

Eva Wlodarek

**The Power of Esteem**

Meeting yourself and others

positively

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## Recognition

Giving yourself recognition

Before we can seek to get recognition from others, we must first take an all-important step – we have to start with ourselves and give ourselves recognition. The reason for this is that we find ourselves in an exchange of hidden interactions with the world around us. Our attitude to ourselves is influenced by our environment more than we realise. If we do not give ourselves recognition, it is bound to follow that the people around us won't either. As a consequence, it is important that we figure out these processes and take care to see ourselves in a positive light.

### Our secret script

The secret script according to which we mould our experiences is our concept of self. This is defined as all of the solid perceptions we have of ourselves as a person. In short, our concept of self is made up of everything that we think of ourselves on an enduring basis. Even if we hardly realise it, we have quite a set opinion of ourselves. See how you would answer the following questions about yourself: are you intelligent? Are you mostly successful in your work? Do you think that you mean something to other people? Are you conscientious? Do you think of yourself as creative? Are you helpful? What about working with your hands? Are you a gifted linguist? These are just a small selection of questions which can give us clues about the picture we have of ourselves. The concept of self characterises how we value ourselves at this moment in time. If it corresponds overall to that of a successful person, we will think, speak and behave like one. The same goes for if we see ourselves as unlucky, an underachiever, a walking disaster zone.

And now the apparent magic comes in to play. People around us behave in mysterious ways – they think we are capable of great things and happily support us – or they devalue us and ignore us. They react as though they can read our innermost thoughts and as though they behave according to our own assessment of ourselves. Obviously the people we know function completely independently from what we deal with on a conscious level. Depending on how intense they are, our feelings and even our thoughts can be transmitted to the person we are talking to. This occurs in a subtle way, termed the 'lower path' by psychologist Daniel Goleman, in contrast to the 'higher path' of conscious exchange. Meanwhile, thanks to neuroscience, we know more about the subconscious influence that people have on one another. Nervous connections in our eyes lead straight to the central area of the brain where our emotions are processed, namely the orbitofrontal cortex, or the OFC for short. The OFC lies directly behind the brow ridge, at the intersection of the uppermost part of the emotion-processing centre and the lowest part of the area of the brain responsible for thought. Therefore it links together three of the most important areas – the cortex, our thinking brain; the amygdala, which triggers most feelings; and the reptilian brain, responsible for reactions that occur automatically. The interaction between these three means that thoughts, feelings and behaviour can be coordinated quickly. As soon as two people set eyes on each other, their OFCs connect. With the very first eye contact, we know how we perceive somebody, whether we like them, dislike them or feel indifferent towards them. We register how they perceive us and decide how we want to behave based on their reaction. This happens in the blink of an eye. In a study in the United States, students judged within three to ten



minutes whether they wanted to make friends with an unknown peer or whether they would only fleetingly make their acquaintance. Two months later, it transpired that they had made astonishingly accurate predictions of how the relationship actually developed, based on their first impression. They did not even need as long as several minutes. When we meet somebody, we begin to assess them within the first third of a second. Even before we can describe with words how we see somebody, we have made our judgment. What are commonly known as mirror neurons also have an important part to play in the informal exchange. The discovery of this special kind of nervous cell in 1995 by the Italian neuroscientist Giacomo Rizzolatti was a true sensation. We know now that mirror neurons take care of how we decode and absorb the feelings of our counterpart.

### Why we get back what we give out

Here lies the riddle's solution as to why we are mostly treated according to our own expectations in terms of our own recognition. Our counterparts subconsciously absorb our attitude towards ourselves and react accordingly. This is less secretive than it sounds. The process is actually very easy to explain – what we think about ourselves influences our posture, body language and facial expressions, our tone of voice, our choice of words and our actions. Thanks to the excellent function of our brains' processing systems, our counterpart decodes the message and reacts in response. The same is true when we try to appear different, to convey certainty although we are anxious. Our true mindset has a vastly stronger influence than the conscious outward appearance. Paul Ekman, professor of psychology at the University of California, demonstrated that our thoughts, feelings and intentions give away tell-tale signs in our expression, even though we don't want to at all. Ekman terms these signs 'micro expressions'. These concern changes in our body language and facial expressions which might flash up in a fraction of a second and betray the truth to our counterpart. On the 'lower path', we are subconsciously able to get others to behave towards us in the way we expect. If we want more recognition, first of all we have to work on our concept of self.

