: *Have I actually done something wrong?*

And becomes: **What do I need to do to make them okay again?**

The relief when their mood improves can reinforce the idea that keeping them happy really is your responsibility.

Sometimes we learn to monitor moods

For some people, paying close attention to other people's emotions isn't a new habit. Imagine growing up in a home where somebody's mood affected everyone. Perhaps there was shouting, swearing, criticism or unpredictable anger. You may have become very good at noticing subtle changes. A facial expression. A tone of voice. Silence. The way somebody walked into a room.

Those details could tell you what kind of evening you were about to have. You might have learned when to stay quiet, when to disappear, when to agree or when to try to make things better. In that environment, monitoring another person's mood may have served a purpose. The difficulty is that we can carry those patterns with us long after the original circumstances have changed. Years later, somebody else's silence can still feel like something you need to respond to immediately.

What happens to your own needs?

If you're constantly checking how everyone else feels, there may be very little space left to notice **how you feel**. Perhaps you don't want to go somewhere. But they'll be disappointed. You don't agree with something. But you know it will cause an argument. You're exhausted. But somebody needs you. You want to say no. But then they'll be upset.

So you keep adjusting yourself. Over time, you may become so accustomed to considering everybody else's reactions that knowing what *you* actually want becomes surprisingly difficult. And sometimes the people around us become accustomed to it too. You're the understanding one. The reliable one. The strong one. The person who checks in. The person everybody talks to.

But what happens when **you're** the person who isn't okay?

When the strong person starts struggling

Being the person who supports everyone else can become part of how people see you. They assume you'll cope because you usually do. And sometimes that means your own struggles aren't noticed. You may even find it difficult to show them. You keep functioning. Keep listening. Keep helping. Keep saying you're fine.

Until eventually you're not.

Feelings that have been pushed aside don't necessarily disappear. Sometimes they emerge as withdrawal, sadness or anxiety. Sometimes they come out much more forcefully than we intended. You might suddenly say everything you've been holding back.

Then comes another layer:

Why did I say that?

I've upset everyone.

I should have kept quiet.

And once again, you're back to worrying about everybody else's feelings instead of wondering what **your reaction might be telling you about your own.**

What if I say no and they get upset?

This can be particularly difficult around boundaries. You know you don't want to do something. But you also know the other person might be disappointed if you say no. So which feeling wins?

Often, it's theirs.

We sometimes treat another person's disappointment as evidence that we've made the wrong decision. But someone being disappointed by your boundary doesn't automatically mean the boundary was wrong. This is where I might become curious with someone: **Have you thought about yourself first?**

When *do* you think about yourself? What would thinking about yourself actually look like here?

And perhaps: **What do you believe will happen if you say no?**

The answer can tell us a great deal about why saying yes has come to feel safer.

But aren't we responsible when we've hurt someone?

Yes — and this distinction matters. Taking responsibility for our own behaviour is part of healthy relationships. If we've hurt somebody, we can check in. We can listen to their experience. We can explain how we experienced the situation too. We can acknowledge our part. And when appropriate, we can apologise and try to repair what happened.

Saying *"I'm not responsible for your feelings"* shouldn't become a way of avoiding responsibility for behaviour that genuinely affects another person. But there is an important difference between:

I did something that hurt you, and I want to take responsibility for my part in that.

and:

You are upset, therefore I must have caused it and it's my job to make you feel better.

Not every emotion somebody experiences belongs to you.

What if I can't make them feel better?

This can be particularly painful for someone accustomed to fixing things. You check in. You listen. You offer support.

And they're still unhappy.

Perhaps you try harder. When nothing changes, you begin feeling as though you've failed. You take it personally. Your confidence drops. You withdraw. You might feel anxious, physically unwell or completely unmotivated.

But sometimes somebody we love is going to be sad, angry, disappointed or struggling — and there is nothing we can do to take that feeling away. Being unable to fix someone's pain doesn't mean you've failed them. Sometimes being there is all we can offer.

You don't have to stop caring

The alternative to taking responsibility for everyone's feelings isn't becoming uncaring. It isn't:

That's your problem.

We can empathise. We can check in. We can listen. We can offer help. We can care enormously about how another person feels. But caring about somebody doesn't require us to take their feelings into ourselves and carry them as though they're our own. And it doesn't require us to overlook our own needs in order to prevent somebody else from ever feeling disappointed.

Final Thoughts

If you spend a lot of time monitoring how other people feel, perhaps it's worth noticing how much of your attention is travelling outward.

Who are you checking on? Whose mood are you trying to change? What are you agreeing to because you don't want somebody to be disappointed? What do you imagine will happen if they're unhappy with you?

And somewhere amongst all those questions, there may be another one worth asking:

How am I feeling?

You can care that someone is upset without automatically assuming you caused it. You can support someone without being able to fix them. You can apologise when you've genuinely hurt someone without apologising simply to make discomfort disappear. And you can allow someone to be disappointed by a decision that is still right for you.

You are allowed to consider yourself in the relationship too.

 **Therapist's Reflection:** When someone tells me they're worried about upsetting another person, I'm often interested in how quickly their attention moves away from themselves. They may know exactly how the other person feels, what they want and what might upset them. So I might ask:

Have you thought about yourself first?

When do you think about yourself?

What would thinking about yourself actually look like?

If they're afraid to say no, I might also wonder what they believe will happen if they do. Will the other person really be as upset as they imagine? And if they are disappointed, what would that mean?

Sometimes we've become so accustomed to preventing other people's discomfort that even a small amount of disappointment can feel like something we've done wrong. I don't think the goal is to stop noticing other people's feelings.

It's remembering that **ours belong in the room too**. We can be kind, thoughtful and empathetic while still having needs, opinions and boundaries of our own.

Caring for someone doesn't have to mean disappearing from the relationship yourself.

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