

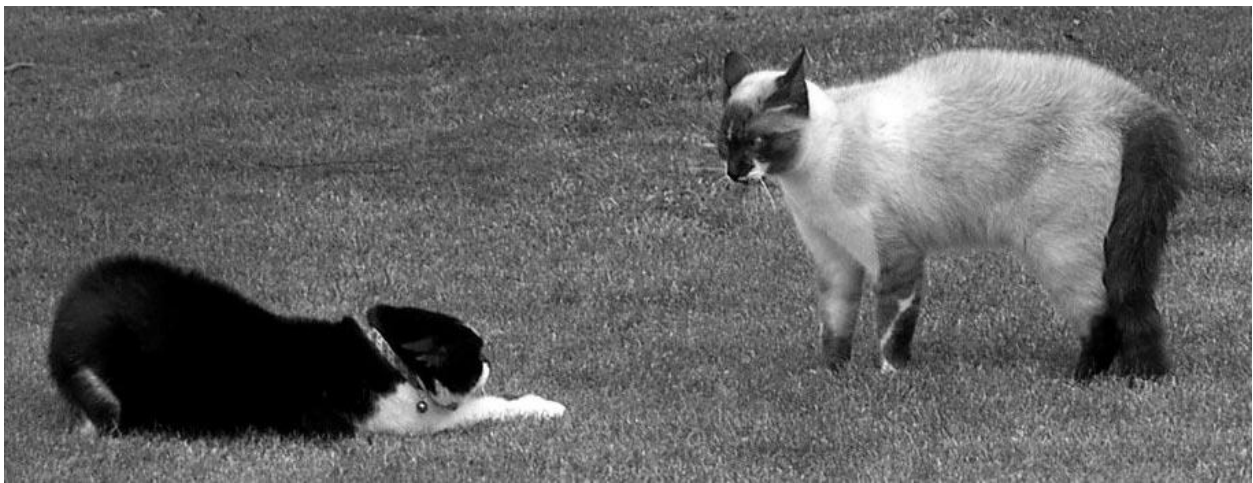
6. Submissive Signs: How Submission Looks

What's Submissive Body Language

Submissive body language signals our relative lower position in the dominance hierarchy.

Submissive body language and behavior communicates that we accept the dominance of someone else over the environment and/or over ourselves.

It a nutshell, **submissive behavior relinquishes control and gives power to others.**



An extreme example of submissive signaling between cats

Is Submissive Behavior Bad?

Not necessarily.

There is nothing inherently wrong with acting submissively.

As we repeated a few times already, sometimes acting submissively is the most powerful thing you can do.

Once you understand the social dynamics of submission, its pros and its cons, you are free to decide when to avoid or when to engage in submissive behavior.

That being said, as a rule of thumb, if you are submissive *too often* during *most* of your life, then chances are that 1. you are not (fully) conscious of your own behavior and its impact and 2. that your life will improve once you increase your awareness and your ability to become more assertive.

The Problems Of Too Much Submission

I quote Robert Bolton here, author of [People Skills](#):

Submissive people do not express their honest feelings, needs, values, and concerns.

They allow others to violate their space, deny their rights, and ignore their needs. Some submissive people do express their needs but do it in such an apologetic and diffident manner that they are not taken seriously.

(...) Nonverbals like a shrug of the shoulder, lack of eye contact, hesitating speech, and other factors may undercut their expression of a need or the defense of their space.

What Bolton is referring to is submissiveness as a lack of *capability* in defending one's needs and rights.

If that's the case, submission has the following harmful consequences:

1. Bottling up of anger and frustrations
2. Passive-aggressive behavior
3. Falling (extremely) short of one's life potential
4. Opening the door to possible abuse
5. Lowering of one's own social status

So let's see now how submissive behavior looks like so you can troubleshoot yourself.

#1. Deferring to Leaders

The core of submissiveness is deferential behavior towards leaders. It takes many forms, including:

1.1 Looking at leaders/group to direct their own behavior

Submissive people aren't sure what they need to do and what they *can* do.

And to understand what's admissible and what they should do, they look around searching for the cues from the social environment.

Most of all, they look at the leader.

