

CHAPTER 39

Being You

From time to time every person faces moments when he is not satisfied with himself. Perhaps you have also experienced them. How can you behave in such a situation? How do you protect your self-esteem? Of course, it would be wrong to dedicate all your life to self-admiration, but to be constantly in a bad mood because of personal imperfections cannot be the solution either. Let us look in more detail at these problems.

Confident talk

Misha admires Arnold Schwarzenegger. He has seen every one of his movies, and his favorite one is "Terminator 2," which he has seen at least three times. Misha has read a lot about Schwarzenegger, and he knows that his idol wasn't just born a successful, muscular, invincible hero, but that he had to work very hard at both the shape of his body and his career. But Misha knows that no matter how hard he works, he will never become like Arnold. Misha is 15 years old, very thin and very near-sighted. Misha hates his glasses, hates the pimples on his face, and sometimes hates just about everything about himself.

Today Misha, his parents, grandparents and about fifteen other relatives have gathered at the dacha of Misha's family to celebrate the 60th birthday of his grandmother. It's a beautiful summer's day and everybody feels relaxed and joyful — except Misha. Today is one of those days when Misha can't stand himself. This often happens: The happier the people are around him, the more miserable he feels.

Misha is sitting alone some distance away from the table where his mother and her sister have just served tea and cake, and where the others are talking to each other in small groups. Several of his relatives had tried to engage Misha in conversation earlier, but Misha answered them unwillingly





Self-esteem and self-respect

Self-esteem (belief in oneself) and self-respect (appreciation of oneself) are as necessary to our happiness as sunlight and water are to a growing and healthy plant.

Self-esteem and self-respect *are not* the same as self-centeredness, egoism, vanity, conceit, or arrogance. Usually people who do not have a genuine sense of self-worth, but instead feel low and inferior, try to prove that they are not inferior and often end up acting as if they are better than others, which is why they may seem conceited and arrogant. If you feel good about yourself, you don't feel the need to prove yourself to anyone because there is nothing to prove. You are who you are.

Self-respect and self-esteem are not self-centered. They lead to love and friendship just as naturally as a bud leads to a flower. By affirming your own worth, learning to appreciate and love the good in you, it is far easier to see and love the good in others.

so that after a while they gave up and left him alone. He also refused to play football with his cousin Vova, who is a little older and very athletic.

Misha has been watching his relatives for quite a while now, and he is thinking about his Uncle Pavel whom he doesn't meet very often because he lives far away in the Caucasus. Pavel has caught his attention several times already today because he is laughing a lot with the people who always gather around him. He seems like a magnet, attracting others. Misha notices this particularly because Pavel has many of the features that Misha doesn't like in himself. Pavel is at least as thin as Misha, and because he is very tall he looks even more like a stick than Misha. He is wearing glasses, too, and he is bald. But he doesn't seem to feel bad about it, and neither do the other people. There is something else that they like about him, which makes them want to be with him. Misha also would like to talk to Pavel, but he doesn't know how to go about it. And anyway, he doubts that Pavel would care too much for him, since he is probably too busy talking to all the other people.

Pavel has noticed for quite a while that Misha is sitting away from the others with a very unhappy face. Pavel knows that Misha is going through some difficulties in finding his true self. Misha's mother had talked to him about Misha earlier, and Pavel has been looking for an opportunity to speak to his nephew. As he sees Misha getting up and coming over to the table to get some cake, Pavel decides to approach him. He excuses himself and leaves the group of people he is with for the moment and walks over to join Misha. "Hi, Misha, can I join you for a while? Are you enjoying yourself?" "Yes, Uncle Pavel, it's such a beautiful day, isn't it," Misha answers, glad that his uncle is talking to him, but not sure how honestly he should answer his question. They both take a piece of cake and a cup of tea from the table, and then, following Pavel's suggestion, sit together on the grass a little way off.

Misha is very glad to be able to talk to Pavel, and Pavel, being a mature and experienced person, opens up Misha's heart very quickly. First they talk about superficial things, but before he knows it, Misha confides in his uncle and tells him how he feels about himself.

