

Why Have Double Standards

The expression “double standards” is generally employed as a criticism of someone else whom we think sets a low demand or expectation on themselves and a much higher one for others. This is a good example of a one-way rule. Many of us have beliefs about how we and other people should be which make a distinction between ourselves and other people. These kinds of double standards often involve us making higher demands of ourselves than other people, not lesser ones. If you, like me, are more willing to exercise forbearance to other people than to yourself then you probably have double standards. Whenever you are self-critical ask yourself how you would judge someone else if they had the same failing. If you expect more of yourself than others you are very likely damaging your self-esteem.

One-way rules are examples of double standards that generally work to make us unhappy and discontent with ourselves. On the other hand there is another kind of double standard that can be very helpful. It helps to have a double standard in the sense of setting both an ideal standard for something and a good enough standard, and knowing when to apply each one. Having an ideal standard helps us to aim for the sky. Many people, especially those who have suffered painful disappointments early in life, tend to set very low standards. Earlier experiences taught them that it’s pointless to raise their hopes because they will be dashed. These folk spare themselves the pain of disappointment by never expecting much. Unfortunately this becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy: if you don’t expect much of yourself or others you don’t try too hard, and neither do other people. We generally achieve more by expecting more. The price of aiming high is often a degree of disappointment but we achieve more by learning to tolerate this than by always setting low standards.

However, setting the lowest acceptable standard has its uses. It lets us know what our limit is: this low and no lower. Accepting a low standard saves us from disappointment and prevents us from expending the huge amounts of energy required to always get the best from life.

In my practice I see both types of people: those who aim to high, and those who aim to low. Like most life strategies, neither approach works every time. It seems to me that the wisest course is not a middle one, but rather to know when to switch between each. If making a greater effort is going to yield a significantly better result, then it makes sense to try harder or to require more of others. However at the point where it becomes apparent that greater effort is unlikely to achieve much improvement, its time to settle. It’s preferable to get a better result, but not essential. Good enough is good enough. Aiming high generates energy and passion, which are great. Settling for good enough generates contentment. I don’t know about you, but a bit of both seem like a good recipe for a happy life.

Which side of the “good enough” versus “going for broke” divide do you fall? What do you need to get better at in order to be happier and more fulfilled: settling or striving?

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Comments and feedback on this article are warmly welcomed.