Here is an example from The Wolf of Wall Street.
Notice how the underlings look at Di Caprio, the leader, for several times during this scene:

<https://youtu.be/ndTbiDQjbiE>

Underlings also look at the group and to the leader for confirmation that they're still in good standing with the group.
You can see it in the above video at minute 1:22. The underling makes a joke and looks at the leader to check his reaction. Then he nods as if to say "alright, I'm done here, take the lead".

And here is another interesting example from the movie The Break-Up.

It's a split of a second, but notice how he keeps looking at her after he delivers his dominant line:

https://youtu.be/1wc_mZ86ypg

He *sounds* like he is dominant and in control.

But he looks at her to glean what her reaction will be, which suggests that she has a strong influence on him.

He is not super submissive, but he's not the leader either.

PRO Tip Only look at the leader strategically, not out of fear

Often in life, you are not going to be the leader, and that's totally fine.

However, looking at the leader too often sends the message that you might not have much leadership qualities at all. And that doesn't bode well for your future, both from a career perspective and from a social power point of view.

In the above scene from The Wolf of Wall Street, they all look like eternal underlings, no matter how much money they make or what their official title is. The type of men who'd never make it into upper management.

Hence, I recommend you avoid looking too often at the leader both at work and in life.

Joining a new group entails learning the rules of socialization, what you can and cannot say, but do so without seeking constant confirmation.

1.2. Rotating towards the leader

Dominance is a bit like an electromagnetic charge.

It can repel people who are afraid or not comfortable with the dominant person (equal charge), but it will attract all the rest (opposite charge).

For example, women who are into their men, move towards their partners with their bodies (or even hide behind them when they're feeling shy and nervous).

Similarly, they will angle their bodies towards the person they are either most attracted to or who has the most social power (which is often the same person).

Notice the meeting between South and North Korean representatives and how the women move right after the meeting:

<https://youtu.be/1-TEm8WS0eg>

Kim Jong Un's sister doesn't rotate towards him.

We might speculate she is very independent, she doesn't respect him much or she does not like him much (but it's *heavy* speculation of course).

On the other hand, we can guess that Lee Nak-Yeon's wife recognizes his leadership over her because she rotates towards him.

1.3. Following the leader's and group's laughing-patterns

Patterns of laughter and smiles are a great, great indicator of social power in a group.

The social dynamics of laughter are very telling for two reasons:

1. Laughs are a sign of friendliness, so who smiles at whom is a good indicator of who is deferring to whom

2. Laughter tells you what topics a group is serious about, and what topics it considers open to entertainment

Deciding which topics are “free to make fun of” is an important decision in the group’s social dynamics.

This is especially true for “risky” subjects such as relationships, sex, politics, feminism, races etc. etc.

Submissive people are scared of taking this decision by themselves and when they risk it, they look around to make sure their social gambit is being well received.

And what happens when they realize that the group is not receiving their joke well?

They will get embarrassed, mortified, they will often look down... And the laughter will choke in their throats.

Example from Knocked-Up:

<https://youtu.be/lzXqlsNH-EU>

She doesn’t like the joke so he quickly lets it die.

He doesn’t do it *too* badly because it’s not an abrupt ending, but we can guess from his behavior that he has no strong leadership in that relationship.

For men, it’s particularly important that they don’t let the women they want to seduce dictate what they can or cannot laugh about. Because that will likely kill most of her attraction.

Training Day has one much more obvious example when it comes to leadership and patterns of laughter.

Similarly:

1.4. Cracking a joke and looking around for approval

A poor joke where nobody laughs is not just a poor joke: **a joke with no laughter is a sign of little social power** and, possibly of group's ostracization.

Since submissive people are particularly afraid of any sign they are not well accepted and liked, when they make a joke they look at others while laughing as if to ask them "laugh with me".

It's as if they were asking:

***Submissive Individual** : (joke) (looks around) that was funny, wasn't it? (please please laugh!)*

1.5. Laughing at leader's joke even when not funny

Submissive people will force themselves to laugh when the group is laughing and, of course, when the leader is cracking a joke.

A dramatized example from "The Sopranos":

<https://youtu.be/PJq3mjARUgg>

PRO Tip: If you need to be polite, smile with your lips a bit, don't force laughter

If someone in your group has done a poor joke, I recommend you arch your lips up just a little bit without showing your teeth as if to say "that wasn't really funny but I'm being polite".

Then move on.

[You can see an example here.](#)

This is a very leader-like behavior that gives feedback to his group without being overly mean about it.

