

# Little Miss Important

Is your ego getting in the way professionally? It may be painful to admit – but there are simple solutions that can help you regain perspective. **Suzy Bashford** investigates

**P**reviously, I did not think that I had an ego problem. That was when I associated big egos purely with loud, brash, shamelessly self-promoting bores, who droned on about their achievements, completely oblivious to my eyes glazing over with disinterest.

I have since realised that ego issues are far more complex, and that I might have a 'difficulty', after all. For example, at a recent business meeting, when I was introduced as a 'stay-at-home mum' instead of a freelance writer, I was shocked at my visceral reaction. I felt my cheeks redden, while my inner dialogue went berserk. I spent the rest of the meeting distracted, trying to assuage my dented ego, dropping

comments about how busy I was writing all day, and not sitting on the sofa. It didn't help – my desperate attempts at self-validation just made me feel worse.

Ego issues such as this arise when a person is so attached to their idea of themselves that their attitude becomes rigid, and they feel threatened when their self-perception is challenged. They then seek to validate themselves through external measures – in my case, job title.

Modern workplaces cultivate the perfect conditions for ego 'incidents' because they're constructed around scaling a career ladder and striving for more ways to quench this thirst for validation. More money. More status. More responsibility. More followers on social media. These are all the domains

of the ego – the 'hungry ghost' howling to be fed, as Buddhists call it. But, as I discovered that day, no matter how much you feed it, the ego will never be sated.

In the spiritual world, ego is seen as 'bad'; something to be transcended. In the workplace, this is unrealistic. Besides, ego is what motivates you to get up in the morning; to work towards that promotion; to pull an all-nighter to ace a pitch and beat the competition. The key, as psychotherapist and life coach Hilda Burke says, is balance: 'A more realistic goal might be to be aware of our egos and to challenge them, so they become malleable and allow for greater flexibility in terms of what we feel capable of. The best managers are aware of their ego's limitations.'

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## >>> 1 The signs: could your ego be running the show instead of you?

If you answer 'yes' to some of the following questions, it could be a sign that your ego is out of kilter at work:

- Are you easily offended?
- Do you crave approval?
- Are you often highly critical of yourself and others, and frequently think that nothing is good enough?
- Are you defensive of your ideas, to the extent that you will put down others' proposals to protect your own?
- Do you regularly compare yourself to your colleagues?
- Do you ever take the praise or recognition for other people's work?
- Do you ever find yourself adopting a 'me versus them' mentality?
- Do you feel that no one else can do your job as well as you can?
- Have you ever withheld information that could benefit a colleague?
- Do you feel as if you are constantly putting on a mask at work?
- Do you hate making mistakes and stepping out of your comfort zone?
- Do you loathe asking for help?
- Do you constantly push for more – whether it's wealth, accolades or working hours, with a sense that the status quo is never enough?

## 2 If you suspect that your ego is out of balance, what can you do about it?

Often, people with ego problems become so fixated on prestige that they lose touch with their true values. The antidote, says author and coach Gayle Hilgendorff, is to be clear about what really drives you, so when your ego threatens to flare, it has less chance of derailing you into unhelpful behaviour.

'The less we look outside of ourselves, and the more we try to figure out who we

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want to be, the easier it is to manage the ego, because you have something to anchor it to,' she says. In her book, *Live More, Work Better* (Bascom Hill Publishing, £10.07), Hilgendorff recommends writing exercises that focus the mind on questions such as 'What do I like?' and 'What excites me?' 'Take your answers and write them on sticky notes to pin up, or get your essential message engraved on a MantraBand [inspirational bracelet],' she says. 'The more you remind yourself of who you want to be, the less you care about what others are doing or saying or liking. It's not easy. It's a constant thing we have to think about.'

Hilgendorff also advocates a 'get over yourself' approach, in which you remember 'inconvenient truths' such as 'you are not as important as you think you are' and 'other people are just as smart, if not smarter, than you are'.

## 3 If you don't take action, how could your ego sabotage your career?

If you are wedded to an idea of yourself, it may hold you back from taking new opportunities and make you resistant to change. It will probably also result in

you being a less effective collaborator, particularly if you feel the need to puncture others' egos in order to pump up your own. Ego-driven characters also struggle to take on board constructive criticism. As Burke says: 'The ego is a bounded set of beliefs about oneself. While those can be "positive" beliefs, they will, by their nature, eliminate other possibilities. Imagine a person who has a core belief that they are a team player. If they get offered an amazing role in which they will have to work autonomously, that may challenge their work ego. Depending on the strength of their identification with it, they may even rule out the opportunity.'

## 4 What if your ego is strongly linked with self-worth?

If you get a disproportionate amount of self-worth from your work, then it will be more difficult to set your ego aside. This used to be the case with former barrister, now coach, Helen Johnson.

When Johnson left her legal career because she was unhappy, her ego was 'totally deflated'. She had lost her 'addictive trump card' of being able to say that she was a barrister, which impressed people. Initially, she says, it was uncomfortable, and she felt 'vague' and lacking 'punch'. However, as she started to work out what was important to her, she began to see the humour in her ego's catastrophising: 'I made a choice not to need to be seen by others in a certain way. If your sense of self is so invested in money and status, for example, then the fear of not having these things will drive you and your decisions, even when this doesn't serve you on a deeper level.'

Johnson advises not allowing 'shallow measures' to take over in your mind, and to remind yourself that these do not define you, or tell the world who you



are. 'Being a barrister in itself is not important. It's the characteristics of the profession, such as intelligence and resourcefulness, that are impressive. Try to connect with the qualities that you have to offer [despite your job].'

What if someone else's ego is the problem? An egotistical boss for example? Trainer and author Kitty Waters knows all about how to deal with an egomaniacal manager – because she used to be one. In her 20s, when she was leading an all-male sales team in a multimillion-pound business, one of her team – 'a well-liked, affable guy' – handed in his notice, citing her bad behaviour.

'It was a pivotal moment for me. I realised that I was living completely "in my ego". I was arrogant. I was abusing my power,' says Waters. The incident led to an extended period of soul-searching and a change in career.

Waters now believes that ego problems are rooted in a disconnection from the self and others, and the best way to deal with someone in this state is to try and gently pull them out of it. 'Back then, I was so out of whack with myself, I didn't realise my impact on others. If he had told me how he was feeling, it would have shifted me. If I had to deal with someone living in their ego now, I would request five minutes of their time to explain their impact in a way that wasn't embarrassing or confrontational.'

Waters says egomaniacs are often ignoring their intuition and feel deeply insecure, so need to be handled with a firm, but kind, hand. Anything that encourages them to pause and reflect – no easy feat in today's pressurised workplaces – is a good idea.

For more information, visit [hildaburke.co.uk](http://hildaburke.co.uk); [thehealthyleader.com](http://thehealthyleader.com); [goddessacumen.com](http://goddessacumen.com); [kittywaters.com](http://kittywaters.com); [mantraband.com](http://mantraband.com)

## Tips for keeping your ego in check

- Focus on learning from mistakes that happen at work, and not blaming someone else for them
- Don't buy into your own hype – particularly on social media
- Start conversations with people about *them*, not you
- 'Get over yourself'
- Laugh at yourself
- Remember that you are more than your ego. As poet Walt Whitman said: 'I contain multitudes'
- Meditation can help improve your connection with yourself and others
- Focus on collaborating to achieve the best for your team, rather than your personal goals