

Nicole:

I'm Nicole Antoinette, and this is Real Talk Radio, a podcast filled with honest conversations about everything. Today's episode is part of our new series called, But How Though? Where I ask people that exact question, how? How do you get out of debt? How do you change careers? How do you stop comparing yourself to people on the internet? How do you have more fulfilling sex, build stronger friendships, decide whether or not to have kids?

Nicole:

Each episode of this series explores a different question like that, with a different featured guest, someone who is also bravely joining me to share the ups and downs of how they've managed to close the gap, between what they say they want, and what they actually do. Speaking of the how, let's talk for a second about how this show gets made, because behind the scenes, our podcast does things pretty differently in a few ways. First, we are 100% listener funded with no ads or sponsors. Also all of our guests get paid, and higher rates are always paid to our guests of color, as well as our queer and trans guests and others with traditionally marginalized identities.

Nicole:

The funding to create this show and pay all the guests comes entirely from our Patreon community, which operates on a shame free sliding scale that allows each community member to support from within their own means. Tons of fun stuff happens over in that community. I host live workshops, share exclusive bonus episodes, and lots more. No matter where on the sliding scale your monthly pledge falls, you still get access to all of the same events and bonuses.

Nicole:

If you love this show, and if you want to make a real-time vote with your dollars to help keep it going, all while meeting the wonderful like minded people who are already in our community, spoiler alert, they're the best. You can come and join us over at [patreon.com/nicoleantoinette](https://patreon.com/nicoleantoinette). That's [patreon.com/nicoleantoinette](https://patreon.com/nicoleantoinette). We'd love to have you. Now on to the show.

Nicole:

All right, friends, let's do this. I'm joined today by Natalie Lue, who's here to talk about how she became less of a people pleaser, which is just such a juicy topic. I've been looking forward to this for quite a while. I'm so glad you're here, Natalie. Welcome to the show.

Natalie:

Oh, thank you, Nicole. I'm really happy to be here too.

Nicole:

It's like the topic that I do and do not want to talk about, right?

Natalie:

Yeah, I think a lot of people feel that way, because I think there is this sense around this topic, oh, people pleasers, benevolence, generous, giving, sweet, kind. That is often true most of the time, but has a whole other side of people pleasing, that people aren't aware of. The downside, the dark side, which is actually what the majority of people pleasing really is about.

Nicole:

Yes, we are going to get into all of that. To get us started, I would love for you to introduce yourself, who you are, what you do, what you love, basically, what are a few things that we should know about Natalie?

Natalie:

Well, as you said, I'm Natalie Lue. I have been writing a, well we call it a self-esteem and relationship website called [baggagereclaim.com](http://baggagereclaim.com), for just over 15 years, and I've actually been blogging for almost 16 and a half years. I really talk about everything to do with unpacking, and decluttering and reclaiming ourselves then from our emotional baggage. I do that because when I first started out writing, I was in a very, very different space. Really did not like myself very much but didn't know it.

Natalie:

It was my life that was really telling me that and it was through writing on my then personal blog and sharing experiences, that I started to realize, "Ah, these things that I think make me weird or unlovable, turns out lots of other people feel exactly the same way, and are going through exactly the same things." The more that I talked about it, the more that I shared, is the more that I realized that I really wanted to dive deep on this.

Natalie:

For the last 15 years, it's really once I experienced my epiphany about what was going on in my life, why I was doing it, and I'm sure we'll talk more about that, I then made it my mission to help at least one person avoid what I have been through, or to help at least one person get out of that. I've done that obviously many times over in the 15 or so years. I've written several books and I teach e-courses, because well who's doing an in-person thing these days thanks to the pandemic?

Natalie:

Yeah, I'm very focused on helping people pleasers, perfectionists and over-thinkers in particular, to address that emotional baggage so that they can be more them, and also so that they can enjoy more fulfilling relationships.

Nicole:

Overthinking and perfectionism. You are speaking my language. I'm in the right place, I think.

Natalie:

Yeah, absolutely. So many people identify actually with the overthinking and perfectionism, but they're variations actually of people pleasing.

Nicole:

I said something about a month ago, about how I'm trying to not just live my entire life from the neck up, like, "Oh, I have a body too. I can sink into it. It's not just about the doom scrolling, thought spirals." But the overthinking feels very relevant and resonant to me. I love hearing how long you have been blogging and sharing these stories. I have been sharing personal stories, either through writing or podcasting since 2007, so a couple years shy of you. I always feel like when I meet other people that

have been doing something like this for that long, it feels like we're part of this strange early internet club, the early days of this.

Natalie:

Yeah, we are the OGs, the veterans. We're in Shady Pines territory now, when it comes to blogging. We are the early as you say, pioneers and life was very different blogging wise, internet wise, back then. A lot of the things that exists now, twinkle in the eye back then when we both started it.

Nicole:

I know. I just recently started a blog newsletter thing, I guess we'll call it, on Substack. One of the reasons that I started it is, because I felt like I was really missing the 2008 to 2012 era of blogging. It just felt like a totally different space. The comment sections were really lovely, and people made friends in the comment section and have this hypothesis of like, "Can we get back there?" Maybe it's not possible, but I have a little nostalgia for those days.

Natalie:

Do you know, I'm feeling very much the same way myself. It's something I've gone back and forth about, because I started a podcast ... Gosh, it's actually five years ago, but I took a year's break in between. I have noticed that gradually over time that significantly impacted on how much I was writing. At the same time, there's also been a real shift as you've really alluded to there, about how before things took place in the comments. You could literally only interact through the comments or privately via email.

Natalie:

There was a real ... Yeah, comments, really, the engagement around that really let you know, where you're at in terms of conversations in your content. Then there's just been a dramatic shift. Now comments aren't really a thing per se, unless you're on a news site, or one of these very intense fan type sites. It's not like that with blogging anymore. People will read it, but then they'll go off to Instagram or Twitter or Facebook or something. Well, probably Instagram.

Nicole:

Yeah, I feel like this is a conversation where our grandparents would be like, "Back in my day," whatever fill in the blank here.

Natalie:

Yeah.

