

Acceptance of Self and Others

Interpersonal Relationships

A workshop in communication may leave the mistaken impression that anyone can have harmonious relationships with friends, co-workers, and family members simply by using a few basic techniques. In fact, many people cannot effectively use communication techniques because they cannot accept themselves and other people as they are. This is why self-acceptance takes on primary importance in interpersonal relationships.

Relating to Others

Thomas Harris, who wrote the book *I'm OK-You're OK*, stated four possible positions that can be taken in relation to self and others.

1. I'm Not OK, You're OK. This person is at the mercy of others and needs a lot of support. He lets others know he rejects himself and needs their acceptance and support.
2. I'm Not OK, You're Not OK. These people give up all hope of being happy and usually pull away from relationships. Rejection flows in both directions.
3. I'm OK, You're Not OK. This ultra-independent person does not want to get involved with others. She lets others know that she is fine, but they are not.
4. I'm OK, You're OK. This person decides that he and others are valuable. He lets others know that he appreciates their strengths and that he appreciates his own strengths. He is free to have meaningful relationships and to grow.

It is very important for people working on interpersonal relationships to make a conscious decision to operate in the fourth position.

Self-Acceptance

A person with high self-esteem accepts herself as she is and can let others know how she thinks and feels. A person with low self-esteem fears others will "find her out" and dislike or reject her. She has a difficult time letting people know what she is thinking or feeling.

When a person with low self-esteem reveals exactly how he feels about himself, he has taken the first step toward self-acceptance and growth. If the listener is helpful and trustworthy, the person sharing his feelings may gain courage and start sharing with others. As others accept him, he

accepts himself and growth continues.

Without self-acceptance, a person can make little or no progress in effective relationships. Noted psychologist Carl Rogers observed that, normally, those who feel that they are liked, wanted, accepted, capable, or worthy who are found in prisons or mental hospitals. Those who are confined in such institutions often feel deeply inadequate, unliked, unwanted, unacceptable, or unable. A self-rejecting person is usually unhappy and unable to form and maintain good relationships.

Self-Fulfilling Cycle

Start learning to accept yourself and set up a cycle of self-fulfilling prophecies. When you think well of yourself, you will expect others to accept and appreciate you. Then when people *do* accept you, it confirms what you thought. Unfortunately, this also works the other way. A person who rejects herself will tend to reject others and expect them to reject her. When she does reject others, they likewise tend to reject her, so her expectation is fulfilled.

Remember that self-acceptance and self-disclosure are closely related. Most people accept sincere self-disclosure, so the person who tells about himself is strengthened.

It may be difficult to take the first risk by being honest and genuine. But if we hide essential information about ourselves and try to create a certain image that we know is not true, we are not self-accepting. It doesn't help if someone accepts an image, because she isn't accepting the **real self**. This person knows others may like his "mask" a little, but fears what would happen if they really knew what he thinks and feels.

Only when one is loved, cared for, and accepted for what he or she is does one begin to feel worthy of respect and love. The absence of such acceptance may be one explanation for so much of this country's loneliness, escape through drugs and alcohol, and retreat into rigid and unloving personalities.

We cannot be close in interpersonal relationships unless we accept ourselves. We cannot accept ourselves until we learn to reveal what we think and feel to others.

The Self-Accepting Individual

A person who learns self-acceptance, even when there are faults, usually displays certain characteristics and behaviors.

1. He believes strongly in certain values and principles and is willing to defend them even in the face of strong group opinion. He feels personally secure enough, however, to modify them if new experience and evidence suggest he is in error.
2. She is capable of acting on her own best judgement without feeling excessively guilty or regretting her actions if others disapprove.

3. He does not spend undue time worrying about tomorrow, the past, or the present.
4. She has confidence in his ability to deal with problems, even in the face of failure and setbacks.
5. He feels equal to others as a person, not superior or inferior, regardless of the differences in specific abilities, family backgrounds, or attitudes of others toward him.
6. She takes it for granted that she is a person of interest and value to others, at least to those with whom she chooses to associate.
7. He can accept praise without false modesty and compliments without guilt.
8. She is inclined to resist the efforts of others to dominate her.
9. He is able to accept the idea and admit to others that he is capable of feeling a wide range of impulses and desires, ranging from being angry to being loving, from being sad to being happy, from feeling deep resentment to feeling deep acceptance.
10. She genuinely enjoys herself in a wide variety of activities involving work, play, creative self-expression, companionship, or loafing.
11. He is sensitive to the needs of others, to accepted social customs, and particularly to the idea that he cannot enjoy himself at the expense of others.

Acceptance of Other Individuals

Communicating acceptance between people creates feelings of emotional safety. In such an atmosphere one can relax and discuss herself without fear of evaluation. To build close, satisfying relationships, a person must communicate acceptance and the verbal and nonverbal message must be, "You're OK."

There are two major skills involved in communicating acceptance. The first one is listening with understanding. Skillful listening will help one understand what the other person is saying and how the other person is feeling. This type of listening shows the other person how interested you are. You are taking his ideas and feelings so seriously that you check carefully to make sure you understand before you move on with the conversation. The person becomes less defensive and mutual trust is created. Skillful listening can be a very powerful tool.

The second skill is the expression of warmth and acceptance. This means letting that person know how you feel and what you think. You may express acceptance to encourage the person to tell you more, or you may express the warmth just as a response to what has already been shared. *Unconditional* acceptance brings more trust; *conditional* acceptance involves some evaluation and judgement. At a later time, you may reinforce your acceptance of others by being available when the person needs help, asking him to help you when you need it, spending time with the other person, or going out of your way to help him.

Failures in Acceptance

The three major ways of failing to indicate acceptance are:

1. Giving a cliché or ritualistic acceptance, such as “I know how you feel,” or “Is there anything I can do?”
2. Saying exactly what you would say to everyone, not something that is a part of your relationship.
3. Remaining silent. The greatest failure is silence.

Summary

We have stressed the importance of self-acceptance before we can accept others or develop meaningful interpersonal relationships. Part of self-acceptance is self-disclosure and the risk of believing that another person will accept us. We have also discussed the two major skills of communicating acceptance to others: listening for understanding and the expression of warmth and acceptance. These are essential skills in effective relationships.

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