

# COVID Crazy: One reader wonders what to do about her lack of motivation

Dear C and Dr. B;

*I know everyone is depressed with this epidemic dragging on. With these short winter days, more restrictions, political dysfunction, etc, we are all down in the dumps. But I feel like I am more depressed than everyone else. I'm not suicidal or anything like that, but I feel such a heavy weight, a lack of motivation, like I am walking through Jell-o. But my mind is racing, I don't sleep, I'm distracted, I can't seem to concentrate to get anything done. I feel hopeless. If you listen to the news, things ARE hopeless. Now what? - Lola Lost*

**Dr. B says:** The human right brain is like a radio receiver. It is meant to pick up on others' emotions - this is what we call empathy. When people's empathy receivers are set too high, it can result in depression. We aren't meant to get the whole impact of others' emotions, just enough to be able to react to them. The right brain is 12X faster than the left brain for survival reasons. Your hairs prick up at a general sense of threat - you might not know exactly what is creeping you out or why, you just get the sense of "get out, now!" People who ignore these signals can get in trouble. Love at first sight works the same way - another impulse that can turn out badly.

You may have a highly sensitive right brain, which makes you pick up on everyone's else's stuff and wrongly make it your own. There are mindfulness and therapy techniques that can help you move from subjective suffering to objective neutrality. This can help change your sensitivity from a negative to a positive thing - that's how antidepressants work. They give you that sense of neutrality by toning down empathy just enough to be objective. They cause a little distance from emotions, which is a good thing - too much empathy functions as a delusion. You can feel you know what someone else is thinking and feeling and assume you know what is best for them. This way of thinking is behind co-dependent and dysfunctional relationships. Too much antidepressant can numb you out, but that isn't the goal. The idea is to give just enough distance to allow your left brain to catch up and gain understanding. That way, your empathy is grounded in reality. A mix of therapy, yoga, mindfulness and medication, if needed, works best. You are not alone - the empathetic among us are all suffering right now.

**C says:** I don't see empathy as being the culprit here, Lola. If anything, you seemed overly focused on your own suffering: "I am more depressed than anyone else." But I'm not judging you - this is what the isolation of COVID has done to all of us. We depend on each other far more than we realize for feedback, and for a sense of purpose. Social distancing, as necessary as it is, is taking a very deep emotional toll, and the rising suicide rate and increasing incidences of domestic violence illustrate all too well the extent of the damage.

Your exhaustion and scattered thoughts have a real source. Our entire way of life has been altered, and no one knows when or if it will ever come back. We have been pushed to "fight or flight" mode - but there's nothing to actually fight, and there's nowhere to flee to. So our thoughts keep racing and our energy is drained to no purpose. It is exactly as you described.

Before this pandemic, there was a sense of routine and familiarity to our days, whether good or bad. We had responsibilities that gave us motivation to move - but nothing is certain anymore. Teachers are

caught between virtual and in-person learning, performers have had entire years of bookings cancelled. Many businesses have slowed, stalled or sunk. Like you said: "Now what?"

Well, here's what, Lola - it is up to you now. Yoga and meditation can help, but they won't get you out of your own head. You need a purpose for your energy, and a place for those thoughts to go. If you just keep thinking about yourself, you are going to lose your freakin' mind.

Set a goal, Lola. It almost doesn't matter what, except it has to be something you can control, put an effort into, and see a result. Connect to others - instead of talking about yourself, ask them how they feel, what they are going through. Take an interest in the world and interact in any way you can. This is how you figure out what to do next.

Sometimes you just have to ignore your feelings, haul your ass out of the chair and MOVE. Don't let your emotions run your life right now, they will take you down a black hole. If nothing else motivates you, think about this - your stuff isn't going to pay for itself. Get going.

