



DO YOU SUFFER FROM **F.O.D.O?**

... That's the Fear Of Disappointing Others. *Stylist's* Lizzie Pook explores the new phenomenon keeping her awake at night

I hope you enjoy this piece. No really, I need you to enjoy this article. Not only because, as a journalist, if I can't deliver appropriate written content I could be unceremoniously handed my P45 and packed off to *Fishing Bait Quarterly*, but also, and mainly, because the idea of you reading it and feeling incredibly disappointed makes me sick to the very pit of my stomach.

Of course, I don't even know you. I'm aware of the irony. But the thing is, I am suffering from a troubling affliction. I'm a victim of FODO (that's, Fear Of Disappointing Others). I'm a worrier. A people pleaser (is there anything I can do for you by the way?). My everyday life is so blighted by the persistent and nagging fear of disappointing those around me that I find it hard to go a day without mentally chastising myself for the entirely uncontrollable emotions of others.

I may sound crazy, but I certainly know I'm not alone.

Statistics show that an estimated

8% of us are thought to suffer from generalised social phobias, and women are three times more likely to suffer from the fear of disappointing others than men*. Not only that, but the fear of failure (atychiphobia), including constantly worrying what others think of us, is classed as a legitimate social anxiety disorder by medical professionals (with 33% of women estimated to suffer from some form of anxiety during their lives).

The truth is, in our thoroughly modern society, the paralysing fear of failing those around us has its grip on many professional,

“FROM THE DAY WE ARE BORN THE BATTLE TO GAIN APPROVAL IS A POWERFUL INSTINCT”

successful and otherwise strong women. Take a look around you; it's likely you work or even live with a FODO sufferer. We're everywhere. When I told people I was writing this piece, the response I received was quite overwhelming. One friend emailed to tell me guiltily about the relief she had felt when her parents – whom, for the record, she loves dearly – left

after a weekend visit, because she no longer had to cope with the debilitating worry of whether or not they were having a good time. This same friend, coincidentally, was also unable to enjoy her own hen do because she was so weighed down by the pressure of others having fun, and spent a significant chunk of her actual wedding day gazing anxiously at the queue for the toilets that stretched across the lawn, kicking herself for not having laid on more loos.

Many colleagues spoke sheepishly about the pressure they feel to personally ensure

everyone gets along when introducing separate groups of friends (university and work, for example), even throwing lame little conversation starters their way (“Erm, Nat likes brie, just like you”) to eagerly stoke the fires of their blossoming friendships. Or about how the pressure to perform when putting on a dinner party is enough to keep them up until 4am, worrying about over-ripe avocados or fancy vs non-fancy napkins – one even admitted to becoming quite hysterical before a recent soiree, frantically baking three separate desserts and

making her own mayonnaise, so her guests didn't leave hungry or disappointed. Of course, most didn't even notice.

The majority of us can actually be found guilty of this sort of people-pleasing behaviour at some point in our lives. Maybe you've sat in the hairdresser's chair, confronted with the horror of an awkwardly short fringe or some sort of mullet, only to tell the enthusiastic stylist bouncing behind you, desperate for your approval, that you “just love it”, when all you want to do is sobbingly beg of her, “Why me?” Or maybe you're a gift person. Feigning overwhelming joy at the receipt of a small, carefully wrapped butter dish? My friend's mother recently did this with Hoover bags. Her husband presented to her, on her birthday, an actual packet of bags for the Hoover within “a new bin for the kitchen”. Instead of bursting into tears, she smoothed down her skirt, rose from the sofa and gave her husband a grateful kiss on the cheek. She just didn't want to disappoint him.

But we shouldn't immediately dismiss this need to please others as ‘neurotic’ and ‘weak’. What we're feeling is natural. According to experts, this fear of letting others down is actually built into us from birth. “From the day we are born, the battle to gain approval is an instinct so primordial that we are unaware of its power,” says psychologist Emma Kenny. “Before we were an ordered community, to survive we had to appeal to others, to ensure we had safety in numbers. We are therefore hard-wired to seek others' recognition.”

NO LET DOWNS

My personal FODO encompasses many things. The fear of not meeting expectations is a biggie – as experienced when dressing up for a special occasion with my boyfriend, walking through the door, seeing his face and immediately thinking, “Oh, he thought I was going to look nicer.” Another is the very real fear of simply pissing someone off. I'm one of those people who *hates* to be the subject of someone's bad mood, cowering like a soggy kitten in their presence, or

“DON'T WORRY, IT DOESN'T TASTE AT ALL LIKE VINEGAR”



overcompensating with inane comments delivered at a level of volume normally reserved for Brian Blessed. I can't even leave a supermarket without ensuring that the sales assistant has heard me say the words, "Thank you." Or go to sleep at night without reading my sent messages to ensure I haven't said anything offensive that day.

