

SELF-ACCEPTANCE...is not what we think it is!

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We can all agree that accepting ourselves as we are is better than hating and being at war with ourselves. That said, what does it mean exactly *to accept ourselves as we are*?

Generally speaking, self-acceptance is described as the ability to recognize our strengths and limitations, and the capacity to express our needs². It would therefore be a matter of appreciating what we have, while also resigning ourselves to what we are missing, and the ways in which we are flawed.

But what if we were wrong about what we think we are? What if the self “we think we are” and forced to accept, for better or worse, is not “who we truly are”?

This short article proposes a different approach to understanding and practicing self-acceptance. In this context it is seen as a process of letting go of the hurtful thoughts, beliefs, and self-judgments that imprison us in a perceived self that is separate from who we really are. Doing so allows us to free ourselves from the barriers to self-love.

The self we *think* we are

Who is the self we think we are? How did we develop it? How did we come to believe that it is in fact who we really are?

The perceived self is the result of a long learning process that started at the beginning of our lives. Throughout this time we have developed various thoughts and beliefs³ conveyed by our parents, school, community, society, and the world. Put more simply, we were taught from a young age to distinguish and name people and objects in our

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² Canadian Mental Health Association, Promotional material for Mental Health Week 2017.

³ Beliefs are broadly defined here as thoughts and theories we have about ourselves, others and the world.

environment, to identify with and acknowledge our family and sociocultural community's values and expectations, and to adapt to the changing world around us.

This very old mode of information transmission is still prevalent in today's society, driven by a thought system that values separation, opposition, judgment, fear, attack, and defense.

One must simply observe the communication and

events happening around the world to comprehend that the thoughts and beliefs we entertain about ourselves, individually and collectively, contain a significant amount of fear, threat, conflict, hate, doubt, sacrifice, and judgment.

Furthermore, we are all familiar with fears of not being loved or being rejected, not being good enough or valued, being accused and punished. We have also experienced the various emotions resulting from those fears such as anxiety, guilt, anger, unfairness, exclusion, shame, self-hate, resentment, and despair.

Not surprisingly, many of the thoughts and beliefs we harvest about our perceived self cause pain, and often reflect a gloomy and distressing image of oneself and others. It should also be acknowledged that we do still possess loving, trusting, and comforting thoughts about ourselves and others, but they are often darkened by our fears, doubts, and judgments.

Not surprisingly, many of the thoughts and beliefs we harvest about our perceived self cause pain, and often reflect a gloomy and distressing image of oneself and others.

It is with these thoughts and beliefs dominated by fear, separation, and judgment that each one of us has developed knowledge and a relationship to the self, others, and the world. However, it is important to realize that this system and mode of thinking was not consciously learned. We did not make conscious choices about the thoughts and beliefs we assimilated, thus explaining why we take them at face value or confuse them with who we are.

This is how, for example, we end up believing that our fears and doubts are an integral part of who we are or that they define us. In other words, we think we are the thoughts and beliefs we have identified with, both the ones that we benefit from and the ones

that hurt us. As long as we are capable of perceiving these initial thoughts and beliefs as outside of ourselves, it becomes possible to make conscious choices about the thoughts and beliefs we want or don't want.

Having said that, the thoughts and beliefs we have inherited from external sources are not the only ones that contribute to our knowledge of the self, others, and the world. There are also the ones that we created internally through our reflections and introspections.

Although these thoughts are largely inspired by the ones outside of us, they are inherently different as they allow us to become aware of our capacity to reason, ponder, and make decisions. This is where our only (but immense!) real power lies, and our desire to consciously transform our knowledge and relationship to the self, others, and the world, for the better.

The self we *really* are

Our self-relationship is not only made of thoughts and beliefs about the self we *think* we

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are, but also about the self we *really* are. The nature of true self-acceptance however, lies in who we really are. To confuse who we think we are with who we really are results in self-deception.

But then who is this self we really are and how can we distinguish it from the self we think we are?

Considering the world thought and belief system is primarily dominated by separation and fear, it unsurprisingly contributes to the development of the self – the self we think we are - that we define as special, different, and separate from others⁴. But who says “different and separate” also means having conflicting interests with others, driving our attacks and judgements towards others. This thought system results in the “law of the strongest”, meaning that we are choosing between one *or* the other. There is always a winner and a loser.