Nicole:

With people pleasing, this might be an overly simple question, but I'm going to ask it anyway because I think it's important. The first thing I'd really love to ask is for you to describe what you think people pleasing actually is. I feel like it's one of those terms that everyone understands, or I guess maybe I should speak for myself. I hear it and I think that I know what it means. But it's more on the surface. I'm interested in perhaps, a definition, what you think is at the core of it, how it manifests, that sort of thing.

Natalie:

Yeah. Actually, I would say that what you've described there is how the overwhelming majority of people actually feel, or think about people pleasing, which isn't, as a lot of people tend to think the equivalent of being a doormat. I mean, yes. Okay, in some instances, it could go to that level, but actually people pleasing is doing what can for all intents and purposes be good things, but for the wrong reasons. Those wrong reasons, will always center around because you feel obliged, even if you're not technically obliged.

Natalie:

You feel like you have to, because you feel guilty because you're anxious, because you are afraid, because you're trying to control something. The other side of this or really what works in tandem of this is that, as a result of all that, people pleasing, then is about putting your needs, desires, expectations, feelings and opinions on the back burner, suppressing and repressing them to put everybody else's ahead of your own, so that you can gain attention, affection, approval, love and validation or so that you can avoid conflict, criticism, disappointment, rejection, loss, stress even and actually what some people will refer to as the big A, abandonment.

Natalie:

The reason why I started out by saying it is about doing what can, for all intents and purposes be good things, but for the wrong reasons, is because we have people pleasing, it's the why behind what we're doing that makes it people pleasing. That's what keeps it so out of view for a lot of people because it's like, "Oh, well, I'm a hard worker or I'm just being helpful or I'm being generous or I'm being supportive." But when we are unaware of our intentions, our motivations, our why and then we go and examine them and discover that a lot of the time, we're doing stuff that we don't actually need or want to, often obliging ourselves into it.

Natalie:

The clue with people pleasers is that, and it's funny, every time I've ever given a talk on people pleasing, I say, "Do any of these sound familiar?" Feeling resentful, overwhelmed, burdened, over committed, guilty, anxious, powerless, helpless, victimized, low, depressed, a list of these types of things that might be like this recurring irritation. Whatever it might be, when we are engaging in people pleasing, we will tend to feel quite drained. We're often not able to either take care of ourselves or articulate what it is that we need or want.

Natalie:

A lot of that is really coming from expecting with people pleasing, that we can do all of this stuff, and that people will then do what we need and want. It's like, we don't take care of our needs, desires, expectations, feelings, and opinions, because we think, "Oh, I'll please everybody else, and then they will take care of all of that stuff for me as well." Our pleasing is a way of making us feel worthy, or it's a way of making us feel needed. It can be a way of making us feel purposeful, but it's like wearing a mask or a costume.

Natalie:

Because we're doing it because we are afraid that if we don't do it, we're not going to get what we want, or that we're going to be hurt or disappointed. We get into this vicious cycle, and ultimately comes from, it's a learned habit. We are socialized actually to be people pleasers. The world says to us, particularly like, for instance, girls, "Be meek, be mild, kind, sweet. Don't make waves, don't cause trouble."

Parenting was about obedience, and be seen and not heard, all of those types of things. It's work hard, you'll get the grades. Get the grades, you'll get the job.

Natalie:

There's a lot of this tying our sense of worthiness, and how well we're doing in life on being a good person, and helping out and doing basically whatever people tell you to do. Of course, once you start to work out where you're going to get praise, or where you're going to get attention, you can often end up repeating that and walk yourself into a whole world of pain over time.

Nicole:

Oh, okay, well, we both need to cancel the rest of our days we're going to talk about this for the next 16 hours, because you just laid out some really good topics. I'm particularly interested in this idea. I know this isn't the wording that you use. But when we do these things, like you said expecting that then other people are going to take care of our needs, or they're going to respond in a certain way, it's really interesting to me how all of that is happening below the surface. Because it's not like we had a conversation or a negotiation of, I meet these needs you meet these needs. It's almost like manipulative and secretly transactional.

Natalie:

Yes, that's it.

Nicole:

That's fascinating to me. Because, I feel like we all know that feeling of, I did X, Y, or Z and either the person didn't appreciate it, or they didn't notice or they didn't reciprocate, when you just assumed that they were going to reciprocate in a certain way. Like you said, that can lead to a lot of resentment.

Natalie:

Amen to all of this, because I would say that if you routinely have the sense of feeling, underappreciated, marginalized, taken advantage of or even abused, and you've had that thought or even said to somebody, "After everything I've done for you," or where you're fuming to yourself, like, "But I do this, and I've done this," and this is the clue that it's not that we are bad people. Far from it, if anything actually we misappropriate our good qualities. But we are so invested in this idea of being air quotes, good, that it actually hasn't occurred to us that the way in which we go about doing stuff and claiming, "Oh, well, I don't want to hurt feelings.

Natalie:

I don't want to cause confrontation. I'm just being loving." But if you're doing stuff to generate a desired outcome, that's not authentic. It's these hidden contracts. I say to people that people pleasing is like creating a debt, and then expecting other people to pay it off. You go around doing all this stuff and somewhere on some level, there is this transactional element, I did this, I did this, I did this. Gradually the receipts buildup. For instance, we are in a romantic relationship, we are set less than what we need.

Natalie:

We don't really have any strong conversation around that. We possibly even hide who we are, because we're worried that if we were truthful about who we are, maybe the person will be scared off, so we

play it small. Then when we feel like, "Okay, well, I've put up with an awful lot of stuff here, so surely, they should feel bad enough, guilty enough that they would want to give us the relationship," and the person doesn't, we fume, we feel besieged with resentment.

Nicole:

Yeah. Can you share some of the things that you've done in your life in the name of being pleasing to others? I feel like it would be helpful, maybe we can just talk about a couple or you can share some, I can share some. Grounding it in specific examples I feel might be useful.

Natalie:

Well, like for me, I've always said that people pleasing certainly was as natural to me as breathing. I am over responsible. I was an over responsible child. From early on in life, I took on responsibilities that were not mine, like taking care of my siblings and beyond the whole looking out for your sibling, like feeling responsible for their happiness and their success, and having to protect them far beyond the bounds of being a kid. I would sometimes play armchair therapist or even substitute spouse to my mom, and think that, "Okay, well, this is showing what a good daughter I am, by letting her basically talk about all of her inappropriate stuff to me."

