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# Turning Envy into a Positive Force



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**Envy, the most corrosive of emotions, lurks in even the most supportive work environment. Take steps to manage your own green-eyed monster.**

As VP of Quality Control of a global pharmaceutical company, Dorothy was infamous for her ability to radiate negative energy. Resentful, angry and highly irritable, she was a powerhouse for disparaging others, begrudging their positions, minimising their intelligence, and failing to acknowledge any form of success.

Most people who worked closely with her had learned (usually the hard way) that behind her overt pleasantries lingered a deep and unyielding resentment. She would express her feelings towards others behind their backs, but if the opportunity arose, she was just as quick to vent her envy openly and defiantly. Seeing others succeed was not something Dorothy accepted easily. If someone would call attention to her negative attitude, she would immediately apologise, but turn the tables around by rationalising or intellectualising her actions.

**A sin without pleasure**

This seething green-eyed monster (to quote Shakespeare) that Dorothy was harbouring created a considerable amount of distress both inside and outside the organisation.

Reflecting on Dorothy's behaviour, have you ever encountered someone who has made your life impossible because of envy? Felt threatened by the comments of an envious person? Or possibly had problems with envy yourself?

Envy is among the most powerful forces in human life. The dark emotions that arise when we see someone else possessing something that we deeply want can inflame feelings of inferiority, hostility, resentment and, in extreme cases the desire to spoil whatever it is we covet.

Historically, envy is listed as one of the seven deadly sins, but it's a sin without any pleasure attached (very different from other ones like lust or gluttony). The philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer described envy as *Schadenfreude*, "a mischievous delight in the misfortunes of others that remains the worst trait in human nature". What makes this amalgamation of feelings even more destructive is the accompanying feelings of shame and guilt. More often, however, envy is so shamefully hidden that others are not able to recognise or perceive it.

### **Envy as a motivator**

The "deadly sin" of envy is ubiquitous in human relationships – there will always be someone who has something we desire. Therefore, we should accept it as an inevitable part of the human experience. Under certain circumstances, envy may even be a good thing. "Constructive" envy refers to situations whereby people admire the person envied which includes the wish to become like them. In this form, envy signals an unfilled need and can turn into a great motivating force. Unfortunately, envy is difficult to manage, and it is much easier to fall into its more destructive form.

### **The destructive force of envy**

The destructive form of envy has a complex etiology. This persistent feeling that other people have something that they want results in incessant social comparisons that threaten the envier's self-image. Such people feel a sense of lacking, deficiency, or inadequacy. Consequently, they become resentful towards others who are perceived as successful, be it moneywise, power,

status, beauty, luck, or simply happiness. Not only does the envious person succumb to unhappiness, but these people also desire to hurt others and are hurt in return. No wonder that envy has been linked to various forms of maladjustment such as poor interpersonal relations, low self-esteem, depression, anxiety, anger management, and even criminal behaviour.

The roots of envious feelings are developmental; a legacy of early comparisons made within the family setting is the basic scenario whereby the envious person ends up with the lingering feeling that he or she got a rough deal compared to the other members of the family. Physical, intellectual, or emotional defects may also accentuate feelings of inferiority.

Unfortunately, because envy is considered a socially-unacceptable – hence shameful – emotion, many who suffer from it deny having these feelings both publicly and privately, making it a difficult problem to identify and deal with.

### **Changing perceptions**

Envy can be mastered by changing our perceptions, refocusing attention on the real meaning of what it means to be happy with what we have.

Returning to Dorothy, being fired for the second time within a five-year period made her realise the degree to which her envious feelings had affected her emotional well-being and her relationships. Encouraged by one of the few friends she still had left, she decided to seek help.

During her sessions with an executive coach, Dorothy confessed to feeling constantly envious of others. She mentioned that she couldn't help but compare herself to others – and always felt shortchanged. She described how she would obsess about her perceived rivals and how she would get angry and vindictive towards them. She also mentioned how playing the “spoiler” would make her feel better temporarily, but ultimately result in feelings of shame and guilt. She had always been haunted by the sense that life was unfair and felt that others possessed the qualities, virtues, values, and attributes that she wished she had. Her envious feelings had even affected her marriage. She envied her husband's career and admitted that it gave her pleasure when he failed. Dorothy also confessed to being resentful at having to celebrate friends' successes.

At times, she would ask herself how a truly loving person could behave the way she did? She didn't want to be this kind of person; but she felt that she

was stuck in a vicious cycle leading to nowhere and instead of working productively towards her own self-improvement, she ended up spending all her energy trying to eliminate whatever she perceived as “competition”.

### **Refocusing on the positive**

To help Dorothy get her envious feelings under control, the coach suggested she make it a practice to carefully monitor her thoughts and to figure out whenever they were of an envious nature. It was important that she could catch and correct her thinking processes and minimise envious feelings before they could become full blown.

Doing so made Dorothy aware that her envy toward her sister, whom she felt had always been preferred by her mother, was at the core of her problems. She found that by doing a simple mental exercise, reminding herself of this pivotal relationship, helped make her aware that there were too many (perceived) sisters in her life.

The coach also helped Dorothy to refocus on the positive. She came to recognise that the dynamics within her family had not been only negative. There had been many positive experiences with her family, including ones with her sister. Capturing these memories was a step forward in providing a more balanced and healthy perspective.

### **Slaying the green-eyed monster**

As time went by, step by step, Dorothy learned to go beyond feeling wronged in whatever situation she found herself. She came to realise that resorting to envious ruminations was not helping her progress in life. Instead of obsessing over the unfair advantages of others, she learned a more constructive way of appreciating and cultivating her own qualities – and thereby slowly slaying the green-eyed monster inside.

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