

Loving and Supporting Ourselves Unconditionally

I can't believe that the shops are now full of Valentine's Day stuff! The years just seem to fly by don't they?

I have never really liked Valentine's Day because as a young woman, I hardly ever got even one card, but I do now like any excuse I can find to talk about love and the 14th February is supposed to be all about love, so

A core problem for each and every one of us is that we believe, consciously, or not so consciously – 'I am unlovable' or 'I am not loveable enough'. This is one of our greatest fears and perhaps the deepest cause of all our endless suffering and angst.

Because we believe that we are lacking in love, we'll keep searching for love or external approval of some kind. But this looking for love - in all kinds of guises, including buying loads of stuff to adorn our bodies and homes, seeking to become an outstanding worldly success in our chosen field of endeavour, or becoming addicted to alcoholic highs, sugar highs or even spiritual highs - is actually hellish, because we never find the lasting fulfilment that we are so desperately seeking.

So what to do? First of all, we all need to learn how to love ourselves unconditionally. But we all tend to be rather confused about self-love. We may even think that loving ourselves is narcissistic, self-centred, or even selfish, but true self-love is none of these things.

According to Robert Holden, self-love is really a commitment that says 'I will not forget who I am. I will not abandon myself'. But every time we indulge in negative judgements about ourselves, this is exactly what we do.

Your mind is constantly churning out judgements about your body, your personality's traits and your behaviour - 'I am too fat' 'I am lazy'. 'How could I have been so stupid?'

Who would you be without all of your endless judgements about yourself? Asking the profound question, 'Who am I?' can be pretty challenging, if we dig deep enough, because we are absolutely not used to defining ourselves as a drop of pure love in an infinite ocean of love. We are used to defining ourselves by our temporary, and ultimately fake, roles and image – 'I am a mother'. 'I am a career woman.' 'I am fat.' 'I am thin.' But any genuine spiritual path of self-enquiry ends up, eventually, in exactly the same place: a profound sense of simply knowing beyond all words and even beyond all thought, that 'I AM LOVE'.

Your true, unconditioned self, never ever judges you. It simply and profoundly accepts you just the way you are in this moment now.

But when you buy into your own mind's constant judgements about yourself, it is as if you spend your whole life on trial. You go on holiday and put on a few pounds, and then you find that you are desperately defending yourself from the ego's charge of gluttony, ugliness, weakness, or whatever crime you accuse yourself of committing. Being constantly on trial like this is so fearful and exhausting. But judging ourselves and others seems to be highly addictive. Try to go through just one day or even one hour without judging anyone whom you meet, or without judging yourself in any way, and you will see what I mean.

Why Are We So Hard on Ourselves and Others?

We all grow up learning an awful lot about conditional love, whilst experiencing far too little unconditional love and acceptance. This is not our caregivers' fault. They are just passing on what they learnt about love.

All parents accidentally teach their children that love is conditional. Many children then learn to twist themselves into pretzels trying to ensure their caregivers' love or approval.

We all need to learn some adaptive behaviour so that we can get on with others and fit into our particular society. However, too many children and teenagers learn to abandon their authentic in exchange for a particular image of themselves. In an ultimately hopeless quest to be loved and accepted by those around us, we learn at a very early age to adopt certain roles, and then we all beat ourselves up for not being good enough players of these particular roles.

For example, some children adopt the role of mother or father's little helper in order to gain their parents' love or approval. Then when they are adults, these individuals often end up playing the role of sacrificial giver in their close relationships, without understanding why they always end up feeling used. They have learnt how to give love in order to try and feel loveable, but they have never learnt how to sit back and accept love and care from others!

Another role some children can adopt (and Robert Holden lists many more in *Loveability*) is to play 'the Star Child' who always has to be exceptionally good at their chosen means of gaining external approval - whether that means becoming a sporting superstar, a musical prodigy, or an academic genius of some kind. Again in later life, such individuals may feel compelled to devote huge amounts of time and effort to their chosen field of endeavour, without ever really feeling 'good enough'.

To transcend all of the emotional pain involved in trying to live up to the impossible role, or image, that we adopted for ourselves very early on in our lives, we have to change our minds and start again! We have to be brave enough, and awake enough, to look at our own self-sabotaging and unloving thoughts and beliefs and then to give up those that are not serving our highest good, even though we may have clung onto them for decades.

Ironically, it can be quite disorientating and therefore frightening to give up the roles that we have played since we were children, even if those roles have bought us a lot of pain and suffering. For example, try telling an individual who was abused in some way as a child that they no longer have to suffer, or to continue to be a victim of that abuse, and they may well react very angrily. 'You have no idea how much I suffered as a child. How dare you tell me I can now just let it all go!'

Changing our own minds about ourselves and the world is the absolute key to creating a much happier life for ourselves. But changing our minds from fear to love, and from attack to compassion, does take quite a bit of time and effort in this world, and so it can be really helpful to adopt some simple daily practices that will help us to be more unconditionally loving and kind to ourselves.

7 Ways to practise loving ourselves more

1. Spend at least some time each day doing what really makes your heart sing.
2. If you have to spend time doing things that do not make your heart sing, such as housework, or filling in your tax return, surround yourself with beauty while you do them - e.g. fresh flowers or uplifting music.
3. At the end of each day, forgive yourself completely for any mistakes that you may have made. For example, if you momentarily lost it and shouted angrily at a loved one, tell yourself that you were just being 'unconsciously incompetent. Then let go completely of any guilty thoughts or feelings about your unskilled behaviour.
4. Whenever you are tending to your physical body – for example, washing and drying your hair, or eating your lunch - do it slowly, gently and LOVINGLY.
5. Each time you look in a mirror, pause and say to your image 'I love you.'
6. Challenge all fearful, angry or judgemental thoughts that you notice you make about yourself by asking, 'Can I absolutely know that this is true?'
7. If at any time during the day you notice that your personality-self is feeling anxious or irritated, take a few deep gentle breaths, smile to yourself and tell yourself, 'I LOVE YOU. I've got you. Relax

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