

# FAMILY MATTERS

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Our self-concept is a complicated and shifting mixture of two basic influences. The most important is how we experience our Self. This self-perception is as subtle as a whisper, yet, powerful enough to resist even the most undeniable evidence to the contrary.

Self-concept is also influenced by the experiences we have with others. The manner in which we are treated, comments that are made about our behavior, and criticisms that are offered will all combine to influence our self-esteem. Yet, this input is limited by the power of our own ideas. Our sense of self will color these interactions, making it nearly impossible to get an objective read on what is really happening.

As a result of the ability of our self-concept to camouflage our more unpleasant traits, we are terrible witnesses to who we really are. Consequently our psychological growth is limited by this selective blindness. The best way to overcome this is to listen carefully to what others have to say about us and learn from the conflicts we have with others.

Criticisms and conflicts force us to look at ourselves from the perspective of the other. Similar to the photograph, such events allow us to see an angle of ourselves we wouldn't perceive otherwise.

Even though criticisms are inflated by the emotions of the other, there is always a kernel of truth embedded within the critique. When criticized, we are faced with two choices: reject it as a subjective exaggeration of the one criticizing or struggle to learn from what is being said. The more we can see our Self as others see us, the more we will develop and mature as individuals.

We do not have to wait to be criticized in order to learn more about ourselves. We can ask for feedback about our behavior from those with whom we live and work. If we have a doubt about our Self, we can ask for help to see our image through the eyes of those we trust to be honest.

Conflict is another excellent source of information about who we are. With conflict, however, it is remarkably easy to lose sight of the part we play in the problem. We all tend to be experts in identifying how badly the other behaves and how we are unfortunate victims of their insensitivity, aggressiveness, indifference, selfishness, etc., etc.

Regardless of the nature of the conflict, there is always a part we play in the evolution of the problem. There will always be ways to explain why we "should" be angry, indignant, irritated, hurt by what the other does or fails to do. While such reactions might be justified, they will not lead to psychological growth.

Psychological growth evolves as a consequence of our ability to detect what we are doing that is complicating our interpersonal relationships. By understanding this, we will be better equipped, in future interactions, to act in ways that are less conflicting and provocative.

It is extremely difficult to see those parts of our Self that others find disagreeable. We explain, we rationalize, we defend, we blame. Anything but accept. Why is that? Why are we not grateful to the other for helping us to see our Self more clearly? Why is it so hard to be humble?

We are mostly afraid, that's why. Afraid to be who we are, with our unique mixture of qualities and defects. Afraid to stand before others and be exposed to their possible rejection and disdain. Many of us will point to those experiences in which we *were* rejected and

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ridiculed and offer them as proof that others cannot be trusted to be kind and accepting. We are convinced that we have to protect our Self from the other's all-too-critical eye.

Such protection, while beneficial in some ways, keeps us locked within a narrow range of our true potential. By avoiding or minimizing feedback about our behavior and personality, we block our psychological growth. We stay the same and then lament about how "nothing changes" and that "people are always the same." Could it be that it is us who remain rigid and stagnant in the face of continually evolving relationships?

Another major source of personal growth can come from the feedback provided through the mistakes we make. If we can get beyond the embarrassment, the excuses ("It wasn't my fault because...."), and the self-criticism for being less than perfect, we will see what we need to do differently in order to perfect our Self. A mistake is the psychological version of physical disease. It signals to us that we have to do something different in order to restore our sense of well-being.

Day-in and day-out we will be given the opportunity to see our Self from many different angles. The combination of these angles will provide a more complete picture of who we are and how we interact with others. Psychological maturity is based upon such clarity.