

Things That Get on Your Nerves

Psychology

BY EMILY C. DAVIS

"Jackie, don't shout so loud to the toy horsie. You'll annoy the people upstairs, again."

"And, Annabel, go tell the cook to wash those dishes better. It gets on my nerves to see the remains of breakfast on the dinner plates. And do stop chewing gum, Annabel."

Annabel, rising from a comfortable chair, drags herself out, remarking: "Well, cook won't be here long to get on your nerves, because she told me she simply can't stand hearing Aunt Louise talk about operations another single week."

Eggy plates, and the click of gum chewing, and a gloomy line of conversation—not great matters in life, but as upsetting to comfortable existence as a sharp grain of sand lodged in a sensitive eye.

Etiquette books are a total blank on this important social problem of "Other people's nerves and how not to get on them." And scientists have somehow overlooked this angle of social psychology—until now.

For several years, Dr. Hulsey Cason, professor of psychology at the University of Rochester, assisted by Eloise B. Cason, has been quietly collecting annoyances, as a naturalist collects beetles. Students and acquaintances have written out for him lists of all the things that irritate them, from the time they get up in the morning until they go to a dinner party, in the evening, and so home to bed.

Everybody likes to tell about his personal aversions, and the things he wishes his neighbors and friends wouldn't do, Dr. Cason soon found. In fact, it is harder to get people to stop than it is to start them talking.

Some of the helpers in the hunt for annoyances became so interested that they said: "Say, I will get mother to make a list of the things that annoy her. And the janitor—would you like to know what annoys the janitor?" Dr. Cason would, and his unique collection grew, until today he knows the things that annoy street car conductors, lawyers, school teachers, millionaires, children, grandmothers, flappers, icemen and policemen. And the mass of facts and figures, with which he is still working, show that there are at least 2,500 different ways of getting the world's goat.

What is the most annoying thing a person can do?

Everybody wants to know that. The questioner waits anxiously to



hear whether he is guilty of the world's greatest annoyance.

To see an animal cruelly treated seriously annoys more people than anything else, the psychologist answers. The second most annoying situation is to see a child harshly treated. The third, jumping from the semi-tragic to the semi-comic, is to see a hair in food.

"Few of us realize how many possible ways there are of annoying other people," said Dr. Cason, in discussing his investigation. "And very few realize that a person can make himself disliked if he displays only three or four of the pet aversions of his associates. If a man has a bad breath, for instance, has a dirty neck, and brags about his feminine conquests, he may make himself so unpleasantly conspicuous in the eyes of some people that they would consider him an impossible companion, though they may never completely analyze their reasons for dislike.

"It is rather pathetic to think that handicaps of this particular type could be removed, if the offender would only realize that his mannerisms are handicaps. It is particularly pathetic because the removable personal characteristics are frequently the very ones that irritate people the most. Dirty ears, untidy clothing, ill-kept hair, an onion breath, excessive cosmetics, missing teeth, and crude ag-

gressive manners are the type of thing that people in general are least likely to overlook.

"It is a more cheerful fact that permanent physical characteristics are not nearly so annoying. Such handicaps as bow-legs, cross-eyes, warts, scars, being crippled, birthmarks, and excessive fatness are irritating to some, but not so much as we might expect. Apparently people are tolerant, knowing that such conditions cannot be helped."

People in ill health find life a little more exasperating than healthy people, the figures show.

Fat men uphold their reputation for being happy-go-lucky by having fewer annoyances than lean men. But fat women have more annoyances than thinner ones. Why? Dr. Cason suggests that the fat woman worries about her figure and all the problems it loads upon her—diet and tight clothes and unwanted exercise. The fat man, on the other hand, remains unruffled because he is not concerned to the same extent about what the world thinks of him.

Dr. Cason is the first psychologist to probe systematically some type of emotion in people of all ages. The emotions of old age particularly are an almost unexplored field. He has found that people of all ages are annoyed to approximately the same degree. Physical health and efficiency decrease with age, and the same is true of the senses, such as sight, hearing, smell, and taste. Pleasures become an old story and lose much of their youthful thrill. But sensitiveness to the things that we emphatically do not like remains as keen and sharp as ever, from nine years old to ninety.

Different ages, however, have characteristic annoyances. One of the particular irritations of childhood, Dr. Cason found from his child subjects, is to be told to do something just as you are about to do it of your own initiative.

Young people hate to get up in the morning. Old ones do not mind that.

Hearing jazz is no annoyance at all to the flapper and her beau, but after the twenty-five year milestone it begins to rasp on some people's nerves. And in old age, strange to say, women find jazz more distasteful than men do.

To see a woman intoxicated is less irritating to peo- (Turn to next page)

Nerves—Continued

ple between 30 and 35 years old than at any other age. To see a woman smoking a cigarette in public is moderately annoying to some young people. But the sight irritates the average old woman about as much as anything you can think of.

