

The Keys to Self-Acceptance

By Brian Tracy

Psychologists today generally agree that your level of self-esteem, or how much you like yourself and consider yourself to be a valuable and worthwhile person, lies at the core of your personality.

Your level of self-esteem determines: your level of energy and the quality of your personality how much you like other people and, in turn, how much they like you your willingness to try new things and to venture boldly where perhaps you have never gone before the quality of your relationships with others—your family, your friends and your coworkers and how successful you are in your business, especially if you are in sales.

But before you begin enjoying the wonderful effects of high self-esteem in your life, you have to learn to accept yourself unconditionally. And even before you achieve self-acceptance, there are other steps you have to take.

Self-acceptance begins in infancy, with the influence of your parents and siblings and other important people. As a child, you have an overwhelming need for love and approval and acceptance from the important people in your life. A developing child requires this emotional support the way roses need rain. Healthy personality growth is absolutely dependent upon it. A person grows up straight and strong and happy to the degree to which he receives an abundance of nurturing in his formative years, prior to the age of five.

Someone once said that everything we do in life is either to get love or to compensate for the lack of love. Almost all of our problems, as both children and adults, can be traced back to “love withheld.” There is nothing more destructive to the evolving and emerging personality than being unloved or unaccepted for any reason by someone whom we consider important.

As adults, we always strive to achieve what we felt we were deprived of in childhood. If you grew up feeling, for any reason, that you were not totally accepted by your parents, you will be internally motivated throughout your life to compensate for that lack of acceptance by seeking it in your relationships with other people. To the growing child, perception is reality; reality is not what the parents feel toward the child, but what the child feels that the parents feel. The child’s evolving personality is shaped largely by his perception of how he is seen and thought about by his parents, not by the actual fact of the matter. If your parents were unable to express a high degree of unconditional acceptance to you, you can grow up feeling unacceptable—even inferior and inadequate.

It’s quite common for a youngster to grow up in a household where he or she feels a lack of acceptance by one or both parents, especially the father. When the young person becomes an adult, the psychological phenomenon of “transference” takes place. The individual goes into the workplace and transfers the need for acceptance from the parents to the boss. The boss then becomes the focal point of the individual’s thoughts and feelings. What the boss says, how the boss looks, his comments and everything that he does that implies a feeling or an opinion about the individual is recorded and either raises or lowers the individual’s level of self-acceptance.

Your own level of self-acceptance is determined largely by how well you feel you are accepted by the important people in your life. Just as the Law of Correspondence says that your outer life tends to be a reflection of your inner life, your attitude toward yourself is determined largely by

the attitudes that you think other people have toward you. When you believe that other people think highly of you, your level of self-acceptance and self-esteem goes straight up. However, if you believe, rightly or wrongly, that other people think poorly of you, your level of self-acceptance will plummet.

The best way to begin building a healthy personality involves understanding yourself and your motivation. Toward this end, I'd like to introduce what is called the "Johari window" and explain its effect on your personality.

The Johari window provides a view into your psyche. According to this theory, your personality can be divided into four quadrants, like a square divided into four smaller squares.

The first part of this window is the box in the upper left-hand corner. It represents the part of your personality that both you and others can see. This is the open part of your personality. The lower left-hand box of this window into your psyche represents the part of your personality that you can see but that others cannot see. It is a part of your inner life.

The upper right-hand box of this window represents the parts of your personality that others can see but of which you are unaware. You have somehow blocked these parts from your consciousness.

Finally, the lower right-hand box represents that part of your personality that is hidden from both you and other people. It's the deeper, subconscious part of your personality that represents urges, instincts, fears, doubts and emotions that are stored away below a conscious level, but that can exert an inordinate impact on the way you behave, often causing you to feel and react in certain ways that sometimes even you don't understand.

One of your goals is to develop a fully rounded personality, to become a fully functioning human being with a sense of inner peace and outer happiness.

A measure of your maturity is often manifested in the way you treat different people. When you are at your very best and your self-esteem is at its highest, you'll find that you are genuinely positive and friendly toward everyone, from the taxi driver to the corporation president. When your personality is completely together, you treat everyone with equal respect.

The way to move toward a higher level of personality integration and, therefore, a higher level of peace and personal effectiveness, is to expand the area of your personality that is clear to both you and others. And you do this through the simple exercise of self-disclosure. For you to truly understand yourself, or to stop being troubled by things that may have happened in your past, you must be able to disclose yourself to at least one person. You have to be able to get those things off your chest. You must rid yourself of those thoughts and feelings by revealing them to someone who won't make you feel guilty or ashamed for what has happened.

The second part of personality development follows from self-disclosure, and it's called self-awareness. Only when you can disclose what you're truly thinking and feeling to someone else can you become aware of those thoughts and emotions. If the other person simply listens to you without commenting or criticizing, you have the opportunity to become more aware of the person you are and why you do the things you do. You begin to develop perspective, or what the Buddhists call "detachment." You can stand back from yourself and your past and look at it honestly. You can "disidentify" from the intense emotions involved and view what has happened to you with greater calmness and clarity.

Now we come to the good part. After you've gone through self-disclosure to self-awareness, you arrive at self-acceptance. You accept yourself for the person you are, with good points and bad points, with strengths and weaknesses, and with the normal frailties of a human being. When you develop the ability to stand back and look at yourself honestly, and to candidly admit to others that you may not be perfect but you're all you've got, you start to enjoy a heightened sense of self-acceptance.

