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# I'm OK, You're Needy

By ELIZABETH BERNSTEIN

*We All Need Emotional Support, But Asking for It Has Come to Imply Something Negative*

Everyone is emotionally needy sometimes, but some are more needy than others. Elizabeth Bernstein joins Lunch Break to explain, and Randy and Janet Brown discuss how different attachment styles almost ruined their marriage.

One recent evening, over pizza and a bottle of red, one of my closest friends, a man I've known for more than 20 years, uttered three words that took my breath away.

"You're being needy."

Ouch. It got me thinking, though. Is it really such a bad thing to need a loved one? Are women "needier" than men? Isn't emotional neediness in the eye of the beholder anyway?

Experts say we are all—every single one of us—needy in relationships. Never mind the situations—a breakup, a job loss, the death of a loved one—when we need more emotional support than usual. We all long to be loved, supported, understood and accepted.

"Everyone who is emotionally healthy is able to acknowledge their needs," says Pandora MacLean-



Gary Hovland

Needy people may ask for help out of an anxious need for reassurance.

Hoover, a licensed independent clinical social worker in Cambridge, Mass. "It's a positive thing to be able to reach out and ask for help."

Yet asking for emotional support has come to imply something negative—being clingy, annoying, fragile. People will use words like "demanding," "controlling" and "smothering" to describe the people they view as needy in their lives. There are husbands who can't seem to find their own socks without help, a cousin who texts 35 times a day, sisters who live 1,500 miles away and call to ask what they should make for dinner.

Clearly, some of us ask for support more often than others. With my friend, James, I had been texting him more than usual, trying to nudge him to tell me when he would be returning from an overseas business trip. Three texts said, "Hi," two said, "Are you there?" and one said, "I've been feeling lonely." He replied immediately to that one: "No pity parties!!"

Is neediness a male-female thing? Experts say not entirely. It's true that many men view being needy more negatively than many women do. This may be because men often are raised to be self-sufficient and not to show emotion. They may equate needing help with being weak.

But the way we express our needs, and how often, is mostly determined by personality and something psychologists refer to as our "attachment system." Though partly genetic, our lifelong attachment style is largely a result of how we as young children learned to relate to our parents.

There are three basic types—secure, anxious and avoidant. Secure people are warm and loving and most likely were raised by a consistently caring and responsive caregiver. Avoidant people, whom psychologists also call "dismissive," try to minimize closeness and often were raised in an atmosphere where neediness and insecurity weren't tolerated.

Anxious people are the ones who typically are seen as needy. They worry about whether their partner loves them, and they most likely had parents who were inconsistently nurturing. They often are emotionally overwhelmed, says Julie Hanks, a licensed clinical social worker in Salt Lake City. "Or they might ignore, deny or minimize their needs, and then look to others to fill their emotional void in manipulative or indirect ways."

For most of his 30 years of married life, Randy Brown, a 53-year-old insurance-company owner from Bountiful, Utah, expected his wife, Janet, to focus on his needs ahead of her own. He would interrupt her while she was on the phone, or talking with their children, to ask her to make him a sandwich or help him find the stamps. He would wake her up in the middle of the night when he couldn't sleep, and complain when she wanted to spend an evening cross-stitching at a friend's house. He worried that men at her office liked her. He dreamed she was unfaithful.

"It was not OK for me to have a life where he was not the center," says Ms. Brown, 49, a stay-at-home mom.

"I was taking—making withdrawals from her emotional bank account, day after day," Mr. Brown says. "Eventually, she had nothing left to give."

Ms. Brown began to pull away. She avoided his kisses, ignored his phone calls from work and acted

as if she didn't hear him when he called her from another room. At night, she pretended to be sleeping so soundly he couldn't wake her. Sometimes, she took a book into the bathroom, locked the door and sat on the floor, reading. "I was just tired and lonely and wouldn't talk to him," Ms. Brown says. "I didn't trust that he cared about me."

Needy people often accomplish the thing they fear most—they push their friend or partner away. "The anxious person can wear out their partner," says Farmington Hills, Mich., psychologist Carolyn Daitch, author of "Anxious in Love."

People can learn to calm their anxious, needy responses. And their loved ones can learn to understand and set boundaries.



Gary Hovland

Someone who expects her own needs always to come first can leave the people around her exhausted and craving time alone.

If you are the needy person, Dr. Daitch suggests taking an adult timeout when you get anxious. Breathe deeply for 10 minutes. Remind yourself that it's OK to have these feelings and that the anxiety will pass. Ask yourself if you are overreacting. If your need is valid, explain it calmly to the other person.

If you are the friend or the partner of a needy person, you need to accept that his or her emotional needs are different than yours, try to understand them and gently push back. Acknowledge your feelings of frustration. "I really appreciate that you love me and want to be with me more, but it's frustrating for me when you don't want me to see my friends once a week. Can you

support me in seeing my friends?"

"That last question seals the deal," Dr. Daitch says

Mr. Brown traces his own neediness to childhood. His mother is a "perfectionist," he says, and he never felt he lived up to her standards. One of his strongest memories is of her criticizing him for clearing his throat. "Subconsciously, I married to have my needs filled," he says.

Divorce wasn't an option, for religious reasons. But Ms. Brown had come to feel hopeless about the marriage. She began to daydream about what it would be like if the nice man at Office Depot asked her out.

Eventually, Ms. Brown asked her husband to go to counseling with her, and he agreed. She asked him to read a self-help book, "How to Make Love All the Time." And he started meditating. Self-reflection led him to realize he wasn't happy in his sales career. He decided to switch gears and is now working to become an inspirational speaker and has written a book.

Mr. Brown also began to pay attention to his wife's needs. He asks her about her day instead of rambling on about his own, and he watches her favorite TV show with her. "Once I began to be more fulfilled in my life, I wasn't so needy of her to fill the emptiness that used to be there in me," he says.

Ms. Brown now tells her husband to get his own vitamins, and he makes his own breakfast and lunch. If they have something important to discuss, they set a mutually convenient time. "My pulling away made him so much more introspective, and he began to look for answers himself," Ms. Brown says. "And I realized that I am not his mother and I am not his psychiatrist. It's not

my job to fix him."

—Write to Elizabeth Bernstein at [Bonds@wsj.com](mailto:Bonds@wsj.com) or follow her column at [www.Facebook.com/EBernsteinWSJ](http://www.Facebook.com/EBernsteinWSJ).

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