1.6. Deferring to the leader for the final word

Submissive people look up at the leader when it comes to making a decision.

Look at the clip below from Training Day and you can guess who is the decision-maker even before he speaks:

<https://youtu.be/EJqSJ2jXEU0>

It's as if they were saying "your call, you're the decision-maker here".

1.6. Praying-like hands

Unconsciously, people can use their hands as if they were praying. Either palms up as if to say an "Ave Maria" or joint hands.

You can see George doing it a few times as he interviews Trump:

<https://youtu.be/FI6w90F9yAs>

#2. Defensive & Reassurance-Seeking Signs

Do you remember the body language of dominance lesson?

There we said that submissive people tend to make space for dominant individuals and to close their bodies to protect themselves.

The same applies during socialization of course, which is expressed in many forms:

2.1. Walking backward

Walking backward is an example of giving space to the person whom we perceive as being the leader.

You can see this in seduction as well, where it replicates a dominant/dominated body language which can be the precursor of sexual submission:

<https://youtu.be/pnyjX3jF4OU>

PRO Tip: This one can work well in seduction

This can be a great seduction power move for men.

A “predator-prey” dynamic is extremely seductive when she’s attracted and primed for sexual intercourse (later we’ll see similar predator-prey moves).

2.2. Rushing away

Rushing away is a typical example of social un-confidence.

It communicates you are overly worried about bothering someone or of taking too much of their time.

Of course, that, in turn, communicates one of the following:

1. Their time is so important (and they are so much more important)
2. You are intimidated or afraid of them

This is a dramatized example of N.2 from The Godfather:

<https://youtu.be/FFVkolpFCUM>

Albeit the above is a dramatized example, this is a common behavior in real-life.

Think about when you're standing at the checkout line for groceries.

Do you feel the pressure of "rushing"?

That's what we're talking about here.

2.3. Sideways body (out of fear)

Placing our body sideways communicates fear.

And, depending on the situation, it communicates we are uncomfortable with our sexuality, and there are two different types:

1. Members of the opposite we are attracted to (it's good when women do it with men, but it's also the sign he is coming off too strong and should increase her comfort level)
2. For men in the presence of an alpha male (submissive apes cover their erections in the presence of alpha males, but not in the presence of non-alphas)

<https://youtu.be/ynjOUts1aKo>

Notice that while the general's body is full frontal, attacking position, Tom Cruise's body is sideways, defensive position.

PRO Tip: Get rid of this one

If you tend to do this in situations that present no real immediate danger, you must root it out.

2.4. Covering the mouth

Very child-like, but it's not so rare among adults either.

You will see it when people said something racy and they immediately are afraid that it's "too much". Especially if they realize the group is not reacting well.

A dramatized example from Fantozzi:

https://youtu.be/Y9Rc_DGmL1Q

This example is dramatized, but any movement of your hand in front of your mouth communicates the same social fear.

So if you see your hand going near your mouth stop it immediately and eradicate that behavior in the long run.

For Women:

Covering your mouth can be a highly seductive coy signal.

It's very feminine and it attracts most men.

Women can use it as a strategical tool of attraction, but should avoid doing so when they want to be more assertive and be taken more seriously -ie.: on the workplace-.

2.5. Avoid leader's gaze (during criticism)

Confident people are not afraid of getting and giving critical feedback.

And they signal it by keeping eye contact as they normally would.

On the other hand, socially weaker individuals will divert their gaze when they give or receive critical feedback.

Sometimes you will see an interesting mix: strong disagreement or criticism without looking in people's eyes.

That communicates a strong personal drive but a lack of social power to back it up.

Example of Schumer criticizing Trump:

<https://youtu.be/6wm-NtMkqz8>

Schumer comes across solid, overall.

His voice is strong, his opinions are delivered with strong conviction. The moment he says “lemme *just* say something mister president” though he does not look at Trump but his gaze is fixated ahead of him and it goes lower.

Right there he communicates two things: that he probably doesn’t like Trump and is not very comfortable with him. And two, that he is in a submissive position relative to Trump (who instead keeps looking at him straight on like a predator).

Schumer shows signs of the “power down” position (ie.: “I voice disagreement but we both know I’m not in charge”).

PRO Tip: Communicate respectfully, but look at them in the eyes

If you express your disagreement fairly and if your criticism is well-founded to the point where you can say it, then you must also back it with your eye contact.