Natalie:

This people pleasing was a lifelong habit of mine. A lot of my doing things, being good, performing a search, we're about trying to control moods like, "Oh, if I'm a good girl, if I help out, then mommy will be happy or there won't be fighting or this will happen," and it didn't. Gradually, over time, of course, I started to feel quite resentful about all of that. Once I got into adulthood, in fact, even from my teens when I started going out with boys, the people pleasing kicked in then. I was trying to be the good girl, nice girl.

Natalie:

I would sometimes be in situations, where boys are trying to pressure me to do stuff. It would be excruciating for me to actually speak up and say, "Oh, actually no, I'm not comfortable with that." In work, it turned me, it made me burnt out. Because I saw it as my job to just go hard at work. I very rarely missed any targets at work in the space of, I think about four years or something like that three, four years, and sometimes worked so hard it was like I was doing the work of other people on the team as well.

Natalie:

That's how much I overperformed. I was in an affair with a co-worker who had a girlfriend, and that was really some of my worst people pleasing. But I also think that my people pleasing funny enough, really revealed itself to me in the last several years, during working for myself and through motherhood, and being in a relationship. It's the relationship, I think in particular with my mother-in-law as well, and realizing that I was almost a performing seal quietly, with her trying to be the perfect daughter-in-law, that that completely broke down my people pleasing.

Natalie:

The fallout from that really brought it all face-to-face with me. Mine has showed up as you can hear that in a variety of guises. Listen, I'm a recovering people pleaser so it can still pop up but it is far less so than it ever was before.

Nicole:

Yeah, I appreciate you sharing all of that. You can't see this but I was nodding along to a lot of it. I feel like so much of this, like if I look at my own life, I've had to question the difference like, do I want to be good or do I just want to be seen as good?

Natalie:

Yeah.

Nicole:

I don't think those are necessarily the same, right? I look at periods of time where I did things that I wasn't proud of, or that were out of integrity for me or things that I really didn't want to do, or didn't want other people to find out about. We've all done stuff like that. It was like, it was okay, as long as I was still seen as being good. There's something about the illusion of it that I think is interesting. I also have been thinking as you were sharing about, just the tendency to try to micromanage other people's emotional landscape, particularly with people that I've lived with, whether it was roommates or partners, that if I could do all of these things, right whether it was clean a certain way or do a certain number of things or cook their favorite thing.

Nicole:

What you said at the beginning of it's not about the act itself, it's about the why. Because I think cooking someone's favorite thing is a lovely thing to do, if it's coming from a place that's more joyful, as opposed to, "I'm going to do these things so that the peace is kept, so that no bad things come up." There's really something interesting to me in that of like, essentially, what are the motivations that we have for acting this way?

Natalie:

Yeah, absolutely. This why thing is really at the heart of it, because as humans, knowing why we do what we do our intentions, helps us to make better choices. It helps us to be more self aware. When we're not aware of what we're doing, and we're not paying attention to the outcomes of that, we find that we enter into things like you say, you do that seemingly nice thing of cooking, and so it has that appearance of "Yes, this is a lovely thing," and it is. But the why behind it, when we're not aware of our intentions is, there's this low level anxiety that if we don't, that this person might not think a particular thing about us. People pleasing is a response to old hurt and loss.

Natalie:

But it's also, I do think that, yes, as much as we have learned to people please because we think as kids, "Oh, I didn't really like that thing that happened. Maybe if I was more pleasing in some way." Maybe we don't necessarily phrase it in this way, but maybe if I do this, then this will create this. Maybe if I don't do that, then this will cause that. A classic example of this is, let's say you grew up in a home with a sibling, who demands a lot of your parents time, because they are getting into trouble.

Natalie:

Then we see that our parents are stressed, that maybe they punish them quite harsh ways, how this person is viewed. People pleasing can start as simply as observing that and saying to yourself, "Okay, so my job in the family is to make sure that I'm the good one; that I don't behave the way that they do. I've got to do better than they need do. I've got to be the good one. I've got to be more responsible." Just like that, boom, we're people pleasing. This motivations thing, one of the things I say to people is, "Let's think about something that you're doing."

Natalie:

Of course, the trouble of people pleasing is a lot of it happens automatically. Because we've used to just complying yes, yes, yes, and afterwards gone, "Oh, shit. What the hell have I just signed myself up for?" But if we actually say to ourselves, "Okay, if the person wasn't going to respond in the way that we anticipate, and we weren't going to get the reward that we think we're going to get or some desired outcome, would we still go ahead and do this?" A lot of the time, the answer is no. Then I say to people, "Okay, so if the answer is no, would you go and say to that person, I expect this if I do this?"

Natalie:

They also say no. It's amazing how once we become aware of our intention, we realize, "Oh, wow, I do this stuff, because I don't want to have conversations."

Nicole:

Yeah. You mentioned the perceived rewards or the expected rewards that we're going to get. One of the things that I think is interesting about this is that, of course, you're right, that there are expected rewards, and sometimes they don't happen, and that can lead to the resentment that we talked about. But also sometimes they do happen, right?

Natalie:

Yes.

Nicole:

If people pleasing didn't work to some degree, we wouldn't do it. I'm interested in some of the examples that you shared, from your life, what do you feel you were getting from acting that way? In which ways was it working? Because I feel like for me, so often I'm not willing to make a change, until the pain of not changing outweighs the fear of changing.

Natalie:

Yeah, yeah.

Nicole:

I'm sure that, you mentioned for having an epiphany around this, I'm sure there was that maybe breaking point, or maybe it wasn't necessarily that extreme for you. But I'd love to hear about, what you feel like you were getting from acting that way, and then maybe when that started to not be enough anymore?

Natalie:

Well, people pleasing is like a coping mechanism, a survival mechanism. Our younger self has been conditioned into these habits. They're things that we've taught ourselves. They're things that we've been taught by others, that we've observed, we've internalized and of course, then it becomes maladaptive over time, because people pleasing is like a mask. It's not actually who we are. For me, what people pleasing did is it allowed me to wear this mask that stopped me from being too vulnerable.

