

SELF-ESTEEM AND PSYCHOTHERAPY

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In my work as a psychotherapist, I am often surprised at how much emotional pain individuals have accustomed themselves to living with. I believe that a considerable amount of daily misery and distress can be traced to an individual's low sense of his basic worth. As one therapist has written, "The crucial factor in what happens both *inside* people and *between* people is the picture of individual worth that each person carries inside him or herself."

A person with low self-esteem is constantly vulnerable to any situation or conflict which arouses uncomfortable feelings, which then trigger internal self-negative statements. Many of us are unable to separate negative *feelings* which we have about ourselves at various times and in various situations from thinking negative thoughts about *who we really are*.

During the first five or six years of life, our sense of self-worth was formed almost exclusively by interactions within our families. Every word, facial expression, gesture, and action toward us by the significant others in our early lives was a message to us about what we were worth. As we began school, other influences came into play, but our experiences within our families usually continued to play a large role until at least late adolescence.

It is crucial to realize that our basic sense of self-worth has been *learned* — it is not a "given", is not innate. When we have *learned* low self-esteem, we have developed negative internal "tape-recordings", which are immediately set in motion when we have feelings of inadequacy, guilt, etc., about something we have done, said, or thought, or about something which has been said or done to us.

One of the basic life tasks for many of us is to learn to treat ourselves positively, and to develop positive internal "tape-recordings" to counteract the negative ones which are often so ingrained and have been practiced for so many years.

One of my most important tasks as a therapist is to assist a person in developing his or her positive internal tapes. To do this, it is first necessary to identify the existing negative tapes and work toward a growing awareness that who we are and our basic worth as individuals is *separate* from the internal negative tapes, i.e., that the tapes are *learned* behavior.

It is ~~not~~ necessary to have been in psychotherapy in order to understand what has been said above and to practice confronting one's internal negative tapes and replacing them with positive ones. However, *we treat ourselves as we were treated as children*. If our feelings and performances were negatively valued, then therapy may be

helpful in giving us a sustained experience of expressing all of ourselves, especially our feelings, with someone who accepts and understands, and is not judgmental toward us. Having had this experience in psychotherapy, we may then have learned how to treat ourselves and our feelings in the same accepting way.

Kopp, Sheldon. *If You Meet The Buddha on the Road, Kill Him*. New York: Bantam Books, 1976.

Rubin, Theodore. *Compassion and Self-Hate*, New York: Ballantine Books, 1976