

The Price of Punishment

*The greatest blessing in life is having had healthy, grown-up parents.
If you weren't blessed with that, you can heal childhood wounds by becoming to yourself
the parents you always wanted.*
Dorothy Satten, "Real is Better Than Perfect"

How many times have you looked in the mirror, literally and/or figuratively, and said something to the effect of, "You suck," and then listed a litany of your failures?

How many times have you made it your parents', friends' or partner's responsibility to love you out of your self-hatred? Or, if you've given up on this strategy, how many times have you caught yourself thinking, "If only I could find the right man/woman to love me, things would work out"?

I'm betting that if you're really honest, you came up with some pretty high numbers on these questions. If you don't, count your blessings! It's hard to avoid this sort of thinking because our culture teaches us that we're not worth loving if we are less than perfect and that we need to punish ourselves when we fall short of perfection. This leads us to judge ourselves harshly for any mistakes or inadequacies, real or imagined. It also teaches us to look for love outside of ourselves rather to find it within. And if you didn't happen to be among the fortunate few who grew up with healthy grown-up parents, you probably got double or triple doses of the harsh cultural lesson.

Neither of these strategies works very well. The more we judge ourselves and beat our psyches to a bloody pulp, the less able we are to change the very behavior we wish to change*. There are several reasons for this. First, punishment doesn't help solve the actual problem. If you look in the mirror and slap at your hair (or lack of hair) in disgust or condemn yourself because you ate an entire pie, you are not really improving your hair or eating patterns. And the problem isn't your hair or your eating habits; it's your perception of your hair or your eating habits and how you feel about that perception. Beating yourself up doesn't fix anything; it just reinforces your pattern of punishing yourself and makes you feel worse. Second, the more you punish yourself about not being perfect, the more likely you are to see yourself through mud colored glasses and the more likely you are to engage in the very behavior that you had set out to avoid. Think about it. When are you more likely to chow down on an entire bag of chips, when you're feeling good about yourself or when you feel like crap? This relates to a deeper paradox. The more you accept yourself, the more you change in positive ways.

When I was in high school, my biology teacher showed that film that revealed how plants reacted to various types of emotional energy. The plants actually moved towards people who talked nicely to them and watered them and recoiled from people who said mean angry things to them. In "The Hidden Messages in Water," Masaru Emoto and David Thayne show a similar phenomenon happening with water. Under a microscope, water molecules look clear and crystalline when impacted by positive comments, and constrained and muddy when impacted by negative comments.

Our bodies are about sixty percent water, so it stands to reason that if negative, hateful comments affect plants and water molecules, they will have a similar wilting impact on humans.

Given this, it makes sense that most of us put so much energy into trying to get other people to love us. We're looking for an emotional balm to soothe our wounds. The problem with this strategy is that it makes us dependent on others for how we feel. We literally give them the power to determine our state of mind.

The good news is that you can change the way you feel about yourself by changing the way you treat yourself. If you want to feel loved and nurtured, try becoming a loving, nurturing parent to yourself. Rather than beat yourself up because you didn't get that promotion at work or because you ate an entire carton of Häagen-Dazs ice cream, try being gentle and compassionate with yourself. Comfort that little kid inside you who feels frightened, hurt and/or angry. He or she probably just needs to feel loved and supported. Do this every time you feel an impulse to punish yourself. Try this for a week and see what happens.

*Note: Physically beating yourself up, i.e. slapping, punching, pinching, burning, cutting or binging and purging as a form of punishment, is not only physically damaging but is also a sign of deeper psychological issues that would best be explored through some form of emotional counseling. If you have questions about how to find a counselor, contact me through my website and I will be happy to help you find someone with whom you might work well with.

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