

The Nice Girl Syndrome

*Stop Being Manipulated and Abused—
and Start Standing Up for Yourself*

BEVERLY ENGEL



John Wiley & Sons, Inc.

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This book is dedicated to the many women in the world who still believe they have to be nice in order to be loved, accepted, taken care of, and safe. It is also for all the women's advocates who work so diligently to help women understand that it is better to be strong than to be nice.

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Last but certainly not least, I want to thank all the Nice Girls I have worked with throughout the years. Your courage and determination to become Strong Women inspired me to write this book.

Introduction

In this day and age, you would think that women would have learned enough about assertiveness, boundaries, and codependency that they wouldn't continue to be used and abused. There certainly are enough books on the subjects. So why is it that women continue to be victimized and taken advantage of by lovers, partners, family members, friends, and co-workers?

The main reason certainly lies in the fact that we still allow abusive men to mistreat women. Although there has been some progress when it comes to exposing and treating abusers, there are still far too many men who believe they have the right to abuse "their" women.

We've come a long way since the time when men believed that their wives and daughters were their property and they had the right to treat them any way they saw fit. But there needs to be more pressure put on abusive men to get the treatment they need.

In spite of a great deal of public education, we are still dealing with a huge problem when it comes to the abuse of women. Statistics tell us that women continue to be abused in record numbers. For example:

- The American Medical Association estimates that over 4 million women are victims of severe assaults by boyfriends and husbands each year.
- Around the world, at least 1 in every 3 women has been beaten, coerced into sex, or otherwise abused in her lifetime.
- Nearly one-third of American women (31 percent) report being physically or sexually abused by a

husband or a boyfriend at some point in their lives.

- Approximately 1 in 5 female high school students report being physically and/or sexually abused by a dating partner.
- Three in 4 women (76 percent) who reported that they had been raped and/or physically assaulted since age eighteen said that a current or former husband, cohabitating partner, or date committed the assault.
- Nearly one-fifth of women (18 percent) reported experiencing a completed or attempted rape at some time in their lives.
- Annually in the United States, 503,485 women are stalked by an intimate partner. Seventy-eight percent of stalking victims are women.

In addition to there not being enough done to expose and treat abusive men, I propose that another reason women continue to be victimized is that they are too nice for their own good. This niceness attracts the wrong kind of people and sends the message that these women are easy targets to be taken advantage of, controlled, and even emotionally, physically, and sexually abused. It also prevents women from standing up for themselves and keeps them in relationships that are unhealthy or abusive.

During my long career as a psychotherapist, I've often heard clients describe painful, shocking, and even bizarre experiences. After thirty years of practice, specializing in abuse, I have become somewhat hardened to just how cruel we human beings can be to one another. And yet there is something that I never seem to get used to: how often women put up with unacceptable, often horrible treatment from others, especially men. Every time I hear a woman describe the mistreatment, abuse, even sadistic cruelty that she has endured, it saddens me. Although I know the answers, I often find myself thinking, "Why does she put up with this?" Even more upsetting to me is that often these

women are worried about their abusive partners. “I don’t know what he’ll do without me,” they frequently respond when we talk about their getting out of the abusive relationship. Or, “I know that my leaving will kill him. He can’t stand to be alone.” In the midst of their own personal crises, they are more worried about their abusive partners than they are about themselves.

I’ve written numerous books, many about recovering from some form of abuse. In most of those books, in addition to offering survivors advice and strategies on how to cope with or get away from an abuser, I have asked them to look at their part in the situation. Always stressing that I do not mean to blame the victim in any way, I encourage them to look for the reasons they have stayed in an abusive relationship and why they chose an abuser in the first place. In this book, I will ask victims and survivors to go one step further—to look for the roots of their Nice Girl behavior.

It is my contention that Nice Girl behavior sets women up to be misused and abused. This does not mean that women cause men to become abusive. It does not mean that women are masochists. What it does mean is that by being too nice, women send a strong message to those who already have a tendency to use and abuse. The message is: “My need to be seen as nice (or sweet or innocent) is more powerful than my instinct to protect myself.”

The hard truth is that women cannot afford to be Nice Girls. It simply is not safe. Too many people (women as well as men) take advantage of any weakness they find in another person. Being too nice is certainly viewed as a weakness.

In this book, I write about the difference between Nice Girls and what I call Strong Women. I teach women how to put aside their Nice Girl thinking and behavior and to instead adopt what I call Strong Women thinking and

behavior. Although not every Nice Girl gets raped or is emotionally, verbally, or physically abused in her relationships, every Nice Girl is putting herself at risk by continuing to believe and act as she does. Nice Girls tend to put up with inappropriate or abusive behavior, to minimize the damage they are experiencing, and to make excuses for their partners. *The Nice Girl Syndrome* will help women to stop being nice and start being strong, to stand up for themselves, and to refuse to be treated in abusive ways.