*You can visit Dr. B's blog at [drbrilliantcliche.wordpress.com](http://drbrilliantcliche.wordpress.com)*

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## **Deus ex Machina: When religion doesn't work, consider cosmic mediation**



*Dear B and C;*

*It has been two weeks since I totaled my car and I am still shaken. Luckily, no one was hurt, but I could*

*have been killed, or worse – killed someone else. I feel sort of numb, which is weird, since it was a huge jolt at the time. I'm not sure how to process my emotions, so I'm just drawing a blank. I know some people turn toward religion, like, "God saved me!" But that makes no sense to me because why didn't God just prevent the accident to begin with?*

*Perplexed*

**Dr. B says:** When I was a teen, I got the money for my first car after an uncle whom I barely knew died and left me money in his will. One week later, I smashed up the car. I had an epiphany in the midst of my devastation and realized that it could have been much worse. Neither I nor the other driver was injured and the car was like new again after a few thousand in repairs. I processed the experience by visualizing that I was destined for very serious trouble, but my uncle had negotiated for me and managed to secure this outcome which, amongst myriad possible horrible losses, had the least damaging consequences. The thing is, the situation could have had a much worse outcome, and when I add personalization and appreciation, I end up thanking the powers that be for their intervention. I have used similar visualization in other times since this crisis. It's like religion without the religion. Humans are wired this way, so it's a useful tool to tap into and it really helps. I call it cosmic mediation.

**C says:** In politics and the world of publicity, cosmic mediation is called "spin doctoring." You look at a bad situation and see if there is something in the whole mess that you can pick out to use as a segue into a more optimistic picture. When politicians and spokespersons do this, they are often using it as a form of sophistry. Just consider the evasive moves that Kayleigh McEnany must have had to pull when asked about Trump's more questionable tweets and tirades. How do you turn a collection of lies and inane observations into fodder that will feed the political supporters? Call in a spin doctor. They can work magic, if you don't mind that you can end up with a fairly tainted "truth" that may actually be rotten at the core.

We all tell ourselves stories in order to live with the unlivable. Right after my second divorce, when I felt alone and lost in the now-empty place that had once been the home of my marriage, I would tell myself a story: I was an immigrant from another country who had narrowly escaped with her life from a terrible war-ravaged village. A rescue organization had given me passage to the US, and I was incredibly fortunate to have been loaned the use of an apartment by a compassionate member of the group. I now had a chance to recover and start over again in a new world, and I had this whole place to myself! I wasn't out on the streets, unprotected and struggling. I could go anywhere I wanted from here! Looking at things that way, I felt lucky and grateful rather than suicidal. I would start telling myself this story every time I got really depressed, sometimes lavishly embellishing my possible future outcomes. It was pretty silly, but a much better alternative than putting a gun to my head or drinking myself senseless, both of which I was at times tempted to do.

Any lawyer knows that if you come up with a plausible explanation, you can turn it into an acquittal – if the jury believes it, too. In the case of "cosmic mediation," we are our own lawyer as well as our own jury. With that much control over the courtroom, a positive verdict is nearly always possible.

PS – Sometimes when feelings are too overwhelming, we put them on hold until we reach a point where we can handle them. Don't be surprised if you suddenly burst into tears out of nowhere one day.

*You can visit Dr. B's blog at [drbrilliantcliche.wordpress.com](http://drbrilliantcliche.wordpress.com)*

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# Forgive 'em? Or Forget 'em?: What to do with Trump-loving friends?



Dear C and Dr. B;

There are people in my life whom I was friends with before all the recent election fraud garbage erupted. They were supporters of the now ex-POTUS, and they were spouting such insane garbage, with such conviction, that I didn't want to continue our friendship. During the month before the final inauguration, they seemed downright crazy. Then, after the insurrection mob swarmed the Capitol in January, I actually feared they might attack me for not sharing their conspiracy theories, and I cut them off completely.

Now that the Election Fraud movement has failed in its mission and we have a sane person in the Oval again, I don't know what to do about these ex-acquaintances. A couple of them seem embarrassed and chagrined in the aftermath of insanity and have ventured to check in with me again, wanting to reconnect. The problem I have is that even though they are saying they were duped and want to put the madness behind them, I don't trust them anymore. I feel like I saw a side of them that creeped me out forever. But should I try to move on and be friends again? We're never going to unify as a country if we keep hating each other for what the last four years did to us.