Comparing the sexes, the psychologist found that altogether women are annoyed considerably more than men. Nervous mannerisms, like sucking the teeth, cracking the joints, and biting the nails, worry women more than men. An encounter with bad table manners is much more likely to spoil a woman's day than a man's. Women get more incensed on sex matters, too. To see love making in public, to hear a woman talking about her men friends—a joke on a sex subject, to be spoken to familiarly by an unknown person of the opposite sex, such matters as these are much more annoying to women as a class than to men.

Another of Dr. Cason's discoveries is that both men and women find women a greater source of annoyance to them than men are.

Acting superior is one way of being a social pest. The lists of annoyances make that perfectly plain. And there are many different ways of acting superior. Inferiority, on the other hand, is much less offensive.

This investigation in social psychology provides the start of a new kind of etiquette guide, though Dr. Cason had no thought of that in mind when he started on his quest for knowledge. Where ordinary social guide books enlighten their eager readers on how to behave acceptably at a banquet and how to answer an invitation from the queen to play croquet, the new data on annoyances get close to the real courtesies of everyday life. You can test it for yourself by running down the following list of a few of the outstanding "goat-getters" to see how many provoke you. And then you can put the shoe on the other foot, and consider whether you irritate people on any of these counts:

A person habitually arguing.

A person in an automobile telling me how to drive.

A person driving an automobile taking unnecessary chances.

To hear a person chewing gum loudly.

A person crowding in front of me instead of waiting his turn in line.

A person picking his nose.

A young person showing disrespect to a much older person.

To hear a person talking continually about personal illnesses.

A person being inquisitive about my personal affairs.

To see a man intoxicated.

To hear a person talking during a musical number.

Being pushed when in a crowd.

To see a man (or woman) spit in public.

To see a person picking at a sore.

To hear a woman swear.

A person reading the movie titles aloud.

To be spoken to familiarly in a public place by a stranger of the opposite sex.

An acquaintance of the opposite sex trying to kiss or pet me.

A grown person talking baby talk.

A person talking a great deal and not saying anything very important.

A person in conversation with me and not listening to what I am saying.

A person talking when he has a good deal of food in his mouth.

A person continually complaining about something.

To find dirt in food I am eating.

The odor of garbage.

A dirty bathtub.

The odor of bad breath.

Excessive cosmetics on a woman.

Food on a person's face, near his (or her) mouth.

The odorous condition of a person's body.

To see decayed teeth.

Some annoyances affect almost every one. But many items on an individual's personal list depend on his experiences, occupation and acquired temperament. Very young children presumably do not have annoyances of the sort that Dr. Cason has been studying. But at some age before ten, at any rate, they begin to be sensitive to a good many of the sights and sounds that are distasteful to adults. Many of these are the result of direct instruction and training by older people, as in the case of table manners, morals, and general deportment. Some very strongly rooted aversions develop through an intense emotional experience. Being in a fire might make a little girl dislike the smell of smoke for the rest of her life, though she might not associate the two facts in her mind.

Annoyances fix themselves in our lives easily, Dr. Cason explains, because they are linked with emotions.

We find it a long dreary grind to train our muscles to hit a golf ball with precision, but "nerves" will curl up most efficiently with distaste at the very next sight of a particular kind of food after a single meeting with it in an unsavory form.

Whether we can make ourselves much less sensitive to petty irritations is not certain. They are part and parcel of modern civilization. Primitive men, Dr. Cason points out, take life easily and apparently have few irritations. But in more complex surroundings, human beings are much more highly stimulated and by a greater variety of situations. They are inevitably more nervous and irritable.

But thinking about situations that annoy you, and especially talking frankly about them, seem to make certain ones less powerful, Dr. Cason has found. A good many of the people who helped him in his investigation said that after talking about their annoyances they began to feel that it was rather ridiculous to allow themselves to get irritated at some of the items. And later they reported that their annoyance at some situations had noticeably decreased. In many of these cases the original cause of the aversion or irritation was recognized for the first time, and by talking over the factors present in the original situation they profited by what the psychoanalyst, Freud, calls catharsis, Dr. Cason explains.

But some things are beyond the power of Freud. It is doubtful if any remedy will ever cure the civilized world of its aversion for hearing a person snore, or for seeing a fly in the soup.

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Canada has 105,000 Indian inhabitants.

The language of the Hawaiians has 12 letters.

Two-thirds of English people have light colored eyes.

Observation balloons were used during the Civil War.

About 1,000 asbestos theater curtains are made each year.

Iceland is the most sparsely populated country in Europe.

Rattlesnakes can be blinded by mustard gas shot into their retreats.