

Seeing Green: All About Jealousy

We all feel jealous from time to time but admitting it is the first step to overcoming it.

By Carolyn J.

Strange

WebMD Feature

So your best friend wears a size 0 -- and complains that it's too big on her! Your next-door neighbor is driving a Mercedes and your car can barely make it to the end of the driveway. Your sister's headed for a week-long vacation in the Caribbean and you can't get farther than the state park. Jealous? Who wouldn't be?

Sure, there are times when everyone else seems to have more, do more, look better. But is that really the case?

"Jealousy may reflect a person's view of him or herself," says Jo Anne White, PhD, professor of education at Temple University. "It's more about how people feel about themselves and whether they're confident about who they are."

For many, jealousy has to do with personal relationships. You might become jealous, for example, if you feel your partner is not paying enough attention to you. Jealousy might also be provoked if your partner or spouse consistently makes you feel uncomfortable through both their words and their actions. "In any relationship, trust and mutual respect are essential to keep the relationship flourishing and communication strong," White says.

"A person who has a poor self-image may feel threatened and believe that she has nothing to offer to keep someone else interested," White adds.

Flattery or Jealousy?

Jealousy might seem flattering at first, if your mate wants all your time and attention, but it can also be a sign of emotional instability, warns Tina B. Tessina, PhD, psychotherapist and author of *How to Be a Couple and Still Be Free*.

"That flattering interest in your attentions can turn into a chronic lack of trust and suspicion," says Tessina. "A husband who is jealous of your innocent friendships with other women, and who tries to control you and separate you from your friends, can become a big problem."

Most jealousy arises when someone feels insecure and threatened, Tessina adds -- either of losing the relationship, or that someone else will get the attention she is craving.

"When you handle jealousy properly though, it doesn't have to be a disaster," says Tessina, who offers these suggestions for coping with jealousy within relationships:

- ✦ Make sure you both feel comfortable with your agreements about spending time with other people. Make some agreements about how you'll behave, and make sure you're willing to keep them. Don't frighten yourself or your partner by testing too hard, demanding the impossible, or risking too much. Keep in mind that jealousy breaks down trust. If you begin to be upset, talk about it and encourage your partner to do the same.
- ✦ Keep each other informed. Lying to your partner about whether you have broken an agreement does more damage than breaking the agreement. If you slip up, tell the truth. If your partner has slipped, be open to listening to him or her without blaming or getting upset, so the two of you can negotiate a solution to the problem. If you or your partner continually create situations that aggravate jealousy, you may need to find a marriage counselor to help you solve the problem.
- ✦ Give yourselves time. Learning to balance and control outside friendships, and still feel good about your primary relationship, takes practice, experience, and lots of discussion.
- ✦ Because most of us are very vulnerable and at our most insecure with regard to sexual issues, sexual trust is among the most difficult type of trust to build. Our feelings of attractiveness, loveliness, and self-esteem are exposed and challenged, so we must remember to be gentle with ourselves and

with each other.

Jealousy is not limited solely to relationships. You can become jealous of your friends' or associates' good fortune. This also ties in to feelings of self-worth, says White. A person who doesn't have a strong self-image may feel that he's not getting his "fair share" and that others always "get the breaks."

Debbie Mandel, MA, author of *Turn On Your Inner Light: Fitness for Body, Mind and Soul*, finds that men are more jealous about material accomplishments -- better job, more prestige, fancier house and car, while women are more jealous about appearance, children, and friendships.

To overcome -- or at least dilute -- jealousy, Mandel offers these suggestions:

- ✦ Know your own strengths. What do you specifically bring to the table?
- ✦ Don't compare yourself to anyone else because then you're only sabotaging your own uniqueness.
- ✦ Affirm the other person. Today it is his or her turn to shine; tomorrow it will be yours.
- ✦ Use jealousy to emulate the object of your jealousy and fuel you to accomplish and grow. If he or she can do it, so can you!
- ✦ If someone else is "toxic" to you because he or she is constantly bragging just to make you jealous, then change the subject, or if need be, simply remove yourself from their presence -- if necessary, permanently!

The Purpose of Jealousy

It's important to remember that jealousy has a purpose, says Erik Fisher, PhD, author of *The Art of Managing Everyday Conflict*. "All emotions, even jealousy, are trying to tell us something about ourselves," says Fisher, who explains that jealousy is a fear of losing power.

"When we find out what we're missing in ourselves, that fear goes away," he says.

Acknowledging our jealousy is the first step in overcoming it, Fisher adds. If we're ashamed of feeling jealous, we may try to mask it with "protective emotions" such as anger, frustration, or resentment. Instead, he suggests, ask yourself, "Why am I choosing to feel jealous?"

"Typically we're jealous of things we 'want,'" Fisher says, "not of things we 'need.'" If that's the case, then ask yourself how you can work toward what you want, and make a list of all that you do have that you feel good about.

Confront your jealousy head on, agrees advice columnist April Masini. If your sister has a solid marriage and your husband just left you, tell her flat out, "You're so lucky to be married to such a great guy. I wish I were."

"It sounds silly," says Masini, "but the energy we use to keep the parts of what we wish were different from showing are immense. Once you let go of any standards you are using to psychologically imprison yourself, you are free to appreciate other people's good fortune without feeling like you're not enough."

If you're the one everyone's jealous of at the moment, well, congratulations! And don't worry. It's not necessary to diminish your pleasure in your own good fortune, says Fisher. "Sure, you don't want to rub it in anyone's face, but handle your successes with grace and with class."

"Not everything is equal or fair, but to be dishonest about your own feelings is wrong," adds April Masini. If a friend is going through a hard time, ask her how her job hunt is going, or how life is in general.

"Express interest in what is important to other people," says Masini, "Then you can share, honestly, what is important to you."

Finally, says Jo Anne White, "Remember, there will always be someone out there who is more beautiful, more talented, and more successful. But so what?"

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