



Dr. med. Lilly Merz Raff, lic. phil. Diethelm Raff, Andrea Hugentobler  
from the Adlerian “Center for Psychology and Education”, Meilen, Switzerland. [www.tageszentrum-meilen.ch](http://www.tageszentrum-meilen.ch)

## **SUFFERING AND PSYCHOSOMATIC DISTURBANCES FROM BEING OVERLY WELL-BEHAVED**

Mary started a therapy because she suffered from depression and often felt the need to withdraw from other people, physically as well as inwardly. She also suffered from strong pains, mainly in her neck and arms. At the same time, she had great problems at work with her boss, who treated her downright dismissively and who often made her do his work without giving her credit for it. She was unable to defend herself against it.

In therapy, Mary began to understand the connection of her afflictions today with her unconscious feelings from childhood. She realized that it was her emotional conviction that she was the one responsible and guilty for everything, who must constantly make sure that the others feel good. She must by no means be a burden to others or find her own problems important, she should in fact have none, while she felt that the problems of others were important and were to be taken seriously. She was the one responsible to find a solution for them. Furthermore, she lived with the emotionally-rooted conviction that others were in principle right and she was not, and therefore she had to endure everything. However, for a long time, she could not realize that she was letting others do to her what they wanted.

Thus, in a nutshell, Mary’s main problem was her unconscious and deeply-rooted feeling of not being right and of constantly being a burden for everyone. In the following, this problem shall be looked at from different angles. In order to understand how Mary developed this feeling in life, some examples from her childhood shall be discussed:

Mary was born as the oldest child of an Austrian family with two younger brothers.

When Mary was seven years old, a chronic disease with uncertain outcome was diagnosed, which meant that she would be repeatedly ill, would have to be operated and that she would have to organise her whole life around that disease. As Mary’s mother often had to take her to doctors and operations, an aunt would come in each case to take care of the younger brothers. Mary’s mother always indignantly made it clear to her that the aunt had to come extra for her. Therefore, Mary felt guilty and responsible for the doctor visits and the operations she needed. Her feelings developed in such a way that she believed that she should not have this problem and in any case should find a solution herself. She could not feel that she was not responsible for her disease.

At the age of five, Mary got a children’s grocery shop from her father, which her brother soon destroyed. In the eyes of her parents, it was not the little brother who was guilty but Mary, because she had not looked after her grocery shop well enough. Otherwise, so was the parents’ logic, her little brother would not have been able to put hands on it. Mary immediately agreed with her parents, since she was already used to searching the mistake on her side. Through this and many similar experiences, Mary’s erroneous conviction that she was responsible and guilty for everything got confirmed again and again. And very often she even believed that she should have prevented things from happening beforehand by observing everything in detail and by attuning to the others’ wishes immediately.



It would not have been possible for Mary to defend herself against the way she was being treated. This is exemplified by the following recent scenario: Since Mary had moved out from home a few years ago, she still visited her parents on weekends and came for dinner. Even though Mary did not like spinach – and had never liked it – her mother usually served spinach for dinner on Sunday evenings.

It did not help when Mary mentioned again and again that she did not like spinach. Her mother had ‚forgotten’ it again the following weekend. When Mary revolted against it, the mother broke into tears and lamented that she was not a good mother – and nonetheless forgot it until next weekend. As the example shows, there was no possibility for Mary to address her wishes in a normal way. Her mother barely took notice of her and passed over her in the simplest everyday needs.

This way her mother treated her and the emotionally-rooted convictions which Mary derived from that led to her believing that she must continuously watch out not to make any mistakes or be a burden. This meant for her to ignore herself, to attune herself completely to the others’ needs and to create a good atmosphere for everyone.

With this emotional frame of mind, she could not feel that it was unfair and unusual that she was treated differently than her brothers: She had to work much more in the household, she was responsible for many more tasks and she also received much harder punishment than her brothers.

So she became accustomed to burden herself with everything, to be blamed for everything that did not work, to always smile happily and to try to put everyone into good humour even when she felt terrible. She became a nervous child, but this was hidden behind her ‚cheerfulness’.

On the basis of these feelings, it is no wonder that she also blamed herself for her medical problems. When the illness began to have stronger impacts, she thought it was her fault and did not tell her family. Although she had terrible pains when walking and had an accident on her way to school, she did not turn to anyone. On the contrary, as she believed that she had caused the pains herself, she tried to go earlier to bed and eat healthily. As her condition got nevertheless worse, she believed that she had failed and felt ashamed. Thus, she did not inform her mother until the pains became unbearable. The doctor was very surprised that she had waited so long before she had come for treatment. This again provoked a bad conscience in Mary.

