

Please Try This at Home

Tips for Increasing the Joy in Your Life

High Stakes Mind Reading

Ever gone out of your way to do something special for somebody—spent a ton of time on a gift, cleaned the house extensively, went to thirteen stores to find the brand you know they like—and have them totally not notice? You want to tell them all that you did, but you'd feel like a schmuck having to spell it out for them, certainly not the thoughtful, selfless person you had hoped they would have thought you were.

Ever felt like if people really loved you, they would be able to figure out what you want and just do it? You could ask them, of course, but that would feel like a little death inside, the end of a dream that someone could really get you and love you the way you've longed for.

Ever surprised someone with something you really thought they'd like, only to have them tell you soon afterwards that what they really wanted was something else? You tried to show them you knew them well and instead, they're giving you the cocked-head look, going, "Don't you know me at all?"

The Rules of the Game

If you've had at least a few experiences along these lines, chances are that you're drawn to relational gambling, particularly the game of High Stakes Mind Reading. The rules to this two-player game are pretty simple. You and another person in at least semi-intimate relationship unconsciously agree to compete against chance to guess what the other one wants and needs. If you guess correctly what the other person needs without being told, you win "Approval" chips and your partner wins "Must Really Be Loved" chips.

If at least one of you gathers enough points for guessing correctly, as a couple, you WIN BIG, achieving "Rescuing Hero" and "Intuitively Known and Loved" status. There's nothing like it! But if either of you have to ask the other what he or she wants or tell them what you want, you lose points. Eventually, you risk dropping to "Failure to Perform as Expected" and "Hopelessly Alone and Misunderstood" status.

Now the odds are about 50-50, going down during times of life transition like the arrival of kids or mid-life crises and up a bit when you've known someone for forty years or more. Of course, there are ways of approaching relationship that have much more winning odds. For example, playing the win-win un-game of "Directly Asking for What You Want and Need" would guarantee that both of you would get what you want and need much more often with much less conflict.

The Recipe for Addiction

So then why is this Mind Reading game so addicting? There's a few reasons, actually. For starters, it reminds us of infancy. Infancy was the one period of our lives where we were incapable of stating exactly what we needed, but the needs we felt were so few in number that mom or mom equivalent could do a pretty job of guessing what they were and taking care of

them effectively. In that state, if our needs weren't getting met, we just needed to be louder and more annoying and—presto!—our needs got met. That state of passively having our needs and wants met is so pleasant that there's not much in this world that can make us feel as deeply known and loved as a situation that feels like a repeat of that infant state where someone just "knows" us and meets our needs without our having to ask.

Plus, having someone guess our needs protects us from one of our greatest fears: the fear that deep down, those closest to us don't really love us because we are fundamentally unlovable. If we don't have to specifically ask the people we love most for what we need, we won't ever be flatly refused in a way that would make us feel like we aren't actually loved at all. For many of us, this fear of being refused and therefore unloved is so significant that we'd rather have our needs go unmet than discover that the other person could know about our needs and then refuse to meet them. Just hoping that the other will magically read our minds feels a lot safer.

Thirdly, when we are the guesser and we guess correctly, the other person's enthusiastic response can make us feel so powerful, wise, and loving that for a moment, we feel heroic and superhuman. It's a great feeling. Besides, because we anticipated the person's need *and* decided to do it before they asked, we didn't actually have to do the hard work of hearing about a need that we didn't really want to do and then doing it anyway because we are committed to and love the other person. Seeing a need, deciding of our own free will to meet it, and then getting praised for it is so much more fun than the grunt work of lovingly responding to a request we're not fond of.

When Guessing Doesn't Pay

When it works, Mind Reading is so rewarding that it is no wonder we are drawn to it. And really, the only reason to quit would be that, as with any kind of gambling, sooner or later it doesn't pay. Adult needs are a lot more complicated than infant needs. Our loved ones aren't going to guess our needs correctly a lot of the time because they didn't grow up in exactly the same environment that we did. That means if we're scared to ask for what we need, our needs are going to go unmet for longer and longer periods.

Over time, we'll likely start fussing and throwing tantrums rather than stating our needs because, hey, that's how it worked with mom! Why shouldn't significant others respond in the same way? Meanwhile, our loved ones are doing the same to us and we are living together in passive-aggressive tantrum city.

Mind Readers Anonymous: A Five-Step Need-Meeting Program

For those of us who are tired of Mind Reading that promises heroism and delivers tantrums, what would it look like to play a lower-stakes, better odds game with a lot more payoff? It would probably start with the five-step program of Mind Readers Anonymous:

Step One: Admit that there is just no way we can read our loved ones' minds all the time, but that we love them enough to do our best to rise to the occasion if they will only state their needs and wants to us obviously and often.

Step Two: Admit that the fact that another person cannot figure out what we are thinking does not mean that they don't love us. It just means that they are not our mom and our needs have gotten more complicated since infancy. If, over time, they continue to do what they can to meet

the needs we tell them about (with reasonable tolerance for fluctuations in moods, seasons of life, etc.) that means they love us. Period. None of this ESP stuff.

Step Three: Get more familiar with what it is that you and your partner really need and want. You might start by each making a specific, measurable list of the things you need on a daily, weekly, monthly, and yearly basis to feel loved in your relationship, plus a list of surprises you'd like your partner to do for you sporadically so it feels like they love you "spontaneously" and can "read your mind." Share your lists with your loved ones as loving requests for closer relationship, not angry, change-now-or-else demands. (For a step-by-step instructions on this, as well as more extensive explanation of what it requires to make this shift, see *Getting the Love You Want* by Harville Hendrix, 2008, 20th Anniversary Edition).

Step Four: Agree to do what you can to meet the needs your loved ones shared, with sporadic surprises exactly as they asked you. Over time, this reinforces direct requests and assures you that you are indeed loved and that your needs will not be ignored.

Step Five: As you and your loved ones transition into this new way of loving and receiving love, resist the temptation return to Mind Reading "heroics" or to prod your partner back into guessing your needs by throwing passive tantrums instead of restating your needs to them. Trying to be direct about your needs while also Mind Reading will exhaust you! Instead, keep telling yourself and your loved ones that *love works best when the those who have a need take responsibility for making it clearly known and those hearing the request do their best to meet the need or to assure loved ones that they are loved, even if their stated need cannot be met in that moment in the way that they would like.*

I recognize that this is hard, hard work. It requires A LOT of change. But, boy is it worth it! And if you can swing it, it's not like gambling. It REALLY pays off.

Thanks for reading!

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