Politely express your opinion and stand behind it with your body language.

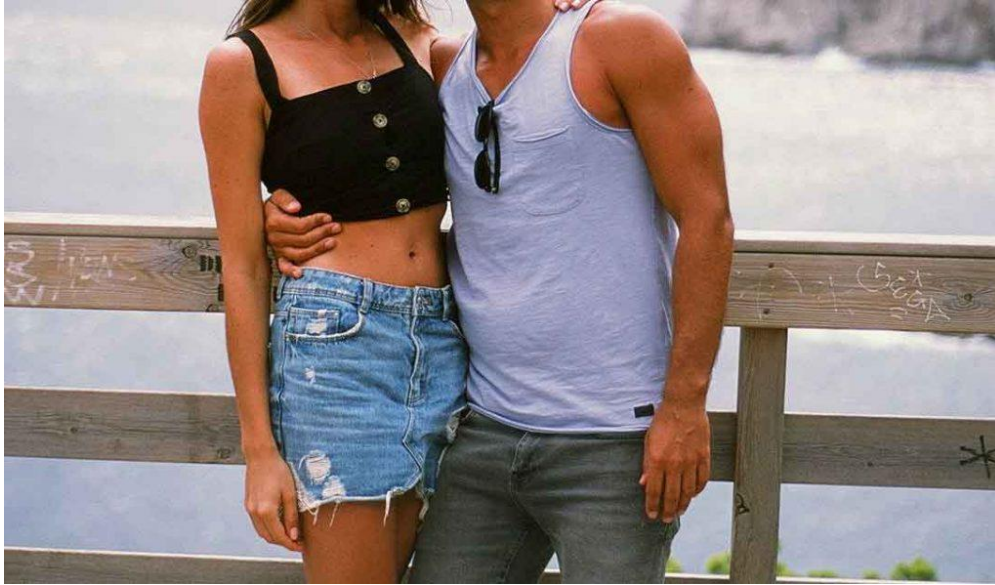
Same for when receiving criticism: keep eye contact and don’t close your body language.

The exceptions are when you are dealing with bosses who are very high on power or have very fragile egos. In those cases, it’s indeed best to look away.

2.6. Moving towards the leader

This is particularly pronounced in intimate relationships or seductions.

The partner who is more into the other will usually move towards the leader, grab the leader’s arm or even seek protection behind the leader.



Sexy picture, but it's him who leans into her.
Who moves towards who is also an indicator of who needs who the most, so men should avoid over-leaning towards their GFs.

#3. Confirming Attention

Confirming we are listening is not only polite but a sign of active listening and good communication skills.

Above a certain threshold though active listening becomes weak and submissive.

People who send too many "I'm listening" confirmations sub-communicate that they feel the need to reassure the leader that they are paying attention.

It's because they are *afraid* of crossing their leaders.

PRO Tip: If you aren't using any, add some

Watch out on this one: most people are sending too few "I'm listening confirmations", not too many.

On average women require more "hmm-hmm" vocal confirmation, so

men should not be afraid of sending out listening confirmation even during seduction ([Body Language of Love](#)).

Here is the general rule: listening confirmation increases empathy and connection, but too much is submissive (see example here below). So if you're otherwise coming across as confident, don't be afraid of using them more.

3.1. Excessive nodding

Nodding is a major "I'm listening" signal.

But it's also one of the easiest to overdo.

Look at the guy interviewing Zuckerberg for Y Combinator at 2x speed and tell me if he doesn't look like a little dog around his owner:

<https://youtu.be/Lb4lcGF5iTQ>

A few nodding are fine. Too often and too quickly are a no-no.

3.2. Aha-aha reassurances

Repeating "aha" is a way of reassuring that yes, we are there, we are listening.

However, they also communicate that you probably agree, that you accept their authority and/or that you are taking mental notes of their directives.

Reduce your "ahas" if you're at risk of coming across like an order-taker.

#4. Signs of Insecurity

Insecurity and submissiveness are not the same.

But there is a strong overlap between them.

Insecure individuals rarely are leaders, and submissive people tend to be insecure.

Submissive individuals tend to be particularly tentative around more assertive individuals.

They are focused on threats and they are fearful of causing the ire of the more socially powerful individuals.