Neverland

Dr B says: What is unusual is that you know people for whom "the spell has broken." Studies show that people believing in conspiracy theories dig in when evidence is presented showing otherwise. For the most part, despite how things turned out, people who were into Trump still are and Trump has by no means gone away nor has the machine that fueled him. He is still very much a clear and present danger. I do not know what the solution will be, but it will not be as simple as just showing tolerance and acceptance of the other side. I believe the other side is being manipulated and used and is addicted to a cult of hate disguised as moral values and religion. White supremacy is still at an all-time high - the FBI has us on domestic terrorist alert. There are still crazies in government and they are still hiring outright bigots who don't even bother hiding it any longer.

How this should affect your decisions as to whom you hang out with is up to you. You don't need to preach to acquaintances, but I hope you can be honest with your close friends. Holding your tongue isn't going to change the country. The last four years alone didn't split the country - it has been split for

a very long time.

I personally do not see the country unifying any time in the near future. We would need serious changes to our system and to the media that covers it. Until the media develops a better standard for the “truths” it reports, we are subject to the continuing struggle of the current cult of conspiracy theories.

C says: I think that what you have to do is to decide whether your previous friendships were strong enough to warrant the effort that a reconciliation would take. How strong were your ties to begin with? Were these people just acquaintances? Or did you share experiences that presented an opportunity to see their reflexive inner character?

Let me put it like this: If you have a close friend who was always there for you, whom you could turn to for help in times of trouble, and whom you truly respected as a person, I'd give them a chance to explain themselves before turning your back forever. We have all gone through stressful times since the beginning of 2020, and people who have operated as sane adults for most of their lives have been thrown into a realm of the unknown, where they may have grasped at whatever rope they thought could save them from falling. Trump made a lot of promises that were cleverly engineered to sucker in those very people. One cannot blame humans for grasping at straws when they are in panic mode.

However, if your “friends” were the kind who habitually made promises, then broke them, who lied when they didn't want to admit to unpleasant truths, and who always seemed to be busy when push came to shove ... well, I can't see any point in wasting any effort to reconnect with that.

The question is, and always will be, what kind of people are these, at heart? If they are worth it, try again. If they aren't, screw 'em.

*You can visit Dr. B's blog at [drbrilliantcliche.wordpress.com](http://drbrilliantcliche.wordpress.com)*

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## **Stuck!: One reader wonders what to do about an unsupportive boss**



Dear C and Dr. B;

I am caught between a rock and a hard place, and not sure what to do. I teach at a middle school in Providence, and the disciplinary problems are pretty bad. Lots of my kids come from what I would charitably call “dysfunctional” families, with a history of criminal activity and physical and emotional abuse from many of the parents. Their kids are a handful, and unfortunately the administration at this school does not have my back. I feel like I can’t even help the kids who need it the most.

Yesterday, a mother came to pick up her daughter early. The child wanted to take some clay home and had it packed neatly in a plastic cup. But the mom just said, “You make a mess with everything, no!” And when the girl started crying, the mother jerked the clay out of her hand, threw it on the floor and started dragging her out. I couldn’t take it, and said to the mother, “You have a good girl there, she’s a good student.” The mother screamed, “Stay out of this!” and left. She later told the principal I’d interfered. The school is taking the parent’s side and I am ready to quit. Should I?

Dr. B says: Working in an environment where the administration, the board, or the boss do not back you up can be like working in Hell. If you want to keep your job, the only way to survive is by learning to be numb. Go in, do your work, go home, with nothing of yourself invested.

In many, many fields, jobs have become structured this way - employees are expendable and the public

is catered to as entitled customers. There is financial incentive to bend over backwards to please the client, whether they be a parent, patient or funding institution – even if they are impossible to please. More and more, there is a lack of respect for, and even mistrust toward, authority in America that puts teachers, police, doctors and many others on the firing line. If the staff is not supported in a workplace, it can encourage clients, parents and patients to treat them with disrespect.

It is true that in past years many in power have abused their roles and now the pendulum has swung the other way, trapping many working people in the middle. You could quit your job, but it is difficult to find a job these days where these dynamics do not exist. You have to decide if the sacrifice is worth it – in learning to become neutral, you may lose the passion that led you to want to be a teacher in the first place.