### Silencing the negative inner voice

By and large, our self-image is created in childhood, but in the present we maintain it with our thoughts. Whatever negative things we have retained about ourselves, we reproduce in an internal monologue. This voice in our head is often termed the 'inner critic'. It says things like, 'better keep your mouth shut, otherwise you'll just make a fool of yourself'; 'you look even more dreadful today than usual'; 'why should they take notice of you of all people?'; 'forget it, it's too late.' The critical voice sticks with all of us, but with varying strength. Its power is based on the fact that we don't question its assertions, but accept them as the irrefutable truth. We don't just *think* that we are incompetent, we *are* incompetent. We don't just *think* that we are unattractive, we *are*. We don't just *think* that we might have embarrassed ourselves, we *did* make an utter fool of ourselves. The fact is, however, that this voice only repeats old stories. With awareness and discipline, it can generally be silenced.

### *Catching the negative voice in the act*

The first step consists of catching it red-handed. However, that's not as easy as it sounds. It scurries through our head with lightning speed and we only notice its debilitating effect afterwards. In spite of this, there is an opportunity to catch it. An obvious indicator that it's at it again is how we feel. Whenever you feel small, unsure, uneasy or otherwise bad, consider specifically: what have I actually just thought? It's guaranteed



that you will hit upon a phrase that has left a negative taste in your mouth as it went through your mind shortly before. It might sound something like this: 'I'm overdressed, how embarrassing'; 'nobody cares about me here, they obviously think I'm boring'; 'I can't do that, people will think badly of me'; 'I can't manage that, it'll be a nightmare'. Noticing this thought, contained within one sentence, forms the solid basis for the next step towards change.

### *Standing up to the negative voice*

Now it's a case of activating our inner positive voice by pointing out a powerful argument against the negative statement. That isn't done with a simple contradiction – as in, 'I can't do this – yes I can.' It only works if we find something that is really convincing. We have to discover an argument that is valid for us personally. There is not a one-size-fits-all solution that we can look up in a book about positive thinking – they have to be made to order. Suppose that your negative thought goes like this: 'nobody cares about me, they obviously think I'm boring.' Then you retaliate with, 'well, there could be other reasons. Maybe people are just reserved because they don't know me. The best thing might be to introduce myself.' Or maybe you think, 'I can never manage that.' Then you argue truthfully that you've already accomplished something more difficult in your life than the current challenge.

You will soon notice that it's always the same negative thoughts that bother you. The debilitating thoughts mainly centre around the same issues – something to do with what we look like, how clever we are, how fit and healthy we are, how skilled we are, who we know, who we love, where we come from, how old we are, or what we have been given in life. These limitations make it easier. If you make your work thorough now, you'll be able to reap the benefits for a long time to come.

? As soon as you have countered a negative thought with a convincing argument, make a note of it.

? Memorise each counterargument. If another of your favourite negative thoughts comes scurrying through your head again, you've got an immediate antidote prepared in the form of a personalised argument.

...]

### **Handling adjustment – if we are refused appreciation**

Now we could just focus on how to get the most appreciation - ultimately that's what it's all about, after all. But in doing so, we would miss something important. First of all, we have to think about the other side of the coin – where are we consciously or subconsciously denied appreciation? Where do the people around us set out to devalue us? As long as we are exposed to devaluations, we don't have enough spiritual power to convincingly convey our self-worth to others. It is as though we are regularly dosed with poison. What's more, the dose differs in strength. Sometimes it's just small devaluations, like a lack of respect, which can be overcome quite quickly. But there are also bigger and more persistent devaluations which make us both mentally and physically ill. They affect mainly the three most important areas of our life – our work, our romantic relationships and our friendships. They are also called 'pillars of identity'. Our self-image and our self-worth are principally drawn from them. As such, it is crucial that we lay down good foundations here. We must not let others humiliate or disregard us in these areas. Let's look at it from this perspective – devaluation is the evidence which suggests that we have to boost our own appreciation. If we endure the

situation – for whatever reason – we lack love and respect for ourselves. To confront this is of course easier said than done. Often we feel that we are at the mercy of circumstances out of our control and that we have very little influence over things. But that is not true. We can choose what we allow and what we endure. As a Chinese proverb about worry says, ‘that the birds of worry and care fly over your head, this you cannot change, but that they build nests in your hair, this you can prevent.’ The same is true here. None of us is immune from encountering people who seek to depreciate us because of their own psychological disposition. But how we deal with it is our responsibility.

