

Ep #179: Unacknowledged Kindness



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With Your Host

Maisie Hill

The Maisie Hill Experience with Maisie Hill

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This is episode 179. I've got a very interesting topic of conversation for you today. It's all about expectations of gratitude and how problematic and damaging they can be. Let's get into it.

If you want to do things differently but need some help making it happen then tune in for your weekly dose of coaching from me, Maisie Hill, Master Life Coach and author of *Period Power*. Welcome to *The Maisie Hill Experience*.

Hello, my loves. Today I want to talk to you about the subtle dynamics of gratitude and recognition in our everyday interactions and also in our deeper relationships. So this is specifically about how we deal with the expectation of being thanked, being thanked for our efforts and our reactions when that acknowledgment doesn't come because life happens. This is a situation that we all find ourselves in. It's something I've coached many people on over the years, and I've also heard people talking about it just in passing conversation.

So really it's about, are we truly acting from a place of genuine giving or are we seeking validation for being perceived a certain way? And this has come up because recently I was buying some groceries and as each person goes through the checkout, the person working there stacks the baskets that have been used to one side. Then when that basket reaches a certain height, they get moved to the entrance, which is next to the checkout.

And after the cashier put my basket in the pile I just picked them all up and I moved them to the stack by the door so that she didn't have to do it and the woman working there didn't thank me. And I was surprised to notice myself thinking that she should have.

Now, to some of you that might sound like a reasonable reaction, a reasonable expectation to have. Because there are all sorts of little things that we do, seemingly for the benefit of others like holding doors open or stacking baskets or letting someone go in front of you in a line when they're in a rush or they haven't got many items compared to what you have. But I

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was surprised because this was something that I shifted my thinking on a long time ago.

So I'm guessing 15/20 years ago, I completely released the idea and expectation that people should thank me in this way. Because I used to get quite annoyed when I'd hold the door open for someone and they wouldn't thank me or whenever I made any small gesture that in my view was clearly beneficial to someone else and thus warranted their gratitude and recognition. And I honestly can't remember why I examined this in myself, but I do know that I got to a very satisfying conclusion with it, which is that no one's asked me to do that for them.

And if I'm really honest with myself, my actions aren't altruistic. I was doing these things because I wanted to be seen as helpful. I wanted to be recognised as a good person. And this realisation got me to a place of thinking that if my actions were truly for the benefit of others, the need for thanks actually doesn't matter at all. And all these day-to-day actions, these everyday things that we do, they're often small, they're often brief, but they do reinforce social bonds.

And displaying traits like kindness, attentiveness, cooperation, they have a part to play. And we humans are inherently social creatures, we are wired for connection, but for all sorts of reasons we can end up seeking validation from others as a form of social bonding and affirmation of our worth. So this is a very real thing, this need for social validation. And it's not just about feeling good in the moment, which also has a part to play. It is really rooted in our evolutionary history because being valued, being recognised by our community, it once played a crucial role in our survival and social standing.

And not much has changed, by the way, our physiology certainly hasn't, and I don't think our circumstances have changed either. We still need each other, this is still very, very relevant. And when we receive thanks, when we feel seen and valued, we are releasing dopamine, that feel good neurotransmitter which is helping to embed these behaviours. And that's why a simple thank you can make us feel so good. And it's also perhaps why its absence can feel jarring at times.

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But understanding this, it's important to help us appreciate why we have such strong reactions to being acknowledged or not. But the expectation of being thanked or recognised for these gestures can end up transforming these well-intentioned acts into sources of frustration or resentment and bitterness, if the expected gratitude is not expressed, if you don't receive that back. And some people really do create a whole thing about this in their life and it can just seep into all of their relationships. And it's the narrative through which they view their relationships. They view everything through that lens.

And as I was preparing for this episode, I was just reflecting on people in my life that I would describe as bitter and resentful. And I really thought about how they carry this belief that other people should be more grateful and that they should receive more thanks and appreciation for the things that they do. Though, I really think it's more about recognition and being seen. So being thanked, being appreciated, it feels good. But what happens when we start expecting those thank you's and they don't come?

So the term I like to use for situations like this is a power leak. When our energy and self-worth, when our mood starts depending on other people and on external validation, especially for the things that we perhaps do out of kindness or duty. Because that can lead to feelings of resentment and all sorts of other things.

So let's be real. Much of what we do, especially tasks that fall into the realm of what's typically viewed as women's work, those daily efforts of keeping things running smoothly, whether that's at home or at work, they are often overlooked. And these efforts are the glue in many relationships and situations and places of business. But they go unnoticed because they're expected, they're routine, they're deemed unimportant because they are 'women's work'. They're not valued by society, and that's a very real thing on a micro level and a macro level.

And it can have an impact on your perception of yourself as well as your relationships with others. Whether that's at work, in your personal life, feeling invisible and unnoticed can really undermine your sense of

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contribution and worth. But it's a good idea to examine how you're perceiving these interactions. Are you focusing solely on the times that your efforts go unnoticed and ignoring the times that you are actually appreciated? Because this tendency to dwell on the negative can really skew our perception and just feed into a narrative of ingratitude.

And that may not actually reflect the entirety of our relationships, but this is just what the human brain does. It focuses on what isn't there. It focuses on the negative. And if you're prone to thinking that nobody is noticing the things that you do and nobody appreciates you, you will be determined to view things that way. You will find evidence for how that is true even when there's factual evidence to the contrary. And you will still be convinced that people don't appreciate you.