There is no easy solution to this – if you decide to work for yourself, you stand to lose a steady paycheck, benefits and long-term security. If there is a board that rules over your field, like there is in medicine, there is no escape from the restrictions. This is one reason why more than 40% of doctors no longer like their jobs. I assume teachers have similar statistics. Some union jobs might have pathways, but unfortunately, if you want benefits, there isn't a lot you can do as an individual. If you need the security of a steady job, find hobbies and interests outside of work where your passion can bloom.

C says: There is nearly always a trade off between job security and personal fulfillment in work. But life is not black and white and the obvious choice doesn't always yield the obvious result.

The happiest people I have ever known were not the richest, by any means. We all need money to pay the bills, but if your job is eating at your gut, it is bound to have an effect on your health and well being. How many people have worked their whole lives to get to retirement, only to find that heart disease, cancer, ulcers or anxiety disorders have rendered their old age a place with more restrictions than ever? I have also known people who gave 25 years of their life to a company only to be replaced by a newer, cheaper model. Seeming security can be loaded with booby traps.

I've always freelanced, and I went to many advertising agency holiday parties. They were always lavish affairs overflowing with liquor and expensive food. It never failed – at 2 am, some executive who pulled in seven figures a year would be drunk as hell, get me off in a corner, and start ranting about how much he envied my life – I had so much creative freedom – and how he was trapped by the thousands of dollars a week in overhead from all his condos, cars, ex-wives and debts. He couldn't leave the agency and change his life even if he wanted to – not without faking his own death.

There are no sure things in life, so don't stay in a job that makes you miserable just because you think it's your only security. Life constantly throws us surprises. The person who can deal with uncertainty is better equipped to meet unexpected challenges, and to continually learn and grow, than is someone who quietly succumbs to the rules and never asks questions.

*You can visit Dr. B's blog at [drbrilliantcliche.wordpress.com](http://drbrilliantcliche.wordpress.com)*

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# Trust Reviews?: A recommended doctor has bad online reviews. What should be done?



*Dear C and Dr. B;*

*I needed to choose a new doctor, so I asked a friend to recommend someone. She told me she liked Dr. \_\_\_\_\_, but when I went online to read reviews of this doctor, I was a bit alarmed. Out of 20 comments I found, across multiple review sights, 17 were very, very negative and only three were positive. Should I run away? These reviews don't sound at all like my friend's experience. Now I am not sure what to think. Should I get another recommendation?*

*- Hesitant Harriet*

**Dr. B says:** No need to run, Harriet. You should take all reviews with a grain of salt. First, people don't

often write reviews for good experiences, only the bad ones. This is especially true in a service field. Also, the way the internet works is that items that increase traffic or make money always get preference. Negative reviews generate traffic and invite those reviewed to engage. In addition, if a doctor cared about his ratings, he would just hire a company that created new positive reviews in order to bury the bad ones. If you ever see a doctor with all positive reviews, they have probably hired a service.

Reviews online are like headlines - they can be very misleading. They aren't real statistics and they don't give the wider context. As one doctor said, "I have 20 horrible reviews online, this is great. That makes me happy because I have 100,000 clients."

The internet likes to push controversy, but that does not mean there is an actual controversy. A cartoon in the political satire journal, *The Onion*, illustrates this perfectly: A doctor checks his Yelp ratings and sees they are down so he says to himself, "My reviews are down, I have to prescribe more Adderall today!" You just have to see for yourself whether the ratings you saw have any relevance. If you have a good experience, you might want to write a positive review.

**C says:** Having written many positive reviews myself, I can't agree that people only write when they have a bad experience. However, I will agree that sometimes reviewers get it wrong, and some reviews are simply a matter of differing taste. For instance, I loved the film, *The Cable Guy*, for the same reason that most critics and fans hated it - it just wasn't what they expected.

Some products and services that get rave reviews turn out to be duds. I do know that there are companies that will pay consumers to write positive reviews online to boost sales. It does seem that a company would be far more likely to pay people to promote their services than to trash their competitors. But that is why, if you want a rating you can trust, it pays to consult a source such as *Consumer Reports*, which uses credible critics with experience in their field, rather than comments from consumers.

