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John Rosemond: Self-esteem is the problem; self-respect is the solution

A team of researchers from Case Western Reserve University and the Universities of Nebraska and Virginia has corroborated what I've been saying in this column for nigh unto 20 years: High self-esteem is a problem, not a solution to a problem.

Said researchers have discovered that people with high self-esteem tend to have low self-control. That makes sense, as only regard for the rights of others keeps one's more nasty impulses in tether, and the more regard for one's self, the less regard for the other guy. I have often said what I will now repeat: The desired goal should be self-respect, not self-esteem.

"Well, John," a fellow recently said, "I think you're mincing words. You're really talking about the same thing."

The fellow's challenge reflects the fact that our national obsession with attaining the supposed "cure all" of high self-esteem (and making sure our children acquire it in abundance) has resulted in semantic confusion. People tend to think that self-confidence, self-respect, and self-esteem are one and the same. Common also is the notion that "true" self-esteem is acquired not by being praised a lot, but through accomplishment.

So, let's examine these issues in whatever depth this column will allow. To take the last first, if self-esteem is truly all about accomplishment, then it is a decidedly un-American notion. Why? Because that most definitely means that those who by virtue of endowment are not capable of much in the way of accomplishment are not due a lot of self-esteem. The meritocracy of self-esteem should not appeal to anyone other than people with high self-esteem, who tend, so the research says, to delight in the notion that they are a cut above the rest of us.

As for self-esteem and self-confidence being one and the same, and speaking personally, I don't have a lot of confidence when it comes to certain things. I pride

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myself, in fact, on knowing what I do well, and knowing what I do not do well. The research says that people with high self-esteem do not seem able to accurately assess their own abilities. They tend to think they are good, or capable of being good, at everything. This is the sort of pride that goeth before a big fall. It is simply not functional to be confident across the board. Rather, it is smart to know what situations one would do best to avoid and when to ask for help. That most sensible trait is not characteristic of people with high opinions of themselves.

Which brings us to the difference between self-respect and self-esteem. The former is acquired as a consequence of giving respect away, of doing things for others. The more respect for others that goes around, the more self-respect comes around. Self-esteem, on the other hand, is acquired as a consequence of people doing things for you - praising you indiscriminately, creating artificial success experiences for you, giving you material things, and generally treating you like the potentate we all, deep inside, want to be. People with high self-respect feel a sense of obligation to others. People with high self-esteem, on the other hand, feel that others are obligated to them. They feel entitled, and the feeling that one is entitled leads directly to all manner of rude, ill-mannered, anti-social behavior - lying, bullying, temper tantrums, and worse. Sounds like some children you know? Maybe some adults? Right, because the high self-esteem child is "father" not to a caring, compassionate, charitable man or woman, but to an overgrown high self-esteem perpetual child whose personal motto is "What I want, I deserve to have, and no one has a right to stand in my way."

No, the difference between self-esteem and self-respect is not a mere matter of mincing words. The very real difference produces two entirely different sorts of people, and therefore two entirely different sorts of culture. If you've traveled abroad to any significant degree, then you know exactly what I mean.

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