The negative nuances of FODO are also hard to ignore; sufferers will often lie or bend the truth to please others – they overpromise, they are flaky. And I am certainly (and ashamedly) guilty of pretty much all these things. I actively avoid certain situations so I don't have to worry about disappointing anyone. Tennis doubles, for example. I am overly competitive, and the first person to talk up my sporting 'prowess' (after a few drinks, mind). But I am just so awful at tennis that I'll constantly make excuses when asked by my boyfriend or friends ("I've actually been experiencing some acute knee pain recently") so that I'm not solely and catastrophically responsible for their loss on the court.

SOCIAL ANXIETY

The FODO I experience most acutely, though, which is the most detrimental to my long-abandoned sense of inner peace, is the fear of people not 'having a nice time'. I'm like a version of Bridget Jones' mum, Pam, fussing around the turkey curry buffet. My family will vouch for this; I've been known to become quite upset at Christmas if I don't feel like people are enjoying the day to its full potential, and I feel personally responsible for their dismay if they don't have the 'best Christmas ever'. It doesn't matter remotely if I have a good time, and that's quite sad actually. In fact, I'm only physically able to do so if I'm sufficiently reassured that everyone else is blissfully happy. This is utterly selfish and obviously impossible to maintain (although I do believe my efforts are single-handedly responsible for keeping Paperchase's festive line afloat). I also know my people-pleasing doesn't actually help anyone have fun.

Equally, if I've invited someone

ARE YOU A FODOIST?

We've compiled the top FODOs below. How many do you recognise?



LYING TO HAIRDRESSERS
You look up from your magazine to discover the trim you requested is in fact a side-shaved pixie crop. But of course you tell your hairdresser it's exactly what you wanted.

GIVING A RUBBISH PRESENT
Before they've even read the card, you've apologised and made excuses about your 'token gift'.

RECEIVING A RUBBISH GIFT
You declare you *adore* the pink chihuahua socks, hoping your partner missed the flicker of revulsion in your eyes.

TERRIBLE RECOMMENDATIONS
That restaurant/hotel/bar was SO amazing when you went, so you told all your friends. But now they've all booked, they might hate it and it'll be ALL YOUR FAULT.

CLEANING FOR YOUR CLEANER
You spend three hours cleaning before the cleaner arrives to... clean the house. You just don't want to let her down.

FOOD FAILINGS
Will the wine you've chosen match the goat's cheese soufflé? What if the soufflé is completely inedible? You can't have disappointed *and* hungry guests.

to a work event; told them they simply *have* to visit a certain restaurant; or even just had them round my house for a cup of tea; if they don't subsequently have a 'nice time', I feel as personally responsible as I would if I'd suggested they shove their head in a rusty lawnmower before suspending it in a vat of heavily seasoned brine.

But, in reality, I know I am not a pushover. I know I am not weak. For me, at least partly, this is about *control*. On a personal level, I have felt (rightly or wrongly) responsible for the happiness and wellbeing of my family for a long time; probably ever since losing my dad some 10 years ago, and I know, in my heart, FODO is an extension of

that. I also know that's natural, and it's not really in my power to control other people's happiness, regardless of how much I try. But if something happens to you – a tragic or life-changing event, a crisis of confidence, something that shakes you to your very core – and the normal everyday contents of your life are hurled into a metaphorical blender and spat out as something resembling Tracey Emin's bed, it seems natural to want to regain some element of control.

I have been researching ways to combat FODO, and advice ranges from the unhelpful: "Just suck it up," to the philosophical: "You can't love others if you don't love yourself." But what I've found most helpful is the idea that causing ourselves so much stress and anxiety by ensuring that

“I'M LIKE BRIDGET JONES' MUM, FUSSING AROUND THE TURKEY CURRY”

others are not stressed and anxious is one of life's biggest ironies. Mike Robbins, author of *Focus On The Good Stuff: The Power Of Appreciation* suggests following three simple rules of thumb to help us cope.

1. Practise saying 'No' – this is great training for those of us who constantly find ourselves agreeing to things we don't *really* want to do because we're unwilling to upset others.
2. Take inventory – at the end of each day, list the things you did because you wanted to, and then those you did because you were worried about letting someone else down. The first list should always outweigh the second.
3. Be honest about your own desires – write down all the things that you genuinely want to do, but might have been holding back on for fear of disappointing someone. Make it your priority to tick something off that list each week. So, I hereby pledge to take my own advice, and promise to relinquish the FODO albatross around my neck. But, only if that's not disappointing to you.

