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What's wrong with being a nice guy? Plenty, according to a local therapist

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SEATTLE POST-INTELLIGENCER REPORTER

In an age of suicide bombers, contaminated mail, road rage and rampant rudeness, it seems the last thing we should worry about is an epidemic of overniceness.

But while America slumbers, says Federal Way therapist Robert Glover, an alarming number of men -- maybe 1 in 4 -- are morphing into wimps who live to please and end up pleasing no one.

"I think since World War II, Nice Guys have just proliferated," says Glover, 46, whose focus on "Nice Guy Syndrome" has spawned a best-selling e-book, a growing caseload and a global online community of "recovering Nice Guys."

"Now I'm seeing second- and third-generation Nice Guys coming along," says Glover, who acknowledges he has no hard data beyond clinical observation of a trait he has sought treatment for himself.

His concern is not with generic niceness but a specific constellation of traits such as passivity, conflict avoidance and emotional caretaking that in the past were more commonly associated with women.

Response to Glover's weekly "Nice Guy therapy groups" is so strong, he's about to launch a fourth concurrent group at his Center for Healing and Recovery. Also in the works is an intensive summer workshop he hopes to turn into a global series of events.

But his largest audience is at nomoremrniceguy.com, where he runs an online support group of about 100 members, fields e-mails from around the world and markets his book, "No More Mr. Nice Guy!"

With business so good, Glover theorizes -- debatably -- that he has hit upon a problem for our times. Wading further into roiling waters, he blames Nice-Guyism on an array of 20th-century social change.

His list of causes responsible for creating Nice Guys -- inclusive enough to rile nearly every interest -- includes absent fathers, the anti-war movement of the Vietnam era, the sexual revolution, an educational system that he claims is "dominated by women" and "women's liberation and feminism."

The end result, he argues, is that a lot of male baby boomers and Gen-Xers grew up adopting "a female perspective on masculinity."

To which family historian Stephanie Coontz replies, "Oh, puleeze."

"Do you have any idea how many times in history someone has announced breathlessly that women are raising men to be wimps?" says Coontz, co-chair of the national Council on Contemporary Families. "Every 40 or 50 years, somebody decides this would be a great thing to worry about."

Coontz says the debate over male upbringing goes back to the Roman Empire. If e-mail had existed in 1900, she added, the same kind of virtual hand-wringing would have taken place then.

Coontz, on leave from teaching history and family studies at The Evergreen State College in Olympia, doesn't dispute that overly self-effacing people exist.



Davide Badders/P-I

"I certainly think there are many men, just as there are many women, who fit this description," she says. "But the idea that they're becoming more common is just absolutely groundless, as far as I can see."

Glover, a psychologist specializing in marriage and family therapy, says he has spent about a decade -- half his career -- working with men who try too hard to be nice.

It was partly because of his established, online following that Barnes & Noble Digital agreed to publish his e-book (priced at \$5.95), which quickly and briefly became one of its top five e-sellers. In February, the company added a print-on-demand paperback, priced at \$14.95 and sold over the Internet.

Glover calls his message "unashamedly pro-male," but says he's heard from women who agree with his premise.

Wiry, with a high forehead and trim mustache, Glover has an acerbic sense of humor and a tone that veers between conventional psychological counsel and edgy outrageousness.

He says he hasn't received any negative feedback from other therapists, "if they actually read the book and get past whatever preconceptions they have from the title."

One Seattle psychologist who hadn't heard of the book said it sounded on first blush like "another marketing ploy." After reviewing Glover's first chapter, however, psychologist Robert Strazicich revised his opinion upward.

"I'm not sure what the validity is for saying this is a new personality type for our age," Strazicich says, "but he does describe a pattern of male behavior that really does exist."

Specifically, says Strazicich, "He seems to be describing an insecure, dependent and probably depressed adult male."

From a "packaging" standpoint, he adds, it's much easier to hook readers by describing them as Mr. Nice Guy, "instead of saying this is something for 'Mr. Insecure, Dependent or Depressed.' That's not very appealing, is it?"

Some of the men in Glover's online support group are, in fact, struggling with serious life issues that have sent them to therapy.

Glover went that route himself, two years into his second marriage. His wife, Elizabeth Oreskovich, is a therapist and co-director at the center.

"My frustrations were pretty typical Nice Guy relationship issues," he says. "Not feeling appreciated, not feeling sexually desired by my wife. I didn't feel like I could make my wife happy, (didn't feel) like I received as much as I gave."

Glover surmises that a lot of "Nice Guys" grew up with fathers who were abusive, overcontrolling, alcoholic, distant or just plain absent. Vowing never to be like their fathers, these men overshoot the mark and become ineffectual, emotionally repressed, manipulative and sexually dissatisfied.

In fact, says Glover, "Nice Guys" really aren't nice at all. Avoiding confrontation at all cost, they wear a mask of agreeability that hides a buildup of resentment, rage or passive-aggressive behavior. All of which he recognized in himself before seeking therapy.

"Elizabeth would often state that she never knew when she was going to 'get it' from me," Glover says. "I decided to seek some answers. I loved Elizabeth and didn't want my second marriage to end in divorce."

Glover, who spent a total of five years in therapy, says the emotional overhaul wasn't easy.

"Doing this recovery from the Nice Guy Syndrome isn't just tweaking things here or there," he says. "It is a dramatic shift in paradigm."