Natalie:

There was this underlying fear that I was going to be rejected or abandoned if I allowed people to get too close to me, or if I didn't do what they wanted me to do. As a result, people pleasing allowed me to keep people at a distance, while also having the veneer of you seeming cool and chill and nice and all the rest. It also ... I don't want to phrase it as I'm not proud to admit this. But a lot of my people pleasing, masked passive aggression as well, having this veneer of compliance on the add side, going along with what, for instance, relatives expected of me, and then quietly rebelling behind the scenes.

Natalie:

But obviously, as a result, not really having to deal with the potential conflict that I felt would have come about. It allowed me to be seen in a particular way by friends or by co workers, or even by partners to a certain extent. What I ignored, of course with these, with what I thought I was getting out of it, which fundamentally was always I think about avoiding conflict and criticism and rejection and abandonment, but also trying to get praise where I could. I did get a lot of praise, about a lot of things.

Natalie:

I was always considered to be a hard worker, a great friend. Always struggled on the great daughter front, no matter how much I tried to please but I felt like I was ... I felt for me, until I really examined it, I felt like, what I was getting out of it, that uncomfortable comfort zone was better than the unfamiliarity of being myself, of actually confronting why I was doing this stuff in the first place, until it didn't work for me anymore. I think what we often struggle with people pleasing is looking at, "Okay, so yeah, you are getting the stuff out of it. But what isn't working?"

Natalie:

A lot of the time people are disassociated from what isn't working because they see it as a worth issue. Well, I'm not good enough. I didn't try hard enough. That person didn't do what I wanted them to do, without really ever making a connection between people pleasing and how they're feeling, or how that even impacted on the nature of the situation.

Nicole:

Yeah, I feel like one ... You mentioned it coming up, particularly with family for you. I feel like for me, obviously, I have engaged in continue to engage in, you said recovering people pleasing in a lot of different areas. But if I look back, particularly in my 20s, it was predominantly in romantic and sexual relationships with men, and with wanting to be seen as the cool girl. There was like something in that.

Natalie:

Yes.

Nicole:

Yeah, right? For me, my fear has always been around being too much for people, too loud, too needy, all of these things, and part of that fear is just my fear, and part of it has been reinforced that I have been told subtly and not subtly that I'm a lot or I'm too much, or all of these different things. It is like, our fears don't come from nowhere.

Natalie:

No, they don't.

Nicole:

Right? For me, it was, "Okay, well, if I'm like you said really compliant or if I'm the cool girl, if I don't need too much, then I'm going to be able to be picked, I'm going to be able to be chosen. If the currency that I'm trading in is male approval, if I act in these certain ways, it makes me more likely to get picked, to be that chosen one." But then I kept finding myself in relationships, where because I had gotten into the relationship, not acting as my most real too much self, then I'm in the relationship that of course isn't the right fit, and makes me feel unhappy because I wasn't me to begin with.

Nicole:

Then of course it never really worked out. There was really a time where I had to decide, I'm actually just not going to do this anymore and having to be willing to be less likable, to be less frequently chosen and that was so scary.

Natalie:

Honestly, I feel like you are describing me in my 20s. I was always the kid that was too much of like a lot of things. We have to keep in mind that the things that we are critical of us are bad, and that we perceive as being too much or too little, are what we've been conditioned, what we've been socialized to believe are wrong. A lot of the things that we give ourselves a hard time about are outdated ideas about gender, and sexuality and race and privilege and all sorts of things that we are still clearly grappling with as a society today. I loved when you said about the whole cool girl thing, because you and I we'd partied down together in our 20s. But also because one of my favorite books of all time really highlights the dark side of people pleasing. Have you read *Gone Girl*?

Nicole:

I have not, because people who know me well will know this. Anything that's even remotely like psychological thrillerly disturbing, anything in that genre is not Nicole approved. I've had friends who had said, "This is a great book and not for you," but I'm familiar with the premise?

Natalie:

Well, Amy, the protagonist, well, protagonist/antagonist, she is cool girl. It is actually a psychological thriller about people pleasing. In this case, it's ... I'm not going to give anything away, but it becomes a very extreme tale of what can happen when you have this façade, and you feel this need to preserve this image and to be the cool girl. I really identified with her, without it obviously turning us anywhere near as nasty and terrifying as what went on in there. But I identified with this whole, what I used to call the blending, merging, twisting and adapting to whatever guy I was going out with.

Natalie:

Something I've talked about over the years is that, when I was involved with the guy who had a girlfriend, this is back in my 20s, the co-worker, during that time; I said that my favorite film was what was called City of God. The truth is, my favorite films because it's always been a joint first place for these, are actually Ghost and Coming to America. There's a really, really stark contrast between the City of God and Ghost and Coming to America. City of God is great, but it wouldn't even be in my top 10, maybe even top 20 of films.

Natalie:

But for a couple of years, I was like, "Yeah, my favorite film is that." I did that because I wanted to come across like I was the type of girl that he should be with. I was prepared to be and do all these things, including compromising my integrity and becoming a liar for two years. Because that's what I thought that forged this connection between us and showed how much I cared about and loved him. But it was all of this willingness to play the role because people pleasing, it always ends up about playing roles of some sort, are roles and what we learn to do in childhood.

Natalie:

Like where in your family, maybe there's one who's super responsible, maybe there's another one who's the listener, maybe there's one who maybe is considered to be irresponsible, or the overachiever or the underachiever or the pretty one or the clever one. This is rife in families. What happens is we just continue to play these roles. You and I, when we're out there playing cool girl and whichever else that was actually if we really looked deeper into it, we've played that role in other guises. For instance, in our teen years, maybe we're friends.

Natalie:

Some of the components of what we were doing were things that we had learned to do in childhood. I was always like very good at being a listener, because guess what? I learned to do a lot of listening in chartered. It doesn't mean that these things that about us that we maybe pride ourselves on are air quotes wrong as such. But we end up using them like a mask, because people pleasing is actually a block to intimacy. As you realized and so did I, is that you play the role of cool girl, so you go in as a fake person.

