

**The DISTORTED LENS of
POLLY THE PLEASER**

DISTORTION: *"It is my responsibility to make everyone happy."*

Think about Polly as she will go to any length to please her parents, husband and four-year-old child as well as co-workers. She admits that she over-commits when she is asked to do something by others but has difficulty saying no. She feels frustrated but is fearful to let anyone know that what they request is too much for her. Polly also worries that she is not doing things "correctly" when her husband David's mood is a little off. She begins to verbalize her concern, "Is there something wrong?" David tells her the same thing he usually does, "I am fine, just tired." A little later in the evening, she will probe, "What are you thinking about?" He responds, "I am not thinking about anything. Why do you always ask the same thing?" This inquiry is a usual routine that leaves Polly feeling empty because her husband will not share his deepest thoughts when he comes home from work. Polly begins to think, "I must have done something wrong, or he would talk to me, maybe I am too fat, and he doesn't even love me anymore." She begins to ruminate about their conversation in the car last night, and then the cycle of codependency begins. "I must try harder to be a better wife, and then David will love me more." When she no longer can take the internal pressure, she gives up and emotionally withdraws and declares, "I just don't care." Then escapes into her own isolation of resentment.

Polly's pleasing provides most or all of the responsible functions in the family. She makes certain that the children are cared for, pays the bills, irons the shirts, cooks dinner, runs the errands for the family, runs the children to and from school, ball practice, and dance and music lessons, takes the dog to the veterinarian. She does it all and is worn out. Because she has enabled her family by doing everything for them, she has trained her family to expect her to keep this pace. Polly is tired, lonely, taken advantage of, neglected and empty. However, there is something driving Polly as she gains some sense of satisfaction from being so adept at handling it all. The family encourages Polly either directly or indirectly and she is trapped in the mania because making a significant change would disappoint someone drastically and that would be too costly emotionally for Polly to handle. She would feel unhealthy guilt and her overdeveloped sense of responsibility keeps her from being able to function differently.

INSIGHT FOR REFLECTION:

Fear of abandonment is usually the underlying motivation that a person is not able to set healthy boundaries. It was Polly's internal belief that she would be abandoned if she would say, "No," to a request. Whether the abandonment would be a physical abandonment, she certainly feared emotional abandonment by her family if she did not do for them what they expected.



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Ironically, what pleases one person may not necessarily please the next. As even that same person may change his or her expectation of the pleaser depending up their mood. Compulsive people-pleasing engages us in chasing a moving target. The pay-off for the pleaser is a feeling of worth or being loved, valued, esteemed – at least through the "pleasing episode." But, when the definitions or expectations change from person-to-person (or even within the same person), what does that do to our definition of ourselves – our experience of love, affirmation, value? Put another way, how realistic is it to try and define ourselves based on others' ever-changing expectations? Pleasers lose the respect of others and self as they become a doormat of sorts. Polly and extreme pleasers have trouble establishing firm and loving boundaries. Putting others needs before her own Polly has reached the burn-out stage and is running on a short fuse before she has a full emotional breakdown. Even worse is the Polly-type who continues to function in robotic-like fashion, pretending and going through all of the motions, as she is too afraid to even experience her own breakdown as she fears her world will fall apart if she does not hold it together. Yet, internally, this type of Polly has died.

Defining ourselves based not on who we really are but on what others expect is futile at best. You may hit a bull's eye on the target once in a while, garnering a smile of approval from the pleased person; however, the seed of resentment is planted within you (often watered and fertilized too).

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