

PATHS TOWARD SELF-WORTH

by Ginger E. Blume, Ph.D.

Over the past three decades of treating adults in psychotherapy, I've observed that a large percentage of people suffer from a faulty, negative, underlying belief system about the "Self". Sadly, due to a traumatic event or an accumulation of negative childhood experiences, people may develop the false belief that they have no intrinsic value as a human being. Once this negative self-view is ingrained or internalized, it becomes very destructive and can spread to affect most aspects of one's life.

People who suffer from low self-esteem are not always obvious (i.e. You wouldn't necessarily recognize them by observing them or listening to them talk in their daily lives.). They might dress impeccably, have important job titles, awards, etc., yet, feel in their heart that they are an imposter, pretending to be worthwhile while feeling just the opposite.

Sometimes, this negative sense of self is limited to one's personal life or to one's work life. When this occurs, you might observe a strong "disconnect" between how the individual functions in these various areas of their daily lives. For example, I know a woman who is a fortune 500 super star at work and a passive, underdog at home, refusing to assert her personal needs and wants in her marriage. Psychologically, she unknowingly compartmentalized her sense of personal power at the office from her sense of self at home. Her inability to be assertive at home baffled even her! She was unaware that in intimate, personal relationships, she cut off her feelings of competency due to a fear of abandonment. Her mother's over-involvement in her own career had left my patient feeling abandoned during child. She only got attention from her mother when she was sick and helpless. For her, love came at a cost of helplessness. It is interesting to note that when this behavior was identified, she eventually became personally empowered to negotiate a more rewarding relationship with her husband where her strengths no longer had to be hidden.

Many people's "valueless self-image" is secretive. Great shame is attached to such a negative and critical self-image. This hidden, negative, self-assessment lurks under the daily radarscope of everyday appearances. But, this sense of low self-esteem functions like a virus in an otherwise normal computer. It can completely corrupt the individual's sense of happiness, contentment, or inner peace. It undermines any attempt at self-care, since the underlying assumption is, "I don't really matter, anyway." Self-sabotage in at least one area of the person's life (career, personal relationships, financial stability, etc.) is a good indicator that an emotional virus is corrupting the individual's ability to function at their best.

Psychotherapy is not always successful in helping some people develop a more positive view of themselves. For example, cognitive therapy, aimed at helping the individual take a more balanced and realistic view of their life, isn't always successful in helping alter the person's emotional sense that s/he is undeserving or less valuable than others. The pain of feeling "less than" is sometimes so deep, that therapy doesn't begin to excavate such well-worn, internal trenches in the emotional brain. How then, can a negative view of the self be remolded, especially for an adult who has grown accustomed to their negative self-image?

Personal change is a curious thing that is not fully explained by the law of cause and effect or other scientific explanations. There are many personal accounts of individuals

who have suddenly and quite dramatically, transformed their view of themselves in a single moment. This concept is easily observed in the “material world” when someone touches a hot stove and gets burned. Through this one instance, the person obtains knowledge that stays with him/her forever. We call this one-trial learning.

Such one-trial learning is instantaneous and does not need to be repeated over and over again to be remembered or believed! Similarly, sometimes when a powerful emotional or spiritual understanding or “intuitive knowing” occurs, a person recognizes his or her affinity with something far beyond his/her material existence. This recognition of the divine inside everyone is a moment of clarity when one’s self-worth can no longer be denied. In essence, a spiritual exploration must oftentimes accompany an emotional exploration in order to repair a history of identifying with a negative self. Can we truly value ourselves if we don’t understand that we are all mysteriously connected to a divine power (whether we call this Buddha, God, Jesus, etc) with a purpose that goes beyond our individual existence?

As a psychologist, I am a strong advocate of self-knowledge. However, wisdom is a much higher form of understanding that comes from understanding others, as well. The purpose of self-awareness is to be able to enter into genuine “relationship with another.” Some people get stuck in focusing on themselves and lose sight of the real purpose of therapy. When this occurs, it is obvious. The individual begins to wallow in feelings of self-pity and tales of victimization become a weekly lament. They become “therapy junkies”--- people who look for reassurance that they are OK according to some higher authority. This temporary fix is essentially a band-aid---A cheap imitation of a real transformation that may occur only through a combination of emotional and spiritual integration.

Yes, you’re hearing me right. Psychotherapy, like other processes, can be used for both good and bad. It can be used appropriately for many things:

1. Gain new self-knowledge and deep understanding
2. Obtain new (or improve) interpersonal skills
3. Develop better coping strategies for managing difficult emotions
4. Provide a corrective emotional experience
5. To have temporary emotional support through a life crisis such as a major loss

Or, psychotherapy can be used inappropriately to

1. Delay or avoid ever growing up
2. Evade taking personal responsibility for one’s life as an adult
3. Hide from the world in the cocoon of therapy

There are no easy fixes and yet, there are truly instantaneous cures. The latter we often call miracles and they happen when people take a courageous leap of faith and believe there is more to life than meets the visible eye. Over the years, I haven’t seen many cures without a few miracles playing some part in the overall process of therapy. I suspect psychotherapy without engaging the spirit is probably not much therapy at all. After all, in the history of mankind, effective, powerful healers (such as shaman) worked with the mind, body *and* spirit.

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