

Excuse me, do you mind?

Call it snarkiness, throwing shade or side-eye—having a feisty ‘tude has become an undeniable part of everyday life. In the age of a “have it now” culture, has our contemporary lifestyle left us without a sense of good manners and conduct? WH investigates the changing landscape of modern-day etiquette

By Yi-Hwa Hanna

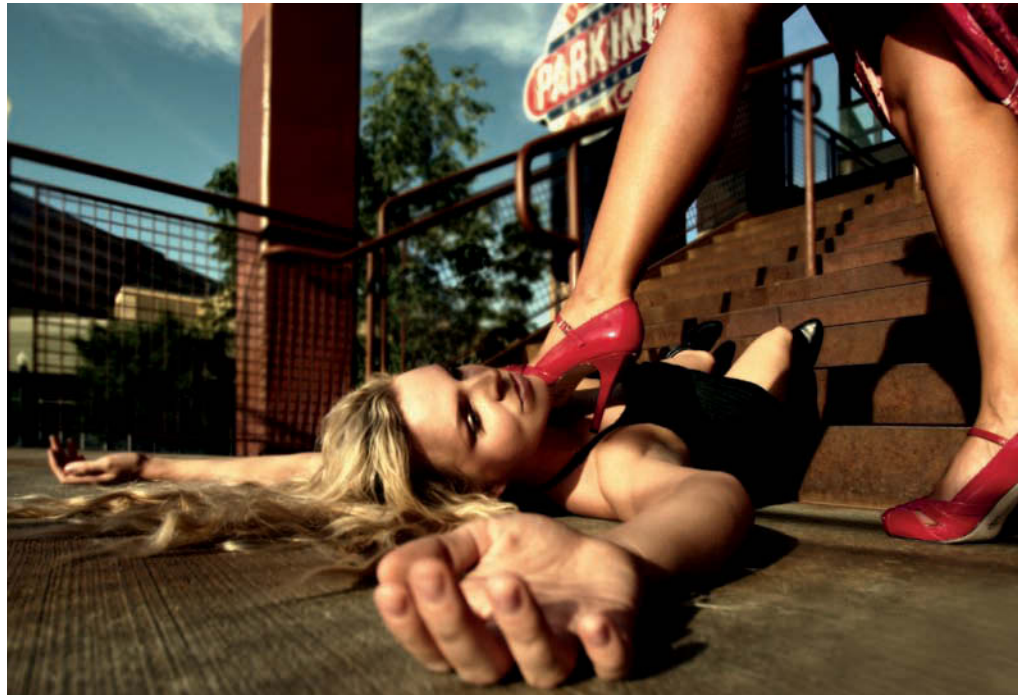
It was a sunny weekend day and I was in a great mood after a relaxed morning spent paddleboarding and soaking up plenty of joy-inducing vitamin D. On my way home, I popped into the supermarket to pick up some groceries when another shopper barged in front of me, cutting the queue that I was clearly standing in with no apology or even a cursory glance. Understandably, I was miffed, but I decided to let it slide. But as I walked out the door, I held it open for the person behind me—only to have him not return the favour and let the next one slam in my face as he strode ahead of me to the next doorway. Muttering with annoyance under my breath, I stomped off back to my apartment when, at the zebra crossing, a car whizzed past me so fast that it almost hit me, beeping at me as if to say “How dare you walk in my way when I’m driving across this road.” It was then that I had to stop and ask myself—had I suddenly become a lot more sensitive, or had everyone else around me just become ruder?

An informal survey among my social circle reveals that I’m not alone: “Taxi drivers often lock their doors and roll down the window when I hail them, speeding off and leaving me in the dust without a word when it’s a destination that wouldn’t be a big fare for them,” says one friend, while another says, “When I’m waiting for a cab after work there’s always inevitably someone who sees me there already waiting, then walks a few metres down the road ahead of me so they can catch the next one first instead.” A colleague commented on her

frustration with the person sat behind her, who often takes loud personal phone calls at her desk without stopping to consider how distracting that might be to those around her, while another lamented at how horrified she was at a restaurant the night before when a fellow diner called the waiter over by snapping his fingers at him and barking orders such as, “Bring me water,” without so much as a please or thank you.

It’s not just happenstance, either—some people seem to actually *enjoy* being unpleasant, whether it’s through mocking what strangers are wearing on the street completely unprovoked and without any apparent reason, or leaving snarky comments on others’ Instagram photos, for instance. Has our modern-day culture left us caring less about thinking how others think and feel, and when did it become ok to champion the idea of being a mean girl?

