



# The Green-Eyed Monster

**Envy destroys relationships and corrodes self-respect. Unfortunately, it also frequently targets the wealthy.**

**L**OST A JOB 20 years ago because of wealth. I had worked my way into a position that was precious to me, and I loved it. From time to time we were restructured, and eventually I found myself with yet another new boss. This one pointed out a problem to me: I was earning more than he was. My family's identity was no secret in Portland, Ore., and it was clear that he resented me for my salary and for my family's wealth. He was prepared to treat me differently because of it, too. He was so annoyed that he suggested I could only continue my job as an unpaid volunteer, because he couldn't "find" enough money in his budget to pay me at all.

After I dealt with the shock of it, I decided his proposal did not appeal to me and I ended up leaving, very disappointed to lose a great job. I felt robbed of my self-worth, wondering if I had gotten the job years earlier because of family connections.

In a country obsessed with material gain and professional success, those who actually achieve success, are born into wealth, or even enjoy a momentary run of luck will notice that other people begin to treat them differently. All too often, envy rears its ugly head. Some may be able to dismiss this irrational strain of jealousy for what it is—someone else's problem. Others, however, simply cannot, and end up internalizing the hostility and negativity they receive. As a result, individuals who are the object of envy can develop problems with self-concept, trust, motivation, self-discipline, guilt, alienation, suspiciousness, communication and respect.

Envy is a mix of emotions: discontent and poor self-concept combined with resentment. Given this complexity, envy is especially difficult to manage, and can wreak havoc on relationships. Because we have so many connections—with ourselves, family, extended family, friends, coworkers and spouses or romantic partners—those who frequently find themselves the focus of envy react negatively, further straining relationships.

## AIN'T NOBODY'S BUSINESS

Envious people may ask nosy, inappropriate questions, all predicated on the assumption that because you are wealthy,



you can't understand the "real" world. Your wealth, they conclude, makes you somehow undeserving of the privacy and respect that others are afforded. For example, someone might start a question with "Since you don't have to work," or may ask how much your home, your jewelry or any personal possession costs. Once in a while, they may preface their query with the quaint

phrase, "If you don't mind my asking."

Be prepared for these intrusive questions, because they will come. It is OK to change the subject or to give an evasive answer, but it is disrespectful to yourself and others to lie, so don't do it. Respond by saying, "That is something I prefer not to discuss." Remember, these inquiries have more to do with the interlocutors' perspective—their own filter on the world—than anything about you. Don't try to change them; you can't.

Envious people let the green-eyed monster take over their relationships with you. It is essential for your own mental health that you not allow yourself to become a victim of it as well. Watch out for your own overreaction to the situation. I have one client who is extremely sensitive to others' envy; he sees it everywhere around him. He is so worried about negative thoughts others may be directing at him that he often succumbs to the stress and retreats from the world.

The best way to avoid this trap is to live your priorities. Understand how you want to live and why, and use your wealth to support that vision. Only when you are truly comfortable with who you are and the role you want wealth to play in that identity will you be able to ignore the psychologically noxious hang-ups of others. You may even find that you can be compassionate toward these unhappy individuals.

Not coming to terms with these emotions may corrode your self-respect. If you focus on the reality of your life—its triumphs, failures, aspirations and all the other components that define the existences of rich and poor alike—you will remain free to enjoy your success, and your life. ▣

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