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By Margie Ryerson, MFT



Margie Ryerson, MFT, is a marriage and family therapist in Orinda and Walnut Creek. Contact her at 925-376-9323 or margierye@yahoo.com. She is also available for parenting consultation.

You may be busy following through with your New Year's resolutions right now (or postponing them like some of us). When we make a New Year's resolution we often think of trying to accomplish something concrete such as losing weight, exercising regularly, or saving more money. I'd like to urge you to consider a different goal, for your own sake as well as your family's, and that is to consider how well you treat yourself emotionally. I see individuals who consistently give of their time and energy to others, who are devoted parents, spouses, children to aging parents, and overall good people, but who fail to give themselves adequate emotional support.

Many people in our community have high expectations for themselves. While it is important to aim high, it is also important to reconcile what is possible and what is not. Some individuals struggle with feelings of inadequacy or inferiority simply because they don't give themselves enough credit or because their expectations for themselves are too high. They may be quick to find fault with themselves, but very slow to embrace the idea of "good job," or "good for me," or "I really admire these qualities in myself." Sometimes they learned as children that it was being conceited or boastful to think highly of themselves. But quietly thinking we are good people in many ways is not at all the same as bragging to others or showing off.

One former client was a successful professional in her field. She had a loving husband, a bright well-behaved child, good health and financial security. "Ellen" had a binge-eating problem and constantly weighed fifteen pounds more than her goal weight. The root of her problem, however, wasn't her inability to control her eating or her obsession with her weight. Rather, she had a head full of negative thoughts about herself. She grew up in a family where her mother had been very demanding and quick to criticize. Ellen admired her mother, an attractive woman and an accomplished musician. Early on, she internalized her mother's messages that she wasn't pretty enough, smart enough, popular enough, and so on. Ellen grew up feeling that she was a huge disappointment to her mother, and she continued to find fault with herself long after her mother's death.

Ellen's challenge in therapy was to change the focus from her fixation on her weight and overeating to her underlying feelings about her mother and herself. She needed to recognize the hurt and anger she experienced as a child, and how her earlier perceptions and experiences continued to affect her self-concept. Eventually, as Ellen gained insight and increased feelings of worth, she was able to consciously practice treating herself well emotionally.

Frequently, personal dissatisfaction also extends to others, especially to members of one's family. A person who has negative feelings about himself (or herself) often tends to project these feelings onto those around him. He may be more short-tempered and critical of his spouse and children. He may try to take too much control of family members and situations in ways that provoke resentment and alienation. His attitudes and behavior not only make his life less satisfying but they create rifts in his closest relationships. And, as we saw in Ellen's case, a parent's attitudes and actions often have a profound effect on his children's self-esteem.

If you aren't treating yourself well enough emotionally, it is essential to recognize the consequences this can have on your children and family. Children model themselves after their parents, both positively and negatively. When I work with a highly self-critical teen or young adult, often one or both parents in the family are also very demanding of themselves. It is important to turn around self-disparaging messages so that you can acknowledge all the positive efforts you make and the admirable qualities you possess. An old book that is still popular, How to Be Your Own Best Friend by Mildred Newman and Bernard Berkowitz, is a wonderful guide for treating yourself with the same kindness and care you extend to others. If you don't feel quite "good enough," make it a priority for the New Year to give yourself the emotional support you deserve.

Reach the reporter at: margieryr@yahoo.com

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