

SELF-COMPASSION

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Self-Appreciation: The Flip Side of Self-Compassion



Sometimes it's more difficult to see what's right about ourselves than what's wrong. For some of us even thinking about our positive traits makes us uncomfortable. Praise and compliments can make us squirm, and we often don't know how to respond without self-consciousness. Flattery feels a lot better than insults, of course, but how many of us really take the praise in? Own it. Delight in

it. For a whole host of reasons it's often trickier than you might think to feel positively about ourselves; most of these stem from fear.

One fear involves setting up overly-high expectations. Underplaying our good points means that we're more likely to pleasantly surprise others by doing well rather than

disappoint them by doing poorly. We're also afraid of letting go of the devil we know. If we're in the habit of cutting ourselves down, recognition of our positive qualities will feel alien to us. Another fear is the perception of being vain. Nobody likes a narcissist – except the narcissist.

So how do we celebrate our admirable qualities in a healthy way? I believe the answer is self-compassion, which involves treating ourselves with kindness, a sense of common humanity, and mindfulness when considering our perceived inadequacies – though in a different guise. I like to call it “self-appreciation.” When we can enjoy what's good about ourselves, acknowledging that all people have strengths as well as weaknesses, we allow ourselves to revel in our goodness without evoking feelings of arrogance or overconfidence.

Let's first consider kindness as it applies to self-appreciation. Would you take your friends' good qualities for granted without ever acknowledging them or letting your friends know what you like about them? Probably not, yet many of us do so to ourselves. It's a great gift of self-kindness to appreciate ourselves and to demonstrate our approval with sincere praise. We don't have to speak this praise aloud, making ourselves and others uncomfortable in the process. But we can quietly give ourselves the inner acknowledgement we deserve.

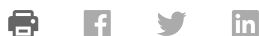
The sense of common humanity inherent to self-appreciation means that we appreciate ourselves not because we're better than others, but because all people have goodness in them. To appreciate others' goodness while ignoring our own creates a false division between us and them. But as a distinctive expression of the universal human condition that animates all our experience, we honor everything when we honor ourselves. As the Zen master Thich Nhat Hahn writes, “You are a wonderful manifestation. The whole universe has come together to make your existence possible.” Celebrating our achievements is no more self-centered than having compassion for our failings. We can't really claim personal responsibility for our gifts and talents. They were born from our ancestral gene pool, the love and nurturing of our parents, the generosity of friends, the guidance of teachers, and the

wisdom of our collective culture. Appreciation for our good qualities, then, is really an expression of gratitude for all who have shaped us as individuals. Self-appreciation humbly honors those who have helped us become the person we are today.

Self-appreciation also entails mindfulness. Just as we need to notice others' good qualities in order to appreciate them, we need to consciously acknowledge our own positive features. However, we're often so focused on our mistakes and flaws that we don't even see when we get things right. What do you notice most when you get a work evaluation, the nine points of praise or the one point of criticism? Some may be concerned that if we focus too much on what's right about ourselves we'll ignore much needed areas of growth. This is true only if our focus is, in fact, "too much." If we take a lopsided view of ourselves — "I am perfect and have no weaknesses whatsoever" — that would certainly be a problem. But the truth is that every human being has both positive and negative traits. Rather than running away with an exaggerated storyline about either, good or bad, we instead need to honor and accept ourselves as we authentically are. No better and no worse. The key is having balance and perspective so that we can see ourselves without distortion.

William James, one of the founding fathers of Western psychology, once wrote that "the deepest principle in human nature is the craving to be appreciated." Luckily, we can meet this essential need without depending on other people to approve of us. When we treat ourselves with the same kindness with which we treat our good friends, we'll have the support and care required to help us thrive.

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