

# WHEN YOU LOVE *too much*

Empathy should not come at a cost to your own emotional health. But that's easier said than done, writes **Nicole Madigan**.

**T**he desire to be happy is arguably society's most commonly shared aspiration. But for many people, women in particular, their ability to feel happy is hinged on other people – their presence, their approval or their happiness. The experts call it having an “external locus of control”.

“Being happy comes from feeling at peace and deeply satisfied with who we are as a person,” says Relationships Australia's Susan De Campo. “This sense of personal satisfaction is, ideally, achieved via a solidly held belief that you are a decent person who acts in accordance with your values.”

Having an “internal locus of control” – relying solely on yourself for your happiness – is easier said than done. “Women are more at risk because we are given many messages,

from a very young age, about ‘external’ factors – especially how we present, what we look like, how fat we are, how big our boobs are, how we should behave in soft, gentle, caring ways, and so on,” says De Campo. “So, having been well trained to focus on external factors, it's not easy to withstand such messages and say, ‘Oh, of course, it is my soul and personality that really matters.’”

According to a recent report published in the *Review of European Studies*, those who are more internally focused tend to make better leaders – and are more likely to be leaders, due to a greater level of confidence.

But the report also found that happiness was experienced most often by people whose locus of control was a mix of internal and external – provided that the dominant focus was the former. We live in a social world

## MAKE IT ALL ABOUT YOU

- Commit to positivity: focus on pursuits that will make you happy.
- Permit yourself to keep a level of good humour.
- Savour the moment: really concentrate on a task and later, reflect on why you enjoyed it.
- Make contact: a hug helps you to connect with others and reduces stress.
- Forget guilt. It's a waste of time.
- Exercise: it's great for your state of mind.

after all, so we cannot be immune to other people. It's when external sources control our happiness that it becomes problematic.

For Sydney business owner Julie Sweet, 36, an intense reliance on others for her own happiness has plagued her for most of her life. “I used to be unconsciously looking at others for their approval – and living like that can be exhausting,” she says.

Relationships dominated her life and she found herself depending on men to make her happy, desperately wanting them to be happy also. “Being fused like that caused a lot of tension and pressure. It was just an unhealthy existence.” Even minor arguments would become all-consuming, taking away from other pleasures in her life.

Sweet found that returning to university and launching her own business were the first steps to refocusing on herself, and discovering there was more to her world than her relationships.

Bernadette Lee, 31, a Sydney marketing assistant, is also making a conscious effort to change her dependence on the happiness of her loved ones. “If someone in my family is going through a difficult time, I find it close to impossible to be happy myself,” she says.

“Even when my life as a whole is filled with things that make me, as an individual, happy, I simply feel too guilty to succumb to the feeling when I know someone I love is unhappy. Deep down, I know feeling guilty doesn't help anybody, so I'm working on my own happiness which will, hopefully, enable me to be strong and supportive for those around me.”

This tendency to tie up our happiness with others' well-being could be linked to the traditional caring roles women have had throughout history, says De Campo. As the old saying goes: “A mother is only as happy as her unhappiest child.”

“We are innately skilled at caring for others, so it is not such a step for this caring to become something that looks a bit like codependence or enmeshment,” says De Campo. “Our capacity for deep empathy can become pathological and we cannot be happy if our kids, mother, husband or workmates are miserable. It is the old story of, ‘Your strength becomes your weakness’.”

If you do find yourself consumed by the emotions and experiences of others, psychologist Dr Joann Lukins says learning to find happiness within yourself is one of the most life-changing skills you can acquire – albeit a difficult one.

Lukins offers this advice: “Focus less on the emotions of others and become aware of your own. This doesn't mean you stop caring for others, but finding the balance between caring and investing in your own emotional health.

“Remember that guilt is a complete waste of time – it won't improve the situation and it won't help the other person, either.

“When we are strong and resilient, we are best equipped to support others.” ●