Glover steers clients toward an ideal he calls the "integrated male" -- someone with a strong sense of self who acts with integrity, sets clear emotional boundaries and knows how to nurture without caretaking.

His ideal is a leader who is comfortable with his masculinity and willing to "provide for and protect those he cares about."

Strazicich responds that it's a pretty good list, as far as it goes.

"His notion of striving to become an integrated male generally sounds like a good thing," he says.

Strazicich adds, however, that the list fails to note that "being flexible and adaptive and accommodating -- those are strengths as well."

As much as he lauds honest expression among men, however, Glover is no sensitive, New Age male.

Take his counsel regarding wifely chitchat, for instance. Glover makes no bones about telling husbands not to listen when their wives run on about "work, family, girlfriends and rude checkout people."

"I don't think men are inclined or even interested to hear about every detail of a woman's day," Glover says. "I'm just encouraging men to listen more selectively so they'll listen more carefully."

Without blinking, he adds that women may be drawn initially to men who "listen to them for hours and drink coffee with them and never sexualize them." But in the end, he claims, women "come to despise" them for those very qualities.

His term for such men: "A girlfriend with a penis."

That draws an incredulous snort from Strazicich, who responds, "That's just absurd. That's humorous, really."

Coontz adds that Glover's assertion is "just not true." But she adds, "It is true that women have conflicted feelings and give conflicted messages to men."

Maybe that was the case with Cally, from Perth, Australia, one of Glover's e-mail correspondents.

"Wow, your description of the Nice Guy sounds SO much like my ex-boyfriend, whom I broke up with for the same reasons -- that he was too much of a nice guy," she told Glover. "Note (that) nice guy = desperate guy."

Glover says he gets e-mails from all over -- so many that he has just launched a program of intensive workshops called NMMNG (No More Mr. Nice Guy) Worldwide Institutes.

The first, in late July, will be in Seattle. Others are planned for Boston, Phoenix, Washington, D.C., and London. He also has created an "associate program" for recovering Nice Guys who want to lead support groups in their hometowns.

Coontz has misgivings about the assumptions fueling the movement. Solutions that seem to turn back the clock on sexual roles are seductive, she says, but not the answer.

"They offer people an easy, over-the-counter patent medicine," she says.

But try telling that to Nice Guys like Tom of New York, whose e-mail suggests that the scales have fallen from his eyes.

"I am now realizing," he messaged Glover, "that I have a distorted view of how to be a man."

NICE GUYS ... OR NOT?

When Federal Way therapist Robert Glover talks about the curse of "Nice Guy Syndrome," he's talking about men who try too hard to please others while neglecting their own needs.

Does such a man actually exist? We put Glover to the test, challenging him to categorize our sample of high-profile males as "Nice Guy" or not.

Here's his scorecard:

- **Former President Bill Clinton**

Not only does Clinton have "a lot of Nice Guy traits," he grew up with the classic ingredients: absent dad, harsh and controlling mom and dominant wife. Then there's Monica, et al. "He has the sexual addiction thing going on," muses Glover. "I think his Nice Guy-ism took over."

- **Movie star Russell Crowe**

No Nice Guy here, despite his passion for poetry. Furious when the British Academy of Film and Television Awards cut a poem from his speech, Best Actor Crowe manhandled the show's producer, possibly costing him an Oscar. Glover wasn't aware of the flap but says, "I love him as an actor. He can play some manly men."

- **Director/producer Ron Howard**

Can the man who played Opie and Richie be anything *but* a Nice Guy? Sure, because Nice Guys aren't always nice, remember? But Glover pegs Howard as a Nice Guy for turning his John Forbes Nash biopic, "A Beautiful Mind," into a romance. "Ron Howard gave it a Nice Guy spin," Glover says.

- **Homer Simpson**

Hmm. Glover says America's favorite cartoon-buffoon dad has some "pretty strong Nice Guy" traits because "he likes to make people happy." On the other hand, Homer certainly puts his own needs first. It's a tough call. Says Glover: "I don't know if we can stereotype Homer."

- **Mariners Manager Lou Piniella**

He shouts, he scowls, he waves his arms in frustration and takes no guff. In short, says Glover, "He's not a Nice Guy -- even if they call him "Sweet Lou."

- **President George W. Bush**

Although Bush has tried to project a tough stance on terrorism, Glover says the president's inherent Nice Guy-ism makes it impossible for him to sound menacing. "He cannot get the passion up in me to save his life," Glover says. "He cannot give an aggressive speech."

- **Washington tax-initiative gadfly Tim Eyman**

How nice is it to falsely divert thousands of dollars in campaign contributions to one's wallet while insisting publicly that your work is a labor of love? Not very, but that doesn't make Eyman a victim of Nice Guy Syndrome. "No," says Glover, "Tim's not a Nice Guy even though he lied like Nice Guys."

- **Gov. Gary Locke**

"I would say he probably fits the Nice Guy mold," Glover says, "because, 1, I have a hard time remembering his name, and 2, I can't think of anything he accomplished."

- **Ichiro, Mariners right fielder**

Given his modest and likable demeanor, Ichiro might seem a classic Nice Guy, but that guess would put you in left field. Ichiro actually embodies Glover's ideal of the "integrated male." "He knows how good he is," Glover says, "but he doesn't have to try to impress anyone."

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