

The Secret to Interpersonal Happiness

As much as we desire being connected to others — good friendships, a wonderful romantic relationship, close family members — this connection always comes at a cost.

We get frustrated by other people.

You know it's true. You might be really good friends with someone, but then they get angry at you for some reason, or they behave without consideration, and all of a sudden, your mood is much darker. You're not happy with them, maybe they're not happy with you. Things can go sour very quickly.

This is such a difficult problem that you could devote entire books to ways of working out these kinds of conflicts and frustrations. But I have one technique that, if applied consistently, will lead to a lot more happiness.

The secret: **always take the good-hearted view of other people.**

That takes some explaining, so let's take a look at two ways of looking at other people:

1. **The ill-intentioned view.** When someone does something rude, you think, "Why do they have to be so inconsiderate?" or "Who *does* that?" Basically, you see their actions in the worst possible light, without putting yourself in their shoes. Most of us do this regularly without realizing it. Anytime you're mad or frustrated with someone, this is what you're doing.
2. **The good-hearted view.** When someone does something inconsiderate — and I'm not saying their actions are justified — you can try to think of those actions in a good-hearted way. For example, maybe they're having a bad day and are grump — that doesn't excuse their actions, but you can understand the feeling of being grumpy. Or maybe they were hurt by something you did (which you might not realize) and they are lashing out because of that hurt. That's not a nice way to react, of course, but we can all relate to feeling hurt and lashing out. So the good-hearted view is that this is someone you care about who is hurting. Forget the personal offense, think about their pain, and be compassionate towards that pain.

Let's take a brief look at the ill-intentioned way of seeing things, then go into what I believe will transform most people's interpersonal happiness — the good-hearted view.

Why the Ill-Intentioned View is a Problem

It's easy to see the rudeness, inconsideration and plain wrongness of other people. That's because we're looking at it from our own point of view, and thinking they should see things

the same way as you do.

For example:

- They left dirty dishes or a big mess in the kitchen. Why didn't they just clean up instead of being inconsiderate? You feel they're not acting as they should.
- They said something kind of mean to you. You have no idea why they would be mean, you're a good person who doesn't deserve that.
- They are mad at you for some reason. You don't deserve that! What's their problem?

Of course, there are much worse things, but these are some typical interpersonal problems, and common reactions.

These are natural reactions, but looking at things this way causes you to feel bad about the other person. You are frustrated, angry, offended or hurt. You build up resentment.

You might also react badly to the other person — say something hurtful or angry, lash out, ignore them, whatever your habitual way of responding to these things might be. This obviously will make them react badly to you, and now your relationship is hurt. You're not happy, and neither are they. This isn't a good situation.

The problem with the ill-intentioned view is that it doesn't help anybody, and hurt the relationship. Worse yet, it's self-centered (you're seeing things from your own point of view) rather than thinking about the other person (whom you care about), both of you, or your relationship together.

The Solution: The Good-Hearted View

OK, so the self-centered view of seeing the ill-intentions of the other person isn't ideal (not that any of us are ideal!). So what about the good-hearted view?

Well, this approach tries to use empathy, to see the good heart of the other person, to assume that they are good people with decent intentions who make mistakes and are having trouble of some kind.

For example, some reasons someone might act badly:

- They genuinely didn't realize how you would take their actions — from their perspective, there was nothing wrong with what they did. Your interpretation might be that they are wrong, but that's only one way of seeing it.
- They were caught up in their world, and weren't thinking of how their words or actions might affect other people. This, of course, is self-centered, but we all do this, probably every day.

- They are having a bad day, are in a bad mood, or are in the middle of a tough problem in their life. This causes them to react badly to you. This is not an excuse for bad behavior, but you can understand this, as we all go through it.
- They have a bad habit of reacting to people in certain harmful ways. This doesn't mean they have a bad heart, but instead, they developed bad patterns when they were young. At one point, these patterns were meant to protect them from harm, but now they just harm others.
- They were abused by someone, or hurt in the past, and now they are worried that you are going to harm them. So they protect themselves. Not an excuse, but more of a way to understand people's behavior.
- You did something that they took offense to, and so they're reacting badly to something you did. Maybe you didn't realize you did this, but that's the world they're in.
- They genuinely were trying to do something to help you, but you took it the wrong way.

None of the above excuses bad behavior. It's wrong to be rude, to yell, to be violent. But to act badly is human, and to judge everyone for their bad behavior means we won't be friends with anyone. Ourselves included, because if we're honest, we have to admit that we act badly sometimes too.

We're not looking for excuses, but instead to see the good heart in the other person. Yes, they acted badly, but it's with a good heart. If we can see this, perhaps we can see the other person in a more kind light, and react to them in a more helpful way.

Some ways we can react, now that we see them in a good-hearted light:

1. We can try to understand them, maybe even talk to them about what's going on. People often like to be heard and understood. Make them feel like what they're doing is understandable.
2. From this place, we might also share how their actions affected us, without blaming, accusing or guilt-tripping. Instead, it's from a place of wanting to resolve the conflict.
3. We might give them compassion for the difficulty they're going through. Maybe a hug, or the appropriate equivalent — just a "hug attitude," where we're trying to commiserate with them and make them feel better somehow.
4. Or we might just feel the compassion inside, and not let ourselves get caught up in resentful or frustrated emotions, and instead, just leave the other person alone until they feel better, if that's more appropriate.
5. If the other person is genuinely harmful, you might need to get away from them (for your own protection), but with compassion you might not be so angry at them.

These are just a few options, but you can see that these actions are much more helpful for the relationship, for the other person, and for our own happiness.

You might say, “Well, isn’t this just rewarding or excusing their bad behavior?” That’s one way to see it, but I believe it’s more about not getting caught up in our own self-centered view, and not engaging in unhelpful and harmful patterns of thought. With the good-hearted view, we are more understanding, more compassionate, more likely to be happy and have good relationships.

The next time you feel difficulty with someone, try the good-hearted view. You just might find some happiness in a difficult situation.