

Why Self-Worth is a Useless Concept

Self-worth is an issue which crops up with most psychotherapy clients. It is clearly important, yet the more one examines it the more slippery it becomes as an idea, to the point where I wonder whether it is useful.

If you have a tendency to base your self-evaluation on other people's opinion you are likely to be prone to anxiety and depression. For example, some people are terrified of being criticised by anyone. Paradoxically, their approval-seeking behaviour usually causes others to give them little respect. It is hard to like people who are desperate to be liked.

Most of us rely too much upon other people's opinion. We fail to realise that nobody can damage our sense of self-esteem unless we allow them to. Self-worth, by definition, is the worth we place upon ourselves. This need not be affected by how much others value us.

Many self-help books imply that there is a points system for evaluating self-worth. They recommend activities such as listing achievements or other evidence: ten things you like about yourself, five achievements you feel proud of, and so on. They confuse self-worth with behaviour. It implies that quantity is everything, as if one must have built up a stock of something - good deeds, nice friends, happy memories - in order to feel that one has reached the critical volume at which point one is justified in feeling good about oneself. This linkage of self-worth with action is something which parents sometimes inculcate in their children by labelling them rather than their actions, calling them good or bad when really they are talking about what they have done.

The experience of esteeming (or not) oneself proceeds from self-awareness. Young children are blissfully unselfconscious. This is a far preferable state than the smug introspection implied when we say of a person "their self-esteem is high", and infinitely better than having self-esteem which is low. Albert Ellis, the founder of Rational Emotive Behaviour Therapy, argues that we should forget self-worth and aspire to self-acceptance based upon the notion that all human beings have worth and dignity: it is a part of our humanness rather than from some other attribute or achievement. We do not have to earn self-acceptance but rather choose to do it. We need to believe, along with the family therapist Virginia Satir, "I am me, and I am okay."

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Responses to this article are warmly welcomed.

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