From now on, she suffered from being a burden to the family. Every action and every remark from her family which could have been interpreted as such, she took as confirmation that she was ‚hurting’ the family with her illness. Therefore, it was her aim to prove to her family that she was able to handle all aspects of life just as well as everyone else.

On the one hand, the family took care of Mary, but on the other hand, it was true that they often also felt that she was a burden, due to their own unconscious feelings. Mary developed that she did not want to be helped in order to avoid this feeling of rejection, and therefore continued to do much more in the household than her brothers. The family unfortunately assumed that girls actually should do more and were not able to see that it was too great a strain for her.

The prevailing mood for this treatment of Mary came from her mother, who had been unconsciously jealous of her daughter since her birth. Her mother had a dominant influence on the



whole family, so that all the family members felt convinced that they ought not give too much attention to Mary – or else her brothers would come up short.

The mother's jealousy towards her daughter had developed for the following reason: She had grown up with an older sister who had an illness of the lungs. Thus, one always had to be considerate of her sister, who received much more attention and care because of her illness. From Mary's mother's point of view, her sister had a 'nice life' and received everything that Mary's mother wished for, too. Out of these experiences, Mary's mother developed a strong feeling of being disadvantaged.

A strong, unconscious wish for attention and consideration arose: She should finally be the centre of attention and the others should take care of her. In that way, she believed she could overcome the feeling of coming up short. Also, out of her childhood experiences, she formed the general conviction that older children were always treated better than younger ones.

This same sentiment also came up with her own children: She believed that her oldest daughter, Mary, had an easy life and was stealing the attention from the younger children as well as from herself. Every tiny bit of attention and love that Mary should have received and every one of her needs was too much for her mother, as she immediately felt reminded of her older sister and felt that she was missing out. She had developed the unconscious, emotionally-rooted belief that her sister's illness of the lungs had served to receive attention and care, while she had had no such 'means' at her disposal. She had been in strong emotional distress as a child and had not known how to help herself other than fight against this preferential treatment by disapproving of her sister and doing everything she could to make sure her sister would not be favoured even more. She downright held it against her sister that she had this illness which gave her 'such a good life'. Therefore, Mary's mother saw it as purposeful and selfish whenever her daughter needed something or received attention, which 'gave her the right' to make her feel guilty for it. Mary, on the other hand, was as a child of course unable to understand her mother's false view of her. So she really felt guilty, had a bad conscience for causing so many problems and for being the reason that her family had to suffer and that her mother was unhappy. Thus, she also thought that she was responsible for her mother's wellbeing and believed that she should have no problems and should always be in a good mood. If she had a problem, she was convinced that she ought to solve it on her own. These were the reasons why both the mother's and the daughter's emotional convictions were further intensified when Mary's illness broke out at the age of seven.

The examples mentioned before, such as the fact that the mother kept forgetting that Mary did not like spinach, are examples for the mother's jealousy which drove her to ignore what her daughter's wishes were.

As an adult, this pattern continued. Mary wanted a nice watch for her fortieth birthday from her mother but never got one, although she had mentioned several times that she would like one. Her younger brothers, however, both got beautiful watches for their fortieth birthdays from their mother, without even having expressed a wish for it.

Taking her feelings from childhood into adulthood, Mary always felt guilty and responsible even for things that were obviously the fault of someone else, as the following example shows:



Mary's boyfriend caused a car accident while travelling with Mary and friends of theirs in France. At the site of the accident, no one was able to react adequately. It was Mary who organised everything, who talked to the people and took responsibility because she felt guilty, although she had not caused the accident. She thought that she might have talked too much during the trip, or that since she had been the one who had wanted to take it, all of this would never have happened if it had not been for her. After the accident, Mary began to feel more and more pain which could not be medically explained. The feeling of guilt was oppressing her very much.

Her pains were now also getting worse in connection with her boss who treated her – and everyone else – unfairly and impudently. She was the heart of the business and the boss's right hand and she settled, without complaining, all the problems that her boss caused with his customers and co-workers due to his affects. For many years, Mary accepted the bad treatment and even blamed herself for everything he criticised. This can be explained by the fact that her boss treated her in a similar way like her mother: He ignored her, he did not show any consideration towards her, did not appreciate her efforts and criticised her for everything whenever he felt inferior. Mary did notice that there was some kind of injustice, but nevertheless, she could not see clearly how devaluing the treatment was, nor was she able to confront her boss or quit.