Natalie:

Then when they don't like you, or they mess you up bad or they don't want a relationship, you feel rejected and you feel rejected for being somebody that you're not, which then creates this confusion because it's like, "Well, hold on a second. They don't even want me when I'm being the fake version of me, so what on earth would happen if I was the real version of me?" So round and round we go.

Nicole:

Yeah. What made you find decided that this was something that you were going to try to change?

Natalie:

For me, it was 2005. It was the year that I started ... I started Baggage Reclaim September, 2005. For the 18 months or so prior to that I, actually probably really two years, I had been struggling with an immune system disease called sarcoidosis. In fact, I tend to call it a mystery immune system disease. I didn't know why I had it. They also said that it couldn't be cured. During that time, was also the same time that

I was in this affair as well. About a month or so before starting Baggage Reclaim, after a year of steroid treatments, and about a month from that all the symptoms started to come back.

Natalie:

I was like, "You got to be kidding me." I basically went to go have my appointment with the consultants and they said, "Look, you've done a year's treatment and we'd hoped that that would force it into submission, but it hasn't worked. You have to go on steroids for life." As I was sitting there, listening to him going on and on, "No cure. If you don't take this, you're going to be dead by the age of 40 from pulmonary heart failure, reduced mobility, dah, dah, dah." I know, it sounds cliché, say life flashing before your eyes.

Natalie:

But I started just all these flashes of all of these times when I just went along with things, when I didn't say no. I felt like taking steroids for a year, and just following instructions, like doing whatever the doctors told me to do, and then it still not working out, me still not being better, me being disappointed. I felt like that was a metaphor for how things went for me in life. I'm sitting there and this guy is like, basically rattling off all this stuff about treatment plan, but how I've basically got to start treatment straightaway and all this type of stuff.

Natalie:

Next thing I heard no, like, really loud and clear in the room, so much so that I actually looked around the room to see who had said it, because I actually didn't realize that I was saying it and it was me. He went, "What?" I was like, "No, I need more time. You don't know why I have it. You say there's no cure. I need to explore the options." He went into a whole thing again, about how there weren't any other options. But it's funny, because normally I was afraid to be disobedient around authorities, being good, not creating confrontation, all this stuff.

Natalie:

But I didn't feel like that in there. I just suddenly thought to myself, "I'm so sick and tired of doing what everybody else wants me to do. I can't believe that I've been sick for this long, and I've been so caught up in being a performer at work and being involved with this guy, and some other guy that I then dated for five months, that I hadn't even realized just how sick I was. I hadn't even really done any proper investigations into my health and so I said no. That day, really for me, just caused this massive shift in my life, because I walked out of there saying to him, "Look, I'll see you in three months time.

Natalie:

I'll come for all of my appointments. Obviously, if my symptoms start to accelerate in that time, I will come back sooner than that. But otherwise, I'll see you in three months." He was just looking at me like, "Okay." I left there and I went to see a kinesiologist. Have you heard of kinesiologist?

Nicole:

Yes.

Natalie:

Yeah. I went to see a kinesiologist which funny enough, a friend had mentioned it to me, but also a number of commenters on my blog had mentioned about seeing an acupuncturist and a kinesiologist, just trying those options. I went to see a kinesiologist. I just thought she'd talk to me about muscle testing and allergy, which foods to cut out and all the rest and she did. But she started poking around into emotions, Nicole. I was like, "I just remembered that I've actually got a meeting at work that I'd forgotten about."

Natalie:

Totally didn't, I was making it up there and then. I just felt suddenly really panicked and she started asking me about my childhood and about feelings and stuff. After changing my mind and deciding to stay, I broke down in tears and a whole lot of stuff came tumbling out. In that conversation, she mentioned the word boundaries. She didn't actually go into any particularly big explanation about it, but remember it going, "Oh, it's an interesting word." I felt like it was something I heard vaguely.

Natalie:

They don't say it as often as they do now. But this is like, this is 2005 that this has been said to me. As I was starting to make these changes of my health in this treatment plan with the kinesiologist, I realized, "Well, what's the point in doing all of this stuff, if you're still going to go around doing all of the other stuff that you normally do?" I had to start making changes. As a result of all of that, I started like, it was small bits of stuff every day. But I basically left that appointment, I went to work, I sat with HR, and I said, "Hey, guess what, I've been sick for two years."

Natalie:

I know I haven't mentioned it to you, but I've got this. I've been on steroids for a year. I was putting the steroid eye drops in. this is the diagnosis. I know that I basically haven't like missed days of work. I've used holiday days. But I think it's time you knew what was going on." They were shocked, totally shocked. They immediately reduced my hours. They did an assessment to see what they needed to provide me with work. This was the beginning of me, basically finding that there was actually an awful lot of joy in saying no, quite a lot of relief as well.

Nicole:

Yeah, I think obviously interesting when you, in five minutes, boil down what was clearly multiple years of your life, right? It makes it of course easy to forget that ... I'm sure it was really hard as well and there were lots of ups and downs. But I'm really interested in, you painted such a clear picture of what some of the people pleasing looked like, and then such a clear picture of this period of when the enough moment came. I think that it's easy to try to put that into such a tight box, like someone listening going, "Oh, she was like that, and now she's just not anymore."

Nicole:

Obviously, I know that's not the case. I'm interested with the time that we have left, if you could give some examples of the actual how of changing and growing in this way, some of the things that you did or that you continue to do, since I know that this is an ongoing process, that actually work for you to break those tendencies and behaviors of people pleasing.

Natalie:

Yeah, absolutely. The thing that I would underscore from the outset, and you've already said it, which is, this has been a 15 year journey for me. Literally, from when I walked out of that appointment, I did start doing small things and it was scary. I constantly felt as if the sky was about to fall down. But I was also more scared of dying, so I continued. But when I look back over my 15 year journey, even I made a lot of progress within several months literally straight out the gate. Wow, like a lot of the big journey of my people pleasing has particularly happened over the last six to eight years of my life as well, and with every year there's been big lessons in it.