Unfortunately, doctors are not products and can't be subjected to controlled testing the same way cars and oven cleaners can. When it comes to physician reviews, I would caution you to read the comments carefully. Some patients just like to bitch - they can go into an office in a bad mood, get a prognosis they don't like, then decide to blame the doctor. Some people demand inappropriate treatments or drugs and get mad when a doctor won't prescribe them. I even know a woman who fired her doctor because he told her to lose weight and she felt insulted. That's the kind of crap you can ignore. But if the doctor was incompetent or caused the patient unnecessary suffering, I'd take those comments more seriously.

In these days of social media and reality shows, people are capable of causing a lot of damage with their words. This is a power that can be misused more often than not. If you have doubts, ask questions. Being your own advocate is always your best protection.

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# Music as Medicine: Musical therapy provides new avenues of communication

Music predates human language - it is woven into the history of every culture and into the rites and rituals of every religion. What is less known is that one of its most ancient uses was not as a form of expression - music was also one of the earliest forms of medicine.

For centuries, music has been an integral aspect of the healing arts. The Aboriginal people of Australia were the first known culture to heal with sound. Sound vibration is part of healing in yogic traditions. Chinese Qi Gong uses specific mantras, chants and sounds to stimulate specific organ systems in the body. Tibetan singing bowls, Himalayan suzu gongs ... the instruments and methods are endless throughout recorded history. Alternative healing has embraced music therapy for many years, but today, research into the neuroscience of music is discovering just how extensive the powers of music can be.

I spoke with Annette Mozzoni, director of education with RI Philharmonic Orchestra & Music School, and learned that music therapy and wellness has been a part of their school's program since 2005; they currently employ two certified music therapists in addition to the skilled musicians on staff. In 2011, they launched a partnership with the Autism Project, an organization committed to serving the needs of the teachers, parents and caregivers who work with children on the autism spectrum. Mozzoni said that the majority of people who seek help with their music therapy program have an autism spectrum disorder. Music therapy is especially effective for these clients because of its ability to address their styles of speech and nonverbal communication skills. Each client who comes to the school is carefully assessed to determine the appropriate therapy, which might include creating, singing or moving to and/or listening to music. Results from this type of therapy can transfer to other areas of their lives, providing avenues for communication that can be helpful to those who find it difficult to express themselves in words.

Not all therapy at the school focuses on psychological and neurological disorders - Jane Murray conducts individual one-hour sessions of body mapping, a therapy that applies the principles of anatomy to movement. This program is popular with musicians who are suffering the repetitive motion injuries that can come as the result of practicing and performing the same highly controlled movements over and over again in their work. During sessions, students learn the mechanics of their own bones, muscles and connective tissue, and develop the ability to correct inaccurate movements. The result is an improvement in both the structural health and the performance and efficiency of instrumental players and vocalists.

Another program offered at the school focuses on the Alexander Technique, named after creator Frederick Matthias Alexander, a dramatic performer in the 1890s who specialized in reciting classical Shakespeare. When voice loss during public performances threatened to end his career, Alexander began developing his technique, using mirrors to observe himself. He discovered that poor habits in posture and movement were to blame for both his damaged spatial self-awareness and his health. The highly effective technique he developed is now taught at performing arts schools in Europe, the US and around the world, including such prestigious institutes as the Juilliard School and UCLA. It is not only studied by numerous actors and musicians, but also by athletes to enhance performance. The results

were so impressive that the technique has been investigated by medical researchers in the treatment of Parkinson's disease; as yet there is insufficient evidence to warrant insurance coverage.

Why does music therapy have such a powerful effect on our brains and our bodies? The human brain and nervous system are hard-wired to distinguish music from noise and to respond to rhythm and repetition. And while this provides humans with entertainment and the motivation for movement, it also produces activity changes in brain structures - the amygdala, hypothalamus, insular and orbitofrontal cortex - known to modulate heart function. We are just beginning to learn the potentials of music therapy in the treatment of conditions ranging from anxiety and depression to PTSD and dementia.

Mozzoni sums it up: "Music therapy unlocks barriers and creates a pathway out of isolation. Through this work you also find the connective tissue that builds a bridge for expression and communication."