"You know, Uncle Pavel, sometimes I think nobody really likes me, because I'm so thin and look so weak. My classmates often make fun of me, especially in sports."

"Misha, I think I understand, because when I was your age, I went through similar feelings. I wanted to be handsome so that the girls in my class would pay attention to me. And I wanted to be strong and athletic so that I could punish those who made fun of me because of my glasses. Sometimes I felt so desperate about myself that I wished I were somebody else."

"Sometimes I wish that, too. But now you don't feel like that anymore? It doesn't matter to you that you are thin and that you wear glasses?"

"Now it doesn't, no, because I have understood that I am me not because of the way I look but because of the way I am. Do you understand the difference? You have to learn to accept yourself, and you have to learn to like yourself."



“But what if I don’t like myself?”

“Then the people around you will also find it difficult to like you. The way somebody feels about himself is expressed in the way he acts, the way he talks and smiles and even by the look in his eyes. People around him respond to these signs, consciously or unconsciously. It is as if a person who hates himself radiates negative vibrations that push others away from him. On the other hand, people who like and respect themselves always attract others who want to be with them.”

“Well, I don’t know. It sounds good, but I’m not sure if it is true. In order for somebody to be popular in our class, it is more important that he has a nice leather jacket or a lot of money than that he likes himself.”

“Misha, it’s true that there are some people who value somebody’s possessions or their external appearance or popularity more than their character. But don’t worry

about these people. They don’t make trustworthy friends. Since they relate to you because of what you have rather than what you are, they will leave you as soon as you lose your possessions or popularity. But don’t worry about wearing the right clothes to attract other people. Worry instead about developing a character that attracts people.”

“I don’t see why others should be attracted to me, whether I like myself or not. There is absolutely nothing special about me!” said Misha.

“Misha, you are an attractive person simply because you are unique, because there is nobody in the whole world that is just like you. You are different from anybody else. There will never be another you. You have something to show and share with other people that no one else has. Do you understand what I’m saying?”

“OK, I got the point: I’m unique. But I still don’t know why this should appeal to others. Maybe my uniqueness doesn’t attract others, but pushes them away instead.”

“If that is really true, then it’s up to you to change it. It is within your power to become the kind of person that you would be glad to know, a person you respect. Become reliable, take initiative and be helpful. Then you are sure to develop many friendships. Polish your diamond, Misha. You know what this means?”

“No!”

“When a gemologist finds a precious gem, it doesn’t look so beautiful at first. All the dirt has to be scraped off, and then it has to be carefully cleaned and polished before its unique and perfect beauty shines through brilliantly. You are like a precious diamond, Misha, but that diamond still needs polishing.”

At this point Pavel and Misha are interrupted, Misha’s father invites them to come over to the table where a family picture is being taken. After this there is no further opportunity to continue the talk, but as Misha says goodbye to his uncle at the end of the day, he is very grateful to him for his advice. During the following week Misha finds himself thinking a lot about Pavel’s words, and he finally decides to write him a letter to ask him a few more questions.

Dear Uncle Pavel,

I cannot forget what you said to me at Granny's birthday party. I think you are right, I have to learn to like myself more, because I want to become a person whom other people like to be with. But I don't know how to do this, practically speaking. I think you must know, because you are a person whom everybody likes (including me). Please tell me what you did to become like that.

And could you please answer this question? You said that I should worry about my character, not about the way I look. Does this mean that I should not try to look good at all? Is it wrong to buy fashionable clothes? Do you think it's OK for me to do some bodybuilding?

I think it must be very beautiful in the Caucasus now, and you are enjoying the summer. But I hope that you can visit us here in St. Petersburg again soon.

With my best wishes,
Your nephew Misha

And this is the answer that Misha receives from Pavel a few weeks later.

My dear Misha,

I was very happy to receive your letter and learn that my words have given you so much food for thought. I enjoyed our talk very much — I think you are a sincere and genuine person.