## No more being the victim

The American psychologist Gary Emery developed an effective method with which we can free ourselves from the role of the victim. Its basis is ‘choice versus change’. There is a considerable difference between the two. When we hope for change, we are dependent on other people’s goodwill. We wait for them to finally notice their derogatory behaviour and stop it. In contrast, if we were to concentrate on our own opportunities, we could choose what we want to think, feel and do. For this reason, Emery developed a method comprising three steps:

- Accept your present reality – face up to the facts. Don’t deceive yourself by telling yourself it’s not so bad. Do not excuse somebody else’s derogatory behaviour for example, because they may have had a difficult childhood. Most importantly, never think that you deserved to be treated badly because you are not perfect.
- Choose what you wish for – how do you want to feel? What do you want to achieve for yourself? For example, fair treatment at work, love and affection in your relationship and dependable friendships. Paint an accurate picture for yourself of how your ideal situation should look.
- Do something about it – consider what you need to do yourself to get closer to your chosen goal. Be aware that it just concerns things that are within your control. That could include your mindset, your words or your actions. The best thing to do here is to make a to-do list. And then get going. Do what is essential in order to achieve your goal.

If we use a system of choices, we find that we have vastly more influence and room to manoeuvre than we previously thought. Thus we can make basic conversation, seek allies, seek legal advice, develop verbal skills, learn another behaviour and put it into practice. As a final resort, we are free to leave the scene and finally free ourselves from a situation that devalues us, by changing our job or ending a relationship or friendship. However, this demands a lot of determination and courage. Sometimes our existence seems to hang in the balance or we fear the isolation that might await us. Admittedly, the price is high. But in the long term it is worth it, in the truest sense. In freeing ourselves, we win back our self-respect.

The more psychological know-how we have, the sooner we will be able to stand up to the people who consciously or unconsciously devalue us. For everyday lack of respect, there are methods to counter this assertively. Furthermore we should be in a position to analyse a situation that is distressing to us in an objective way and to deploy possible counter-strategies. At the same time, every ‘pillar of identity’ – job, relationship, friendship – has its own requirements. Therefore it is worth delving into the possible devaluations of each of them respectively.

We will therefore look in detail at what we can do to combat the different types of devaluation.



## **Demanding respect**

Our self-worth requires that we are dealt with mindfully, decently and on equal terms. Respect is the short form of appreciation and it is due to us no matter what. Unfortunately, not everyone seems to be aware of this. This fact seems to have escaped the short-tempered boss who lets rip about every tiny thing. Or the love interest who stands us up and cancels a date without telling us. In these cases, it is up to us to demand the respect we deserve.

### Lack of respect causes stress

How does derogatory behaviour affect people? This question occupies American scientists Sally Dickerson and Margaret Kemeny and their research. Their test subjects assume [they are being tested on a practice job application, but actually it is the effects of stress from depreciation which are being studied. One of the subjects is John McDowell. He is unemployed and urgently needs a job. Therefore, when he is offered the opportunity to take part in a practice job interview, he happily agrees. He arrives punctually to his appointment and is ready to do his best. While he talks enthusiastically about his skills and positive experiences in his previous job, the person interviewing him regards him critically, straight-faced. No smile, no friendly nod of the head. With a furrowed brow, he scribbles notes in his notepad. Now and again he interrupts John with disparaging comments like, 'is that all you have to offer?' John gets nervous. He gets muddled, forgets what he actually wants to say, tries to defend himself. During the course of the interview, he gets more and more doubtful. The study shows that if others behave in a derogatory or devaluing way towards us, our stress levels increase hugely. This is also proved physically. The body releases huge quantities of cortisol, a hormone that is mobilised in threatening situations. The amygdala, the area of the brain responsible for feelings of anxiety and fear, is therefore stimulated. We are unnerved, our feeling of self-worth becomes shaky. The more at someone else's mercy we feel, the more stressed we become. In John's case, it was just an experiment – albeit quite a cruel one – but for many of us, it is a painful reality. We encounter someone who treats us with no respect. We do not have to tolerate that.