Signals of insecurity are:

4.1. Make a joke and start laughing

We saw this earlier.

Starting to laugh signals “end of the joke, please support me and start laughing now”.

4.2. Looking away after “risky” comment

A risky comment can make or break your social status.

If people back it up (ie.: laugh, accept the topic or adopt your attitude towards it), you’ve just acted as a leader.

If they spurn it or reject it, they just rejected your leadership.

Since risky comments are so consequential in social dynamics, submissive people are afraid of the consequences.

And when they do make a risky comment, they don’t have the strength to back up their remark with a confident body language.

So they look away, look down, close themselves up or “move away” from what they just said.

The moving away can be physical, and it can be a telltale sign of a lie as well.

Look at Nixon here:

<https://youtu.be/sh163n1IJ4M>

Right after he says “I’m not a crook” he moves away.
He can’t stand there because, deep down, he knows he’s a crook.
Same with people who feel like they have just said or done something socially risky: they feel the need to escape and defend.

Look how James Bond does the exact opposite instead: he looks away *before* delivering the witty remark and then stands behind it by looking straight into his eyes and holding the pause.

That’s social power right there:

https://youtu.be/0t1_usmB30s

4.3. Looking down

Looking down is the most typical sign of submission.

Men should avoid it with other men, and especially so when they are being challenged and when they are in the right.

Example from 500 Days of Summer:

<https://youtu.be/Mt9onjeNmD8>

both look down *and* moves his face away (next signal).

For Women: looking down can be a powerful coy signal. Looking down and then up again to meet his eyes is a powerful flirting technique that communicates “come get me” (we’ll see examples of it later).

4.4. Angling your face away

Similar to the concept of “burying one’s head in the sand”.

Instead of facing the issue, we’d rather remove ourselves and hope the issue disappears.

Angling our face away **is one sign of avoiding an environment which is too overwhelming and over which submissive individuals don’t feel like they have enough control.**

Milton in Office Space does it twice:

<https://youtu.be/jsLUidiYm0w>

Lowering your head down instead of sideways is even more submissive.

4.5. Blinking excessively

Another example of blocking signals from the environment.

The more we blink, the more we get to remove ourselves from situations and people that make us uncomfortable -or afraid- ([Allan Pease](#)).

On the other hand, a longer blink-free gaze makes you look more confident.

Note on Blink-Free Stare:

Don't overdo the blink-free gaze though or it can become overwhelming the same way psychopaths' stare can be overwhelming (rare exceptions in seduction as we'll see later).

#5. Signs of Low Self-Esteem

Low self-esteem often looks like insecurity on the outside.

But while insecurity can be situational and changes depending on the environment, low self-esteem tends to be "stickier".

If you recognize the following in yourself, it's a sign that you might want to address the root causes of low self-esteem:

5.1. Guilt & idealization of others

Some people are ashamed of their genders, their cultures or their past.

When we devalue our culture and we glorify someone else's culture we are also slightly devaluing ourselves and we are placing others above us.

And that's the definition of submissiveness.

See if you can spot this dynamic in this scene:

<https://youtu.be/5P1q3IDjBal>

Putin answering in English but Obama not speaking in Russian would have meant submitting to the English language (and, by reflection, cultural dominance).

That was never going to happen and Putin, obviously, was forced to spurn him and ignore him.

5.2. Trying hard to please

Examples of trying too hard to please are:

1. Not saying what we think in fear of offending
2. Over-complimenting
3. Pretend we care about stories we don't really care of
4. Inconveniencing ourselves for others

At the core, **trying hard to please means inconveniencing ourselves and expanding lots of effort with no returns.**

Viktor in the movie The Terminal is the example of a man who tries too hard to please:

<https://youtu.be/Agir-TyNXm8>

Repeating “please, please” three times screams “trying too hard”. Coupled with cleaning her glasses and following her like a dog... This guy would have no chances outside of a scripted movie.

Trying too hard to please is a form of over-compensation, which in turns communicates “you are too high value for me so I need to make up for it”.

There is a big difference between gallant helping -the previous example of Kutcher in dominant caring- and trying too hard to please.

Trying too hard to please can also be as simple as feeling obliged to take a flyer in the streets, to say “sorry” when you have barely done anything wrong or not to take the free seat in the metro even though you're exhausted.