On the other hand, the self we really are is based on love and unity. It is confident, open, and connected to others. It sees the internal sameness shared with others beyond the external, superficial differences. In other words, the self we really are knows that all

⁴ The self we think we are is the equivalent of the self-concept as usually defined.

human beings have the same fundamental desire and purpose: to feel good and be at peace with oneself and others. This quest is consistent among all individuals, without exception. It's both one *and* the other, allowing us to bring each one of ourselves together, or not at all.

Ultimately, what allows us to distinguish the self we really are from the self we think we are is our experience. The thoughts and beliefs we entertain about ourselves have a direct impact on how we perceive or interpret our relationship to others and the world and therefore, how we experience them in our daily lives.

Thereby, when thoughts and beliefs about oneself are dominated by separation, fear, and judgment, it can only result in seeing others and the world as threat or potential danger. Not surprisingly, this negative perception often drives experiences of attack or defense (see *Cycle of fear and judgment* page 10). In addition to hurting us, our thoughts and beliefs based on fear are also characterized by their persistent and repetitive nature. They are thoughts that cycle in our mind and reinforce our fear, sadness, anger, resentment, helplessness, lack, or emptiness. They are also thoughts that push us to repetitively make the same choices, which results in consistently facilitating the same painful experiences.

At the opposing end, when thoughts and beliefs about oneself are dominated by love, trust, and unity, it allows us to perceive and experience our relationship to others and the world with a sense of solidarity, sharing in peace (See *Cycle of love and trust* page 10). Thoughts and beliefs based on love create joy in addition to a profound feeling of fulfillment and wellbeing. They are inspired inwardly in an impetus that moves outwardly towards others. Their circular movement rises in power and influence to eventually become transcendent, allowing us to move beyond the self we think we are and find the self we really are.

In short, the way we see others and interpret our life circumstances always reflects our self-relationship which is either based on the self of fear and judgment we *think* we are, or the self of love and trust we *really* are. From the moment that we become aware of this inner dichotomy or duality of the self, we can choose. We are not condemned to spend our lives in a false identity riddled with self-deception, nor are we forced to withstand a self that is not who we really are, separate from others and miserable.

But how can we choose, retrieve, and experience our true self?

Practicing self-acceptance

From the moment we understand that our life experiences always reflect the thoughts and beliefs we entertain about ourselves and others, and thus decide we don't want these dark and painful thoughts that deprive us from who we really are, we are ready to practice self-acceptance.

Our thoughts and beliefs pervade all our daily perceptions and experiences, and as a result can sometimes seem very invasive. Nevertheless, the true nature of these thoughts and beliefs are void of substance. We are the ones giving our thoughts meaning, importance, and truth value. Our thoughts have no power to affect us unless we give it to them. Therefore we can decide at any time to withdraw their value and power over us. It's a decision and a conscious choice (see Questionnaire on page 11).

When we free ourselves from the grip of thoughts and beliefs that have nothing to do with us, we allow the emergence of our true identity, who we really are. We don't have to search for, develop, or deserve who we really are. We must simply make more room for it by progressively letting go of who we are not. Beyond our thoughts of fear, our doubts about our personal value, and our judgements about ourselves and others, we can discover that we are complete beings united to one another, carrying joy, love, trust, and peace within ourselves. We have to experience our true selves to fully realize this.

A 3-step practice

Concretely, practicing self-acceptance means we have to learn to be more attentive to the thoughts and beliefs - especially judgments - we entertain about ourselves and others and their impact on our relationships and daily lives.

Easier said than done! We are so used to paying attention to what is happening outside of us, namely the flaws and failings of others and the world, that this way of thinking seems totally natural. We have to learn to redirect our attention inside of ourselves, on our thoughts

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and beliefs colouring our perceptions and interpretations, as these are the link to our experiences with others and in the world.

In short, by becoming an observer of ourselves we can learn to recognize our painful thoughts and judgments to make informed choices. For example, we will observe that thoughts driven by fear, doubt, and judgment never result in positive interpretations and experiences. Even though they may seem justified, especially when it comes to blaming others or the world, the relief they potentially offer vanishes rapidly, replaced by feelings of guilt, anxiety, shame, and uneasiness or dis-ease. On the other hand, thoughts inspired by love and trust provide feelings of joy, wellbeing, peace, and openness towards others.