The primary audience for *The Nice Girl Syndrome* is women who have been or are currently being emotionally, verbally, or physically abused by their partners; women who have been raped or date-raped; and women who are being or have been stalked by an intimate partner. But nearly every woman has some Nice Girl still left in her. While younger women (ages eighteen to thirty) will be especially attracted to this book, women thirty-one and older will also find the book interesting, provocative, and helpful. Unfortunately, Nice Girls don't tend to grow out of this behavior all that easily.

This book is not about codependency or "relationship addiction." The self-help plan for codependency, as outlined by CODA (Codependents Anonymous) and books such as Robin Norwood's *Women Who Love Too Much* is for women to *surrender*. My treatment program, on the other hand, has more to do with the notion of standing up for your rights.

Susan Faludi, in her groundbreaking book *Backlash: The Undeclared War against American Women*, noted that instead of encouraging women to become stronger, to defend themselves, and to challenge men to change, Norwood recommended that women "build [their] willingness to surrender," and "let go of self-will." Taking the initiative to improve one's situation was not part of the Norwood plan. Instead, she advised letting go of "the

determination to make things happen.” She further explained, “You must accept the fact that you may not know what is best in a given situation.”

You will not hear anything like this in my book. In fact, you will hear the opposite. I encourage women to trust their instincts more and to never allow anyone to tell them that they do not know what is best for them. I will encourage them to become more assertive, not more passive.

Norwood’s plan, modeled on Alcoholics Anonymous’s 12-step program, advised women seeking the source of their pain to refrain from looking beyond themselves, a habit she calls “blaming.” My plan encourages women to stop taking all the blame for the problems in their relationships and to begin to recognize that often they are putting up with intolerable behavior from others. Blaming an abusive partner, for example, in the interest of freeing yourself from an intolerable situation can be a healthy thing if it means that you stop blaming yourself. I encourage women to stop blaming themselves and place their righteous anger where it belongs: on the people, past and present, who have mistreated or abused them.

While I do address some of the same issues that books on people-pleasing do, such as discomfort with and fear of anger, hostility, conflict, and confrontation, I also name and focus on other factors that contribute to women’s victimization, such as the long history of female oppression, feeling powerless and helpless, being too gullible, being in denial about the current dangers in our society, being in denial about one’s own dark side, having an overly strong need to be fair, and having religious and spiritual beliefs that set one up to be used and abused.

In addition to covering the psychological reasons for niceness (guilt, shame, low self-esteem, fear of confrontation, fear of rejection, intense fear of being alone),

I also focus heavily on the *societal* reasons, such as the fact that women and girls are *conditioned* to become Nice Girls.

I focus specifically on the *beliefs and attitudes* that set women up to be used and abused. I offer a specific program for unearthing and discarding these deeply buried false beliefs and attitudes and replacing them with the truth. And I offer remedies—exercises and steps—women can take to heal themselves of the brainwashing that created these false beliefs in the first place. Finally, I offer an empowerment challenge that will help women develop what I call the four C's: confidence, competence, conviction, and courage.

In *The Nice Girl Syndrome*, women will learn that they can be kind without sacrificing their souls and that they can give people the benefit of the doubt without being pushovers. Most important, they will learn they can remain feminine without giving up their power.

Most women don't want to continue their Nice Girl act. It has become too cumbersome. It feels dishonest. It keeps them from finding out what they really feel and who they really are. In the following chapters you will learn how and why women have been programmed to hide their true feelings behind a mask of sweetness and niceness. By learning the causes of the Nice Girl syndrome you will be taking the first step toward dismantling the false beliefs that are the underpinnings of the Nice Girl syndrome.

PART ONE

STRONG WOMEN AREN'T NICE

1

The High Price of Being Too Nice

When one is pretending, the entire body revolts.

—ANAÏS NIN

Are you a Nice Girl? Do people often take advantage of your patience, compassion, and generosity? Are you constantly let down because other people don't treat you as well as you treat them? Do you constantly give others the benefit of the doubt, only to be disappointed when they don't come through? Do you tend to give other people too many chances? Is being too nice becoming a burden? If you answered yes to some or all of these questions, not only are you not alone but you are in the majority. There are millions of other Nice Girls worldwide who think and feel exactly as you do. In fact, it is safe to say that every woman has some Nice Girl in her. Here are just a few examples from my practice.