PRO Tip: Root out any “trying too hard” behaviors

If you recognize in yourself “too hard to please tendencies”, force yourself to combat it.

Don't take the damn flyer if you know you'll be throwing it away and make it a point to take the seat if you're really tired. See how you will

feel after.

To avoid trying too hard to please with people you know, keep a mental checklist of what they've done for you and keep it in balance.

As a reminder, this is not an invitation to be an asshole: it's an invite not to be taken advantage of, which is very different!

Here's the core message: **to be truly kind, you have to be kind out of kindness, not out of social fear!**

5.3. Seeking group support

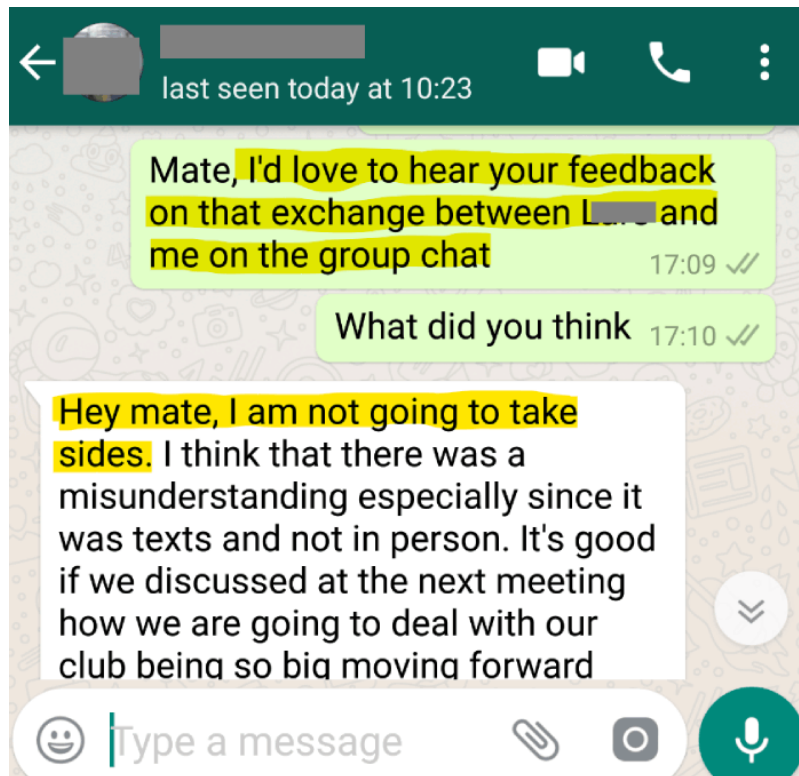
People who are insecure seek to get support from the people around them.

They want to hear they are doing well, that their decision was right and that they are "good".

You will see this one especially when there is a minor altercation and less confident people want to hear reassurance from the group that yes, they are still well accepted in that group.

People are instinctively aware of this need.

You can see an example here, where I was looking for honest feedback but the receiver thought I was looking for group's support:



Also notice that his reaction to my request was extremely poor. We will revisit this example in the “workplace power” module and how you can do better in similar situations.

5.5. Weak Leadership Seeks Group Support

Insecure or weak leaders seek group support and allegiance.

When the leader isn’t sure of his leadership, he looks around to shore group support.

From a verbal point of view, he will use utterances, filler words and “come ons”. From a nonverbal standpoint, he will look around, open up his palms and, if he is having a disagreement with someone else, smile in a derisive fashion.

This is a really nasty behavior from a leader because it seeks to frame his opponent in the wrong. But ideally, a leader should not have “opponents” in his group.

Look at Matt Dillon trying to garner group support in this scene from Beautiful Girls:

<https://youtu.be/gu6PAedRgkM>

“Diamonds are supposed to be colorless”, and he looks around for support.

Can you feel how it’s also a nasty behavior as it seeks to ostracize his own friend? If you can feel that, you’re getting good at reading social dynamics.

#6. Child-Like Behavior

Child-like behavior denotes a submissive position relative to an authority (often a judge role).

Childlike behavior includes the following:

- Tears
- Quivering lip
- Pouting
- Delighted face
- Downcast eyes
- Nail-biting
- Covering laughter with one hand

We all have some of the above sometimes.

But if you do it too often, you need to address it and remove it.

And watch out for people who present too much childlike behavior: they don’t make for good, strong and reliable life partners.