



Katie,* 31, had a cool career and a live-in boyfriend. She was doing what she loved, with someone she loved (she and her guy run an entertainment company in Orlando). Yet despite professional and personal success, she felt blah inside. She wasn't depressed, but she wasn't really happy, either.

Sound familiar? It just might. Such so-so outlooks are quickly becoming accepted among young women, says LeslieBeth Wish, Ed.D., a psychologist and licensed clinical social worker in Sarasota, Florida. In a 2012 survey of more than 900 women, Wish found that one in four felt indifferent about love, work, and life in general. What's more, they considered that indifference to be normal. Like Katie, they got through their day-to-day activities just fine—only sans any real spirit.

"I see women like this on an almost daily basis," confirms Toronto-based psychologist Tami Kulbatski, Psy.D. "They don't meet diagnostic criteria for depression, such as chronic sadness or impaired ability to function. Instead, they suffer from ongoing feelings of apathy." In other words, they've lost their proverbial spark, but not in an I'll-bounce-back-soon way; these women are perpetually listless. And because many of their peers are too, they don't think to seek help (after all, whose verve *hasn't* been dulled by a stress-fueled 24-7 life?). But they should look for aid, says Kulbatski, because apathy isn't just a harmless 21st-century attitude. It's a toe in the water of much bigger problems.

*Name has been changed.

Down But Not Out

If most days feel "meh," you could be stuck in a common health-draining cycle of apathy. Here, how to spot the signs so you can unmute your enthusiasm.

By Krissy Brady

Beyond Blasé

Apathy isn't considered a formal mental-health disorder (like, say, depression or OCD), so it can be very difficult to pinpoint and often slides through the cracks during health checkups. Like depression, apathy can hit the mute button on happiness, says psychotherapist Erena DiGonis, a licensed master social worker in New York. But unlike severe depression,

protection. "It's a way of dealing with the stress, disappointment, and resentment that can come from attempting to meet huge internalized societal expectations," says Cristalle Sese, Psy.D., a clinical psychologist in Los Angeles.

Apathy can also sneak into your life as a preemptive coping tool, under the guise of the old "I don't care what happens anyway" defense,

mechanisms. But apathy has a way of spreading and burrowing deep, eventually giving women the sense they're on autopilot, like they're just passengers in their own lives. "Women with apathy learn to live in and accept such dimness," says DiGonis. "It can stunt your ability to hope, dream, and think big." It can also thwart your health.

problem, majorly apathetic women often end up deprived of good nutrition and exercise, since they don't always put the time into taking care of themselves, says Moffit. Enter weight gain, sleep problems, and even more anxiety.

Apathetic women can also have a tough time with decisions, especially if they feel unable to exert the effort required to make tough but necessary choices, says



Indifference can make strong feelings fade into the background.

apathy is not a syndrome that completely trips women up. They go to work, pay bills, and socialize—all while feeling unmotivated or unsatisfied.

"Any woman can become apathetic provided the right set of circumstances," says psychotherapist and relationship expert Kimberly Moffit. And those circumstances are piling up as women strive to look sharp and nurture others while juggling challenging careers, demanding relationships, and hectic households. Rather than admit they're in too deep—and hard-pressed to find the time to pursue any healthy alternatives—many women fall into apathy as a form of emotional self-

says clinical psychologist Elizabeth Lombardo, Ph.D., author of *A Happy You: Your Ultimate Prescription for Happiness*. It's a way of both steeling yourself against future disappointment and upping your sense of self-control in situations where you have little. So if, for example, you went on an awesome first date with a guy who has yet to call for a second, telling yourself you don't care either way theoretically shields you from getting hurt.

In short-term situations—the above dating dilemma, or getting passed over for a promotion—these reactive and preemptive forms of apathy can be valuable coping

The Bad-News Blahs

In the long run, because apathy incites lots of conflicted emotional turmoil ("I'm upset about this, but I shouldn't be because I don't care"), it ends up increasing your distress, says Lombardo. Perhaps unsurprisingly, this "almost depression" can eventually slide into the real thing. "Subconscious stress can raise levels of cortisol, the body's stress hormone," says psychiatrist Samantha Meltzer-Brody, M.D., an associate professor at the University of North Carolina's Center for Women's Mood Disorders. "And chronic high cortisol is associated with mood disorders, including anxiety and depression."

Chronically high cortisol also puts women at risk for a laundry list of physical health problems, including heart disease, diabetes, osteoporosis, fatigue, and the inability to focus or complete tasks. Compounding the

Meltzer-Brody. That's bad news for those in need of, say, a career reboot or an exit from a toxic relationship.