### Not playing along with the game

It takes two to tango, so the saying goes. When somebody consciously treats us without respect, they set great store by it having an impact on us. The smaller we make ourselves, the meeker and more submissively we behave, the more anxious or irritated we seem, the better things work out for them. In this way, they feel bigger and more powerful. Therefore their own inner strain is resolved, at least for a while. We don't have to play along with this game. We can decline this person's strange release of their own tension. I still remember to this day with grim amusement a situation in an editorial team where I worked after finishing my studies. The head of department had reached her position less through ability and more through force. She took out her resulting inferiority complex on her colleagues. She liked to summon them into her office, only to ignore them at first. Many times I witnessed how an editor would stand anxiously in the room while her superior behaved as though she did not exist, as far as she was concerned, and otherwise went about her business before she finally took notice of her. One day it was my turn, I was summoned. I had hardly got in the door when she began a conversation on the phone with her golf partner. I just thought, "Not with me!" Uninvited, I sat down on the chair at her desk, took a newspaper for the pile that lay there, and began to leaf through it in

an interested way. She stared at me, speechless, and very quickly put the phone down.

Regardless of how much we depend on the person we are talking to, we all have a limit to our tolerance. We don't have to let everything happen to us. If we allow someone to consciously behave in a disparaging or disrespectful way towards us or to humiliate us, then we do ourselves harm. We should stand up to such behaviour. Say something like, "I am not accustomed to being treated like that," or "Please do not speak to me in that tone." We can also signal with our body language that we are not going to play along. Silence is effective, accompanied with direct eye contact. Where possible, leave the room. By consistently behaving in this way, we can earn respect and turn the tide.

[...]

## **The meaning of gratitude**

What actually is gratitude? At first, the question seems easy to answer. Most of us know immediately what it means – we receive a present or somebody does something good for us and we react positively towards it. The German-language Encyclopaedia of Values, which lists definitions of moral concepts, defines it more precisely: 'The word gratitude describes a state in which one recognises or knows to value that somebody or something has given them a positive feeling, mostly by immaterial or sometimes by material means.' How long this state lasts for and how intense it is, it does not say. There are actually varying degrees of gratitude. They range from a polite reaction to an enduring attitude to life.

[...]

## **Test – how grateful are you?**

Gratitude is diverse and varied. It ranges from pure politeness to a fundamental attitude to life. Take this quiz to find out how pronounced your personal feeling of gratitude is.

### **How the quiz works**

Put a cross next to the answer that most applies to you.

### **QUIZ QUESTIONS**

#### **Question 1**

You have done an acquaintance a big favour. Unfortunately they don't seem particularly grateful. The reaction that most annoys you is:

- ? They just say a quick 'thank you'. (B)
- ? When you ask for a favour in return, they don't have time. (A)
- ? They thank you with a discount store chocolate bar. (C)

#### **Question 2**



A card, an email or a phone call on their birthday – how reliable are you when it comes to congratulating your friends?

? If I remember, I always congratulate them, of course. (C)

? I have made a note of all of my friends' birthdays and congratulate people regularly. (B)

? Unfortunately I don't actually know when most of my friends' birthdays are. (A)

### Question 3

Your great-aunt bestows a painting on you, beaming with joy. 'Capri Fishermen at Sunset' – really not your style. You:

? Say honestly, "That's very kind of you, but I'm afraid that it doesn't match our décor." (A)

? Say, "Thank you so much for thinking of us. It must have been really hard for you to part with the picture." (C)

? Thank her for the wonderful present and promise to put it in pride of place in your living room. (B)

### Question 4

Three celebrities are discussing the topic of gratitude on television. Which opinion are you most likely to agree with?

? Gratitude is the lubricant of relationships. It makes the world a more pleasant place to live, just like politeness and friendliness. (C)

? Gratitude is a feeling that is mainly fulfilled by us. In that case, it's not that important whether we get it from others. (B)

? Gratitude is a sign of intelligence. By being grateful, we encourage others to want to give us more. (A)