

## TRANSCRIPT FOR PODCAST EPISODE 125-BREAK A MINOR SOCIAL NORM

I'm Jill Baughan, and you're listening to the podcast called Find Joy...No Matter What.

This is Episode 125.

If you're in a tough place right now, your joy may seem like it's hiding--or gone.

I understand. But it's still there, I promise, just waiting to be resurrected. And this podcast is designed to help you do just that...no matter what else is going on in your life.

For just a few minutes each week, I'll tell you a story. --one that just might inspire a way to uncover a piece of joy you might be looking for.

Then we'll consider how it might speak to your life, because even though you'll hear quite a few of my stories during our time together, I believe you'll find your own in every one of mine.

Then I'll offer a benediction to send you into your day--or into your night.

So. If you're up for doing joy shots with a friend today...have a listen.

You are very familiar with social norms--those *unwritten rules of behavior that are considered acceptable* in society. And since you probably want approval of the other people, you probably tend to comply with most of those unwritten rules of behavior. And there are lots of them--more than you might think. For instance, consider this list of social norms. In Western society we tend to think it's desirable to

Make direct eye contact with the person you're speaking to

Avoid sitting right next to a stranger in a place like a movie theater unless it's crowded

Avoid taking a seat that has a purse or a coat or some kind of object in it that's meant to convey "This one's taken."

In some church cultures, avoid sitting in a seat that's been sat in by the same people for a generation or so. Church people can be viciously protective of their places.

Avoid standing close enough to a stranger to touch arms or hips, observing the "rules" of personal space--2 or 3 feet between people who know each other, 4 feet for strangers

Avoid cursing in polite conversation

Avoid picking your nose, belching or worse in public

Be kind to the elderly, opening doors and giving up your seat

Go to the back of a line instead of pushing your way to the front

Say "I'm sorry" if you bump into someone

Flush the toilet and wash your hands

Say "please" when asking for something and "thank you" when someone does something for you

Not interrupt someone while they're talking

On the phone, say “hello” when you answer and “goodbye” when you hang up  
Not eat off someone else’s plate without asking  
Stand facing the front in an elevator.

You get the idea.

Children sometimes are among the uninformed when it comes to social constructs, however. When I was a little girl, I remember that one time we encountered one of my brother’s friends riding a horse someplace or other, and to be funny--which it was--he yelled, “Get a horse!” when he saw his friend.

I had heard the phrase before, and at 5 or 6 years old, got the joke and thought it was hilarious.

Not long after that, we were in our family vehicle in town in some slow-moving traffic when we were passing by a stranger who was hitchhiking on the side of the road. I saw my perfect opportunity, rolled down the window and with great gusto yelled, “Get a horse!!” at the guy--after which I was handily reprimanded by my mother. Apparently, my sensitivity to social transgression needed a little heightening.

But now that I think of it, there are times when adults could use a little coaching too. You’ve probably encountered grownups who should “know better,” exhibiting behavior that violates a social norm or two.

For instance, last year Ben and I celebrated our 45<sup>th</sup> anniversary this year with a trip to Shenandoah National Park. We love the mountains, and it was so romantic. Until.

We were hiking at Big Meadows when what should we see coming down the trail toward us but another hiker with two dogs. We love dogs, so we were very excited. Ben seemed especially happy--a little too happy, it seemed to me, and as the hiker came into view, I figured out why. Said hiker was sporting a bikini, bouncing happily down the trail.

And I HAVE QUESTIONS: WHO hikes in a *bikini*? Gross violation of the norm for hikers in the area.

Anyway, we passed her, exchanging greetings, and after she got about 30 feet past us, Ben decided he wanted to stop her so he could “talk to her dogs.” Oh my gosh. I am not kidding. Now I’m kicking myself for neglecting to take a picture of this iconic moment. Or maybe not.

Natalie Kerr, who writes for *Psychology Today*, says *It’s wise to conform to many social norms.* (Seriously. What if that lady had run into a briar patch or some serious poison ivy?) *They help people know what to expect during social interactions and they facilitate social connection, which is essential for one’s health and happiness. Also, people who do not conform to these norms risk social disapproval or rejection.* (From me, possibly. Or consider how you

*feel about the person who stands too close for comfort, or the mooch who lives off the generosity of others without giving anything in return.)*

Of course, there are much more serious acts of rebellion, like harming another person, but that's not what we're talking about today. Rather, we're talking about mundane acts of rebellion and, as keyed in as we are to the inappropriateness of some behaviors, I'd just like to suggest that it just might be a good thing to break a few minor social norms.

In her article *4 Social Norms You Should Break: How breaking some rules of social behavior can improve your social life*, Kerr says, *I've often thought that a little social transgression is necessary to break free of a potentially endless cycle of etiquette and politeness.*

*In one study, researchers dared hundreds of undergraduate students to go into the world, break a minor social norm and record the consequences. One ran up a downward escalator in a shopping centre. Another lowered their car windows and sang loudly. Another sat next to an old lady on an otherwise empty bus.*

*The escalator prank did not go down well, drawing glares of disapproval. But passersby cheered and joined in with the automotive singing, and the old lady welcomed the opportunity to chat. Overall, when all examples were logged and categorised, only a minority of the transgressions were negatively received (35.4%). There is something to be said for low-level social transgression as a tool for breaking free of convention and prompting some genuine human warmth and interaction*

So. Just maybe *some* social norms were almost made to be broken.

