KEEPING YOUR SANITY BY BUILDING A GOOD REPUTATION WITH YOURSELF

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When we get to know people, we are, in part, building a reputation with each other. "What kind of person is he?" "How does she handle a difficult situation?" "What kind of attitude does he bring to his work?" "How does she respond to confrontation or adversity?"

Over time, we learn whether a given person is honest, whether they can be relied upon, how playful they are, to what degree their actions reflect what they say. We get a sense of their style, their likes, and their dislikes.

There are multitudes of small interactions that give us information about a person's character and personality, values and integrity. Over time we come to decide whether this is the kind of person we want to spend time with; whether we like how we feel when we're with them.

And they learn and make decisions about us.

Part of what we do in this back and forth of getting to know each other is deciding how much we care about what the other says or thinks about us. A lecture on honesty from a dishonest person, or on manners from a rude person, is not worth listening to – unless they are a *formerly* dishonest or rude person who has learned something important from their past.

We pay attention to other people who matter to us, and we tend to ignore those who don't.

There's more to this, though: *We watch ourselves just like we watch others, and we develop a reputation with ourselves accordingly.*

This is the essence of *earned* self-esteem. (As opposed to the "everybody gets a trophy" feeling good about yourself in the moment self-esteem)

What kind of a person are you, in your own assessment? Do you have values, goals, and priorities? And do you act in accordance with those values, goals, and priorities? Are you the kind of person you would like to be? And if not, what are the barriers to becoming the kind of person you would like to be?

I don't mean, do you *have* what you would like to *have*. You may or may not have any say in the end product. I may want to have a billion dollars, but I may not ever earn a billion dollars, even if I apply myself fully to the task

I mean, are you a person who lives according to your values, goals and priorities? Are you doing what a person you would like to be would do? Or do you spend much of your time and energy going in another direction?

I'm not talking about perfection here. We all make mistakes, we all can take the wrong road; but if you often spend time and energy in ways that run counter to your highest values, goals, and priorities, and you refuse to see it or learn from it, your reputation with yourself will suffer.

To the degree you are doing what a person you would like to be would do, your reputation with yourself will improve.

But another question to ask is this: is your assessment of yourself accurate?

I have written about Carol Dweck's work with mindsets. A *fixed trait mindset* is one that looks to relatively unchangeable qualities such as intelligence or talent, whereas a *growth mindset* is one that looks to actions.

A fixed trait mindset does not allow for change or growth, so a poor assessment can be devastating, and is usually avoided at all costs. A growth mindset, in contrast, focuses on actions; so a poor assessment means primarily that there is work to be done.

Why this is relevant here is that if you know that who you are, what you do, and how you think about things is changeable and accessible to your own intervention and effort – a growth mindset – *your assessment of yourself will also tend to be very accurate*. The necessary self-reflection will not be threatening to you; it contains a treasure: the information with which you seek to improve.

Our own self-reflection has a huge impact on our behavior.

In contrast, if you believe that who you are, what you do, and how you think about things is fixed and unchangeable – a fixed trait mindset – you will then believe that you are at the mercy of forces outside of yourself, and your assessment of yourself will be predictably and dramatically *inaccurate*.

In order to make accurate assessments, you have to have accurate data. If you are faced with a poor assessment, and your belief is that you are powerless to change, then the only way to salvage any emotional hope is to skew the data, to trick yourself into discounting it. In this case, the necessary self-reflection will feel threatening to you, containing blows to your self-concept, rather than useful information.

This can lead to incredible suffering, bad results, and can lead you to avoid challenges or difficult feedback – the very things you need to grow. This is how prisoners can end up with high self-esteem – they feel great about themselves, because their assessment is not based on reality.

(The "everyone gets a trophy" approach encourages a fixed trait mindset. The reward doesn't come from our effort and perseverance, it comes *independent* of our effort and perseverance – from outside of us.)

Here's the challenge: notice how you respond to feedback. Do you tend to reject negative feedback, become

defensive, change the subject? Or do you hear it, feel the predictable emotions (nobody *likes* negative feedback; I wouldn't expect you to feel happy about it), and look for what there is to learn from it?

Of course, the way the feedback is delivered can make a big difference. Attacks, condemnations of character, name calling, are not effective ways of giving feedback. Blame is not the goal; learning is.

When giving feedback, consider what it is you would like the listener to understand and learn; what is the behavior that you would like for them to change? If it's a valuable lesson, and you can present it with learning in mind – finding a solution rather than casting blame – then your feedback is more likely to be heard and valued.

So let's say you receive negative feedback – there is something you did that needs improvement or was the wrong move – and it does not come in the form of an attack or with the intent to cast blame. How do you respond?

If you tend to reject it, chances are you are operating, in that particular area at least, within a fixed trait mindset. If you can identify this, that is very good news; because you can change it!

By understanding that this is a fixed trait mindset, you can choose to change it toward a growth mindset. Look for your assumptions about yourself that are fixed and immoveable, and dispute them. Sometimes this is all it takes.

Now for an even trickier challenge: pay attention to how you give yourself feedback, and how you take it.

When you see that you've done something wrong, or make a mistake, or you've forgotten to do something, how do you treat yourself? Are you harsh and attacking ("You idiot!")? Do you make negative generalizations about yourself ("You can never get this right!")? Or do you look for what you have to learn, and keep your focus on how to solve the problem?

If you're calling yourself names, or generalizing, then you're not going to get anywhere. You'll just feel bad, and you're likely to do the same thing again, and call yourself names and generalize again, and you'll try to avoid the whole issue if you can, making your possibilities contract.

If you're looking for what you have to learn, and you keep your focus on how to solve the problem, then you're likely to see the situation and your role in it clearly; *and you're also more likely to actually solve the problem.* This is an expansive cycle that leads to learning and growth, and an expansion of possibilities.

Pay attention to how you give and receive feedback from others. It will tell you a lot about what you can do to improve your life. But the person you live with constantly, whose assessment you are continually exposed to, and who has the greatest impact on your thoughts, actions, and feelings, is yourself.

Do what you can to earn a good reputation with yourself; it's the reputation that matters most.

PS: *A Master's Course in Happiness* can help you to take charge of your habits and your life in ways you may not have thought possible; and my new course, *Mastering Emotions, Moods and Reactions* can help you grow a deep understanding and practical skills for mastering these systems and living well.

And I'm now offering both at a lower price.

Joel F. Wade, Ph.D., *is the author of* The Virtue of Happiness, Mastering Happiness, his new course, *Mastering Emotions, Moods and Reactions,* *A Master's Course in Happiness,* and *The Mastering Happiness Podcast* *. He is a marriage and family therapist and* *life coach who works with people around the world via phone and video. You can get a FREE Learning Optimism E-Course if you sign up at his website,* *www.drjoelwade.com.*