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Self-esteem vs. Self-respect - Brief Article

[Psychology Today](#), [Nov, 1999](#) by [Ellen Langer](#)

The Power Lies in the Difference

Our culture is concerned with matters of self-esteem. Self-respect, on the other hand, may hold the key to achieving the peace of mind we seek. The two concepts seem very similar but the differences between them are crucial.

To esteem anything is to evaluate it positively and hold it in high regard, but evaluation gets us into trouble because while we sometimes win, we also sometimes lose. To respect something, on the other hand, is to accept it.

I enjoy singing and do so quite frequently. As those within earshot will attest, I'm not very good but I love to sing anyway. During summer parties I frequently sing solo and play the part of the "moving ball," trying to stay just ahead of the music to provide the words for those who don't know the song. I am not saddened by my lack of talent. I accept the way I sing. Because of this acceptance, I am able to sing without being evaluative of myself or concerned with what others think.

The word acceptance suggests to some readers that our culture does indeed deal with this idea of self-

respect; after all, don't we have the concept that it is important to accept our limitations? Aren't many of us encouraged "to change the things we can change, accept the things we cannot change and know the difference between the two?" I believe I could learn to sing better, so my acceptance is not based on my limitations. Nor is it based on resignation, since I am not resigned to the belief that I cannot sing well and am not committed to any particular belief about my voice in the future.

The person with self-respect simply likes her- or himself. This self-respect is not contingent on success because there are always failures to contend with. Neither is it a result of comparing ourselves with others because there is always someone better. These are tactics usually employed to increase self-esteem. Self-respect, however, is a given. We simply like ourselves or we don't. With self-respect, we like ourselves because of who we are and not because of what we can or cannot do.

Consider an interesting test of self-respect. If someone compliments us, what is our reaction? If we are very pleased, it would suggest a certain amount of uncertainty about our skill. Imagine that somebody whose opinion we respect told us that we were great at spelling three-letter words, or that our pronunciation of vowels was wonderful. Chances are we would not be moved. We know we can do it in the first case, and we don't care in the second. Because we were not evaluating ourselves, the compliment was unimportant. The more instances in which we don't "take the compliment," the less vulnerable we become to evaluation and insult.

My recent research, with Judith White and Johnny Walsch at Harvard University, points to the advantages of self-respect. Compared to those with high self-esteem who are still caught in an evaluative framework, those with self-respect are less prone to blame, guilt, regret, lies, secrets and stress.

Many people worry whether there is life after death. Just think about it: If we gave up self-evaluation, we could have more life before death.

Ellen J. Langer, a professor of psychology at Harvard University, is author of *The Power of Mindful Learning* (Perseus, 1997) and *Mindfulness* (Perseus, 1989).

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