

DMRDynamics

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SELF, SELF-ESTEEM, PERSONA AND SHADOW

Media background Q&A

*What is your expertise and how long have you been an expert in it?

Practicing psychiatrist for 25+ years, specializing in “front-line” adult and adolescent psychiatric care. Recently served for four months as Interim Medical Director of Providence Hospital (Holyoke, MA; November 2011 thru February 2012). Recognized internationally for expertise in character and personality dynamics. Performed more than 10,000 psychiatric evaluations; evaluated and treated patients from diverse social and cultural backgrounds, from every occupational field. Numerous invited lectures and publications in academic journals and newsletters on understanding the significance of character and personality traits in regards to business organizations, personal development, medical and mental health treatment, socio-political systems, and sports / entertainment industries. Interviewed and quoted frequently in the print, Internet and radio/TV media, nationally and internationally.

*What is self-esteem, exactly?

We generally think of self-esteem as how we “see” ourselves – strengths vs. weaknesses; level of virtues vs. vices. Simply put, self-esteem is considered to be how you feel about yourself – whether you like and respect yourself.

In reality, self-perception is more complicated, multi-layered and often conflicted – an unholy alliance or battle between how we *want* to see ourselves (narcissism), how we *think* we really are, how we *fear* that we may actually be (what Jung called “the Shadow”), and how we present ourselves to others (persona).

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Those perceptions may be integrated into conscious awareness, or isolated and compartmentalized perceptions, each of which may “have a life of its own.”

**How does what society says is “good” or “right” impact our self-esteem? Is this always a negative thing?*

A person’s sense of who they are and what qualities or failings they have are imbedded in social expectations, “norms” and traditions. Even if a person takes on the role of a “rebel” – they are rarely ignoring social input; they are defining themselves as opposing social input, which leaves them just as dependent upon external expectations (if you are committed to always doing the opposite of what I ask – I can easily control you).

In fact, self-esteem originates in the expectations of the social environment (usually, most importantly, parents or parental figures). Infants are not born knowing who they are. Before a baby can speak words or think rationally, he or she is developing a sense – a *feeling* – of who they are in response to their perceptions (and misperceptions) of the emotional reactions and behaviors of those attending to them.

With healthy maturity comes increased independence in the ability to objectively evaluate the value of external demands – but the childhood dependent feelings and vulnerabilities never totally disappear and the influence of the *social network*, for better or for worse, vanishes perhaps only for a Zen monk living in isolation. (In fact, it is not facetious to say that some people are more identified with their *persona* on Facebook than who they actually are in daily life.)

Of course, some social expectations are wise and appropriate; some social expectations may be silly remnants of outmoded traditions; some social expectations may be malicious or simply illogical. The problem is that as one tries to step outside of their social network to “objectively” evaluate the expectations, more times than not, they are only moving into a different social network that inflicts its own prejudices and expectations. Literally and figuratively, divorcing yourself from social expectations is as difficult as leaving your shadow behind. The goal should be continually move into healthier and more honest social settings, with increasing ability to objectively evaluate external expectations rather than following them blindly.

**How much of self-esteem is what we have internalized from outside messages (we’ve drunk the Kool Aid), and how much of it is from what we really are and feel?*

Self-esteem begins, in infancy, with internalized perceptions of non-verbal emotional input – and that remains the “bottom floor” of the sense of self and self-esteem, both

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positive and negative. Maturity is the process of struggling to temper those feelings with rational, objective observations and considerations. That struggle is difficult, uncomfortable and at times unnerving – not particularly appetizing or attractive compared to sugary Kool Aid to which you only need to add water and stir. Where things get particularly paradoxical is when outside forces convince a person that they are “independent” – but in reality, the sense of “independence” is an illusion that has been created by external expectations and messages. This often occurs in currently-fashionable “cognitive-behavioral therapy”, when a therapist strives to convince a person to re-frame how they think of themselves. The new input may be superficially less dysfunctional or disruptive – but in reality, the person is no less dependent and vulnerable when push-comes-to-shove.

**How do people with high self-esteem and those with low self-esteem behave differently? Does behavior function to enhance or detract from self-esteem?*

We tend to generalize regarding the attributes of people with “high self-esteem” as opposed to people with “low self-esteem.” However, this is where the observations are confusing and seem illogical until it is realized that the premise is faulty. “High self-esteem” that is based upon a *false*, grandiose, or externally imposed perception, inconsistent with reality, may result in a person who *appears* self-assured, determined and “more likely to succeed” – when practically, that person will succeed only as long as they surround themselves with others who accept those perceptions as accurate, often to boost their own sense of “self-esteem” or for their own manipulative purposes. Clinically, we see those people as “narcissists”. Success may be long-lasting in the “right” circumstances, but it is always fragile. On the other hand, the person who has “high self-esteem” based upon an objective evaluation of their strengths and weaknesses, and honest efforts make use of talents and improve areas of less adequacy, is a person who is usually less bombastic, more modest and more compassionate. That does not guarantee practical success, especially if the person works in an environment that reinforces or encourages false pride. But emotionally, the person is usually more stable and better able to tolerate the unfairness of life.