And listen, I am not telling you to gaslight yourself. This applies on the basis that you are in loving, respectful relationships, where there is reciprocity, where there is that giving and receiving. I'm just talking about our tendency to focus on the negative and discount the positive. So instead of remembering how your friend or your partner does notice and appreciate you and the things that you do. You just hone in on that one time when they didn't express gratitude in the way that you wanted them to.

So when that gratitude isn't forthcoming, how do you want to handle it? We've got to manage our expectations here. Not everyone will express gratitude in the ways we expect or hope for and that is just life. So I really recommend making your peace with that rather than having your mood hinge on the behaviour of others. And expressions of gratitude aren't universal. They do vary across cultures.

In some cultures, gratitude is expressed more through actions rather than words. While in others, verbal expressions are the basis of society. Saying please and thank you are staples of politeness in the UK, but they won't be in other places so there are these variations. And seemingly innocuous demands for manners, insisting on hearing please and thank you, they play a role in broader social dynamics, particularly in the context of race and power.

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Particularly in places like the UK and the US there are these very specific expectations about manners. But as I said, it varies across different cultures, societies, countries, etc. And when we are imposing our own standards of politeness on others, we're actually imposing a form of cultural dominance. And this insistence on certain types of manners can be traced back to colonial histories where the customs and social norms of the coloniser are imposed on others. And this was often an attempt to civilise them, civilise these people, just they're existing in their countries doing their thing.

And then we rock up, I say that as a white British woman, we rock up and impose our way of doing things, just according to this western Christian standard, blatantly dehumanising, dismissive and all kinds of wrong. This demand for manners are still used to assert dominance and to imply and uphold superiority. When white people expect the global majority to strictly adhere to social codes, typically to a greater extent by the way, then is asked or expected of white people.

So it's not actually about manners. It's about maintaining the power structure of white superiority and enforcing conformity because it makes us feel more comfortable or superior and using these standards as a way to exercise control and diminish autonomy. And if you're white, it's very easy to say, "I don't do that", and put it on all those terrible racists out there. It's easy to distance ourselves, but I really challenge you to find the places and occasions where you have done this.

I remember watching something on social media somewhere where this republican guy from Texas called into, it was a TV or a radio show, and it was a show that was about Juneteenth. So the anniversary marking the day when the last enslaved people in America were freed.

And this guy called in and said that Black Americans should thank white people for freeing them. Yeah, my hope is that it's obvious why that's problematic. But it's easy to go, white American dude from Texas, of course, and put racism on him and folks like him, rather than being willing to ask and answer the question, in what way do I expect people from the

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global majority to be grateful to me as a white person? Really reflect on that, please.

So why do we do these things for others? Is it for their benefit or do we have an ulterior motive, like seeking approval, wanting to be seen as a good person? If our actions are truly for others then the absence of a thank you shouldn't actually be a problem, but gratitude can take on this transactional nature. And gratitude can become a currency that's exchanged for services or kindness.

And each act of goodwill can come with an underlying expectation or invisible price tag, where the expected payment is thank you or some form of acknowledgment. But when we start viewing our interactions through this transactional lens, every kind of gesture or effort must be compensated by gratitude or acknowledgement. It's like saying, "I'll do this for you, I'll hold the door open for you, but only if you acknowledge it in the way I expect."

When I put it like that, can you see how ridiculous this subconscious way of thinking is? But it's so prevalent and it literally turns interactions that are meant to be sincere and good hearted into negotiations where the genuine joy of giving and connecting is overshadowed by this expectation. I bet you can think of a conversation you've been a part of where there's been a discussion of some kind that involved the evaluation of whether the debt of kindness has been repaid with sufficient gratitude. It's such a British thing, by the way. I've heard it a lot.

And some people might even say thank you, but they haven't said it in the right way. They haven't said it enough. They haven't been demonstrative enough. And this mindset is so limiting and harmful. It really constrains our ability to give freely and just enjoy the act for its own sake. And just feeling that intrinsic satisfaction of helping others, being in a position of being able to help others and doing that, of contributing to community. Instead of tallying up who owes us thanks and taking issue with people who probably didn't even ask you to help them in the first place, even if they did, who cares?

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All this tallying, mental accounting, it just drains the spontaneity and joy and connection that comes from these interactions. So when our helpful gestures are motivated by the desire for a specific response, they really lose that authenticity. So are we really being generous if our generosity comes with strings attached or are we just engaging in a subtle form of bartering? And this isn't to say that gratitude is wrong. It's lovely to receive, of course it is and it's natural and understandable to want to feel appreciated.

These expressions of true gratitude do create and reinforce connection, they support our relationships, they create social cohesion. All of those are good things. The issue is when this becomes an expectation or a demand. So I would really encourage you to reflect on your needs to receive thanks and how that plays out in your life. Often we want to be seen in a certain light as generous, thoughtful, conscientious, etc. But in craving to be recognised in those specific ways, we can actually end up acting in ways that are at odds with those ways of seeing yourself, with those identities.

So are you genuinely being helpful or is there a layer of performance to your actions? Because authentic giving, where the act of giving as its own reward is far more fun and liberating. So are you doing things for a thank you or because you want to help, and that's enough? Because helping is rewarding in and of itself.

And when our actions are stemming from that intention, the need for external validation just diminishes, it goes away. And then with that, we're removing the sting that can come with unmet expectations and instead you're just delighted to help. This just feels so much better.

Alright, folks, that's it for this week. I will catch you next time.

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