Kerr writes that *some of the behaviors that are normative in our modern society (like glancing at one's phone while talking to a friend) can limit opportunities for social interaction and hinder authentic social connection. These norms may also contribute to the loneliness epidemic in America, where at least one-third of adults feel lonely.*

*So, go ahead: break a couple rules. Here's how:*

*1. Stop asking "How are you?" unless you really want to know.*

*Sometimes people ask "How are you?" because they really want to know how others are doing. Other times, they ask because it has become a normative greeting in our society. "Hi, how are you?" seems to be a lengthier alternative to "Hi." The standard response is usually mumbled as a single word: goodhowareyou? or fineandyou? This exchange happens even when people are moving in opposite directions, with no possibility of having an actual conversation.*

*When the question "How are you?" becomes a simple greeting rather than an expression of genuine concern, it forces us to provide quick and/or inauthentic responses. This conditions us to relate to others on a shallow level, which can make meaningful connection more elusive.*

*If you're one of the many people who asks this question, reserve it for times when you really want to know the answer.*

## *2. Talk to strangers.*

*Many of us tend to avoid talking to strangers, especially in crowded spaces. We assume that talking to strangers will be awkward and unpleasant, or we worry that others will not be interested in talking to us.*

*And yet, research shows that our concerns about talking to strangers are overblown. Talking to strangers often goes better than expected, and even brief moments of connecting with a stranger can improve one's mood and well-being. In one [study](#), commuters on a train into downtown Chicago had a better experience when they talked to a stranger than when they sat in silence, even though they predicted the opposite result. This was true for extraverts and introverts. Another [study](#) found that taking the time to talk to the coffee shop barista increased people's sense of belonging.*

*Try breaking the norm of staying silent. Say "hi" to the strangers you encounter during the course of the day. Doing so could leave you feeling happier and more connected to others.*

*(If you feel anxious about talking to stranger, start by making eye contact. The data suggest that simply acknowledging a stranger with eye contact is enough to foster connection.)*

## *3. Talk, don't text.*

*Technology has dramatically changed the way we communicate in the modern world. According to a recent Gallup poll, sending and receiving text messages has become the most prevalent form of communication among U.S. adults under 50. In other words, texting has become the norm.*

*There are many advantages to texting, but research shows we may feel more connected with others if we pick up the phone or make a video call. What's important is being able to hear the other person's voice. The voice communicates interpersonal warmth, which is harder to convey via text.*

*If you want to really connect, make the call. Or at least send a voice message.*

## *4. Put your phone away during social gatherings.*

*In a recent survey, 89% of cell phone owners reported using their phone during their most recent social gathering.*

*Even though it's a normative behavior, using your phone when you're with other people can have negative social consequences. Indeed, researchers have found that phubbing (the act of snubbing someone by looking at a phone) makes people feel ignored or rejected.*

*Even the mere presence of a phone can diminish the quality of social interactions. One set of experiments showed that simply having a phone out and visible during a conversation lowered people's sense of connection to the other person and the quality of the conversation. This was especially true during meaningful conversations.*

*So, the next time you gather with friends or family, resist the temptation to use your phone. Keep it out of sight—and out of mind.*

*Also consider creating new norms or rules for your social gatherings (e.g., the first person to pick up their phone at dinner has to pick up the bill!).*

*Bottom line: Don't be afraid of breaking the social norms that hinder meaningful social connection. Doing so may be a key to a less lonely world.*

And of course, don't be afraid of breaking the social norms that stifle playfulness and joy--even if you're a business, like Lambert's Café in Sikeston and Ozark, Missouri and Foley Alabama. Lambert's calls itself The Home of "Thrown Rolls," because if you want a roll, apparently an employee will hurl it to you from across the room. Years ago the waitstaff walked around the restaurant with a bucket of them, and couldn't access all the customers clamoring for rolls. Finally one customer said, "What the heck, just throw it to me." Which the waiter did. Then another customer raised his hand for the same delivery, and well, the rest, as they say, is history, much to the delight of their clientele, young and old.

Applause, applause to the business who enthusiastically defies the socially acceptable method of delivering nourishment to patrons. It may be reminiscent of adolescent food fights and the parental admonition, "Don't play with your food," but it delivers heaping helpings of fun.

And so, my friend,

If ever you come upon a social construct whose relentless politeness stifles human connection and delight,

May you screw up your courage, gird up your loins, and ride on over it...for the sake of joy.

And may you find that when you do, someone in this world is a little less lonely,

And someone in this world smiles a little bit more.

Thanks so much for joining me.

If you know someone who just might like to defy an unwritten rule of behavior, I invite you to share this podcast with them, and subscribe yourself on iTunes, or wherever you listen to podcasts. Or you can go to my website at [jillbaughan.com](http://jillbaughan.com), click on a podcast episode and sign up to receive episodes in your inbox. Just don't miss an episode, because I so look forward to being with you again soon.

Break a minor social norm, friend. And always, always remember, if you go looking for joy, you'll most likely find it.

Till next time...

NOTES:

Kerr, Natalie, PhD. "4 Social Norms You Should Break," *Psychology Today*, May 15, 2017.

<https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/social-influence/201705/4-social-norms-you-should-break>

Lambert's Café

<https://threwedrolls.com>

Social Norm Examples. *Your Dictionary*.

<https://examples.yourdictionary.com/social-norm-examples.html>

Stephens, Richard. Five Ways Bad Behaviour Can Benefit You and Others. *The Conversation*, January 28, 2021.

<https://theconversation.com/five-ways-bad-behaviour-can-benefit-you-and-others-154004>