

understanding ourselves and others

Susan S. Meyers

Why Bother with Me?

Oh, how easy the Extension job would be, if it weren't for people. At times, many Extension educators have recognized that the "people" variable influences the educational message because each person is so different. Some are exceedingly easy to get along with; others, frankly, tax our patience. Yet, we're able to communicate effectively with clientele to share information, enabling them to make wiser decisions. Not only must we keep on top of our own subject matter, but we need to know how to share this information with others.

One key element in doing so is that of knowing and understanding your "self." Communication skills follow self-knowledge and understanding. Before effective learning can take place, the Extension educator and the learner need to have a grasp of their own "self" to understand why each may behave, react, think, and feel in particular ways. This understanding may be (and often is) quite different from the ways in which others think, react, feel, and behave. These differences, instead of being a threat to each, can be a benefit *if* recognized as such.

I'd Rather Focus on Others

Extension hires individuals who are interested in both their subject matter *and* in people. Most of us would rather focus on understanding the other person than spend any energy and time understanding ourselves. This tendency is true for clientele as well. However, when people begin to know and understand themselves well, they'll be more able to know and understand others. A *basic assumption* in this article is that people are fundamentally good, and this focus on understanding self and others reinforces the basic good of people.

Most Difficult Task Is Self-Acceptance

The paradox is that the most difficult task is the simplest—accepting your "self." Throughout education, this little but difficult task receives minimal attention—yet it appears to be

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one factor in distinguishing between effective and ineffective educators. The perceptions or views that you hold of your "self" will directly influence your interactions with clientele, colleagues, and family members. As we understand more about ourselves, parts will continue to surprise us—and sometimes disappoint or frustrate us.

Because the treatment that we give others is based on the ways we treat ourselves, it's revealing that some give and receive only negative images, while others appear to lead "charmed" and positive lives. If we can learn to treat, value, and like ourselves, we're more likely to treat, value, and like others. If I can't accept and acknowledge the love and respect that's offered to me, I'm unaware of how I really can give it to others. If I feel that I'm worthy (at least at times) of respect and love, I can accept what's given to me and thus develop the skills to give it to others. In essence, it all begins with me.

Many terms for "self" are bantered about. Some have suggested that only a selfish person would focus on self-acceptance, self-worth, and self-esteem. Perhaps the most selfish person is the one who consciously chooses *not* to focus on the "self," becoming a "selfless martyr" as a result. Satir's "Declaration of Self-Esteem" (her prose on self-worth) illustrates that there are parts of ourselves we like and don't like, some can be changed and others can't. She acknowledges and celebrates the many parts of us that make us unique and okay and summarizes the many concepts of "self."¹

Self-acceptance includes becoming familiar with your self—the negative *and* positive parts—and learning to accept yourself as you really are at this moment. Some feel that acceptance means "liking," but in this term it means to allow to be. Until we accept the fact that we have a characteristic that needs changing, we're unlikely to change. Lair (quoting Carl Rogers) states, "When I accept myself as I am, I change, and when I accept others as they are, they change."²

Until we know that we have a grating voice, a drinking problem, or are overweight, we don't see a problem. Once we see the ways in which we could change, we have the opportunity to make that change. (As one who hasn't made some of the desirable changes, I can testify that it isn't always easy to change, even when you want to.)

Some Tests of Self-Esteem

How do we know when our self-esteem is positive? One test is to see how you react when someone gives you a compliment. Many of us tend to "put down" the compliment by making a joke about it or making some smart remark. We may resort to simple denial such as, "I've got 40 more pounds to

lose,” or “This old shirt? Why I’ve had it for years.” A person whose self-esteem is positive can accept the compliment as it was given with a “thank you.” By accepting the compliment, you’re telling the other person that they’re of worth and they have good ideas (and judgment). By putting down the compliment, you’re telling the other person that they have lousy judgment.

Another test of your self-esteem is how willing you are to share your strengths with others significant to you. Most of us don’t look forward to filling out the annual performance document which cites our achievements. Most of us are reminded of all those things we didn’t accomplish. (Granted there are a few who tend to see only their strengths and seldom their weaknesses—but odds are they’re pulling a bluff job.)

The first element of this test is to eliminate blame for where you are now. It’s not your parents’ fault, your administrators’ fault, or your fault. Blame is only a means of hiding from finding out who we really are. A high self-esteem allows us to share those things about which we’re proud. This sharing can best be done with someone who knows and understands why we’re sharing.