“It’s important to first understand the basic requirements and foundations of manners: empathy and compassion,” says Carey Kirk, a Counsellor and Programme Manager at The Lighthouse Arabia. “Surveys of values conducted over the past 50+ years have shown a shift in values away from concepts essential to empathy and compassion (such as togetherness and connection), and towards values such as personal success, fame, wealth, and efficiency,” she explains, continuing: “These values are not only espoused in media but also in our schools and other institutions where there is a statistically implausible pressure on everyone to be above average in order to be accepted or feel good about ourselves. When our self-concept becomes tied to being able to evaluate ourselves as better than other people, we are creating a hostile environment for



empathy and compassion, and fertile breeding grounds for disconnection, judgment and rudeness.”

Changing Times

While what is considered rude has invariably changed over many centuries, not to mention across cultures, what is being perceived as a lack of the sense of civility as well as sensitivity to others seems to be a phenomenon that’s an unfortunate side-effect of our modern lifestyles. “Many societies have shifted their orientation from a collectivist one to an individualistic one, which has increased a more self-absorbed and narcissistic approach to social situations,” says Dr. Thoraiya Kanafani, a Clinical Psychologist and Director of Clinical Services at the Human Relations Institute and Clinics. Life Coach Linda Bonnar agrees: “I think there are a number of reasons for it, and one of them is most definitely this ‘Get me, give me, I want it now!’ attitude that some of us tend to possess or exercise in today’s society. Everything has become so easily accessible to us that we

sometimes feel we should no longer have to wait for things; we want the get-rich quick plan, the lose weight in 24 hours plan, we tell our taxi drivers to drive faster, we want results now! A sense of urgency sometimes seems to envelop us and blinker us from the bigger picture, which includes considering how others feel in a situation,” Linda explains.

It makes sense—unlike generations of the past, who had been told to be seen but not heard, ours have been taught from a young age that we *should* speak our minds and say what we think and feel, equating it with standing up for yourself and, in turn, our confidence. The intent may be good, but it’s when the fine line is crossed into a more aggressive territory where problems begin to present themselves: “At the end of the day, the majority of people just want to be heard. Unfortunately, too many of us want to win and that’s when the problems arise, because some of us feel that our opinion is more important than others. Some people love

Having a sense of urgency can sometimes blinker us from the bigger picture, which includes considering how others feel in a situation.

getting on their soapbox, and many do so behind the comfort and security of a computer screen because they know that certain opinions would perhaps not be accepted in their social surroundings,” Linda says.

With everything from online articles and social media constantly encouraging us to “join the conversation,” how much is technology to blame? “[It does] play a role by decreasing the necessity for face-to-face interactions,

Life and Love

providing constant stimuli, and publicly presenting a skewed and idealised version of people's lives," Carey says, adding: "At The LightHouse Arabia, we've seen an increase in the number of children and teens who present with autism-like symptoms such as difficulty making eye contact and recognising their own and others' emotions despite not having an autism-spectrum disorder. This is usually the result of technology usage. In an age of technology, we are less likely to have face-to-face interactions with people and more likely to be oriented towards a screen or electronic device even if we are in the presence of others. This means that the amount of time we're exposed to facial expressions and learn to read other people's emotions has decreased significantly. This problem is two-fold when it comes to creating a culture of rudeness—firstly, when we haven't learned and practiced the skills of identifying other people's feelings, we can't connect on an empathic level and are more likely to act in a way that could be considered rude or hurtful. Secondly, when we haven't learned or practised how to understand and connect with our own emotions, we have little resources to manage our own feelings and then are more likely to act in ways that could be considered rude or hurtful because we don't know how."

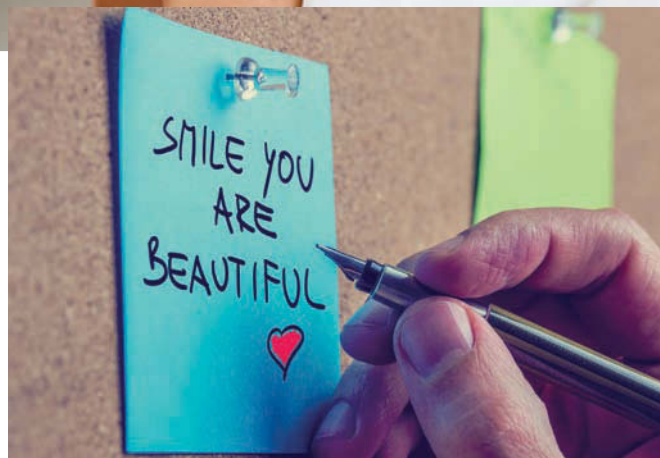
In fact, this lack of social interaction has become so vastly different that saying "good morning" or "hello" to a person in the elevator—acts that were once considered good manners, polite, and comforting with a sense of community—are now often considered weird or uncomfortable, Dr. Kanafani points out. It's a worrying shift, especially when humans are social beings that thrive on social situations.



