



PRACTICE LOVING YOURSELF

Many of us find it easier to love others than to love ourselves. We may have come to believe that loving ourselves means that we are conceited, egocentric, or selfish. Or maybe while growing up we received messages, both overt and covert, that we were not lovable.

Consider an alternative line of reasoning: Perhaps we can love others only to the extent that we love ourselves. Perhaps we can give to others only that which we can give to ourselves. We cannot share water from a well that is dry.

Maybe the most unselfish and loving thing we can do for others is to first love and accept ourselves unconditionally. This kind of selfishness can be a virtue.

To practice moving toward love, we can begin by accepting and appreciating all aspects of ourselves. These aspects include our thoughts, emotions, and actions—especially the ones we'd rather not face.

Love your thoughts

Notice the content of your thoughts—the specific words and images that flash through your mind at any given moment. When you're feeling anxious or afraid, you might be mentally rehearsing a “worst case scenario.” In your imagination, you might picture yourself doing something foolish in public, having an accident, or even making a mistake that leads to your death.

Then observe any judgmental statements that accompany these images, such as *This kind of thing always happens to me* or *I never come through when the chips are down*.

You can work with statements and images in exactly the same way: Move toward loving them. Just notice them and accept them, moment by moment.

When you do this, you gain freedom. Instead of experiencing blind terror or blind anger, you gain some clarity. Images lose some of their intensity. Judgments slow down and lose some of their grip. This not only provides relief but gives you a cooler head as you decide what action to take next.

Love your emotions

Being happy includes accepting and celebrating *all* of our emotions—especially those considered negative. These emotions, once fully experienced, have a tendency to disappear or dissipate. When that happens, we're free of any lingering residue. We don't need to carry around the excess baggage of suppressed emotions struggling to find an avenue for expression.

One way to be free of tough emotions is to love them and feel them without limitation. That means noticing them and totally accepting them for the moment. You can apply this strategy to sadness, anger, fear, or any other emotion. When you give emotions this kind of forgiving and focused attention, they often cease to be a problem.

In addition to fully experiencing an emotion, you have the option to fully express it. Unexpressed emotion is like static on a short-wave radio: It makes listening and speaking difficult. When we carry around suppressed emotions, we find it tough to be honest, open, and spontaneous.

Releasing emotions is something we do naturally. Emotions seek release. Laughter can release fear and embarrassment. Tears and sobbing release grief. Trembling releases fear. Yawning can release tension, and animated talk often releases boredom.

There are many safe and skillful ways to discharge our emotions. To begin with, we can simply talk about them in the moment we experience them. We can complete the sentence, “Right now I am feeling _____.”

We can even set up environments in which we are free to scream, shout, cry, or laugh to the point of embarrassment—all without causing problems for anyone. For example, we can hit pillows or beat our beds with a rolled towel. And we can see a therapist or talk to a friend who’s particularly skilled at listening.

Emotions are neither right nor wrong, good nor bad. Our only job is to permit them, fully experience them, and then choose ways to respond to them—if we choose to respond at all.

Love your actions

Whenever we set a big goal and move into action to meet it, we create the possibility of success. We also take on the risk of failure. The greater our capacity to contribute to other people and make a positive difference in the world, the smaller our potential for making mistakes that result in significant damage or loss.

Look around and you’ll find many examples. The chief executive of a corporation can make a decision that costs millions in lost revenue. The president of a country can make policy blunders that double the deficit or ignite a war leading to the death of thousands. Even a highly trained surgeon can make an error during an operation that leads to the loss of life.

There’s a flip side to all this. The people in the previous examples can also be a force for good. A president can articulate a vision that unifies opposing political factions. Executives can lead their companies into prosperity, and surgeons can save lives. In each case, people with the power to succeed also have the potential to fail. The two possibilities are interwoven.

Whether our actions succeed or fail, we can move toward loving them—a path that can lead to even more effective action in the future.

