



**Leon F. Seltzer Ph.D.**  
Evolution of the Self

# The Path to Unconditional Self-Acceptance

How do you fully accept yourself when you don't know how?

Posted Sep 10, 2008

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## Self-Esteem vs. Self-Acceptance

Though related, self-acceptance is not the same as self-esteem. Whereas self-esteem refers specifically to how valuable, or worthwhile, we see ourselves, self-acceptance alludes to a far more global affirmation of self. When we're self-accepting, we're able to embrace *all* facets of ourselves--not just the positive, more "esteem-able" parts. As such, self-acceptance is unconditional, free of any qualification. We can recognize our weaknesses, limitations, and foibles, but this awareness in no way interferes with our ability to fully accept ourselves.

I regularly tell my [therapy](#) clients that if they genuinely want to improve their self-esteem, they need to explore what parts of themselves they're not yet able to accept. For, ultimately, liking ourselves more (or getting on better terms with ourselves) has mostly to do with self-acceptance. And it's only when we stop *judging* ourselves that we can secure a more positive sense of who we are. Which is why I believe self-esteem rises naturally as soon as we cease being so hard on ourselves. And it's precisely because self-acceptance involves far more than self-esteem that I see it as crucial to our [happiness](#) and state of well-being.

## **What Determines Our Self-Acceptance (or Lack of Same) in the First Place?**

In general, similar to self-esteem, as children we're able to accept ourselves only to the degree we feel accepted by our [parents](#). Research has demonstrated that before the age of eight, we lack the ability to formulate a clear, separate sense of self--that is, other than that which has been transmitted to us by our caretakers. So if our parents were unable, or unwilling, to communicate the message that we were totally okay and acceptable--independent, that is, of our hard-to-control, sometimes errant behaviors--we were primed to view ourselves ambivalently. The positive regard we received from our parents may have depended almost totally on how we acted, and unfortunately we learned that many of our behaviors weren't acceptable to them. So, identifying ourselves with these objectionable behaviors, we inevitably came to see ourselves as in many ways inadequate.

Additionally, adverse parental evaluation can, and frequently does, go far beyond disapproving specific behaviors. For example, parents may transmit to us the overall message that we're selfish--or not attractive enough, smart enough, good or "nice" enough . . . and so on. As a result of what most mental [health](#) professionals would agree reflects a subtle form of emotional abuse, almost all of us come to regard ourselves as only *conditionally* acceptable. In consequence, we learn to

regard many aspects of our self negatively, painfully internalizing feelings of rejection we too often experienced at the hands of overly critical parents. And this tendency toward *self-criticism* is at the heart of most of the problems that, as adults, we unwittingly create for ourselves.

In other words, given how the human psyche operates, it's almost impossible *not* to parent ourselves similarly to how we were parented originally. If our caretakers dealt with us in a hurtful manner, as adults we'll find all kinds of ways to perpetuate that unresolved pain onto ourselves. If we were frequently ignored, berated, blamed, chastised, or physically punished, we'll somehow contrive to continue this self-indignity. So when (figuratively, at least) we "beat ourselves up," we're typically just following our parents' lead. Having to depend so much on them when we were young--and thus experiencing little authority to actually question their mixed verdict on us--we felt pretty much obliged to accept their negative appraisals as valid. This is hardly to say that they constantly put us down. But, historically, it's well-known that parents are far more likely to let us know when we do something that bothers them than to acknowledge us for our more positive, pro-social behaviors.

In fully comprehending our current reservations about ourselves, we also need to add the disapproval and criticism we may have been received from siblings, other relatives, teachers--and, especially, our peers, who (struggling with their own self-doubts) could hardly resist making fun of our frailties whenever we innocently "exposed" them. At any rate, it's safe to assume that almost all of us enter adulthood afflicted with a certain negative bias. We share a common tendency to blame ourselves, or to see ourselves as in some way defective. It's as though we all, to whatever degree, suffer from the same chronic "virus" of self-doubt.

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**. . . So How Do We Become More Self-Accepting?**

*Cultivating Self-Compassion, Letting Go of Guilt, and Learning to Forgive Ourselves*

Accepting ourselves unconditionally (despite our deficiencies) would have been almost automatic had our parents conveyed a predominantly positive message about us--and, additionally, we grew up in a generally supportive environment. But if that really wasn't the case, we need on our own to learn how to "certify" ourselves, to validate our essential ok-ness. And I'm hardly suggesting that independently confirming ourselves has anything to do with becoming complacent--only that we get over our habit of constantly judging ourselves. If deep within us we're ever to experience, as our normal state of being, personal fulfillment and peace of mind, we must first rise to the challenge of complete, unqualified self-acceptance.