• *Don't let the nasties get you down*

Werk It, Girl

And it's not just socially—in the workplace, aggressively going after what you want is a trait that's championed. "A large proportion of blue chip companies and market leaders look for and recruit on the basis of an individual's performance on psychometric tests, many of which assess for [traits such as] innovation, conscientiousness and agreeableness. What you may not be told is that being agreeable may not get you the job," says Ross Addison, a Cognitive Behavioural Psychotherapist and Counsellor at Camali Clinic. "Much research has shown that innovation potential has been linked with individuals that are not particularly agreeable," he adds. He has a point—just think of Mark Zuckerberg, Madonna, Steve Jobs or Sir Alex Ferguson, polarising figures that weren't always particularly well-liked but celebrated nonetheless



thanks to their innovative ideas and many contributions to society.

With the world becoming increasingly global, a clash of cultures can be another factor—different cultural definitions of what is considered polite or ill-mannered can lead to misunderstandings and, in turn, uncomfortably frustrating snafus. "I don't think [a] smorgasbord of different cultures sometimes helps certain situations; for example, I might think it's rude for a person to jump the queue

to ask the employee at the counter something, and in someone else's culture this might be perfectly acceptable," Linda says. The transient nature of living in an expat-heavy region could also contribute to the way we act in our society, Ross adds: "I do believe that many people—expats—see the UAE as a bit of a playground, and that if things go wrong they can just return to their home country. So with that in mind, there may be less consideration shared between people, possibly because they



insensitivity can render the culprits eventually isolated and distanced from others, Dr. Thoraiya suggests, adding: “People are social beings and social interactions are an important part of a person’s self-esteem, self-worth and value. Nobody likes to be around someone who is rude and insensitive, therefore isolation is highly probable.”

Let’s also not forget the boomerang effect of the feel-good factor: “Happiness and positivity will largely prevail due to the direct impact on the individual’s psyche. Most people would agree that seeing someone happy or doing a good deed makes them feel positive and that positivity would most likely be overpowering than any satisfaction that comes from being rude or inconsiderate. My experience is that people have a preference for being around respectful people and it’s seen as a trait to be valued, so we may actually see that those with little regard to manners remain the minority of society.” How many of us have watched videos of random acts of kindness that

have touched us so deeply that we’ve shared them until they’ve gone viral? Indeed, with celebrities such as Taylor Swift, George Takei and Russell Brand championing kindness and using their influence over the public to encourage positivity, compassion and consideration of others, it seems that this trend of casual acrimony could soon be on its way out.

Breathe, Rinse and Repeat

But what’s a girl to do in the meantime? “Personally, I used to take these situations very much to heart. [Don’t] sit around dwelling on ‘why’ or planning revenge—the key is in our reaction, because we cannot control everything about the situation but we can always control our reaction. Remember, it’s not a reflection on you as a person, and reacting in a polite (yet assertive, if need be) and calm manner will always allow you to feel better about yourself,” Linda advises.

If it’s your own temper you need to keep in check, it’s even more important to take a moment to keep your reactions in line: “When you feel the need to be unkind to others, ask yourself why you’re feeling the need to be rude or insensitive. Usually, that stems from our own feelings of being hurt or insecure. Try to deal with it without taking it out on others—learn to be kind to yourself as well as others,” Dr.

Thoraiya says. Michael Jackson was on to something when he sang about first looking to the man in the mirror when it comes to making a change—and about how good that can feel.

Writing your thoughts down can also help, Ross says: “For those that recognise that perhaps they can be rude or selfish, or can become frustrated [easily], if they’re motivated to change, they could adopt some cognitive behavioural therapy methods to manage this. [Learn to identify] the individual triggers that give rise to the above emotions or behaviours. Whether it be frustration in traffic, language barriers between different cultural backgrounds, or impatience with waiting in a queue, write down some specific times in the past fortnight when you have found a situation difficult to manage. You will then be able to pre-empt times when you are likely to become angry or frustrated, and intervene to reduce the symptoms.” Often, simple awareness and reminding yourself that in certain situations your emotions can become difficult to keep under control can give you a better chance of responding to them appropriately, Ross adds—resulting in fewer situations arising in which you might respond in a way that you could later regret or feel remorseful of. Trying not to sweat the small stuff may sound cliché, but this is one of the most important factors in not letting things escalate, and being able to put yourself in someone else’s shoes. The next time you encounter rudeness, Linda suggests taking a few deep breaths, then asking yourself how important the issue really is in the grand scheme of things. It’s also helpful to remind yourself that you have no idea what kind of day the other person is having, she says: “A little empathy goes a long way.” ■

The need to be rude or insensitive usually stems from *our own feelings of being hurt or insecure*. Learn to be kind to yourself as well.