

MANAGING YOUR UPS AND DOWNS

Self-esteem



Americans worry a lot about self-esteem, and starting out in college is a challenge to self-esteem regardless of the culture involved. The first grade I got in college -- I had done really well in high school -- was a D on a paper in a writing class. I can't claim that my self-esteem kicked in right away. I was ready to go home, and only the embarrassment at facing my parents kept me in place. Fortunately, my grades got a lot better and fast, although I continued to run a bit scared all through college because I thought so many of my fellow students came in knowing more and had greater self-confidence. I might also note that I tried to get into all sorts of activities that I'd done well at in my small high school, failing almost across the board in my first months of school. It was not a great initiation. And while I did keep going, and ended up fine by the end of the year, I was not conscious of calling on deep reservoirs of inner strength; I just kept plugging away.

So I don't feel I'm a personal expert on self-esteem. In some ways, I'm simply uncomfortable with the term as it gets used, and overused, in our society. Let me give an example of what bothers me. Two years ago, a group of parents in Connecticut pressed their school board to force teachers to stop using red pencils in correcting student papers. Their concern that these vivid critical marks might damage, you guessed it, the students' self-esteem. This strikes me -- and I'm an older guy, and maybe a bit crusty -- as absolutely ridiculous. Too many Americans, particularly parents who can be notoriously overprotective of their kids in our culture, feel that self-esteem is a fragile flower that must be nourished with an undiluted diet of praise. That's not what life's about, and it's actually a really bad approach to self-esteem because it can encourage everyone to think that whatever they do, they should be rewarded and not chastised. Here's one source of the grade inflation that some schools legitimately worry about, or the notion that "all our children are above average."



No one, of course, can easily tolerate getting slammed all the time. I believe that, in grading papers for example, I should try to find a few positives if at all possible, along with points that need correction -- to that extent I've bought into the self-esteem movement. And actually, in my view (not always my students') I'm a fairly easy grader, precisely because I like to reward good work and, particularly, clear signs of improvement. But it is not my main job, as an instructor, to make students feel happy about themselves (in college and beyond).

Which means that, in my view, self-esteem is mainly a quality that comes from within a person and allows him or her to carry on despite some criticism and adversity -- like bad grades, or getting dumped by a friend, or whatever. The point about self-esteem is that it allows one to adjust to the bumpier sides of reality, learn from mistakes, without feeling overwhelmed or mistreated. It's not mainly a good feeling that comes from the outside; though of course getting some praise periodically helps a lot.

Self-esteem is not something worth checking on every week; too much concentration on it risks inflating expectations. Adequate self-esteem is perfectly compatible with feeling sad and deflated some of the time -- another mistake in American culture is the tendency to expect to feel cheerful and upbeat on a daily basis. Self-esteem can also be overdone: we all know people who seem to have so much self-confidence, from whatever source, that they have real problems reacting to mistakes they make or even tactful efforts at correction from the outside. Self-esteem, again, is a bit of a balancing act, between wanting to feel appreciated, and even more wanting to have an inner sense that one is contributing, and not expecting rewards all the time.

Different personalities and prior life experiences bring different levels of self-esteem to early adulthood (or later adulthood, for that matter). My early college tensions resulted in part from having done so easily well in high school, in grades and activities alike, and then encountering a much larger and more competitive pond. Fortunately (I think) I'd had parents who loved me but criticized and corrected me a fair amount, so that I felt supported but not impervious. As a result, while I can't claim I really liked my first year of college, I learned a lot, did well, and enjoyed many aspects of the experience (and it got better after that).

My most intense personal feelings about self-esteem focus on two points. First, I think effective people have to be able to forgive themselves (and apologize when necessary). Everyone, as the saying accurately goes, makes mistakes; almost everyone in a long life will make a few big ones (hopefully not in college, but one never knows). It's a fool who does not identify and examine mistakes, and try to avoid them in future; but an equal



fool who gets so self-critical (or so vulnerable to legitimate criticisms from the outside) that he stops functioning well. Bouncing back and earning second chances both express and further self-esteem.

Second, there are points in life where one has to be so comfortable with a decision or an action that one can carry on despite criticism, even harsh criticism. This may come up more often after college than during, but even in college there may be some protest action or some intellectual dispute with an instructor that call upon this ability to think through a difficult decision and feel in the gut that you're living up to your values and are making the best effort possible. Making this kind of decision-in-conflict is not easy, and sometimes there are nights, even weeks of worry before the right course of action emerges, that allows effective behaviors and the ability not to ignore but to surmount criticism.

The qualities of self-forgiveness and inner confidence must not be pressed too far, for it remains vital to react to the larger environment and take outside evaluations into account. College -- that odd period when a person is grown up but still deliberately subject to frequent and formal evaluations by people who claim (hopefully legitimately) to know more -- requires particular capacity to adjust and change course. And self-forgiveness and confidence can't excuse mere sloppiness or laziness: proper self-esteem does not seek cheap reinforcement, but comes as part of trying to turn in a job well done.

Nurturing self-esteem--which is ultimately one's own responsibility -- has some practical features, besides the difficult qualities of confidence and the ability to acknowledge but rise above mistakes. It's important to identify a few things that bring rewards and pleasure without too much effort -- a game or a hobby may do the trick, providing opportunities for reminders about competence when the routine environment turns a bit rough. It's also important to form some friendships that offer positive reinforcement (though not encouragement to ignore mistakes). Getting these features set in college is just common sense. And avoiding excessive sleep deprivation and other daily distractions adds to a positive framework as well.

But the big self-esteem messages, in my opinion, are: look for positive reinforcements some of the time but don't expect the outside world to do your esteeming for you; don't try to take a "do I feel good about myself?" temperature all the time; work on the inner qualities that will allow you to get past mistakes and to withstand some flak from some of those around you. Learning how to do things better (not just knowledge things, but relationship things and personal habits as well) -- long after college -- is a vital part



of a successful life. Self-esteem, to me, ultimately means a sufficient inner sense of quality that the learning and adjusting, while not always pleasant, do not seem overwhelmingly threatening.

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