

# Is It Fake To Act Differently Around Different People?

- [Chris MacLeod, MSW](#)

Someone may find themselves acting differently around different people and wonder if it's okay. Are they being fake? Are they not being authentic or true to themselves? Should they be consistent around everyone? Is it manipulative and sleazy to adjust your social behavior to meet your goals?

A psychology term for this is *self-monitoring*. It's the degree to which someone pays attention to how they're coming across and adjusts their presentation and behavior based on the circumstances. People low in self-monitoring don't tune into how they're seen, and act the same around everyone. High self-monitors are very aware of how they're acting and will change based on what they think the situation calls for.

People who have been rejected and misunderstood throughout their lives for not being "normal" or mainstream enough can have strong, conflicted feelings about this topic. They can see the benefits of adapting to the situation at hand, but also resent the idea of being forced to conform. They may want to protect their independence and not feel like they're selling out to fit in.

Here are my thoughts:

## **It's not automatically bad to adjust your behavior based on the setting and the people around you**

Everyone does it sometimes. You act differently at a funeral than you do at a party. You speak differently around your sheltered grandma than you do around your buddies. Things like that are easy enough to do and just considerate. It's also normal to be pragmatic here and there. Like you may dress and act "professional" at work because that's

what the company expects, and you want to seem like a good employee.

## **It depends more on why you're changing your behavior around certain people**

Self-monitoring isn't inherently fake or bad, but it is possible to do it for the wrong reasons. If you're around someone and thinking about tweaking how you behave, ask yourself why you want to do it.

### **Do you just want to be considerate of other people's feelings?**

For example:

- Not swearing around your grandparents because you know it would bother them.
- Not listening to music on the bus without headphones because you know it would annoy the other riders.
- You have two hobbies you're equally happy to discuss. You bring up the one you guess the other person would like to hear about, and skip the one they probably won't find that interesting.

These things are just common courtesy. Plus, it's not much of a sacrifice to do any of them. It's good to consider other people's feelings and preferences. People who only follow their inner compass, and never consider if their actions fit the context, can come across as rude, insensitive, oblivious, and stubborn.

### **Are you being a people pleaser who tries to get everyone to like them, and puts their own needs on the backburner?**

It's one thing to act a bit differently around someone because you're a regular nice person and want them to be comfortable. It's another to go in with a mentality of, "I have to get these people to accept me. I'll morph into whatever I think they want in order to get their approval.

There's no way they'd like my natural self." For example, they say they hate a TV show, and you pretend to dislike it too, even though you just rewatched every season for the third time. People pleasing may not hurt you in the moment, but over time it eats away at your self-esteem and leads to unsatisfying, unbalanced relationships.

### **Are you selling out one of your core values in order to fit in?**

If you're at an event you may not care much either way whether you have to be polite and quiet, or if you can be loud and rowdy. Like you have no moral objection to keeping your voice down in a museum, so it's not an issue to adjust your behavior to go along with that expectation.

It's different if a situation forces a choice between violating one of your deeper principles or not. Like what if equality is important to you, and your acquaintances start making racist jokes? It wouldn't be right to default to just matching whatever the group is doing. You may decide it's worth it to challenge them, even if they see it as a bad social move. If you want, you can take some time to think about what things you're indifferent to, and have no problem going along with, and which values you're not willing to budge on.

### **Are you conforming to the setting to get something more important to you?**

Like I said, we all conform for practical reasons sometimes. A big example is fitting a workplace's culture. If you had your way you wouldn't dress like the office expects you to, but you like a paycheck so you show up in bland business casual outfits. It doesn't mean you're spineless. You just think financial security is a higher priority than getting to wear exactly what you want at all times.

### **Are you showing different sides of yourself, or pretending to be someone you're not?**

Say you like baking, tennis, talking about politics, and making morbid jokes. You're with a group who seem into sports and politics, but probably don't care about baking, and definitely wouldn't appreciate your humor. So you talk about tennis and the news, and skip trying to joke around. You're choosing which existing parts of your personality to highlight or hold back, but you're still being you.

What if you didn't like sports at all? You could acknowledge you don't have much to say on the topic. But if they're all eager to talk sports, you might try to chime in a bit, to not seem totally disinterested in everyone. Not the funnest thing ever, but a polite enough choice. What would likely make you feel fake and insincere was if you pretended you were a lifelong fan of the exact teams they were discussing.

### **Are you adjusting how you act to try to manipulate someone into doing something they clearly wouldn't do if they knew your real beliefs?**

This is plain sketchy. It's easy to think of bigger examples, like lying about sharing someone's religious values so they'll date or do business with you.

Now, you could argue adjusting your self-presentation in smaller ways to get along with someone is still manipulative. Like you are being a skeezy liar if you pretend to be interested in a subject a co-worker is excited to talk about? Where's the line between that kind of everyday small-scale deception, and more clear cut, selfish manipulation? I think it comes down to what the heading says. Are you being deceptive about who you are? Are you trying to get them to act in a way they never would if they knew what you were really like? Would they probably feel angry and cheated if they found out you were misrepresenting yourself?

### **Are you mindlessly molding yourself to the situation because you don't have a good sense of who you are?**

If you go to a party and everyone's liberal, do you start sharing a bunch of liberal opinions? If you're hanging out with relatives and they say some conservative things, are you suddenly a conservative too? It's not even that you're trying to get everyone to like you. It's that you have no sense of what your own political views are, so they change to fit whoever you're with in that moment. Again, it could be good to spend some time clarifying what your exact beliefs and values are.

## **The acting ability factor**

Behaving differently around different people isn't intrinsically phony, but one thing that can unintentionally make you seem that way is if you're not a great actor. Like it's common to have a long conversation with someone, not be fascinated by every last topic they bring up, but still politely listen and try to look engaged. If you can do that with a subtle touch, you're fine. If your 'pretend interested' body language is forced and exaggerated, the other person may see you as fake.