

WHY YOU NEED A STRONG SENSE OF SELF,
HOW TO AVOID PEOPLE PLEASING
AND LEARNING TO SAY NO

With the consumer driven world constantly hammering us with notions of who we should and shouldn't be, it's harder than ever to find who we really are and stay true to ourselves. This is especially so in the world of social media, where even those with the strongest sense of self can fall prey to wanting to be liked by pleasing others instead of being true to themselves. People-pleasing behaviour just adds more complications to an already confusing world.

To be clear, pleasing others is a wonderful experience but not at the expense of our own needs. People-pleasing refers to behaviour that sacrifices our own needs for what we imagine will please others. When we have a strong sense of self we know our needs and we can align them in a healthy and productive way with our work, social roles and relationships. This is to live authentically.

It is now more important than ever to build a strong sense of self, which will help you make choices that lead to a happier and more contented life. Knowing yourself and who you are avoids people-pleasing, and taking time to learn about yourself helps develop a stronger sense of who you are to help cope with life's rough patches.

Without a strong sense of self it's easy to become overwhelmed. Imagine that your life is an ocean and you are happily swimming along. All is fine if the sun is out and the water is smooth. Then the wind picks up and the water gets choppy. A strong sense of self is like a life raft you can grab onto until the storm passes. Without it you are left floundering in a state of anxiety, and often panic.

Most importantly, without a strong sense of self it's hard to have healthy relationships. Knowing who we are gives us solid ground under our feet and consistent behaviour, which also helps others feel secure around us. When we change according to what we think will please others we behave inconsistently, which makes it hard for others to understand us.

And if you lack a sense of who you are it's likely you struggle with trust. You may fear that if you let people come too close they will realise you are a mess and reject you. Fear of intimacy leaves us feeling lonely, inadequate and not good enough, making it impossible to trust that others will like and accept you. Self-esteem is believing that you deserve respect and love.

People-pleasing is about trying to be liked by wearing a mask, which hides the parts of us we don't want others to see. We appear happy and smiley, but inside we are not. We are not being true to ourselves and so we fall foul of Shakespeare's advice: 'Above all things to thine own self be true'.

- Find your values.

Values are deep-rooted beliefs that guide your every choice in life. Often we are not aware of them yet they are determining our behaviour and goals. The trouble begins when we choose the values of others because they are friends or colleagues. Using another person's values just leaves you constantly working against yourself. Your true values are not the things you took on board very early in life, possibly linked to DNA, usually acquired during the conditioning processes of infancy and throughout childhood. No, your true values lie deep within your mind, body and spirit and are there to be discovered.

Knowing our values not only give us a clearer sense of self but more energy, focus, and self-confidence. Our core values guide us towards goals that link to who we really are. Going against your values is self-defeating and exhausting because it's much harder to pretend to be something than to be naturally yourself. Living a life in line with our values helps us jump out of bed in the morning, inspired and purposeful. When we face a void of uncertainty and feel unsafe we just don't want to face the world.

- Practise saying no.

Every time we say yes to something we don't want we weaken our sense of self. It's like constantly lying to yourself until in the end you don't even know what the truth is or who you are. We live in two parallel universes when we sacrifice ourself for someone else's needs and forget our own.

For example, if you don't like playing tennis, but your friend asks you to join the tennis club when you really want to join the running club but you say yes, then you've sacrificed yourself. You try hard to find tennis okay and convince yourself that playing tennis is good enough, entirely forgetting the huge enjoyment you get out of running. And you might then not bother to go running at all anymore, letting yourself down and settling for less. This kind of behaviour leaves us with internal conflicts because we are just not doing what we need to be doing. We are following others and not ourself.

If you say yes to things you don't want enough times, you can become so far removed from knowing what makes you happy you feel a continual sense of depression. This comes from the failure to honour your authentic needs. Alongside the underlying depression comes a permanent state of anxiety, because depression and anxiety are sides of a single coin.

So how do you say no? The first rule is to keep it simple. You don't have to give a reason for saying no. Often the person you are saying no to will try to change your mind by arguing or finding a way to seduce you back to agreeing with them. If you allow them to get their way it makes you look indecisive and a soft touch. So keep your refusal upbeat and firm. If you say no with positive energy the other person will be more likely to accept that you mean it. This is not about being impolite but being assertive. Just a firm 'No, that's not for me, but thank you for asking', usually does the trick.

- Become aware of your need to please.

If saying no makes you feeling anxious, then it's likely you are a people-pleaser. It is impossible to have a strong sense of self if we base our identity on the opinions the others. When we do this we are trying to get a response that pleases them, which we think will make them like us. This might work for a time but we soon lose the reason we are doing things, and a sense of emptiness and pointlessness arises. Worse still we begin to resent and feel angry because no one likes to do things they don't want to do. But when we have a weak sense of self we just don't know what we want and so we follow others.