Get Your Spark Back

First things first: Stop waiting around to be inspired to take action. As schmaltzy as it sounds, you have to remember that much of your happiness is under your control, says Kulbatski. And that apathy is more a symptom than a root issue. For her part, Katie realized it was stemming from her near-obsession with not letting down her business partner/boyfriend—to the point that she focused almost exclusively on their company and relationship and became indifferent to her own personal well-being. She eventually forced herself to take more guilt-free me-time that, in turn, helped her shed the growing resentment her apathy had been hiding. "It's like a weight has been lifted off of me," she says.

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Energize Your Pals

Chances are, someone in your circle could use some anti-apathy help. Erena DiGonis, L.M.S.W., and Elizabeth Lombardo, Ph.D., share how to talk your friend out of her indifference.

Watch out for...

> Behavioral Changes

If a fun-loving girlfriend starts canceling plans more often than not or seems uninspired to socialize, she might be sliding into apathy. Listen for phrases like "I just don't feel like it."

> Appearance Shifts

Apathy can start in the closet: Take note if your fashionista friend has started looking a little ragged or dons her yoga pants a little too often.

> Attitude Adjustments

Acting nonchalant toward things she used to really want (e.g., a raise at work) could signal apathy. So could consistently spacing out in conversations.

Help out by...

> Sharing Your Side

Rather than directly confronting her ("I really think you need help!"), get her to open up by talking about things that make *you* feel blah. It's about planting the seeds of encouragement.

> ...And Your To-Do List

Likewise, ask her to help you with a small errand; it might pique her interest or temporarily get her out of her funk. (People are more likely to participate in an activity when it involves helping someone else.)

> Backing Off

Ultimately, the only person who can cure your friend's apathy is her, and pushing her before she's ready might backfire. Keep up your support and encouragement—just don't try to take control.



Even if you're not feeling as "meh" as Katie once did, you can fend off the blahs by working these apathy-blasting practices into your life.

> Score Enough Shut-Eye

"During sleep, the body renews neurotransmitters that are critical for mental wellness," says Meltzer-Brody. Indeed, a study in *Psychology Press* found that people with good sleep quality had a better handle on their emotions and were better able to deal with negative experiences. Aim for a minimum of seven hours of snoozing every night.

> Compare and Contrast

Apathy can seep into all areas of your life, but chances are you do have a reason (or three) to be happy. Sussing those out and acting on them can boost your overall contentment. If you just can't muster the energy, try a thespian's trick: Picture someone else who is upbeat and passionate and ask yourself, *What would she do?* Then do that, says Lombardo. Or finish this sentence once a day: *I'm glad I'm not...* "Research shows happiness levels are influenced by

how we compare ourselves with others who are worse off than we are," says Kulbatski.

> Stick to Your Limits

Some 63 percent of all people report high levels of workplace stress, per a recent survey by behavioral health firm ComPsych. And many people aren't even passionate about those too-stressful jobs; instead, they tend to use work as an escape from personal problems, says Wish. (Avoiding the issue equals heightened apathy.) If you can, "give yourself a quitting time each day, and stick to it," suggests Gretchen Rubin, author of *The Happiness Project*. "The feeling that you should constantly be answering e-mail even when you're not working is too exhausting."

> Break a Sweat

Exercising for as little as 30 minutes a day can help you ditch apathy by naturally increasing your levels of serotonin, an all-important hormone that regulates mood and energy. "Many really apathetic women haven't worked out in a while and need to start slowly," says DiGonis. Begin by going for short walks, then increase the intensity by walking faster or by bringing along hand weights. No matter what kind of exercise you embrace—anything from yoga to salsa dancing to at-home workout DVDs is fine—"the key is consistency," says DiGonis.

> Go for Realistic Goals

Setting anti-apathy goals is great—just keep them small. Striving to cancel out your blahs in one fell swoop can be a huge de-motivator, says Moffit, since most people won't succeed the first time around. Studies show it can take an average of about two months to solidify a new habit, so give yourself some leeway. Start by creating one new routine—or tackling one to-do list item—at a time. ■



THE DOCTOR IS IN

My feet cramp like crazy at night. Why?

—Keyana, New York, NY

Stuffing your hoofs into constricting footwear can cause foot muscles to compress into tight knots by the time evening rolls around. Dehydration can exacerbate the problem by making those muscles even more susceptible to cramping. Try massaging out the ouch by rolling each foot over a tennis ball for a few minutes at a time. Strengthening your foot muscles might also help: Stand barefoot with both feet flat on the floor and try to lift each toe, one at a time, for five seconds each; repeat two or three times a day.

My roommate gets cold sores. Could I catch them?

—Amber, Gainesville, FL

Unless your roommate is also your significant other, probably not. Cold sores—a.k.a. the herpes simplex virus type 1—are spread through skin-to-skin contact. Someone who carries the virus can be contagious even without an obvious outbreak, but you're far more likely to catch it via contact with an open sore. In theory, you could wind up infected after sharing your roommate's utensil or cup, but it's highly unlikely. She'd have to have an oozing blister—and research has shown the virus is short-lived on surfaces.

Keri Peterson, M.D.

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