To focus on oneself and recognize that we are the cause or the author of our negative thoughts and judgements has only one goal: to ultimately decide we don't want these thoughts anymore and let them go. In order to let go of them, it is important to recognize them without judgment or feeling guilty for having judged ourselves or others! Self-acceptance is a process of correction, not condemnation. Deciding to let go of our judgments about oneself and others is to cease giving them value and power over us.

In summary, practicing self-acceptance is to:

1. Bring the attention back inside oneself where our painful thoughts and beliefs of fear, doubts, and judgments lie, but also our power of decision.
2. Recognize, without judging ourselves, that our thoughts, beliefs, interpretations, and emotions dominated by separation, fear, and judgment are poisoning our relationship to the self, others, and the world, imprisoning us in a self that is not our *real* self.
3. Decide we don't want these hurtful thoughts and beliefs anymore and let them go by, withdrawing their value and power to affect us.

By doing so, we free ourselves from the barriers to self-love. And self-love is accepting who we *really* are!



There is no definite way to practice self-acceptance. Everyone must find a way that suits them best. What is important is to follow the three steps and respect one's own personal pace. This is no performance or struggle against oneself. It is a personal practice we offer ourselves in order to increase our wellbeing.

Self-acceptance is put into practice every day as we move forward with our life circumstances and relationships.

Practicing self-acceptance is a personal and lifetime engagement towards ourselves. It requires us to be vigilant, patient, honest, kind, and gentle to ourselves. It is not an easy task to let go of old thought patterns or ingrained beliefs. We must constantly renew our decision to let go of these thoughts such that we see results, and always remember to be gentle and supporting of oneself to make progress. With time and determination, there will be results because one cannot decide to let go of negative thoughts and judgements about the self and others without progressively transforming our individual life experiences.

Self-acceptance is put into practice every day as we move forward with our life circumstances and relationships. In fact, it is mainly in our relationships through which we find the opportunities to practice self-acceptance and find who we truly are.

Acceptance of others

Without others, we would not be able to accept oneself. Why is this the case?

We are so strongly identified with the thought system of the world that we often confuse it with reality. Thus without others we would not have the means to become aware of the negative thoughts, beliefs, and judgments we entertain about ourselves and project externally. We would repeatedly continue to see problems and conflicts outside of us instead of trying to address them where they originated: in the thoughts and beliefs we entertain about ourselves and others.

What we see in others or what we feel about them always results from our interpretations and consistently reflects our self-relationship. Judgments about others are first and foremost self-judgments. We are not responsible for who others are or what they think, but we are responsible for how we see them, which in turn gives us insight into how we see ourselves. Others are therefore an invaluable, even essential, aid to help us recognize and let go of our self-judgments.

Others are not the enemies we often believe they are. Rather, they can be seen as our travel partners that help us progress on the path to self-acceptance in our lives. The way we react to what they say or what they do, whether we approve or not, reflects the thoughts and emotions we carry inside. Others offer us a continuous source of feedback.

Learning to understand others instead of judging them helps us to also do the same for ourselves. Again, we share with them the same desire or the same goal of feeling good and at peace with ourselves and others. We are all equal in this adventure! We are all trying to live better in a world that often feels strange to us, and practicing to accept the self and others can only help us achieve that goal.

Resistance to self-acceptance

Resistance to let go of our negative thoughts and beliefs about ourselves result from the fact that we are all attached to the special self we have identified with and afraid of losing it.

To be ready to practice self-acceptance doesn't mean that there won't be any resistance. Actually, this is to be expected. Besides our tendency to project and look for the causes of our life experiences outside of us, in others or in the world, our resistance to let go of our negative thoughts and beliefs about ourselves results from the fact that we are all attached to the special self we have identified with, the self we think we are or the self-concept. As such we are afraid of losing it or losing "ourselves" even though it carries self-doubts and judgments that are heavy and painful to live with.

However, be reassured. The goal here is not to change who we are – that would require that we know who we really are in the first place – but to let go of the hurtful thoughts and beliefs that interfere with our flourishing and wellbeing. In other words, the goal is to simply recognize that we feel much better when we decide to free ourselves from the self we think we are by letting go of the thoughts of fear, doubts, and judgments that we entertain about ourselves and others.

