SELF-ACCEPTANCE: THE FOUNDATION OF MENTAL HEALTH AND WELLBEING

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What is self-acceptance?

Are you someone who when faced with strong criticism, lack of success or negative self-perceptions of body appearance **AVOIDS** giving yourself an overall negative, global rating such as, "I'm hopeless"? Instead, at these moments, are you someone who chooses to think, "I accept myself no matter what."

If so, you demonstrate *self-acceptance* which is, perhaps, the most important of all attitudes underpinning your mental health.

Self-acceptance means acknowledging that you are a complex, imperfect human being capable of making mistakes as well as significant accomplishments. You possess a realistic awareness of your strengths and weaknesses. You accept yourself in spite of your imperfections and because of your uniqueness. You refrain from self-criticism, avoiding rating your self-worth based on other people thinking negatively of what you do, the way you look, or when you perceive you do not live up to your own expectations.

Historically, *self-acceptance* has long been a stimulus for personal change and development in Eastern and Western religion and culture, as well as in psychological literature. Different theologies (e.g., Christianity, Buddhism), psychological theories (e.g., Humanism), and therapies (e.g., REBT; ACT) view *self-acceptance* as a catalyst for the alleviation of emotional misery as well as an energizer, supporting growth towards happiness and fulfillment. Research continues to show that *self-acceptance* is strongly related to mental health and wellbeing in people of all ages.
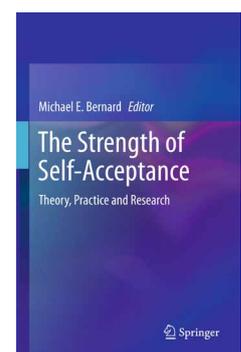
Being clear on self-acceptance

Self-acceptance is not an excuse for accepting your bad or inappropriate behaviour. In fact, with strong self-acceptance, it is much easier to realistically evaluate what you do and to work on changing behaviour that is inappropriate or self-defeating.

Self-acceptance is not self-esteem. Self-esteem refers to our judgments about how much we like or value ourselves and is based on comparisons with others and on the extent to which we achieve personal goals.

Not taking things personally gives you the resilience, confidence and wisdom to change those things about yourself that need changing and the calmness to accept those things that you cannot change.

Self-acceptance at work

Steve, a promising teacher known for innovative, student engagement methods, has taken a job as a science and technology teacher at a large, established secondary school. After a few months of teaching, his Head of Department has begun being quite critical of his pedagogy. Additionally, his Head has taken to sarcastically criticising his ideas presented at team meetings. Steve is effectively managing the emotional impact of the highly critical interactions. How? He reminds himself that while his Head's behaviour is not acceptable, with strong self-acceptance, he refuses to take it personally. As a consequence, he more readily copes with it. Steve's calmness in the line of fire not only helps maintain his mental health and wellbeing, it also gives him the breathing space to see what, if anything, he can do to change the way his Head communicates.

Lack of self-acceptance and self-depreciation is harmful to your mental health

We can for different reasons when we are faced with one or more negative events think of ourselves as a failure or hopeless. This is called, *self-depreciation*. This negative attitude literally causes feelings of depression and anxiety.

Self-depreciation represents an extreme form of thinking that is not based on evidence. When you think you are a total loser or failure, you are in essence saying there is no evidence in any area of your life that you are capable of anything at all, or likeable by anyone. This is highly unlikely to be true! Self-depreciation is illogical due to its' over-generalisation; that is, one or more negative aspects of you or your behaviour, simply does not mean that ALL aspects of you are negative.

All of us, to a greater or lesser extent, have a tendency to devalue ourselves and to take things personally. This is due in part to our early childhood and continuing life experiences as well as our innate temperament.

Beliefs about self-worth are the most difficult to change. Fortunately, armed with self-awareness and tools for changing self-belief, most people can be taught how to overcome this tendency.

The key insight for change is knowing that you do, in fact, have the power to choose self-acceptance - or not.

How strong is my self-acceptance?

Here are some descriptors of low self-acceptance. The more you agree with these statements, the more likely it is that you have low self-acceptance:

☐ Saying something stupid in front of others shows I am an idiot.

☐ I am someone who needs my friends to like me in order for me to feel important and worthwhile.

☐ When a colleague treats me unfairly, I think I must be useless.

☐ I feel I always must do well in important tasks and activities.

☐ When a friend asks others but not me to join him/her, I can't help but think I'm a loser.

☐ When I don't succeed at something in my work that is important to me, I am likely to think I'm a complete failure.

☐ When I don't experience exciting times with others, I think I'm a dull and uninteresting person.

☐ I am someone who needs to perform well to feel important and worthwhile.

Keys for strengthening your self-acceptance

1. It is important to distinguish between being a failure and failing at a task. YOU are not your behaviour.
2. People's opinions of you are not facts. If someone says you are a totally useless piece of garbage –does that make it true?
3. Be aware of and value your positive characteristics, skills and character strengths in all areas of life including work and family relationships – do not take these strengths for granted. Then, when faced with difficulty or negativity, remind yourself why you are proud of who you are.

4. Generate and practice using self-accepting self-talk when confronted with criticism, imperfect performance, negative self-perceptions of body image or other events you experience as troubling.
   - "I accept myself no matter what."
   - "I prefer people to like me, but I can live without their approval."
   - "Mistakes and setbacks are inevitable. I will accept myself while disliking my mistakes and setbacks."
   - "My performance at work – perfect or otherwise – does not determine my worth as a person."
   - "I accept who I am, even though I may not like some of my traits and behaviours."
5. Rating your overall self-worth as poor, based on negative results or what others think of you, does not make sense. Use the following analogy developed by Albert Ellis next time you feel down about yourself to challenge and change self-depreciation to self-acceptance:

Imagine that you have just received a large basket of fruit. You reach into the basket and pull out a beautiful red apple, and then a ripe, juicy pear, but then you find a rotten orange, followed by a perfect banana, and then a bunch of grapes, some of which are mushy and rotten. Clearly, some pieces are good and some are not so good. How would you label the basket or judge its overall value? You see, the basket represents you, and the variety of fruits which vary in ripeness are like your traits, strengths and weaknesses. Rating yourself overall, based on a single trait is like saying that the basket of fruit is totally bad and worthless, just because it contains a few pieces of bad fruit.

The need for professional development

Self-acceptance is not instinctive. You may not acquire it from experience - although, with maturity, some people seem almost to stumble across it and decide not to care so much about what other people think of them. Plus, self-acceptance can be regularly undermined by the basic instinct of self-depreciation which we all have to greater or lesser extents.

Therefore, it is important that as a part of the support provided to employees across organisations including teachers (and principals), everyone learns about self-depreciation, how to combat it and how to strengthen self-acceptance. For schools, I have written a professional development, SEL program that incorporates self-acceptance as a unit:

Stress Management for Teachers and Principals: A Professional Development Program
https://edu.youcandoiteducation.com.au/blocks/androgogic_catalogue/index.php?id=15

The Resilient Educator
https://edu.youcandoiteducation.com.au/blocks/androgogic_catalogue/index.php?id=52

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