

## Self-Esteem or Other-Esteem?

After some consideration and many years of practice as a therapist, I have come to believe that the term self-esteem appears to be a misnomer. The first half of the expression, “self” would seem to imply that the esteem is derived from one’s self. Yet, if we look closer we may find that very often that self-esteem is actually attained from outside of one’s self. For a student it might come from good grades, for a business person or employee, a promotion or a raise. For most individuals, praise or acknowledgement provide an increase in esteem.

Although all of the above are understandably positive, it is essential to note that they depend upon things external to one’s self. Since the esteem is externally derived from the outside, we can see how we might be inclined to alter our personality and behavior to achieve more of this reward. Admittedly being approved of or valued by others is a natural desire, but we must be cautious not to betray ourselves in order to achieve these results. If we don’t receive the desired outcome, or if it is suddenly removed, how do we then feel about ourselves? If a mediocre performance or lack of praise, or even criticism diminishes how we feel about ourselves, it becomes evident that the esteem is indeed not from self, it is actually what I call other-esteem.

Authentic self-esteem is not dependent upon others or things external to us. Such self-esteem is a manifestation of our relationship with our self. The essence of self-esteem is that it flows from within. If we lay ourselves bare in our vulnerability and strip away our careers, our families, our friends, our possessions and achievements, what are we left with? And how does that feel? Beyond the obvious losses, do we like and respect who we are, irrespective of the markers of other-esteem?

We modify and mold so much of our behavior and even more, our very personality to achieve other-esteem. We literally create personality masks in this endeavor, presenting to others the person we think they would approve of. In such circumstances we are abandoning our true self to derive approval or recognition from others. Not only is this a self-deprecating experience, it also sabotages our relationships, for they are far from authentic. When we act in this manner we are literally taking our well being and serving it up to other people. It then becomes the other person’s to decide if we are worthy. This is not a healthy place to be and it is a soul-defeating exercise. We should never judge ourselves based upon who we think others see us.

### *Who is the Judge?*

The simple truth is that others don’t judge us. They may have opinions of us. Yet, to elevate their opinion to the status of a judgment is simply ridiculous. No one can judge you unless you grant him or her the power of being your judge. Why would we put a judge’s robes on an ordinary person and confer such power upon them? The only person who you might grant such power to works in a courtroom; all others are people with opinions. With a healthier measure of self-esteem we might more easily tolerate other’s opinions without escalating them into counterfeit judgments.

Esteem must be generated from within and can then radiate outward. When we focus outwardly for approval, we are seeking it in the wrong place. And in so doing, we subordinate our authentic being in a vain attempt at happiness. Such fulfillment must be dependent and superficial and undermines our personal evolution. This process of external gratification is other-esteem. Self-esteem is not contingent upon others.

When we set up this drama around approval, we create issues in regard to notions of rejection. The issue of rejection can be misleading. With a healthy self-esteem one doesn't consider rejection. It is actually the rejecting of one's self that inclines people to seek approval from others. In such cases, we're not content with ourselves and so we solicit that acceptance from others. If that approval isn't granted, we have a habit of claiming that we were rejected. In truth, we have rejected ourselves when we set others up as judge. The degree to which we are reactive to other's opinions of us is likely inversely correlated to our level of self-esteem.

A reconsidering of our understanding of self-esteem might be helpful in reframing our cultural expectations of happiness. Almost all parents would claim that they are thoroughly invested in their children's self-esteem. Educators and other professionals place great value on the development of children's self-worth. Yet, I would argue that most don't begin to comprehend self-esteem. If an A student becomes depressed by a B, it is abundantly clear that their grades are a product of other-esteem. As such, the diminishment of other-esteem leaves them feeling devalued. Their sense of well being is dependent upon factors outside of themselves. Similarly, athletic achievement or popularity are things that we understandably encourage in our children. When put into proper perspective we might see that these experiences might enhance their lives. But it is critical that they not be the cornerstones of how they see themselves. For in that case, the average student or the mediocre athlete is relegated to the imprisonment of low self-esteem.

Self-esteem is the legitimate foundation for a healthy relationship with our selves and others. Genuine self-esteem removes the construct of neediness so prevalent in most relationships. And liberates us to thrive, as issues of rejection and judgment recede. If we seek our esteem from outside, we leave ourselves in a tentative and dependent place. When the sense of worth emanates from within, life unfolds in an empowered manner.

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