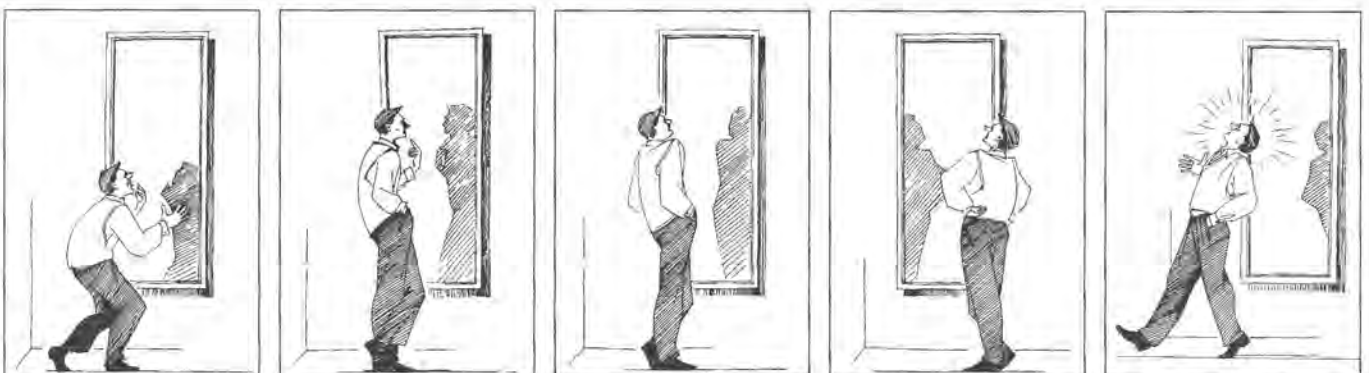
Let me answer your questions now. I don't think there's anything wrong with buying fashionable clothes to look nice. In fact, it is important to make yourself look as smart as you can, because it can help you feel good about yourself. Doing some bodybuilding is fine too; it will make your body feel good (as long as you don't overdo it). It is better not to compete with Schwarzenegger, though, because his body is quite different from yours. Accept that you are unique, and therefore different, and don't try to become a copy of somebody else. Whatever you do to make yourself look good — remember that other qualities are more important.

Inner beauty, for example. Inner beauty can balance physical imperfections, because a person who has a beautiful heart and mind will seem beautiful to others. Think of Granny. Did you notice during the birthday celebration that her skin isn't so beautiful anymore, all wrinkled up as it is? Her face looks a little like an old, shriveled apple. And yet Granny looks beautiful, because of her inner beauty and her heart of love.

I deeply respect your decision to learn to like yourself more and to become a person whom others want to have as a friend. I cannot promise that it will be easy, but as I told you already, I was very much like you when I was your age, and if I have been able to change, you can also. Here are some things I did to change my beliefs and feelings about myself step by step.

Following the advice of a person close to me, I looked into a mirror, smiled and said, "I like myself! I am satisfied with what I see. I am a beautiful person. Really! At least where it counts — in the heart." I admit I felt quite embarrassed at first. But I knew it was important because it was difficult to do. I repeated this every day for a long time.

I knew that I had to stop criticizing myself. There were so many things I didn't like about myself, and I was always quick to think, "I'm so bad, it's so hopeless, I can never become like that, it's no use trying to change," et cetera. I observed myself carefully and studied my own



words, thoughts, feelings, gestures, smile, and voice, et cetera. I made a point of reflecting on my day every evening. I analyzed what I had done right and what I had done wrong. Then I made a new goal for the next day. After a while I felt that I was improving, and my self-respect increased.

I had to learn to resist the temptation to compare myself with someone else. Instead I learned to respect other people for what they were, and their achievements, but also I respected myself for what I was and for my own rate of growth.

Another very effective technique I used was to write a love letter to myself every once in a while. In this letter I praised myself for all the qualities I liked about myself, and I just tried to be nice to myself.

And finally, because I thought that I was a rather unkind person, I started serving others, even in small ways. I asked people if they needed help when I saw them in need (sometimes I didn't feel like doing it, but I pushed myself to do it anyway). I sometimes even gave small gifts to people, without any other reason than just to surprise them and make them happy. Doing this helped me a lot to feel better about myself.