Heather's boyfriend had an old car that continually broke down. She worried about his having to drive his old clunker into the city every day to work, so she let him drive her car. After all, she rationalized, she didn't have to go as far to work and could easily take the bus. One day, Heather went out to her car only to find that a tire boot had been put on it. It turned out that her boyfriend had been getting tickets and

then not paying for them. But this wasn't the worst part of the story. Instead of realizing that her boyfriend was not responsible enough to drive her car, Heather allowed him to continue to do so. Two months later, he totaled her car. The insurance company paid her only for what the car was currently worth, which wasn't enough for her to buy a new car. Did Heather's boyfriend help her pay for a new car? No. Did he even agree to drive her to work until she got a new car? No; he said it would make him late for work. Most important, did Heather say anything to him about his irresponsibility and inconsideration? No.

Mandy's husband, Jason, puts her down a lot. He corrects her whenever she mispronounces a word. He rolls his eyes in exasperation whenever she has a hard time figuring out how appliances work. He even makes disparaging remarks about her in front of other people. Mandy's friends tell her that Jason is a jerk and shouldn't treat her like that, but she explains that that is just the way he is. She knows Jason really loves her. He gets like that when he's stressed or tired.

Whenever Gwen's boyfriend, Ron, drinks too much, he starts treating her very disrespectfully in public. He talks loudly to others about how "stacked" Gwen is and what a great ass she has. He touches her inappropriately in front of others. And worst of all, he encourages other men to flirt with and dance with her. Gwen, a rather shy person, is very embarrassed and uncomfortable with all this. She quietly tells Ron to stop these behaviors, but her request has no effect on him. So instead of getting up and walking out, she just silently continues to take it for the rest of the evening.

Carolyn didn't like the way her manager at work looked at her or the fact that he often told her off-color jokes. She wondered if she had given him the wrong idea, so she started dressing more conservatively. Nothing changed. She

thought of saying something to him, but she was afraid that he would be insulted, which could cause even more problems at work.

Heather, Mandy, Gwen, and Carolyn are all Nice Girls. Like many women, they are afraid to speak their minds either out of fear of hurting someone's feelings or out of fear of being rejected or hurt themselves. Unfortunately, they almost always end up paying quite a price for their silence. Heather lost her car to an irresponsible, uncaring boyfriend; Carolyn was constantly being sexually harassed; and the self-esteem of Mandy and Gwen is constantly being diminished.

What Is a Nice Girl?

Being a Nice Girl doesn't necessarily have anything to do with morals. Monica Lewinsky was a Nice Girl because she was naive enough to believe that President Bill Clinton loved her and was actually going to leave Hillary for her. She was a Nice Girl because she put his needs ahead of her own and was willing to continue lying for him, even after they were caught, and because she kept hoping they had a future together even when it was clear he had dumped her.

Neither does being a Nice Girl necessarily have anything to do with being kind or generous or respectful. Oprah Winfrey is all those things, but I don't believe anyone would describe her as being "nice." As warm as she is, she also sets very clear boundaries, letting people know what she will or will not put up with. And she is a person you wouldn't want to cross.

A Nice Girl is more concerned about what others think of her than she is about what she thinks of herself. Being a Nice Girl means that a woman is more concerned about

other people's feelings than she is about her own. And it means she is more concerned about giving people the benefit of the doubt than she is about trusting her own perceptions.

According to the dictionary, synonyms for the word *nice* include *careful, pleasant, subtle, agreeable, likable, delightful, good, admirable, pleasing*. These words describe a Nice Girl to a T. In fact, many Nice Girls have an investment in being perceived in all of these ways. But I also think of other words when I think of the word *nice*, namely *compliant, passive, wishy-washy, and phony*.

Nice Girls are compliant; they do what they are told. They've learned that it is easier to just do what someone asks than to risk an argument. Nice girls are passive; they let things happen. They are often too afraid to stand up for themselves. They are walking doormats who are easily manipulated and controlled. Nice Girls are wishy-washy. Because they are so afraid of confrontation, they say one thing one time and another thing another time. They want to please everyone all the time, and because of this they agree with one person and then turn right around and agree with someone else who has the exact opposite belief. Because they are afraid of telling others how they really feel, Nice Girls can be phony; they pretend a lot. They pretend they like someone when they don't. They pretend they want to be somewhere when they don't.