Natalie:

From the outset, for me I had to, I didn't go, any of us did, we go and take any class on boundaries when we were at school or whatever. I had to figure it out as I went. But what I did was that I used to get in, I would spend a lot of phone calls with my mom. They were not the back and forth calls, where you're having a chat and it feels like there's a flow to it. They were draining, and sometimes very triggering. I took to having more like 10 to 12 minute conversations. I don't want to say that it was that specific.

Natalie:

But I realized that 15 minutes was my limits, and that I stopped holding myself on the super draining calls, like as if I'm just supposed to be some receptacle container to pick up everybody's emotions, the dumping ground. What I did is that, I would say like, if it was unexpectedly that we were talking, I'd say, "Look, actually, I've only got 10, 15 minutes. Is that all right? Or shall we park this for later on?" Or we would be talking and it will go into this territory of feeling like I was about to be dumped on, or criticized or something, and I would go, "Oh, gosh, would you look at the time.

Natalie:

I just realized I've got to be blah, blah. I got to be wherever in however many minutes or I've got somebody else on the line." I did this consistently and it, I am not kidding, changed my life overnight. I hadn't realized how drained, how tense, how anxious, how resentful I was feeling a lot of the time, where the phone would ring, and I would have this dread around me. As a result of doing this, I found that I stopped taking responsibility for my mom's feelings. I stopped feeling as if it is my job to be a good daughter and so because that is my job, I have to stay on the phone, even if I don't want to, even if I feel uncomfortable, even if actually this person is saying awful things to me.

Natalie:

This created a dramatic shift in my life. Now, the relationship with my mom and even with my dad, I'd say were the most difficult ones for me around with the people pleasing. But they also, when I say they've been rewarding, I'm not talking about them. But I mean like, changing my relationship with them has definitely been super rewarding. Because I started to put some distance between things. I started looking at, "Oh, where do I feel obliged?" I started noticing what I was feeling. This is a big thing. Is it an obligation?

Natalie:

Or is it a desire? A lot of the time, I was feeling like it was an obligation. At the time, I didn't really call it that. I'm calling it that now, because I'm years down the line. But I started noticing how I was truly feeling about things, and started trying to be in a bit more of an honest place. When you turn, before I'd just let people say whatever. I was like, now I was like, "Actually, I can't sit here and listen to this." It was

really quite liberating. Other things, let's see, well with exes, I cut them all loose. I was like somebody who had a lot of axes still reaching out, trying to keep in touch, thinking they could just restart things up.

Natalie:

I gradually cut that all off. Just when they'd say, "Oh, hey, should we get together?" I would say, "Actually, you know what, I'm going to pass." I'm not saying it was easy, because actually the first several months in particular, I tended to feel quite upset afterwards, particularly if I had to speak up for myself. Sometimes I burst into tears afterwards, with just the whole; I don't know the buildup of having to do it. Sometimes, yeah, feeling like, "Oh my gosh, I can't believe that I said that to that person. Maybe they're going to hate me."

Natalie:

Nine times out of 10, they didn't hate me. If they did, well, it was better that we had that conversation. A few months into all of this, a co-worker started up something with me, because I've been the performing people pleaser, I think it is expected that he could dump something on me. Basically I said, "Actually, I can't do that, I can't," and a big argument ensued. I ended up with a migraine for four days afterwards and actually couldn't go to work. But it really showed me about how I was taking on too much.

Natalie:

I really started to really force myself to delay on saying yes to stuff, and tell people that I needed to get back to them. That made a big difference, because I was automatically always saying yes, yes, yes, yes, yes. In recent years, a lot of my people pleasing in particular has been around family. There have been times where I've had to have some very, very difficult and awkward conversations, ones that in the past, I wouldn't have because I would have said, "Well, I don't want to hurt feelings."

Natalie:

I don't want to cause confrontation, family, blah, blah, blah." But I was actually able to say what I wanted to say, without expecting the other person to change. That's just a few examples. But I want to make sure I'm not kind of going off-piste there.

Nicole:

Yeah, no. I feel like I want to just underscore a couple things that you were saying this idea about, differentiating between desire and obligation, I think is incredibly powerful. It's something that I'm always interested in, why it's hard for us to be honest with ourselves. I think you know that there can be multiple reasons. But for me, I realized that one of the reasons that I was lying to myself so much about different things is, because I thought that as soon as I was honest with myself about something, that meant that I had to do something about it, and I wasn't ready to do something about it, and creating a little bit more space between those two, like I can admit to myself as something feels like an obligation and not a true desire.

Nicole:

That doesn't mean that I have to make a change yet. I can think about it more. I can kind of work through it. That was always really helpful for me. I feel like hearing you talk about, just that noticing being something that was useful for you of, again, what is the why behind this? Why am I doing this?

Obviously, of course, sometimes we have to do things that we don't want to do, but I really had to check myself on that, because I think the amount of things that I have to do truly have to do, that are obligations are actually quite small.

Nicole:

There's a lot of things that I told myself, there's no way you could stop doing this, right. There's, you would lose these people, you would lose this money, you would lose ... I put the stakes so high and told myself that, "You have to keep doing all these things," when the truth was, there were very few of them that I actually had to keep doing. This noticing, the delaying saying yes when people ask or request, "Oh, let me check my calendar. Let me check my schedule.

Nicole:

Let me get back to you." Just being able to create that buffer of space, I feel like is also really useful, because then it lets me not in the moment feel like I have to give the yes to make them happy right now. It was easier for me to give the no after that initial ask frenzy feeling had one off.

Natalie:

Yeah, absolutely. Because when we people please, it's a way of relieving tension in the short-term. It's like something occurs, we automatically comply or we hastily say yes, or whatever it is, because of this automatic or almost automatic response to this tension, this anxiety. That tension, anxiety comes from, it's like, "Oh, somebody, I think has expressed a need, robot activated. Now I must go and please that person and do what they want, because somebody out there has a need. Ooh, somebody expressed an interest in something, or said that they were struggling about something, it's like a robot activated, somebody has a desire. Go and fulfill it."

