Learning to Let People Be Disappointed

How to start dialing down your intense focus on others' emotions

Kathleen Smith, PhD, LPC

My daughter had a birthday recently. It was a wonderful day for all, but afterwards I realized I'd focused a little too much on making it so. When I kept asking her, "Have you had a great birthday?", I was inviting her to manage how I felt about the day. I was also robbing her of an opportunity— the chance to spontaneously express gratitude to others.

Do you focus a lot on whether others are enjoying themselves? Whether they're comfortable or calm? How do you distinguish between being a considerate human and needing other people to be what you want them to be?

I think the difference is the intensity of the relating. The level of relationship pressure. Even when we have the best of intentions, no one likes having our anxiety directed at them.

This intensity can look like:

- Continually asking someone, "Do you like it?" after you give them a gift.
- Being very focused on whether someone is enjoying their meal.
- Wanting someone to be having as much fun as you are.
- Not talking about something that interests you, because it might bore others.
- Acting over-responsible for your partner's mood.
- Insisting people have some dessert because you're having dessert.
- Breaking tension with constant jokes.
- Worrying about creating enough "holiday memories."

© 2026, Kathleen Smith. All Rights Reserved.

- Becoming over-responsible for people's travel schedules.
- Complaining to others when someone isn't enjoying themselves.
- Drinking because others are drinking.
- Avoiding people completely when they're unhappy or anxious
- Asking people, "What do you want to do?" without ever stating your own opinion.
- Participating in every activity so no one will think you're a bad sport.

What's the alternative to these behaviors? How do you operate with more freedom, while letting others also taste some freedom? All while staying connected in important relationships?

Freedom can look like:

- Letting people not like the restaurant. Let them!
- Letting people tell you if they like something, rather than anxiously prompting them.
- Letting people tell you if they don't like something, rather than anxiously prompting them.
- Taking a thoughtful break (i.e. a walk) from all the togetherness.
- Letting people manage their emotions.
- Expressing what you like, while being open to others' suggestions.
- Talking about what's interesting to you and letting others do the same.
- Managing your own anxiety rather than trying to quickly fix another's distress.
- Letting people manage how they spend their time.

It's no easy thing to be in the same room with somebody who's pouting or worried. You don't have to strap yourself in for every minute of discomfort, but look for opportunities to ride the ride of being together without fixing. Of being together while having different

© 2026, Kathleen Smith. All Rights Reserved.

experiences. You may become a little less allergic to others' distress. You may find you have more energy to be present and interested in others.

Your exercise: When haven't you given people the chance to be responsible for themselves? Think of the times where you absolutely needed them to have a good time, or a great meal, and that pressure kept everyone from feeling and acting a little more freely. Write down a few examples.

Your assignment: Look, I'm not asking you to be a sociopath, or to stop comforting and supporting people. Just try treating people like individuals who can find their way if they're not having a good time. Practice allowing people to be a little down, a little disappointed, or not completely engaged when you're speculating whether Benson and Stabler will ever get together on Law and Order.

One of the greatest gifts we can give our family and friends is the freedom to experience life with less relationship pressure. To show them that we love them without them needing to be a certain way or have a certain kind of day. People will have mediocre birthdays. They'll have terrible meals and grumpy holidays. Give them the chance to navigate these realities and see if they surprise you.

Kathleen Smith, PhD, LPC *is an author, licensed therapist, and expert on relationship systems. She helps individuals and organizations learn to think differently about their relationship challenges and begin to operate more thoughtfully and less anxiously.*

© 2026, Kathleen Smith. All Rights Reserved.