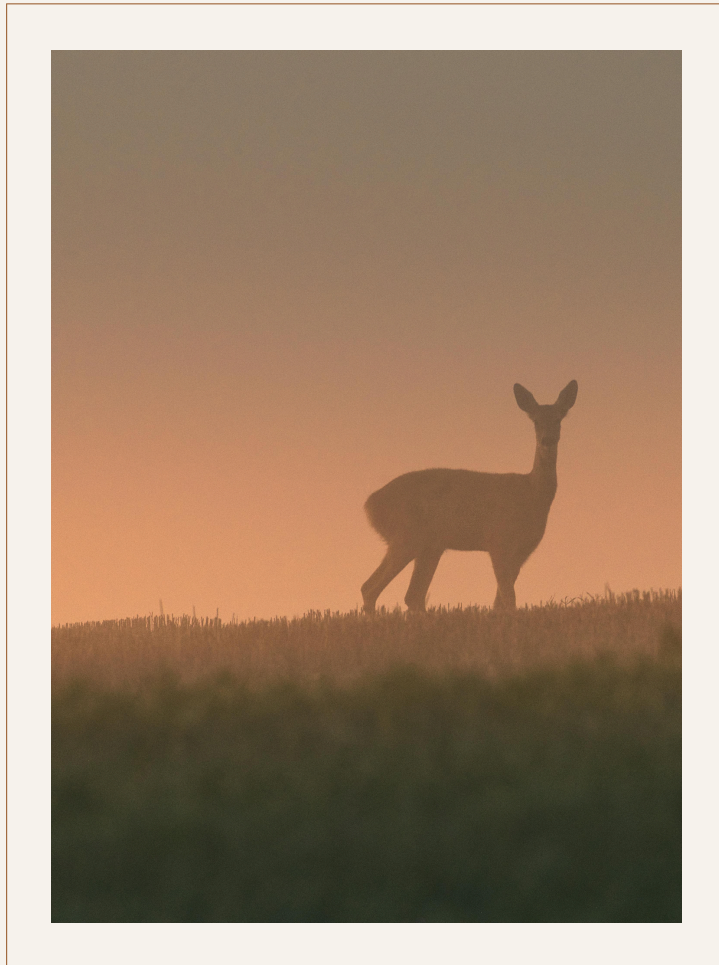


When Helping Others Hurts You

UNDERSTANDING FAWNING AS A HIGH ACHIEVER

A Guide for Perfectionists Ready to Stop Performing and Start Living



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A Note Before You Begin

If you've picked up this guide, there's a good chance you already sense something is off — but you can't quite name it.

You say yes when you mean no. You shrink yourself in conflict. You work overtime to keep everyone comfortable while quietly abandoning your own needs. And somehow, despite being praised for being so giving, so reliable, so easy to work with, you feel exhausted, invisible, and a little lost.

That's not a character flaw. It's a survival response. And it has a name: fawning.

This guide is designed to help you understand what fawning actually is, how it shows up differently in high achievers and perfectionists, why awareness alone isn't enough to change it, and what you can start doing about it.

This is a starting point, not a finish line. The goal isn't to read this and feel fixed.

The goal is to begin seeing yourself more clearly.



Section 1: What Is Fawning?

Most people are familiar with the fight-or-flight response. Some have heard of freeze. But fawning — the fourth trauma response — is the one that tends to fly completely under the radar. Especially for high achievers.

Fawning is the pattern of appeasing, people-pleasing, and self-abandonment that develops as a way to stay safe. It often begins in childhood or early experiences where conflict, disapproval, or someone’s emotional state felt threatening. The nervous system learned: if I keep everyone happy, I stay safe.

The problem? That wiring doesn’t disappear when you become an adult. It just gets more sophisticated.

Fawning vs. People-Pleasing: What’s the Difference?

People-pleasing is often a behavior — a choice you make, even if it’s a habitual one.

Fawning is deeper. It’s a nervous system response. It happens before you even realize you’ve abandoned yourself.

People-pleasing: You choose to say yes because it’s easier.

Fawning: You say yes before your brain has time to check in with what you actually want.

The “yes” comes out automatically, and you don’t notice the cost until later — or sometimes, not at all.

How Fawning Feels in the Body

Because fawning is a nervous system response, it often shows up physically before it shows up mentally:

- A sudden urge to smooth things over the moment tension appears
- Tension in your chest or stomach when someone seems upset
- A compulsive need to explain, apologize, or over-justify yourself
- The inability to access what YOU actually want in the moment
- A sense of relief when conflict is avoided — even if nothing was actually resolved



Section 2: Fawning and Perfectionism — The Hidden Connection

Perfectionism and fawning are deeply intertwined. Both are rooted in the same core belief: *I am not enough as I am, and I need to perform to be accepted, safe, or loved.*

Perfectionism turns that belief into high standards and achievement.

Fawning turns it into hypervigilance about other people's needs and emotions.

And for many high achievers, both are running at the same time.