On the flip side, the person with “low self-esteem” because they have been imbued with false negative images of themselves, (e.g., victims of abuse) will generally be ineffective, unhappy and self-defeating. On the other hand, a person who realizes that they have truly acted poorly, and has “poor self-esteem” quite reasonably based upon their behaviors – may actually be healthier and more likely to take positive steps to improve themselves than the person with a false sense of “high self-esteem” who sees no room for improvement and has no motivation to be a better person.

The other side of the equation is that for self-esteem to be accurate, it must be realistically based upon behavior. Solid and mature positive self-esteem is based upon

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striving to objectively behave appropriately and effectively – the person who acts dastardly but thinks well of themselves – or projects an image of being a superior person – is dangerous. If self-esteem is not objectively coordinated with behavior, problems are inevitable.

This leads to the issue that has become controversial regarding rewarding effort vs. rewarding success. The problem is that the two are not mutually exclusive. The mature person indeed should be proud of “a good effort” or a “personal best” – but at the same time, can tolerate, without unreasonable distress, not always being successful, winning or “being the best.” If a person is not proud of a good effort, that will breed depression and regression. Good efforts should be rewarded. But confusing a good effort with success can be cruelly misleading. If the specific endeavor is not an area of talent, believing that the effort is equivalent to success may provide a superficial “good feeling” – but is a set-up for an even more devastating fall when the illusion of superiority is eventually confronted. The mature person should be comfortable saying, “I put in a good effort but you know, I really suck at this and if I really want to succeed, I should but my efforts elsewhere; or I should be content enjoying the effort without false expectations of needing to ‘win’.”

**How do people with high self-esteem and those with low self-esteem manifest behavior in any of the same ways?*

Again, this really depends upon whether or not the sense of self-esteem is reality-based. If it is reality-based, the person with high self-esteem will make good use of their talents in a non-bombastic manner, while still striving to improve; and the person with low self-esteem will similarly be striving to improve, but starting from a different point. If the sense of self-esteem is not reality-based, people with false high self-esteem will act very differently from people with false low self-esteem; but in both cases, there is likely to be inevitable deflation if not despair, as the cost of the false perceptions lead to the same fate, but from opposite directions.

**Do the people in your life affect your self-esteem?*

As discussed, the earliest basis of self-esteem is the internalization of perceptions of how others respond to you. It is almost impossible, if not impossible, to have the opinions of those whom we feel close to, or hold in high esteem, have a significant impact upon how we perceive ourselves. However, while an immediate reaction is natural, maturity involves identifying and acknowledging that reaction, and then evaluating the reality of the situation as objectively as possible; as opposed to remaining dependent upon the perceptions of others. Specifically, if someone in your

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life tends to make you feel particularly good or particularly bad about yourself, it is best not to accept either conclusion unquestioningly, no matter how much you trust, admire or love the person. Accept your initial reaction, but then objectively evaluate the situation and then temper your reaction – even people who mean well may be wrong; even people who are malicious may at times be correct.

**How can someone begin to improve his/her self-esteem? Are there any easy exercises?*

Realistic self-esteem is not a “thing in itself” – it is a conclusion based upon evaluation of your behaviors and attitudes. In fact, to try to “work on improving self-esteem” by focusing upon self-esteem is counter-productive. Telling yourself, “I’m a good person” is hollow and narcissistic unless there is an objective reality to back it up. The easiest exercises to improve self -esteem involve striving to objectively evaluate and improve your behavior and performance – and as you realize you are meeting your goals, positive self-esteem will follow; and if you are not behaving well, improved self-esteem is false, disingenuous and dangerous.

**Can changing personal appearance in healthy ways enhance self-esteem? When does it become unhealthy?*

It is perfectly healthy to take pride in your appearance, and to take reasonable efforts to improve your appearance. However, when appearance becomes synonymous with identity, it is unhealthy; and since in the long run, appearance will not substitute for being a good person, expecting your appearance to improve your sense of identity and self-esteem will become a never-ending chase of illusory perfection, or a never sufficiently satisfying attempt to *appear* to be someone whom you are not.