If pleasing yourself instead of others makes you uncomfortable, think of it this way: if you are happy, people will be pleased just to be around you. It is a gift to be around people who are genuinely happy and at one with themselves. Sacrificing yourself to be liked, loved or admired is an unconscious attempt to manipulate the feelings of others, which always ends in confusion and disappointment. Your attempts to impress others inevitably fail, leaving you miserable and so you end up pleasing no one. Pleasing yourself by being authentic you become a more pleasing person to everyone around you because you are simply happier. That's part of the reward for learning to be genuine and true to yourself.

Of course having been a life-long people-pleaser means it will be difficult to break the patterns and habits associated with it. Learning to break self-defeating patterns begins with checking that every decision you make reflects your

authentic needs rather than what you imagine others need and trying to please them.

It is very helpful to write about what would change if you didn't try to please others. Also, learn about codependent relationships, where we try to find our self worth through the approval of those we are in relationship with. Codependent relationships are toxic, fraught with difficulty and filled with emotional turmoil.

- Accepting yourself

When we are in a constant state of self-judgement we oscillate between spitefully negative feelings about ourselves, and inflated images: I hate myself morphs to I'm great. There is no ground between these opposing states of mind and we flip from one to the other in the blink of an eye. Our sense of unity within ourselves is lost and we try to hold onto something stable, which we imagine is pleasing others. But the desired state of continuity, security and safety in a stable environment cannot be found until we allow ourselves to be who we are, through accepting what we are. Only then will we stop judging ourselves and feel whole.

Self-acceptance is not an idea but action that responds to our genuine and authentic needs. So, make a list of the things that you like about yourself, no matter how small, and read through it at least once a day. Spend more time doing things you are naturally good at, and less time attempting things that make you feel a failure. Get honest with yourself, too, about social situations that make you feel less than good enough.

In particular, if you have critical friends, it is probably time to find a new social circle. Real friends are not critical of us. Those who care about us reflect our strengths; give us positive feedback and supportive advice. Negative criticism is destructive and abusive, and if those around us are pointing out our faults then it's important to reflect on why you continue to relate to them. The answer is most often that we are caught in negative habits, and so the first step is to know what those habits are. We can't change what we are not aware of.

Catching patterns of negative thoughts that tell you that you are not good enough is a helpful start. To be positively critical of yourself is sometimes important, especially when we do something we regret, but beating up on ourselves is a very destructive form of self-abuse. Our conscience tells us that we have a lesson to learn; it does not give a stick to beat ourselves with. Positive feedback is

enormously helpful to our development, while negative criticism destroys our sense of worth, esteem and dignity.

- Mindfulness

The word for meditation, in Tibetan, means 'become familiar with'. Meditative practices turn our attention inwards to help us learn about our mind and body and their relationship. The first step is to learn to focus our mind and hold a stable object of attention, which helps to create the feeling of slowing down and being grounded.

Meditation supports learning to know ourselves. Coming off the fence of indecision to commit ourselves wholeheartedly to goals and objectives requires that we build a strong sense of self so we know how we truly feel about things. Knowing ourselves is the valuable prize of self-discovery, which underlies our psychological, emotional and relational well-being.

Mindfulness helps you learn to be more in the present moment. It involves training yourself to be more aware of what is around you in the here and now, as well as how you are truly feeling. There is a separate section on meditation, which supports the development of a daily practice.

- Learn how to be alone and experience solitude

The way we behave around others teaches us a lot about ourselves. But if you never spend time alone and by yourself, how can you truly know what your real self is and who you are.

The truth is that many of us fear being alone. We know that the things we avoid tend to surface when we give ourselves time to think, so we might keep constantly busy with compulsive zeal. A busy life can be a strategy to avoid being alone. We rush from work surrounded by colleagues, to our home life surrounded by family and then to the bar, club or restaurant where we meet friends. When alone we listen to music, watch the television or go online. Anything to avoid listening to ourselves.

Spending time alone doesn't mean you need to spend a week in a meditation retreat or do anything radical. It can just mean carving out one evening a week to do something for you, by yourself. Choose something that you really love, whether that is a long walk or going to see a film, or spending time at home

writing in your journal. These periods alone are not in any way lonely, but teach us the joy of solitude.

Learning to be alone, if you aren't used to it, can at first feel a bit miserable. Emotions you have hidden from yourself might surface, but wait it out. Once you adjust to spending time alone you'll also start to hear yourself clearly. It can be quite exciting to suddenly have a clearer voice in your head telling you what you do and don't like. That's when your self grows strong and healthy enough to support you for who you truly and authentically are.