To learn more, visit [riphilharmonic.org/MusicSchool/Programs/MusicTherapyWellness/tabid/227/Default.aspx](http://riphilharmonic.org/MusicSchool/Programs/MusicTherapyWellness/tabid/227/Default.aspx)

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## **Resolve to Change?: One reader wonders if new year's resolutions are harmful**

*Dear C & Dr. B;*

*Every year, I make resolutions for the new year, usually to lose weight and stop drinking. Every year I break the resolutions after a few weeks. Last year, I decided not to make any resolutions, and I lost 5 pounds. My alcohol consumption remained about the same, but still...*

Now as the new year starts, I want to make resolutions, because I want to make decisions in my own life that I can control, and follow through with them. I think it's a reaction to COVID and feeling stressed and restricted for so long. I want to do something. But now I am afraid that if I make resolutions, I'll just doom myself to fail - and if I just act without thinking, I will go in the right direction.

*Can resolutions be bad for you?*

*Saint Sativa*

**Dr. B says:** Any ultimatum doesn't work. Change doesn't happen in a day. You either make a lifestyle change that you do every day, or you don't. To quote my friend, Valerie Frank: "Did you know that if you eat perfectly and lose 13.5 lbs in a month you have to keep doing it... like forever?!!!!!!!!" There is a great podcast about the science behind changing or maintaining behavior on NPR at The Hidden Brain.

Here is another relevant quote: "resolutions are made to be broken." So, either do it or not, but if you "do it," keep doing it... like forever.

**C says:** I beg to differ.

Resolutions are neither all bad or nor all good. A resolution does not have to be an ultimatum, and it need not always be repeated FOREVER exactly the same. I've worked at diet centers, so I know - there is a science to effective weight loss and it doesn't involve eternal starvation. On safe weight loss programs, after reaching goal weight the maintenance diet isn't nearly as restrictive as the weight loss diet was. I think Dr. B's friend may have been referring to those fad diets that cause rapid weight loss, which is mostly water. But in a broader sense, I think that the mistake most people make with resolutions is that their goal is to STOP doing something. They don't consider that human nature deplores a vacuum, and if a new habit isn't formed to fill that vacuum, failure is imminent. That's where permanent lifestyle changes come in.

But the biggest problem most people face when they make resolutions is the discomfort that always comes with change. It has nothing to do with ultimatums or resolutions, it is simply a consistent feature of change: we have a result in mind when we make those new year's promises, but in between now and that result, there's going to be a whole lotta uncomfortable. There are very few changes that feel right when they first happen - quite the opposite. Humans are creatures of habit, and every habit we break screams to be reinstated, while every new unfamiliar habit we are trying to stick to feels completely wrong. Anyone who is not prepared to deal with that is doomed to failure.

Resolutions do have a purpose. In order for ANY change to happen the first step is a decision, ie, resolution, to change. Of course, that decision must be ACTED on. But the resolution comes first. If you just act without thinking, you are not likely to wander randomly into new, better ways of living. You are far more likely to wander where your instincts take you - right back to those comfortable old habits.

Don't be afraid to make resolutions. Just be aware of what comes next, and you will be on your way to keeping one.

*You can visit Dr. B's blog at [drbrilliantcliche.wordpress.com](http://drbrilliantcliche.wordpress.com)*

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**Mom Is Making Everyone Nuts: One writer wonders how to deal with a complaint-filled family member**



Free image/jpeg, cartoon Old Lady pointing with finger

Dear C and Dr. B;

I love my mother, but she is driving me absolutely nuts. She wants my help but then doesn't let me help her. She also makes everything about her, even COVID - you'd think it was a personal plot against her. She complains she is lonely but then refuses to go anywhere with our family when I suggest it. She says she doesn't feel well but doesn't follow through with the doctors appointments I make for her. The few she does make, she never follows through with the advice or treatments.

She is so frustrating I feel like I want to scream. I find I am lashing out at her in small ways, and it makes me feel so guilty I just end up hating myself. I can't just ignore her or let her be. She is my mother and she does have real problems that she is ignoring like diabetes. She has no one else but me; my dad died years ago. What should I do?