I realize that it may sound harsh to call someone phony—or compliant or passive or wishy-washy, for that matter. But I prefer to tell it the way it is, and in this book I am going to pump it up a notch or two because Nice Girls can also be something else—stubborn. Many Nice Girls firmly believe that their way of operating is the right way. They are convinced that it works for them. And they tend to think they are taking the moral high ground and that others could

benefit from being more like them. I am going to be firm also, because I know that for some of you it's going to be an uphill battle to get you to let go of your Nice Girl mentality.

This doesn't mean that I don't have compassion for those who are stuck in the Nice Girl syndrome, because I do. I understand all the reasons that you act as you do. I understand that it is not your fault. I understand that due to cultural conditioning, parental messages, and childhood experiences, those of you with the Nice Girl syndrome are simply doing what you have been conditioned or taught to do. I understand because I have been a Nice Girl myself.

How Big a Problem Is the Nice Girl Syndrome?

Surely in this day and age we must be talking about only a small number of women, right? Unfortunately, we are not. There are far more Nice Girls out there than you can imagine. Even the most empowered women have some Nice Girl in them.

Most women have tolerated unacceptable behavior from friends, family, or lovers for far too long in their attempts to be understanding, tolerant, and compassionate. We've all known women who are too nice for their own good. When someone does something to them that is inconsiderate, offensive, or even cruel, instead of getting angry they try to "understand" the other person. They spend more time asking why the person did what was done than in telling the other person how unacceptable his or her actions were.

If we didn't have so many Nice Girls, the rate of domestic violence and emotional abuse would be much lower than it is. We would not have so many women who stand by while their children are being emotionally, physically, or even sexually abused by their husbands and boyfriends. We

would not have so many women staying in relationships in which they are being manipulated and taken advantage of. And we would not have so many women remaining silent when they are being sexually harassed, date-raped, or sexually pressured by their partners.

Is This Book for You?

This book is for all women who have yet to learn that if they don't take care of themselves, no one else will. It is for every woman who puts her own needs aside on a regular basis to either attract or keep a man. And it is for all the women who are beginning to learn that being nice doesn't pay off in the long run. Most especially, it is for all the women who are currently being emotionally, verbally, or physically abused.

If you are uncertain whether you are a Nice Girl, the following questionnaire will help you decide.

QUESTIONNAIRE: ARE YOU A NICE GIRL?

1. Do you have a difficult time asserting yourself with service people? (For example, sending a plate of food back, telling a salesperson you are not interested.)
2. Do you get talked into things, including buying things, because you can't say no?
3. Are you overly concerned about what people think of you?
4. Is it overly important to you that people like you?
5. Are you afraid to say how you really feel out of fear of making someone angry?
6. Do you apologize too much or too often?
7. Do you have friends or acquaintances you don't really like or have much in common with but feel obligated to continue seeing?
8. Do you often say yes to invitations because you don't want the person to feel rejected?

9. Do you tend to give in because it makes you feel selfish if you refuse to help someone?
10. Are you afraid people will dislike you if you're not cooperative?
11. Do you have trouble speaking up as soon as something or someone is unfair to you?
12. Do you hesitate telling someone that he or she has hurt your feelings or made you angry because you don't want him or her to feel bad?
13. Do you avoid telling someone he or she has upset you because you don't think it will do any good or will only cause a big problem between you?
14. Do you have people in your life who take advantage of you?
15. Do you often take the blame for things just to avoid an argument or to avoid rejection or abandonment?
16. Do you often make excuses for people's poor behavior, telling yourself that they didn't mean it or they didn't know better?
17. Do you avoid conflict or confrontation at all costs?
18. Do you get a terrible feeling when someone is angry with you?
19. Do you give someone the benefit of the doubt even when others tell you this person is trouble?
20. Do you give people another chance even when they continue with the same hurtful or inappropriate behavior?
21. Do you tell yourself that you don't have a right to complain about a person's behavior if you've ever been guilty of the same behavior?
22. Are you attracted to bad boys or people with a large dark side?
23. Do you strongly believe in being fair even when other people are treating you unfairly?

If you answered yes to two or more of these questions, you have some Nice Girl in you no matter how assertive, successful, or self-actualized you think you are. This book will help you to shed whatever vestiges of niceness you still have.

If you answered yes to more than five of these questions, you still have some work to do in terms of changing the way you view yourself in the world.

If you answered yes to more than ten of these questions, you have an extreme version of the Nice Girl syndrome and will need to do some serious work to rid yourself of the negative and false beliefs that are basically dictating your life.

You Cannot Afford to Be a Nice Girl

Why should you let go of your Nice Girl thinking and acting? Women today simply cannot afford to be Nice Girls. What do I mean by this? First and foremost, Nice Girls are far more likely to become victimized—emotionally, physically, and sexually—than are those who are not so nice.

