

# NO MORE MR. NICE GUY!

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October 5th, 2006 08:51 PM

## Self Soothing

At its core, the Nice Guy Syndrome is the manifestation of a deep seated anxiety disorder. Everything the Nice Guy does or doesn't do involves trying to manage anxiety.

Seeking approval, avoiding conflict, pleasing, caretaking, fixing, playing it safe, hiding mistakes; these are all about trying to keep anxiety at bay.

- Nice Guys feel anxious if they think someone is angry at them.
- Nice Guys feel anxious if there is conflict.
- Nice Guys feel anxious if someone is upset or having a problem.
- Nice Guys feel anxious when they make a mistake.
- Nice Guys feel anxious when they try new things.
- Nice Guys feel anxious when people try to give to them.
- Nice Guys feel anxious when they are in the spotlight.
- Nice Guys feel anxious when they feel out of control.

Nice Guys don't like feeling anxious.

In an attempt to manage their anxiety, Nice Guys utilize covert contracts. The Nice Guy's covert contract with the world looks something like this: If I am good (nice, polite, generous, pleasing, different from other men, etc), then I will be loved and liked, get my needs met (without having to ask), and have a smooth, problem-free life.

When this paradigm doesn't work, Nice Guys just keep trying harder, doing more of the same. Ironically, since these covert contracts don't work, they create even more anxiety for the Nice Guy because he believes he must eliminate anxiety at all cost, and this is the only way he knows how to try and do it.

Here is what Nice Guys don't understand: Anxiety is a part of life. And, anxiety won't kill you! Anxiety is part of life and as long as we are moving forward in the real world, we will experience anxiety. Everyone does. It is a sign that we are alive and kicking.

Anxiety doesn't have to be managed. Fear of anxiety doesn't have to control us. Anxiety doesn't have to paralyze us. Anxiety doesn't have to prevent us from living an exciting, challenging life. Anxiety doesn't have to prevent us from getting what we want; love, sex, wealth, friendship, comfort.

When working with recovering Nice Guys, I make a distinction between "managing" anxiety and "soothing" anxiety. Managing keeps the Nice Guy stuck in ineffective, dysfunctional patterns. Soothing anxiety allows the recovering Nice Guy to make his needs a priority, have healthy relationships, be clear and direct, be honest, deal with conflict, express his emotions, have

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integrity, pursue his passions, allow other people to own their own problems, try new things, receive from others, make mistakes, be visible and transparent.

Managing anxiety is about trying to control what goes on outside of you. Soothing anxiety is about comforting what goes on inside of you.

Since we can't control what goes on outside of us, it makes a lot more sense to work with what is going on inside of us. This is self soothing.

Self soothing is the ability to hold onto yourself and comfort yourself in the midst of situations that make you feel anxious.

So what is self soothing? Picture this. You were 14 years old hanging out at the local swimming pool. Your friends were jumping off the high dive. It looked like fun and you wanted to fit in. So you climbed up the ladder and took your place on the diving board. From this vantage point, you looked down at the water below you. For some reason, it seemed a lot higher from up there than it did from down below. Your anxiety went way up! What do you do? Turn around and climb back down the ladder? You couldn't do that. There were too many people watching. You had to jump. You didn't have a choice.

Since you aren't still standing up there on the diving board today, you must have found a way to talk yourself into facing your anxiety and jumped off the diving board. That was self soothing.

Anxiety comes from a very primitive part of the brain that signals us when we are faced with possible danger. Not only does the part of the brain, called the amygdala, warn other parts of the brain that a threat might be present, it also sends signals to various internal organs to prepare the body to physically deal with the potential threat. This is why your heart beats faster, you get butterflies in your stomach, your palms sweat when you feel anxious.

The amygdala or "lizard brain," as some call it, does not have logic or language. It is purely an electrical signal to parts of the brain and body. The cognitive parts of the brain have to interpret the signals from the amygdala and decide if the threat is real, how significant it is how, and what needs to be done.

I have found that many Nice Guys seem to have an overactive amygdala. This might be do to heredity -- Nice Guys often report that one or more parents were anxious. Or it might be the result of threatening or inconsistent experiences in childhood when the amygdala was the most developed part of the brain. Either way, Nice Guys often have an overly active amygdala.

Nice Guys don't seem to be very good at distinguishing the signals they receive from their amygdala. All signals are treated the same. Since all anxiety signals are interpreted the same, Nice Guy tend to react to every anxiety situation the same.

One powerful self soothing tool is learning to distinguish which signals from the amygdala are warnings of a real threat and which are just the response of an overactive "lizard brain."

Recovering Nice Guys can learn to use the cognitive part of the brain to distinguish real threats from perceived ones. If there is a real threat, run or fight. If is just a perceived threat, identify it as such and tell yourself, "I can handle it."

"I can handle it" is one of the most powerful self soothing technique you can use. Even when your amygdala is screaming at you, you can keep telling yourself, "I can handle it." And then take whatever action necessary.

How did you get yourself to jump off that high dive all those years ago? One way or another, you

The third to to get the experience of facing them. Next time conflict comes up, deal with it on the spot. At first, I sucked at it, and pitched fits. As time continued on and the conflicts were endless, I kept my goals in mind, developed a sense of how these things occur and just learned how to deal with them. Since it's now just short of habitual, the anxiety is strongly reduced.

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