During this time I became more and more aware of my own uniqueness (remember, we talked about how each person has value just because they are unique). I discovered that I had certain talents and gifts different from anybody else I knew. People often told me that I was very good at imitating others, and so I began to develop this gift. Also, people told me that I was very sensitive and tender-hearted, and at first I didn't like that, because I wanted to be tough and never show any emotions. But after a while I started to recognize that these qualities were a gift too, and instead of denying these soft parts of my character, I started to accept them.

Well, Misha, now you go ahead and find out which of these methods work for you. And then write me to tell me about your progress. I am thinking of you.

With love, Pavel

Self-confidence

Your self-image is a creation you alone fashion. You are the master designer of your self-esteem. Confidence in yourself is important. Become a champion of love; dwell on positive thoughts, dreams, and images. Have a rich and vivid imagination.

Self-confidence involves confronting life. If we shy away, we climb on and ride an inner merry-go-round from which we cannot easily get off. Confront life as it is. If you go to the back door and see a lot of snow, don't turn around and go through the front door. Cope with it.

When you nurture a positive and optimistic attitude, you will feel your own value. Life is not always easy or beautiful; it is inevitable that you have to trudge through struggles as well as climb summits. But there is one thing to remember, regardless of whether you stand on a peak or in a valley — *we are ultimately able to master anything if our desire and motivation are strong enough.* That knowledge alone can give you incredible self-confidence.

Sometimes we reflect on the things we should accomplish as well as those we dream about, and then tend to stamp the word "impossible" across the plans and don't complete them.

The only limitations upon us are the ones we set ourselves.

True or healthy self-confidence is never promoted by rating yourself against another.

If you compare yourself with others, you may become vain or bitter; for always there will be greater and lesser persons than yourself.

Why not erase the word "impossible" from your vocabulary?

Share your experiences with people. Learn from each other and help one another, yet do not ignore the fact that we all have different personalities. The principal tool every person must use to relate with others is heart. But no two hearts are the same; no two people are totally alike. So be confident in who YOU are!

How do you see yourself?

How do you see yourself: as lovable or unlovable, or somewhere in between?

lovable	a b c d e	unlovable
likable	()	unlikable
attractive	()	unattractive
overweight	()	underweight
punctual	()	tardy
careful	()	careless
friendly	()	unfriendly
talented	()	incapable
accepted	()	rejected
diligent	()	lazy
loyal	()	disloyal
kind	()	unkind
sincere	()	insincere

Which qualities would you like to improve?
Number them in the order of their importance to you.

For Your Journal



Write a small story describing a situation in which a person passes up a good opportunity because of lack of self-confidence or because he's afraid he will fail. You can also illustrate the story so that it would look like a comic.

Princess Maria

From War and Peace, by Leo Tolstoy

One of the heroines of Tolstoy's novel War and Peace is Princess Maria. One day she returns to her room with a sad, frightened expression — one that she wears often. She looks into the mirror and finds an ugly, weak body and a thin face. Her sad eyes gaze back at her, deep and shining. These eyes, despite the simple face, could take on such beauty, especially in moments when the princess did not think about herself. Soon her maid and the duchess began to make a dress for her, wanting to make her feel pretty. They believed that a dress could bring beauty to life and began their work.

“No really, my dear, this dress is not pretty,” said Lise, looking sideways at Princess Maria from a little distance...

It was not the dress, but the face and whole figure of Princess Maria that were not pretty, but neither Mademoiselle Bourienne nor the little princess felt this, they still thought that if a blue ribbon were placed in the hair, the hair combed up, and the blue scarf arranged lower on the best maroon dress, and so on, all would be well. They forgot that the frightened face and the figure could not be altered, and that however they might change the setting and adornment of that face it would still remain piteous and plain ...

Mademoiselle Bourienne and the little princess had to own to themselves that Princess Maria in this guise looked very plain, worse than usual ...