For example, Karen agreed to go out with a man from work because she felt sorry for him. “I didn’t like him, but he kept asking me out and I felt bad about constantly turning him down. He seemed so awkward around women. I thought it would be nice if I offered to make him a nice home-cooked meal.” That night, after dinner, the man from work raped Karen. Not only did she blame herself for being so stupid as to invite him to her home, but she didn’t report it. “I was just too embarrassed. I didn’t want everyone at work to find out about it.” And so every workday, Karen lives in fear that she will run into the man who raped her.

Karen's niceness had actually put her life in jeopardy. She allowed her concern for someone else to blind her to the dangers of dealing with a stranger. Nice Girls often are targets for con artists, rapists, and other attackers. Because Nice Girls tend to be focused outside of themselves—helping others, worrying about not hurting others' feelings—they don't focus enough attention on protecting themselves, their feelings, and their very safety. In Karen's case, she was so busy being nice that she didn't pay attention to her instincts and did not check out how others felt about the man. She was so concerned about her image—another common Nice Girl trait—that she didn't report a man who was dangerous to other women.

Because Nice Girls tend to be gullible and to give others the benefit of the doubt, they are far more likely to be taken advantage of, cheated on, abused, or abandoned by their partners than are not-so-nice girls. Cindy suspected for quite some time that her husband was having an affair. He started having to work late and was no longer interested in having sex with her, and she even thought she smelled perfume on his shirts when he came home. But each time she confronted him, he swore to her that it was not true. He seemed so sincere and so deeply wounded by her accusations that she always doubted herself. "I decided I was just a suspicious person and that it was unfair for me to accuse him when I had no proof," she shared with me during her first session. The reason Cindy had begun seeing me? She found out that her husband was, in fact, having an affair and that it was only one of a series of many.

Nice Girls are also far more likely to be taken for granted, overworked, underpaid, and passed over for promotions than are not-so-nice girls. For example, Kendra was passed over for a promotion two times. Each time, her boss explained that the reason was that he needed her too much where she was. "I just can't function without you," he'd tell

her. “You’re my right arm.” It felt so good to Kendra to be needed that she didn’t recognize she was being manipulated. It never occurred to her to ask her boss for a raise since she was so indispensable.

In addition to being targets for abuse and manipulation, there are other reasons to give up your Nice Girl image, namely:

- People don’t respect Nice Girls.
- If you don’t tell others what makes you angry, upset, unhappy, or disappointed, there is little chance of fixing the problem.
- People don’t really know you unless you tell them how you really feel.
- If you don’t tell people how you honestly feel, you are being dishonest.
- Unless you are honest about who you are and how you feel, there is little chance of your experiencing true intimacy in your relationships.

Nice Girls Aren’t Always Nice

Another reason for giving up your Nice Girl act is that Nice Girls aren’t always nice. In fact, they can often be conniving and mean. They often complain about people behind their backs because they are too afraid to confront them to their faces. They can be passiveaggressive—meaning that even though they may be angry at someone, they smile and pretend everything is okay and then do something underhanded to get back at the person. In the past few years, we’ve been exposed to how girls and women tend to gossip about and backstab one another.

The female gender may be hardwired to be more cooperative and to value connection over confrontation, but

these very tendencies often cause girls or women to take their aggression underground. As Rachel Simmons, the author of *Odd Girl Out*, found after interviewing three hundred girls, there is a hidden culture of female aggression. Girls may not be as physically violent as boys are, but there is a silent, often equally destructive form of bullying that occurs between girls. This behavior includes name-calling, snide remarks, dirty looks, gossiping, and starting rumors. Because women value connection so highly, to be excluded from the group may be the ultimate form of revenge or punishment. In some cultures, such as many in the Middle East, women learn a very poignant yet nonviolent way of wielding power with dirty looks, body postures, and silence.

Nice Girls often end relationships without notice when someone better comes along. Nice Girls can be too nice in some areas of their lives and not so nice in others. For example, some Nice Girls put up with unacceptable behavior from their lovers or mates but are impatient, angry, and unreasonable with their children. Some are overly solicitous at work but are rude and demanding at home. Often, Nice Girls put up with unacceptable behavior for so long that they finally blow. Then they feel horribly guilty, apologize profusely, and overcompensate by being super nice to the person in the future.

The Seven Types of Nice Girls

Every woman has some Nice Girl in her, but some have more than others. For this reason, this book will be of particular interest to the following types of women:

1. The Doormat. This is the stereotypical passive female who allows others to walk all over her. She suffers from “terminal niceness” and never seems to learn