

Accept yourself

The first requirement for self-knowledge: accepting yourself just as you are. This is not easy. Most of us are constantly trying to improve ourselves. Those messages from childhood about not being good enough are in very deep. And no matter who we are or what we accomplish, we feel inadequate, like we're not who or where we should be.

But it's hard to get where you're going if you don't know where you are. Change is a two-step process. Step one is having an accurate picture of the current reality. Only then can you take step two and intervene effectively. You are who and what you are right now. By accepting that, you can see yourself clearly.

What's working and what's not? You may be surprised at how old messages are clouding your assessment. Looking objectively, which you can do only when you're willing to admit what you see, you might find that you're doing pretty well. The survival strategies you adopted early in life have carried you, more or less successfully, this far. If some of them don't serve so well at present, that doesn't mean they were useless. They had a good use at one time. Only by viewing them straight on, rather than looking up or down – “I'm wonderful” or “I'm terrible” – can you judge how they're operating now.

If your habits are working, keep them. If not, successfully changing them depends on really knowing them as they exist at present.

There's another, even more important, reason to accept yourself just as you are. That's to take the pressure off yourself. You don't insist on perfection in others, do you? Then why do you demand it of yourself? You're quite willing to like, even love, someone who has less than ideal qualities. They're human, after all. Why don't you give yourself the same understanding?

When you do, you come to a huge realization. You adopted some not-so-great survival strategies because you were given “conditional love.” Your parents and other important people in your life told you they loved you when you were this way – “good” – but not that way – “bad.” This served to get you to do what they wanted, but it had some seriously damaging consequences. In order to retain

necessary love and protection from others, you split yourself into “good me” and “bad me,” and attempted to purge, to get rid of, the “bad” in yourself.

Of course, it didn’t work! Everything that’s you is part of your nature. It’s all there for a reason. The “bad” just went underground, into the unconscious, and what you were left with is a constant insecurity about who you are. At some level, you’re always thinking, “Am I being ‘good me’ or ‘bad me’ right now? I have to be very sure to only be ‘good me’ so people will approve of and not hurt me.”

This constant inner struggle leads to a pervasive sense that you’re not okay, because you have these “bad” aspects of yourself that somehow never seem to go away completely. You walk around doing to yourself just what was done to you earlier in life. You give yourself conditional love – “I accept myself only when I’m this way, but not that way” – just as your caregivers did. This perpetuates and exaggerates your feeling of unacceptability.

I’m not condemning our parents for the way they raised us. They did the best they could, and most of us turned out pretty well. We were raised in the commonsense way people understood to raise kids. Too bad it wasn’t the best way! But we’ll speak of that later.

Right now, only – and I mean *only* – by giving yourself unconditional acceptance – “unconditional love” – can you heal the wound that you carry. If you accept yourself just as you are, imperfections and all, the feeling of being loved without reservation will gradually fill in the deep chasm of inadequacy. You’ll experience less sadness and anger, which typically result from love being withdrawn. Instead, you’ll feel seen and supported.

You won’t be perfect. You’ll still get upset, and do things you later have to apologize and make up for. But because you feel fundamentally lovable, you’ll behave poorly a lot less often. Further, you’ll use difficult feelings, now owned and expressed in a healthy way, to make needed changes in your life.

But you can only do this – be more like you wish you could be – if you’re willing to accept yourself as you are. No matter what you see in the mirror, in yourself, say, “Yes, that too is me. What’s there is there for good reason – it had a use –

and if I accept that it did so, I can find out how to use it best in the future. Meanwhile, I'm good enough now, just as I am. I'm undeniably worthy of love."