As Robert Holden puts it in his book [Happiness Now!](#) "Happiness and self-acceptance go hand in hand. In fact, your level of self-acceptance determines your level of happiness. The more self-acceptance you have, the more happiness you'll allow yourself to accept, receive and enjoy. In other words, you enjoy as much happiness *as you believe you're worthy of* [emphasis added]."

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Perhaps more than anything else, cultivating self-acceptance requires that we develop more self-compassion. Only when we can better understand and pardon ourselves for things that earlier we assumed must be all our fault can we secure the relationship to self that till now has eluded us.

To adopt a more loving stance toward ourselves--the *key* prerequisite for self-acceptance--we must come to realize that till now we've pretty much felt obliged to demonstrate our worth to others, just as initially we concluded that we had to submit to the judgmental authority of our caretakers. Our approval-seeking behaviors since then (misguided or not) have simply reflected the legacy of our parents' conditional love.

Undertaking such a heartfelt exploration of what I'd call our well-nigh "universal plight" almost inevitably generates increased self-compassion. And it's through this compassion that we can learn to like ourselves more, and to view ourselves as deserving of love and respect by very "virtue" of our willingness to confront (and struggle against) what previously we've found so difficult to accept about ourselves.

In a sense, we all bear "conditional-love scars" from the past. We're all among the ranks of the "walking wounded." And this recognition of our common humanity can help inspire in us not only feelings of habitually-withheld kindness and goodwill toward *ourselves* but toward others as well.



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To become more self-accepting, we must start by telling ourselves (repeatedly and-- hopefully--with ever-increasing conviction) that given all of our negatively biased self-referencing beliefs, we've done the best we possibly could. In this light, we need to re-examine residual feelings of guilt, as well as our many self-criticisms and put-downs. We must ask ourselves specifically what it is we don't accept about ourselves and, as agents of our own healing, bring compassion and understanding to each aspect of self-rejection or -denial. By doing so, we can begin to dissolve exaggerated feelings of guilt and shame based on standards that simply didn't mirror what could realistically be expected of us at the time.

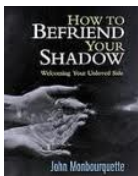
The famous French expression, "*Tout comprendre, c'est tout excuser*" (literally, "to understand all is to pardon all") is a dictum that we ought to apply at least as much to ourselves as to others. For the more we can grasp just why in the past we were compelled to act in a particular way, the more likely we'll be able both to excuse ourselves for this behavior and avoid repeating it in the future.

Becoming more self-accepting necessitates that we begin to appreciate that, ultimately, we're not really to blame for anything--whether it's our looks, intelligence, or any of our more questionable behaviors. Our actions have all been compelled by some combination of background and biology. Going forward, we certainly can--and in most cases, *should*--take responsibility for ways we've hurt or mistreated others. But if we're to productively work on becoming more self-accepting, we must do so with compassion and forgiveness in our hearts. We need to realize that, given our internal programming up to that point, we could hardly have behaved differently.

To take ourselves off the hook and gradually evolve to a state of unconditional self-acceptance, it's crucial that we adopt an attitude of "self-pardon" for our transgressions (whether actual or perceived). In the end, we may even come to realize that there's nothing to forgive. For regardless of what we may have concluded earlier, we were, in a sense, *always* innocent--doing the best we could, given (1) what was innate (or hard-wired) in us, (2) how compelling our needs (and feelings) were at the time, and (3) what, back then, we believed about ourselves.

That which, finally, determines *most* problematic behavior is linked to common psychological defenses. And it almost borders on the cruel for us to blame ourselves--or hold ourselves in contempt--for acting in ways that at the time we thought we *had* to in order to protect ourselves from anxiety, shame, or emotional distress generally.

### *Embracing Our Shadow Self*



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As a kind of P.S. to the above, self-acceptance also involves our willingness to recognize and make peace with parts of the self that till now may have been denied, shunned, or repudiated. I'm referring here to our illicit or anti-social impulses--our *shadow self*, which may have spooked or sabotaged us in the past. Still, it represents an essential part of our nature and must be functionally integrated if we are to become whole. As long as we refuse to accept--or in some way accommodate--split-off segments of self, full and unconditional self-acceptance will remain forever out of reach.

