

REBEL YELL

Those of us who shun society's expectations are on a difficult and maybe even dangerous path. But are there unexpected upsides to being a rebel?

WORDS BY REBECCA DOUGLAS

ReBELs hold an unadulterated fascination in our lives. They're the fearless folk who don't care what others think and aren't afraid to colour outside the lines, or – to hell with it – rip up the whole damn piece of paper and set it on fire. 'If only we were braver, cooler, less constrained, maybe we could even be like them,' we whisper to ourselves. We don't really understand them, but many of us secretly want to be them.

Senior social scientist at the University of Melbourne, Dr Lauren Rosewarne says whether a person is considered a rebel depends on the context and the expectations placed on them by a particular group. "Rebellion is about going against the norms of a household, a culture, or a society, which means there are not fixed definitions of who or what a rebel is. Someone in a highly devout, conservative family, for example, who opts not to be devout would be viewed as a rebel by their family but not by our broader, Western society."

So what makes a person a rebel? Is the aim to get under other people's skin, or is it about resisting others' expectations and compulsively seeking pleasurable experiences? We might automatically picture the motorcycle-riding figure posed by movies and TV, but Rosewarne says not all those who pit themselves against society's standards are leather-clad larrikins. "There are stereotypes of rebels – the James Dean *Rebel Without a Cause* type [who's into] rule-breaking, criminality, etc – but generally it's about electing not to observe values and customs that you've decided shouldn't apply to you. Motivations might be political, subversive, or just wanting to be a 'troublemaker'."



The mystery of how rebels are made might come down to the way we respond to internal and external motivating forces in our lives. In Gretchen Rubin's book, *The Four Tendencies*, she proposes humans are divided into four personality types based on the way in which they respond to various expectations placed on them by outside forces such as family members and bosses, compared with expectations they place on themselves (such as New Year's resolutions). Upholders are good at complying with both kinds of obligations, Obligers are better at satisfying others' expectations than their own, and Questioners are the opposite of Obligers.

Rebels, of course, resist all expectations, even those they place on themselves. Woe betide anyone who tries to tell them what to do. Unsurprisingly, this poses special challenges to achieving success when our lives seem to be an endless parade of responsibilities and tasks to perform. The good news is that this personality type can find ways to trick themselves into fulfilling duties when instinctually all they want is choice and freedom. The key is to understand yourself and work with your nature rather than against it.

REBELS WITH CAUSES

Rebels are motivated by challenges and being given freedom to express their creativity in how they respond. They take special satisfaction in surprising people who've misunderstood or underestimated them. If they find causes they believe in, their feisty natures can turn towards a task rather than away from it, and they'll blaze away with incredible focus. You've just got to make sure their resolve is pointed in the right direction first.

From the medical point of view, the impulse to strain against rules placed on us begins in early childhood, according to clinical psychologist Renee Mill. "People rebel for all sorts of reasons – the most common is to seek autonomy, which is a normal developmental process that starts around two years of age," she says. "It is important for parents to give as much autonomy as possible, as it helps a child develop good self-esteem. The child feels that their tastes and opinions are valid."

In their teenage years, Mill says it's normal for a young person to try out different lifestyles from the one in

DEFIANT LEADERS

It may seem paradoxical, but rebellious types can be brilliant bosses, if they bridle their wayward impulses and channel their passionate side constructively.

Here's how:

Consciously breaking away from routine.

They're always seeking new ways of performing tasks they've done countless times before. This can lead to fantastic discoveries when someone constantly questions what everyone else takes for granted.

Encouraging varying perspectives and debate among team members.

They enjoy a robust discussion and sometimes this is how the best ideas are formed, plus everyone feels heard and meetings are rarely boring!

Earning the respect of their charges by being authentic.

Rebels dislike being deceived and don't like deceiving others. They simply aren't comfortable unless they are showing everyone their true selves, warts and all.

Getting their hands dirty.

Another way rebels in leadership roles can earn admiration from their employees is by their willingness to muck in with everyone else. They reject traditional hierarchies and the expectations that come with them.

Valuing 'happy accidents'.

Rather than hitting the roof when something goes wrong, rebels can spot the value in a mistake. After all, some of the most popular and useful inventions in history were the result of 'failed' experiments – think the Slinky, pacemakers, penicillin, and microwave ovens.

which they grew up to determine what suits them best in preparation for their adult years.

"In adolescence, the need for autonomy is a focus of development again," she says. "This time it is about questioning parental values and questioning the world around them. For most people, if a sense of personal autonomy and validation is experienced, the need to rebel disappears in adulthood. Adolescents reject their parents' values, experiment with other lifestyles, and by 25 years old, more than 90 per cent will have taken on their parents' values, but out of choice, not coercion."

So why doesn't everyone grow out of it after their teenage years? According to Rosewarne, it depends on what the person's main motivation is for choosing to defy expectations. "Not everyone who is a 'rebel' is doing it merely to defy their parents. For some people, choosing to go against the grain – to follow a set of beliefs that differ from the majority – makes that person a rebel."

Mill says for some individuals, rebelling is a way to divert attention away from their insecurities and avoid the pain of not measuring up to society's standards, whether this shortfall is real or perceived. In other words, they are rejecting the world before it can reject them.

In other cases, this lifelong desire to stick it to society is a reaction to past oppression or abuse, whether by their family, at school, from their government or other authority figure. "If a child was repressed, dominated or abused, they never develop an authentic, validated self," says Mill. "They define themselves in opposition to the dominator."

A further possibility is that a person's rebellious impulses can be caused by certain conditions such as attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) or oppositional defiant disorder (ODD). Children and adults with these diagnoses can be impulsive, wilful and contrary beyond the occasional bull-headed moment we all experience from time to time. These individuals may struggle to follow rules and control their emotions, displaying a short fuse and unstable mood.


These conditions are relatively common – ODD affects around one in 10 children, while ADHD affects two to five per cent of children, with boys heavily outnumbering girls in both cases. A number of treatments such as

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medication, family therapy and cognitive behavioural therapy are available to help those with conditions such as these.

Mill says for rebels, the key to happiness and success in life may be finding your tribe of people where you fit in rather than stand out. "A person who rebels against capitalist society and becomes a hippie may be rebelling against their parents or society. However, if they join a commune of other hippies, they may fit into their guidelines without a problem."

Provided you're able to find a place of peace, stay out of trouble, and aren't harming anyone, it probably doesn't matter if your values stray from what's considered 'normal' by society. Mill suggests seeking help only if your rebellion is preventing you from satisfying your basic needs in life such as working and sustaining fulfilling relationships.

Rosewarne argues that as long as rebels still stay within the bounds of the law, their creative approach to life can be an asset both to themselves and to society at large. "Provided your rebellion doesn't manifest in harm to others, or in criminality, I'd argue there is no reason to grow out of it," he says. "In fact, in some contexts, unorthodox thinking – thinking 'outside of the box' – is highly prized and helps society and culture move in new and interesting directions." 



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