Conclusion

To be aware that we are decision makers, and not victims of others and the world, is essential to self-acceptance. It allows us to reclaim and use our power of decision-

making with which we can let go of the self we thought we were and find the self we really are.

The only true power we have in this world is the power to decide what we think, and that can change everything! Either we identify with painful and imprisoning thoughts and beliefs based on separation, fear, and judgment, or we free ourselves from them and rediscover love, trust, and unity that are our true nature. We cannot go wrong. Who we really are is beyond fear and self-judgments.

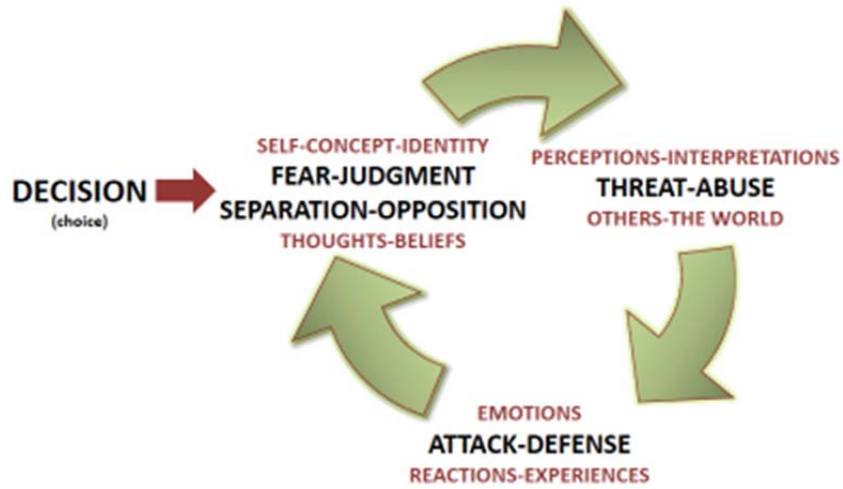
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We are beings of decision which also make us beings of transformation. The changes we wish for ourselves, others, and the world can only come from inside us, from the thoughts and beliefs we entertain about ourselves. Real transformations always come from inside out. The world can only testify to our state of mind.

Finally, practicing acceptance of the self and others is a life-long process that benefit us more and more as we progress. The road we travel is just as important as the final destination.

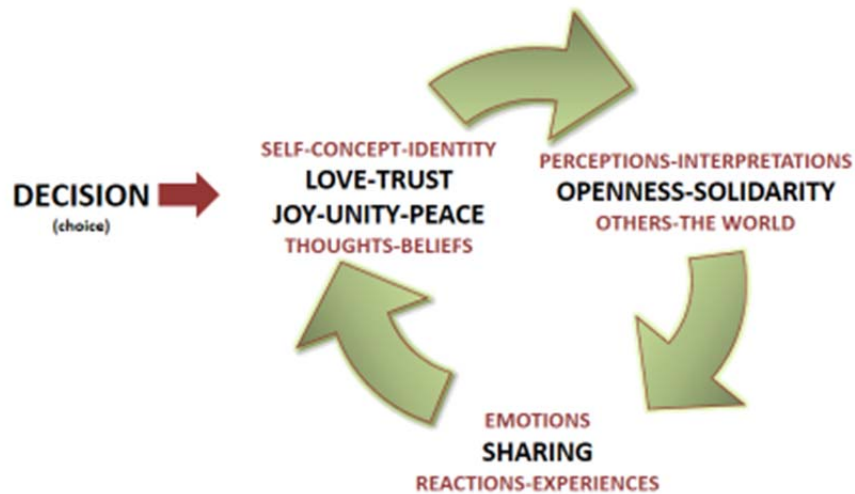
September 2017

CYCLE OF FEAR AND JUDGMENT



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CYCLE OF LOVE AND TRUST



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QUESTIONNAIRE

- ❖ Does my belief about _____ have a happy and comforting, or an unhappy and painful effect on me and my life?
- ❖ Where does this belief come from? Did I choose it consciously? How long have I been living with that belief?
- ❖ What are the advantages to living with that belief? What do I get from it? What do I gain by having this belief? What am I hiding or avoiding by having this belief?
- ❖ Would my life be very different without this belief? Would I be the same person without this belief?
- ❖ Am I ready to let go of this belief?