What This Looks Like for High Achievers

In perfectionists, fawning often doesn't look like weakness. It looks like:

- Being the most competent, capable, reliable person in the room — because disappointing people feels unbearable
- Overperforming at work to manage how others perceive you
- Taking on more than your share because asking for help feels unsafe
- Editing yourself in conversations so no one is uncomfortable
- Apologizing constantly, even when you've done nothing wrong
- Struggling to advocate for your own needs, even when you're exhausted

The praise you receive for being this way makes it harder to see. You're told you're a team player. A natural leader. So giving. Meanwhile, inside, you're running on empty and wondering why.

The Burnout Connection

Fawning is one of the most underrecognized contributors to burnout in high achievers.

When you're constantly attuned to everyone else's emotional state — managing, soothing, accommodating — there's very little left for you.

This is why high achievers can do everything “right” and still feel completely depleted. The output is visible. The invisible labor of fawning is not.



Section 3: Recognizing Your Fawn Patterns

Fawning looks different in different contexts. Below are some of the most common patterns that show up for high achievers. As you read, notice which ones land.

Work and Professional Settings

- You take on tasks outside your role because you can't tolerate letting someone down
- You soften your ideas before sharing them, or don't share them at all
- You say "no problem" when it is, in fact, a problem
- You over-explain or over-apologize in emails and conversations
- You work harder than necessary to avoid criticism

Relationships

- You default to what the other person wants, and rarely voice your own preferences
- You avoid difficult conversations to keep the peace
- You feel responsible for managing other people's emotions
- You stay in situations that aren't working because leaving feels selfish or unkind
- You find it easier to give than to receive

Your Relationship with Yourself

- Your needs consistently come last
- You feel vaguely guilty when you do something just for yourself
- Rest feels unsafe or unearned
- You struggle to identify what YOU actually want, separate from what others expect
- You've spent so long managing everyone else that you've lost touch with your own preferences, desires, and boundaries



Section 4: Why Awareness Alone Isn't Enough

Here's what most guides on fawning and people-pleasing miss: knowing is not the same as changing.

You can read every book, take every course, and understand fawning intellectually — and still find yourself saying yes when you mean no, shrinking in conflict, and abandoning yourself in real time. Not because you lack knowledge. Because fawning lives in the nervous system, not just the mind.

The nervous system doesn't respond to logic. It responds to safety. And until your nervous system learns that it's safe to disappoint someone, set a boundary, or take up space — the fawn response will keep showing up, even when you know better.

What Actually Creates Change

Rewiring fawning patterns requires:

- Noticing the response as it happens — not just in retrospect
- Learning to pause before the automatic “yes”
- Tolerating the discomfort of someone's disappointment without immediately moving to fix it
- Building a relationship with your own needs, preferences, and desires
- Practicing new responses in low-stakes situations first
- Having support that reflects your patterns back to you in real time

That last one matters more than most people realize.

Because fawning is relational in nature — it developed in relationship — it often heals most effectively in relationship too. This is part of why working through fawning with a coach or therapist tends to accelerate what independent study can only begin.

Section 5: Where to Start — Practical Tools

These tools won't rewire your nervous system overnight. But they will begin to build the awareness and tolerance you need to make real change possible.



Tool 1: The Pause Practice

When someone asks something of you — a favor, a yes, a commitment — practice a single pause before responding. Even two seconds.

In that pause, ask: What do I actually want here?

You don't have to act on the answer yet. You're just learning to access it.

Tool 2: The Body Check-In

Start noticing where fawning shows up in your body. Before you respond to conflict, tension, or a request you're unsure about, do a quick scan:

- Is there tightness in your chest or stomach?
- Are your shoulders raised?
- Do you feel a rush to smooth things over?

These physical signals are your nervous system communicating. They're not signs that you need to act immediately — they're invitations to pause.

Tool 3: Reflection Prompts

Set aside 10–15 minutes with these questions. Write without editing yourself.

- Where in my life am I consistently putting others' needs before my own?
- What am I afraid will happen if I disappoint someone?
- When did I last say yes and mean no? What did it cost me?
- What would I want or choose if no one else's reaction mattered?
- Where in my life do I feel most like myself — and least like myself?

Tool 4: The “Small No” Practice

Fawning doesn't change with one dramatic boundary. It changes through small, repeated acts of self-honoring.

This week, find one low-stakes opportunity to say no, express a preference, or take up a little more space than usual. Notice what happens in your body. Notice what you were afraid of — and whether it came true.



A Note Before You Begin

If you've recognized yourself in these pages, please know: you're not broken, and you're not alone.

Fawning is one of the most common — and most overlooked — patterns in high achievers.

It was developed for a reason. It kept you safe. And it's costing you now.

The work of unlearning it is real work. It takes time, support, and a willingness to sit with discomfort that might feel very unfamiliar at first. But on the other side of that work is something most fawners have never fully experienced:

A life that actually feels like yours.

You don't have to keep doing this alone.

Ready to go deeper?

If this guide resonated and you're ready for real, lasting change — not just more information — VIP Coaching is designed for exactly this. Together, we go beneath the patterns to the nervous system level, building a sustainable way of working and living that actually feels like you.

Book a free strategy call at ncoyne.com

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