One of the keys to happiness is to "live in truth" with yourself and others. And one of the ways to live in truth is to stop trying to be perfect and to see yourself honestly, as you really are. Attempts to achieve needless perfectionism, and an intense, often unconscious desire to impress people with how good you are, are real time wasters and energy killers.

There is a joke that cuts to the heart of this issue: "When you are in your 20s, you are very concerned about what people think about you. When you are in your 30s, you don't really care that much about what people think about you. And when you get into your 40s, you discover the real truth: Nobody was even thinking about you at all." A valuable exercise for developing higher levels of self-acceptance involves doing an inventory of yourself. In doing this inventory, your job is to accentuate the positive and minimize the negative. The real difference between optimistic people and pessimistic people is that optimists are always looking for the good in every situation, the opportunity in every problem, while pessimists are always looking for the down side and the problem in every opportunity. When you honestly analyze yourself during this inventory, you will be amazed at how extraordinary you really are and how incredible your potential is for accomplishing the things that you really desire.

Begin your inventory by recalling your accomplishments. Think about all the things that you have achieved over the course of your lifetime. Make a list of them. Think of the subjects you passed and the grades you received. Think of the awards and prizes you won. Think of the people you have helped and the kind things that you have done for others. Think of the adversities that you have triumphed over. Think of the goals that you have set and achieved. Look at the material parts of your life; think about all the things that you have managed to acquire as the result of hard work and disciplined effort.

Now, to increase your level of self-acceptance, think of your unique talents and abilities. Think of your core skills, the things that you do exceptionally well that account for your success in your profession and in your personal life right now. Think of the results that you have achieved by applying yourself to the challenges of your world. Think of your earning ability and your ability to accomplish your goals. Think of your ability to make a contribution to your company and to your family and to the world around you. Think about all the things that you have to offer to your world.

Finally, to boost your level of self-acceptance, think about your future possibilities and the fact that your potential is virtually unlimited. You can do what you want to do and go where you want to go. You can be the person you want to be. You can set large and small goals and make plans and move step-by-step, progressively toward their realization. There are no obstacles to what you can accomplish except the obstacles that you create in your mind.

Here's an important fact to keep in mind when it comes to self-acceptance. What we work for more than anything else is respect. The British author E. M. Forster once explained, "I write to earn the respect of those I respect." Almost everything that we do, or refrain from doing, is somehow associated with gaining, or at least not losing, the respect of the people whom we respect the most. And only when we feel that we are respected by those we respect do we accept and like ourselves to a great degree.

One way to raise your level of self-acceptance, then, is to pick a role model, someone you admire and look up to and want to be like, and then pattern your life and your work after that person's. Many businesspeople have become top executives by selecting a role model who had already reached the top and then patterning their lives along the same lines. Everything you do that you feel is consistent with what someone you admire would do increases your level of self-acceptance.

A second way to assure a higher level of self-acceptance is to develop good work habits and to work efficiently and effectively toward the accomplishment of high-value results. The most respected people in any organization are those who can get the job done. Your level of self-efficacy, in other words, your belief in your ability to do what is expected of you, has an incredible effect on how much you accept yourself as a good and valuable person.

A third way to increase your level of self-acceptance is to be very aware of your image and the way you appear to people. If you want to be respected and admired by others, you need to act like a person who is worthy of respect. And remember, everything counts. Everything you do or don't do can either contribute to or take away from your image and the impression you are making on others. When you know that you look absolutely excellent on the outside, your level of self-acceptance shoots up.

A fourth way to raise your level of self-acceptance is to take complete responsibility for the various parts of your life. Refuse to make excuses or to blame other people. Never complain; never explain. Volunteer for assignments and responsibilities, and then carry them out without comment.

The key to achieving a feeling of mental well-being is having a sense of control, a sense of self-determination and internal mastery. This sense of self-control is tied directly to your willingness and ability to accept full responsibility for every part of your life. When you criticize others, or you make excuses for things that you did not do well or complete on time, you actually feel more negative about yourself, and your sense of self-acceptance declines. When you take charge of every part of your life, you feel terrific about yourself, and your level of self-acceptance and self-esteem goes up. A fifth way you can build up your level of self-acceptance is by interpreting events in a positive way. Dr. Martin Seligman of the University of Pennsylvania calls this your "explanatory style." He concludes that high-performing men and women have a tendency to talk to themselves in a positive way and to explain things that are happening to them and around them in a way that allows them to stay optimistic.

Look for the silver lining in whatever cloud may be hanging over your head right now. Look for the lesson or opportunity in each obstacle or setback. Look for reasons to excuse others and let them off the hook, rather than becoming angry or upset. Play mental games with yourself to keep your thoughts on the things you want and off the things that you fear or that make you unhappy.

A sixth way to raise your level of self-acceptance is to become a habitual goal setter. Write down clear goals and a plan for what you want to accomplish and then work your plan every day. Develop of clear sense of direction for your life. Work on track and on purpose. Know exactly who you are and where you are going. Each step that you take toward the accomplishment of a predetermined objective raises your self-esteem and improves your level of self-acceptance at the same time.

Finally, a seventh way to raise your level of self-acceptance is to practice the Law of Indirect Effort, or reverse effort, and realize that everything you do or say to another person rebounds and causes the same effect on you. Whenever you are warm and friendly and courteous to another, you improve your own level of self-respect and self-acceptance. Whenever you do something nice for another person, you tend to feel better about yourself. Whenever you do or say anything that causes another person to like himself more, you find yourself liking yourself more as well.

One of the great riches of life is the self-acceptance that leads to self-esteem and maximum performance. By being aware of and practicing these recommendations, you can increase your self-acceptance to the point where you can confidently move forward toward the realization of your full potential.

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