It takes courage to share with someone important that we did do something well—and share it in an accepting way—not as a braggart. Many of us were raised feeling that bragging is unacceptable behavior. If we can share with one or two significant people, we have the opportunity to affirm those positive parts of ourselves. And that leads to positive affirmation of the other person. It really does begin with me.

A portion of Dyer’s book, *The Erroneous Zones*, has special significance to Extension staff, especially within their first few years on the job. He says that there are two worthless emotions—worry and guilt.³ Worry is in anticipation of things that might happen—and our imagination works geometrically not arithmetically. We spend a great deal of time worrying about things that are well off in the future.

The other feeling—guilt—is regret over what happened. Good honest reflection on what went wrong is reasonable, from which we can learn. However, many of us whip ourselves over some minor item and carry that guilt for a long time. If you think that doesn’t apply to you, I challenge you to review evaluations you’ve received and see which you ponder over more—the 40 that raved about you and the presentation or the 4 that were negative.

Understanding Others

Without understanding the many facets of your “self,” it’s all too easy to form assumptions about others. When we

realize how complex our own lives, feelings, and reactions are, we're not as quick to make assumptions or prejudgments about others. It's difficult for me to really accept others as they are until I can accept myself as I really am. It's easier to accept people as they ought to be, or as they want to be, or as they don't think they are than to accept them for what they are.

Sometimes our interactions with others are influenced by some external factors—lousy weather, a near-accident, a rude person in the store. It's all too easy for that interaction to color our whole day—and provide the black clouds under which we hide. Of course, we can blame that incident for making us this way. We also can choose not to let it upset us. It's easy to fall for the bait sometimes, but it takes strong self-acceptance to let the outside factor roll past us.

We can choose to be the determiners of our behavior instead of being reactors to other people's behaviors. Powell says that each of us has the choice of being an actor—in charge of our own lives and of situations cited above—or of being a reactor, allowing others to determine the kind of day we're going to have.⁴

. . . Before effective learning can take place, the Extension educator and the learner need to have a grasp of their own "self" to understand why each may behave, react, think, and feel in particular ways. This understanding may be (and often is) quite different from the ways in which others think, react, feel, and behave. . . .

Another test of our self-esteem is how we react when criticism is given to us. This response truly tests our relationship with others. It also holds for how we give that criticism. In the first place, if a person didn't care, no criticism would be given. That isn't easy to remember when you're the one being criticized. That brings up a key second point—*separate the person from the behavior*. When you're receiving criticism, it isn't easy to remember that the core of you isn't being attacked—only a specific behavior. The person who gives criticism needs special skills in how to share that difference—that the person is okay, but the behavior could be improved. Both the giver and receiver of criticism need to keep the person/behavior apart. This distinction is the real difference between constructive and destructive criticism.

All of us have times when we have tried to accept and understand the other person, but have run into a brick wall.

Optimists will keep trying, because sometimes it takes only a little additional effort to reach them. However, sometimes even the optimists are thwarted in trying to accept someone.

When we've tried for a long time to understand and accept the other person (be it someone in our office, our family, or in our audience), we may find that the additional effort isn't worth it. It's not easy to give up trying on these, but the time may come to stop trying to reach them. If not, we may actually become compelled to reach them, and they become the determiners of our lives. If we can't leave the situation, sometimes we just need to accept that the situation does exist and we're okay.

It All Begins with Me

Perhaps the most selfish thing we can do on our Extension job is to *not* take the time to help build our own self-esteem. When we feel good about ourselves, we can give good to others. When we feel rotten, we may (unconsciously) try to have everyone else "catch our headache." Building our self-esteem is a continual process . . . and there will be those bad days that set things back. We all can benefit by a constant dose of positive building of self-esteem. We can recognize the positive things our colleagues and family members do. We also can learn to see our own good works. It's up to each one of us.

Footnotes

1. Virginia Satir, *Peoplemaking* (Palo Alto, California: Science and Behavior Books, 1972).
2. Jess Lair, *I Ain't Much Baby—But I'm All I've Got* (New York: Doubleday and Co., Inc., 1972), p. 19.
3. Wayne W. Dyer, *Your Erroneous Zones* (New York: Funk and Wagnalls, 1976).
4. John Powell, *Why Am I Afraid To Tell You Who I Am?* (Niles, Illinois: Peacock Books, Argus Communication, 1969).