Natalie:

When we start to notice, not even just how we feel, which is a biggie, but also not even just noticing about the whole obligation thing, but even what's whirling around in our head. For example, I say to people, somebody asks you to do something. Outwardly, you're like, "Yeah, sure." Inwardly, you're going, "I can't believe that mother beep has turned around and asked me to do this. Who do they think they are? Don't they not realize how much stuff I've got to do? I can't believe they even have the brass to say this."

Natalie:

Or we're going, "Yeah, but you know, if I turn around and I say no, then maybe people are going to think I'm this, and I don't want people to think of that. I just think it'd be better if I do it this way. I don't want people thinking that I'm not a team player." All of this kind of stuff, is a sign that you need to say no, or you need to find the desire in you to do it. The thing about people pleasing is, it's a way of being checked out from the world. Whereas when we actually start to observe our day, like one of the things that

Natalie:

I encourage people to do is, rather than going, "Oh, well, I've heard this thing about people pleasing, and I've realized that I've been taken advantage of, and I've been given too much, and I'm going to rein it in and have boundaries." People then go and charge off, and then like, "Oh, my gosh, this is backfiring." I

say, "No, spend a week observing. Just as part of your day to day have post-its or your journal, or whatever it is where you are noting what you say yes, no, and maybe to." Now, your average people pleaser doesn't have a hell of a lot of no in there. There's possibly not even any maybes in there.

Natalie:

Or sometimes what you find is there's hardly any no, and there's plenty of yes and there's plenty of maybes that are going to turn into yes, the maybes are just like a stalling thing. They panic themselves into saying yes. I say to them, "Observe your weak, so that you can start to notice what you're spending basically your bandwidth on. Where are you spending your attention, your time, energy, effort and emotions?" Because the more of your bandwidth that is spent being and doing things that you don't actually need or want to do, is the more drained you're going to feel and the less bandwidth you have.

Natalie:

What's interesting is, people will then spend that week observing, and what they will notice is the truth about how they spend their time, energy, effort and emotions. They will see who routinely makes them feel bad. They will notice, "Oh wow. When my phone rings or I get the text things sound or whatever, I actually feel a bit jumpy and nervous, because I'm thinking it's whoever it is." I'm going to say to people is, "People pleasers often have a people pleasing entourage." A person off you who benefit from our people pleasing.

Natalie:

Not necessarily because they intentionally set out to, although sometimes they do, but you know celebs who have a drink or drugs problem, and then they have a whole group of people around them and you're like, "How come nobody ever pointed out that maybe doing that amount of coke is not a good idea?" But those people in the entourage benefit from that celeb having that particular lifestyle, and drinking themselves into oblivion or doing that coke. Well, with people pleasers, they will notice that there are certain people in their life, who benefit them the most for them to people please. It might be our parents.

Natalie:

It might be, I don't know a sibling. It might be a boss, whoever it might be. But once we can become aware of who was in that entourage, we can also start to notice the people in our lives, who actually do not have any problem whatsoever with us saying no. Because then we can identify opportunities for us to be more ourselves. As a result of this observation then what, we can look at is, "Okay, where can I, even if it's not today, tomorrow, even or next week, where can I gradually start to make some shifts?" We don't have to go and change the whole thing. We just need to start somewhere.

Nicole:

Yeah, I love that. Really for me I learned, and I'm continually learning this, but how much better it feels to have honest, kind, direct communication, instead of passive, aggressive hinting or manipulation, or so much of this stuff for me, if I'm willing to have, one honest conversation that so much of it can be made better, or boundaries can be established. Like you said, sometimes that's not the case. Sometimes you do wind up losing people. But I think that the more I'm willing to have that direct communication, I would so much rather someone give me a no, like, say no to if I've made a request of them.

Nicole:

If they mean no, I'd so much rather them say no, then say yes, but not mean it. Say yes and flake at the last minute, say yes, but show up but not really be there. All of that is stuff that I have done before. It just feels so icky when it's done to me, so why would I do that to someone else? I can't even tell you how much energy I have wasted in my life, trying to figure out how to get out of something that I said yes to, that I shouldn't have said yes to.

Natalie:

I really want to do one of those testified dances there, because you are talking stone cold facts there. Because one of the things that we have to come to terms as people pleasers is that, if we're people pleasing, then we're not being honest. Doesn't make us a bad person, but the people pleasing is this mask, and it blocks intimacy. We get to avoid vulnerability with it. It's this whole thing of not going the whole way and hiding behind this, "Oh, well, it's going to hurt feelings. It's going to cause problems."

Natalie:

The thing is, we cause far more problems by not talking about the stuff, because from the moments that we decide we're not going to talk about it, because we've decided how the other person is going to feel, then we've cut off intimacy, because the person doesn't actually know how we feel. But the other bit, which you were so spot on as well about, was about how 100% is the whole way. We as people pleasers convince ourselves, well, we're doing 70% of the work here. We expect the other person to pick up the slack.

Natalie:

But our idea of 70% might actually only be 30% of the way. It might actually be very little way at all. What people pleasers do is, they hint. People pleasing is like showing others how to behave. When we're being like the good girl, and so no matter how badly somebody behaves, we do not kick off about it. We don't say anything. We just try to be cool and sweet and whichever else, right? That's because a part of us is like, "Look at me, and how good I'm being. Take the hint and be good like me and then we can both be cool together."

Natalie:

Does not work like that. Sometimes what we're doing is for instance, and I was guilty of this being the good daughter, so playing this role of being what we think the good daughter has to be. The reason why we're playing the role of the good daughter is, because we're trying to appeal to one or both of our parents, so that they will become what we need and want them to be. It's all this dropping hints. Then when we do this whole like, "Oh, I'm afraid of hurting feelings." The truth is, is we're more afraid of hurting our own feelings. That's the truth.

Natalie:

We are afraid that if we are honest, that we're not going to like what the other person turns around and says, that our feelings are going to be heard, not the other way around. The thing is, once we actually have these conversations, and we get consistently into it as you've discovered, you realize the sky doesn't fall down, that you're better off in an honest relationship than a dishonest one.

Nicole:

Yeah, or that if I am disappointed or that someone does reject me, it will be painful and I will be okay.