During this time, Mary went to psychotherapy where she discussed her unconscious feelings intensively. She got insight into her emotionally-rooted beliefs and maladaptive patterns which she had developed in childhood. She went to a psychological day centre where she was almost daily surrounded by people who liked and appreciated her and who had a lot of knowledge about human nature. In many therapeutical group sessions, she got to know people with similar emotional convictions and could realise through their example that such feelings – of not being right and having to satisfy others – were no longer necessary. Understanding how other people had developed their feelings helped her grasp the development of her own beliefs in childhood, which she could then begin to recognise as erroneous. For example, she could see that it was false to believe that everything was her fault and her responsibility. She developed trust towards her therapist and the other people in the centre and thus had the chance to correct her false views: She realized that she was not ‚wrong‘, that it was okay to be the centre of attention sometimes, that she did not need to feel guilty when other people were in a bad mood and that she also had the right to defend herself against bad treatment and was not responsible to find a solution to all problems for others.

Due to her therapy and the insight into her emotional convictions and her life style, Mary stopped feeling hurt whenever her boss treated her badly and began to answer back. When her boss became angry because she was telephoning in the same room and threw his expensive ball-point pen after her, she threw it out of the window. Despite her bad conscience and her doubts whether this had been right, it was a success that she had not let herself be treated in this way anymore. Some months later, Mary even dared – without feeling guilty or justifying herself – to leave the room and not take her boss's accusations to heart. Soon, her back and neck pains got better thanks to this change of feelings.

As things developed, she told her boss in a direct and clear way whenever he treated her or others badly and that she would not accept it anymore. She dared to pack her things and leave if he became offensive. Since then, her boss got used to interacting more adequately and fairly.



Over time, she stopped being upset every time her mother cooked spinach on Sundays and once simply took along her own vegetables. After the mother had burst into tears and the whole family had agreed that Mary was a bad daughter, no more spinach was served on Sundays.

One day, Mary got into a situation which was especially difficult for her regarding her life style.

It was very cold and she wanted to get her winter boots out of the cellar, but she could not remember exactly where she had left them. A friend of hers offered to come with her and help her, since Mary could not stay too long in the cellar due to her chronic disease. But because Mary did not want to cause problems or be a burden to others and therefore tried to avoid having to accept help, she denied. In that very moment, she was probably not aware of the reason why she turned down the offer. Lots of people with similar feelings like Mary simply feel uncomfortable in such situations but do not know the reasons behind those reactions. A third person, who was also with Mary and her friend and had followed the conversation, said to Mary: „Do you have something against your friend?“ Mary exclaimed: „No, of course not!“ – „But if you do not accept your friend’s help, she will feel rejected.“ Now the third person had put Mary into a dilemma: On the one hand, she did not allow herself to accept help, on the other hand, she did not want anyone to feel rejected by her. She now felt that she was a problem, no matter which option she chose. This situation was so unbearable for her that she exclaimed that she did not want to live anymore. However, after this first shock, it was good for Mary that she had been made aware of the fact that her continuous resistance against help could affront others. Mary learned that she was free to accept help and was not a burden to others when she did so.

Mary experienced in connection with her change of feelings a sad, yet liberating episode with her best friend. The relationship had been good as long as her friend could decide what, when and how things were done. Mary was used to give in, step back and have no needs of her own, but falsely believed they had a good friendship. However, this caused her pain in her shoulders and arms and made her nervous. This nervousness can be explained by the fact that Mary was constantly agitated whether she could reach her high and unrealistic goal of pleasing her friend and not making any mistakes.

In this time when Mary started to be aware of her physical and emotional needs and dared to express her wishes, it happened that they had planned a holiday, which her friend had wanted to be luxurious. However, Mary did not have as much money at her disposal as usual because of the accident she had had and therefore she wanted to make cheaper holidays. Her friend did not want to change her plans, even though she had just spent 5 weeks on a luxurious trip. She insisted on an expensive hotel and suggested that Mary use a credit. In the past, Mary would have given in, but this time she dared to contradict her friend by telling her that she could not afford such luxurious holidays. Her friend could not accept that and broke off their relationship. In a letter, Mary tried to explain everything, but in vain. Presumably, the friend did not understand the world anymore and considered it as the end of their friendship.

Mary suffered a lot because of the broken friendship, but she also had to recognize that the friendship was based on her obeying her friend’s wishes. Mary had always come up short. In time, she could see that she had had to endure a lot because their friendship had only worked as long as her friend had the lead and she put her own needs last – just like it had been with her mother.



She became aware that there were people in her surrounding who were truly interested in her and wanted to have a friendship with her based on equality. She could make the new experience that it was a pleasure for others to help her, to respond to her wishes and needs, to think through all kinds of questions with her and to undertake things with her.

Nowadays, Mary does not accept it anymore when someone in her family, her boss or other people treat her badly and she focuses more and more on other people with whom she can have an equal and warm-hearted relationship. Even when she sometimes still falls into a mood from her childhood and believes that she has to please the whole world, she now stops there and does not withdraw herself. Today, she is much more among other people, expresses her opinion and does not hold back with her whole personality. In this way, she can get rid of her downcast moods and pains quickly again whenever they reappear.