When we're able to sympathetically understand the origin of these darker, recessive fragments in us, any self-evaluation rooted in them begins to feel not only uncharitable but unjust as well. The fact is that virtually *everybody* harbors forbidden (and quite possibly, outrageous) impulses and fantasies--whether they entail brutally injuring someone we find obnoxious, exercising unbridled power over others, or (indeed!) running naked in the streets. And when we're able to recognize this, we're also well on the way to accepting ourselves without conditions. Appreciating that, however bizarre or egregious, most of our "evil imaginings," are probably little more than fantasized compensations for indignities, hurts, or deprivations we experienced in the past, we can now reconceive our "aberrations" as, well, rather normal.

Further, even as we come to accept our shadow side we can still maintain voluntary control over how these parts of us are expressed—that is, in ways that can ensure safety both to ourselves and others. For as long as we've been able to re-connect to our deepest, truest self, we'll be coming from a place of love and caring. As such, it really isn't *in* us to do anything that would violate our natural tendencies toward compassion and identification with all humanity. Owning and integrating our various facets is a transcendent experience. And when we—or really, our egos—no longer feel separate from others, any sinister motive to do them harm literally disappears.

### *Self-Acceptance vs. Self-Improvement*

It should be apparent at this point that self-acceptance has nothing to do with self-improvement as such. For it really isn't about "fixing" anything in ourselves. With self-acceptance we're just—non-judgmentally—*affirming* who we are, with whatever strengths—and weaknesses—we possess in the moment.

The problem with any focus on self-improvement is that such an orientation inevitably makes self-acceptance conditional. After all, we can't ever feel totally secure or good enough so long as our self-regard depends on constantly bettering ourselves. Self-acceptance is here-and-now oriented—not future oriented, as in: "I'll be okay when . . ." or "As soon as I accomplish . . . I'll be okay." Self-acceptance is about *already* being okay, with no qualifications—period. It's not that we ignore or deny our faults or frailties, just that we view them as irrelevant to our basic acceptability.

Finally, it's we—and we alone—that set the standards for our self-acceptance. And once we decide to stop *grading* ourselves, or "keeping score with" ourselves, we can adopt an attitude of non-evaluative forgiveness. In fact, once we refrain from our lifelong habit of assessing, and reassessing, ourselves—striving rather to compassionately *understand* our past behaviors—we'll find that there's really nothing to forgive (remember, "Tout comprendre. . ."). Certainly, we can vow to do better in the future, but we can nonetheless accept ourselves precisely as we are today, regardless of our shortcomings.

And here I can't emphasize enough that it's possible to accept and love ourselves and still be committed to a lifetime of personal growth. Accepting ourselves as we are today doesn't mean we'll be without the motivation to make changes or improvements that will make us more effective, or that will enrich our (and likely others') lives. It's simply that this self-acceptance is in no way *tied* to such alterations. We don't have to actually *do* anything to secure our self-acceptance: we have only to change the way we *look at* ourselves. So changing our behaviors becomes solely a matter of personal preference—not a prerequisite for greater self-regard.

It's really about *coming from* a radically different place. If self-acceptance is to be "earned," a result of working hard on ourselves, then it's conditional—always at risk. The ongoing "job" of accepting ourselves can never be completed. Even scoring an A+ in whatever endeavor we're using to rate ourselves can offer us only temporary respite from our strivings. For the message we're giving ourselves is that we're only as worthwhile as our latest achievement. We can never finally "arrive" at a position of self-acceptance because we've inadvertently defined our quest for such acceptance as everlasting.

In holding ourselves to such perfectionistic standards, however, we may inadvertently be validating how our own conditionally-loving parents dealt with us. But we're certainly not validating *ourselves*—or treating ourselves with the kindness and consideration our parents failed adequately to provide for us.



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To conclude, only when we're able to give ourselves unqualified approval--by developing greater self-compassion and focusing much more on our positives than negatives--can we at last forgive ourselves for our faults, as well as relinquish our need for others' approval. No doubt we've made mistakes. But then, so has everybody else. And in any case our identity is hardly *equal* to our mistakes (for such a linkage would represent a bad case of "mistaken identity!")

Finally, there's no reason we can't decide *right now* to transform our fundamental sense of who we are. And we may need to remind ourselves that our various weaknesses are part of what makes us human. If all our faults and failings were suddenly to disappear, my pet theory is that we'd instantly turn into white light and disappear from the face of this planet. So in the pursuit of unconditional self-acceptance, we might even want to take a certain pride in our imperfections. After all, were we beyond criticism in the first place, we'd never have the opportunity to rise to this uniquely human challenge.

**Note:** If you found this piece useful and believe others might as well, please consider sending them the link. Additionally, if you'd like to explore other self-help articles I've written for *Psychology Today*, please click [here](#).

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