Natalie:

Yes, yes, the two things can exist at the same time. One of the things I say to people is like, boundaries are like our principles, preferences and priorities for how we want to live our lives happily and authentically. Now, a lot of people misunderstand boundaries and see it all as about saying no, saying no is actually just a part of boundaries, not all of boundaries. Boundaries is as much about what we say yes to as it is about what we say no to. Now, one of the things that I think creates a lot of friction is this idea that, we should be able to get a good reaction out of people, because we've said something nicely, because we've actually had the boundary, because we've done the right thing.

Natalie:

You know as well as I do, humans don't work that way, because humans have egos. An example I give is, let's say you've been pissed off with somebody for like, I don't know, a month about something and you've had time now to think about that. Now you actually turn around and you say to the person about what has been bothering you. That's great that you turned around and said something. But the thing is, you've had a month to think about that. They've just had a minute or five, or however long that conversation took, to become acquainted with that.

Natalie:

I'm not saying it's going to take them a month to digest whatever it is that you've told them, but they are allowed to have whatever feelings that they've had about it. I think with people pleasing, we seem to be under this mistaken impression that we're supposed to spare people from their feelings, that we're supposed to ensure that nobody feels anything and actually-

Nicole:

Oh my god.

Natalie:

... we're not.

Nicole:

Yeah. Oh, my god, this is so real. I feel like that in particular, I need to replay that to myself every morning as my pump up thing. Yeah, it is not our job to spare other people from their feelings.

Natalie:

Do you know what, right?? It is like trying to cup the ocean in our hands. Because I bet you can think of a time, where with all the best intentions in the world, you've actually tried to avoid, like I don't know some negative outcome in a situation. Yet, despite all of that the person has whatever feelings they have, whatever opinion, they do whatever they do. You realize that you're not in control of that, because people respond to stuff based on their baggage not on us.

Natalie:

Where they're trying to control how they feel about stuff, and people are going to feel how they're going to feel. We've got to stop acting like, "Oh, well, if I do things the right way, they will feel how I want them to feel." Humans are far too complicated for that.

Nicole:

I think that's a wonderful place to start to wrap up. Is there anything that hasn't come up so far in the conversation that you wanted to mention?

Natalie:

Yeah, something did pop into my head a moment ago. What was it? We talked about the desire ... Oh, something that I encourage people to do is, when you get into that place, where you are like, "Oh, well, it's going to hurt their feelings if I do that," or where you're pissed off with somebody and you're mad at them for whatever it is that they've done, and you feel like you've done a lot for them, the question I get people to ask themselves is, what's the baggage behind this? What I mean by this is, yes, the person has pissed us off or disappointed us, or whatever it might be.

Natalie:

But what else does this specific incident, how we are feeling, what the person has done, what we're thinking, what else does it remind us of? Who else does it remind us of? Because that will help us to understand why we are responding, reacting in the way that we are. This can be a big game changer for people, because I think it depersonalizes things, because we realize, "Oh, I've got my baggage and they've got their baggage," as opposed to, "Oh, well, I've been a really good person, so they should have responded differently."

Natalie:

Because then it's like, "Oh, I'm reacting to this in this way, because they actually remind me of my really annoying sister. Or I'm responding this way, because I feel like I did when I was a teenager at school when this particular thing happened." Then we can go, "Oh, hold on a second. I'm 43. I'm not at school anymore. How can I respond differently now based on where I am now in the present?" this helps us to be more bounded.

Nicole:

Yeah, yeah. I love that. The last thing that I want to ask you, if you could leave folks with one small call to action based on our conversation, what would it be? Maybe a question to ask themselves or a small action to take if this is something that's resonating with them.

Natalie:

In the quest to become more grounded, to be more mindful, as you're going about your life, and you're signing yourself up to things, committing to things, ask yourself, I'm I doing this because I want to? Or am I doing this, because I want to control how I'm perceived or I want to avoid something? That's not actually a depressing question to ask. It's actually a really good way of becoming self aware. Because the better that you get to know you is the better that your relationships, the more honest your relationships become.

Nicole:

Yeah, I think it's a really liberating question. Because even if, let's say the realization is, "Oh, I'm doing X thing because I want to be perceived a certain way." Even if I decide to keep doing that, it feels better that I'm at least knowing why I'm doing it and doing it on purpose.

Natalie:

Yeah, absolutely, rather than this unconscious, blind bowling in there and then afterwards we give ourselves a hard time. It's like, actually, let's open our eyes and wake up and make more conscious choices. Because then actually, we have an opportunity to learn from it. Because if you went in there with your eyes closed, half asleep doing that, as you said, when you consciously go, "Actually, I'm still going to go ahead anyway," you'll learn a lot more from the experience.

Nicole:

Yeah. What's the best place for people to find you and say hi online? Do you have a particular favorite way to connect with new folks?

Natalie:

Instagram is always the best place to get a hold of me. I'm not massive on, I don't massively use like Facebook or Twitter. It's Instagram, @NatLue is my Instagram handle. Of course I'm on my website, [baggagereclaim.com](http://baggagereclaim.com) where you can also find my podcast and where oh gosh I have 1,600 blog posts or something like that.

Nicole:

Yeah, everyone who's listening who wants to go deeper, Natalie has everything you could possibly want in which to do that, which is fabulous. Natalie, this was wonderful. Thank you so much.

Natalie:

Oh, thank you, Nicole. It was an absolute pleasure. You are a breath of fresh air.

Nicole:

That's our show for today. Our music is by Adam Day who also handles our sound editing. Thanks, Adam. You're the best. Huge thanks as well to every single member of our Patreon community, for making this honest conversation, this entire podcast and so much of my other work, like my twice weekly personal essay newsletter called Good Question possible. Your monthly funding allows me to keep creating resources and gatherings for folks who crave honest conversations, both with themselves and others.

Nicole:

I fully believe that these conversations can change our lives, our relationships and our world. To join us just come on over to [patreon.com/nicoleantoinette](https://patreon.com/nicoleantoinette). Our community operates on a shame free sliding scale, so you can feel good about supporting this work from within your own means. I'll see you over in the Patreon community, yeah? Until next time, I want you to know three things first, that you are enough second that you are not alone and third, that I'm totally rooting for you.