When Rostov entered the room, the princess lowered her head for a moment as if to give him time to greet her aunt, and then at the very moment Nicholas addressed her, she lifted her head and her shining eyes met his look. With a movement full of dignity and grace, she stood up with a joyful smile, held out her thin soft hand and spoke



in a voice in which for the first time some new, womanly, deep notes were sounding. Mademoiselle Bourienne, who was in the drawing room, stared at Princess Maria in bewildered surprise. "Either black is so becoming to her, or she has really become so pretty, and I did not notice it. And think of this tact and grace!" she thought.

Had Princess Maria been capable of reflection at that moment, she would have been even more astonished than Mademoiselle Bourienne at the change that had taken place in herself. Since the moment Rostov had come in, her face transformed. Like the intricate artistic carving and painting on the sides of a lantern, which seem so coarse, dark and senseless, but become suddenly visible and surprisingly beautiful when the light is turned on, so the face of Princess Maria was transformed. For the first time all the pure, spiritual travail through which she had lived till then came out into the open. All her inner searchings of spirit, her sufferings, her striving after goodness, her resignation, her love and self-sacrifice — all this shone forth in those radiant eyes, in her sweet smile, in every feature of her tender face.

Rostov saw all of this as clearly as though he had known her his whole life. He felt that the being before him was utterly different from and better than anyone he had met before, and above all, better than himself. Nicholas was struck by her particular moral beauty ...

If Nicholas could have analyzed his feelings, he would have found that his proud, tender, assured love for his wife rested on this very feeling of awe at her spirituality, at her lofty moral world almost beyond his reach, in which she had her being.

What makes this image so appealing? At the beginning of the novel we see Princess Maria as an unattractive, reserved girl living in a remote mansion together with her old father and a French companion, Mademoiselle Bourienne, whose company bores her. Describing the external appearance of Princess Maria, Tolstoy stresses the irregular features of her face and her heavy walk. The princess herself realizes that she is unattractive. When thinking of the future, she is afraid even to dream about love and having a family, even though that's what she most deeply desires.

Just try to imagine yourself in such a situation. Few of us would keep our dignity and not fall into despair thinking about the long years that lie ahead, filled only with the dictatorship of one's father and complete loneliness of the soul. Who of us would be able to resist the temptation to run away from the mansion using any means — to buy new clothes, to participate in the life of "higher spheres" so as to meet someone to marry? Princess Maria would be a rich bride, and undoubtedly there would be numerous young men ready to marry — not her, but her money. And this is the way it happened to Anatoly Kuragin, whom his father brought to arrange his marriage to Princess Maria.

If Princess Maria simply submitted to her sad destiny or married only to escape from her father, it wouldn't bring her internal peace and happiness. She would be going against her own principles and would be betraying herself. She simply couldn't do it. The most amazing of her qualities is her deep moral purity and ability to remain herself even in circumstances that would plunge most people into absolute despair.

When faced with difficult times, she didn't look for easy solutions. "How can I suppress in my heart these evil thoughts? How can I reject evil desires forever?" And as soon as she asked, God answered in her own heart: "Don't desire anything for yourself, don't search, don't worry, don't envy. The future of people and your own future should be unknown to you; but you should live so as to be ready for anything." Princess Maria didn't think about the future too much, but simply lived, trying to help others, to love even those whom she didn't like.

This faithfulness to her deepest intuitions, to her spiritual purity that captured the essence of her special beauty, brought her great reward. Some time passed and Nicholas Rostov appeared. First he was attracted to the princess just by the unusual circumstances of their first meeting. Step by step, the young Count Rostov started to notice in this girl a surprising and unfamiliar beauty. And Princess Maria was also transformed when she fell in love with Nicholas Rostov. There appeared a femininity and charm about her that amazed everyone who knew her.

Nicholas' and Maria's love faced many challenges, but they married and created a family. In a few years the Rostovs had three children. They lived together in such harmony that "even Sonya and the old countess who wanted out of jealousy to see some quarrels between them, couldn't find anything to accuse them about."

Something to
think about



- What do you think determines happiness?
- How important is it in difficult circumstances not to follow some easy compromise that life offers?
- Where can we find support in moments of deep crisis?
- What determines the true value of human life?
- How can you remain faithful to your true self?