- Frustrated,

Dr. B says: Some people think in a very black and white manner and have no ability to separate themselves from any outside stimuli - this is what makes everything personal and about themselves. Do not take this personally, it is the way they think and it is more or less unchangeable.

This way of thinking often leads into behavior such as your mom's. There's actually a non-sanctioned term for it: "Help-rejecting Clingers." Inside they often feel trapped between helplessness and control, and, like a drowning person, they tend to grab onto anyone who tries to save them, and take them down too.

It is not easy to walk the line of compassion with neutrality. Maybe you could try addressing the core: "You seem frustrated, are you perplexed, confused?" Ask leading questions that make it her idea for what your goal is for her. This is called motivational interviewing. You might want to find her a counselor who works with this technique and take a class yourself. It is a very effective teaching tool because it works without the person knowing they are being taught.

It is normal to get so frustrated you want to lash out, but that's something your own therapist could help you with. Don't internalize the frustration - it is not your fault, and guilt doesn't help anyone.

Your mom is an adult and you can't make her a happy person no matter what you do. You have to learn to be happy yourself, not dependent upon your mom being happy. You have no way of knowing what is inside her head or what her thinking and motivations are, so don't make up her story for her. You can only do your best and know you tried. Be the person you want to be and appreciate yourself for who you are. Sometimes the hand we are dealt is a hard one to play.

C says: I used to have a friend - "Ken," a painter who lived alone. A few minutes with him showed why - his idea of communicating seemed to consist of fretting, worrying and bitching about things in lieu of conversation. He went on and on about problems and annoyances, like a dog settling down for a good chew on a bone, gnawing at whatever misery he was obsessing over.

Other people, and his family, said nothing to deter him. They just played along, let him gnaw and fret, then avoided him afterward for months, even years, at a time.

I couldn't stand Ken's crap, but I understood his lack of social ability and respected his painting, so I made an effort. Whenever I was with the guy and he went off too long on one of his rants, I'd just say, "No, Ken. Enough negative stuff. Now we are going to talk about something happy." If encouraged, he would babble on and on about his painting instead. Self obsessed people always enjoy talking about themselves. It's up to you to change the subject.

You aren't going to change your mom, but people take their cues from others on how to act; you can redirect them with a little practice. Dr. B gave you some useful advice - therapy for both of you is a good idea. You are just as much stuck in your role of "martyred daughter" as Mom is in hers of "Help-rejecting Clinger." Time to learn some new tricks.

*You can visit Dr. B's blog at [drbrilliantcliche.wordpress.com](http://drbrilliantcliche.wordpress.com)*

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## **In Kind: If kindness doesn't bring kindness, what's the point?**



Dear Dr B and C,

I was raised in a Christian home and was taught that humans were made in God's image so there is

good in everyone. I was taught to be patient, loving and kind, and that this would bring out the best in others. But what I have found is that this doesn't seem to be true. The more kind I am, the worse people seem to treat me. I am confused.

- Virginia

C says: The problem here is that whatever sect of Christianity you were raised in seems to have left out a great many of God's other attributes. The God of the Old Testament was not merely a kind and benevolent entity. He was also vengeful, angry and demanding. If we are made in His image, we also contain less gentle emotions, and there are few religions on Earth that do not address the fact that there is a dark side to humans as well as light.

Another problem with answering your question is that you are being incredibly vague about both what your idea of "kind" is and what your idea of "being treated badly" is. Do you help old ladies across the street only to be cursed at because they were, in fact, waiting for a bus? Do you lavish emotional sympathy upon those less fortunate than you, and are they surly in return because they are starving to death and desperately need food, not pity? Your attitude and expectations might be part of the problem for all we know.

You might need to learn the difference between "being kind" and being a door mat that nobody asked for. True kindness means seeing that something is needed and supplying what is required with no expectation of a reward or applause. Sometimes true kindness requires both training and courage - for instance, if a man is drowning, he is probably terrified and thrashing about. If you approach him with gentle concern, chances are he will not only be unreceptive, he will probably clobber you and take you down with him. Only a trained life guard is really of use in a situation like that.

Here's a fact you need to deal with: The world is made up of many people who were raised in different religions and cultures, and under different circumstances than yours. All of those differences allow for the possibility that you are not all following the same script, and may not get the responses you expect. You are not wrong to be kind, certainly not as an initial gesture. But you have to understand something about this dual nature of humans - being kind over and over to someone who slaps you silly in return is not kind - it is just teaching them that they can act as badly as they want and they will still be rewarded with kindness. Dr. B will elucidate.

Dr. B says: If you have to believe in God know that god is everything so there is nothing that is not god thus God is good and God is bad. So even in your paradigm people can be good or bad, so just use common sense. Some people are good. Some people are bad. Some people are very bad but most people are just confused and trying to figure it all out. Good people can be too good thus causing bad outcomes like with enablers or codependents. In our culture, both economically and politically, people often succeed best by being very bad. Whistle blowers are often punished for trying to stop corruption.

Since people don't always get rewarded for being good, the best reason to be kind is because that is who you want to be. So, Virginia - judge people by their behaviors. If they have bad behaviors, they are bad and stay away from them. No goodness on your part is going to change them.

All the best in the New Year.

*You can visit Dr. B's blog at [drbrilliantcliche.wordpress.com](http://drbrilliantcliche.wordpress.com)*

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## Hard Habit to Break: Is there harm in a bedtime glass of wine?



Dear C and Dr. B;

I am not a problem drinker - my one glass of wine before bed was something my doctor knew about and saw no harm in. I never drank during the day and two glasses was my limit at parties.

Then for some reason back in August, after I had an awful bout of the stomach flu, I didn't drink for a few days because I was recovering. I expected I'd go back to my usual habits, but for some reason, I just didn't want to drink anymore. The days went by. I thought I'd see big changes in my life after I'd been sober a month, but nothing much changed except I was a bit more awake sooner in the mornings and felt a bit stronger.

As I enter my fourth month of unintentional sobriety, I've been wondering as the holidays are upon us: Is it a good idea to perhaps have one toast to nod in the new year? It does seem like a social glass of

wine, even if it's on Zoom, is an appropriate way of sharing and relaxing. Or should I leave well enough alone? I admit - when I did have that glass every night, even if I was already so tired I wanted to drop, I'd still want the wine before bed. I felt a bit like it controlled me in a way. Now it doesn't. What if I was right back to every night again and couldn't stop?

Dr B says: There are different types of addictions. By your description, you didn't drink enough to have had a physiological addiction to the alcohol itself but you did have a psychological addiction. You created a state-dependent Pavlovian pairing between the relaxation that alcohol induced and the first stage of sleep, which is a slowing and relaxation that the body normally does on its own. When these things get paired, after a few times you can no longer induce the first stage of sleep on your own without the anticipated drink to do it for you. This is not an alcohol disorder, but a sleep disorder. Now that you once again can sleep on your own, I wouldn't screw it up by using alcohol to celebrate. Try some other ritual, perhaps an outdoor sparkler?

By the way, psychological addictions can occur with any type of pairing. This is often the way many products and placebos work. However, since alcohol is not a placebo, if it used on a regular basis for sleep you will rapidly not be able to sleep without it. Other depressants, such as marijuana or benzos, will have the same effect.

C says: I do understand your quandary - although you could celebrate by waving a sparkler around, it just isn't the same as sharing a nice bottle of wine with friends and sinking into that lovely floating warmth without effort. Sigh. If only you could do it just that once and then wait until the next celebration to imbibe again. But we know better, don't we?

Maybe it wouldn't be such a big deal if you started drinking again - after all, you weren't exactly a problem drinker. And research shows that for many people there can be health benefits in the moderate consumption of alcohol. But let's be very clear about this: You are not making a decision to have one celebration, you are making the decision to go back to an old habit. It is a very rare phenomenon for the door to Freedom From Alcohol to open as effortlessly as it did for you. For most people, stopping is an ongoing and difficult struggle.

This is a decision that only you can make, but consider this when you make it: Your body was trying to tell you something back in August. What does it say now? That's who you should be asking, not us.

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