

SECTION 7

KEY FACTORS AFFECTING YOUR BEHAVIOR

29. HOW YOUR EGO AFFECTS YOUR BEHAVIOR

Your ego has a profound effect on almost everything you do and say.

Ego is the Latin word for I, but its significance goes far beyond the usual meaning of this pronoun. Nevertheless, your ego is not you but your feelings about yourself. Feelings cannot be described accurately in words, but some observations about how your ego works will give you an idea of what it is and how it affects your behavior.

All feelings are some combination of your emotional and intellectual response to stimuli. They evolved to inform you of your status for survival at any given time. You feel good when you think your survival is being promoted and you feel bad when it is threatened.

Your ego is a combination of three levels of feelings. One level consists of the feelings you have when you detect and react to specific stimuli in your everyday activities. This level of feelings is constantly changing, going up with every success and down with every failure.

The second level of feelings is your "moods" that last for days or weeks. Moods are based on longer-term factors that affect survival, such as your health, the security of your job, and the quality of your marriage. You can visualize your short-term feelings as irregular ups and downs on the longer, slower, but larger waves of your moods.

Your moods in turn are variations in your underlying feeling of your status for survival. These feelings were formed early in your life by what you thought your chances of survival were then. Although your ego can change up or down to some extent based on your experiences in life, it is surprisingly constant. A person with a low ego doesn't improve it much when his short-term chances of survival improve. A person with a strong ego remains optimistic even when his current changes of survival are poor.

The egos of our early ancestors were based almost entirely on their impression of their chances of physical survival. When they started to form cooperative groups, their survival began to depend more on their acceptance by the other members in the group. Today, except when your physical survival is threatened by illness or war, your ego is determined almost entirely by your feeling of social acceptance. Your ego is good when you feel worthy of being accepted by others and it is bad when you think that you do not meet the requirements for membership in the group, whether it's a street gang or a professional society. The feelings that make up your ego are very intense because they are still associated with survival.

Some people have a strong ego in one area and a weak one in others, presumably because their early experiences in these subject areas were different. A self-made man, for example, might have a strong ego in business but a weak one socially. Some people are comfortable with people of their own sex but uncomfortable in mixed company.

Some have a good ego within their own ethnic or social group but a poor ego in dealing with anyone they consider superior.

However, your ego is not necessarily a correct measure of your social acceptance. It's only what you think your degree of acceptance is. Some people think that no one likes them. Others, ignoring all indications to the contrary, think almost everyone admires and respects them. Although most people have a mild to severely negative ego, almost everyone actually has more acceptance than he or she realizes.

Relations With Others

Your ego affects all aspects of your behavior with others. People with a poor ego are afraid that if others really knew them, they wouldn't like them. So they do everything they can to conceal their failings. Then they constantly patrol these defenses to fight off any attempt, real or imagined, to uncover their shortcomings. Whenever anyone gets near their sensitive areas, they react with unexpected violence, either fleeing from or attacking the person who represents the threat.

People with a positive ego feel that, even though they aren't perfect, their faults are not serious enough for others to reject them, so they don't have to constantly prove themselves worthy of social acceptance. And since they aren't afraid that they will be hurt if others uncover their faults, they don't have to be defensive about them. As a result, their feelings are not easily hurt, so they are less likely to lose status through frequent quarrels.

People who feel good about themselves don't need to diminish others to defend their status in the hierarchy. They can extend compliments, praise the achievements of others, and give a helping hand when asked for it. In contrast, the person with a poor ego cannot help peers move up, as that would reduce his own level even further. Just as a poor man cannot give others money he does not have, a person with a poor ego cannot offer a part of it to others in the form of compliments or praise. Moreover, he cannot accept compliments because this information is contradictory to what he thinks about himself.

People with a good ego can accept some criticism without being too upset by it. They know that whatever they did wrong is only a minor failing compared with their good qualities. Occasionally, they learn from the criticism and improve themselves. At worst, they shrug it off with no permanent damage to their self-esteem.

In contrast, people with low egos frequently have their feelings hurt. They detect insults in every conversation, even when they don't exist. At the extreme, they provoke others into making the insults they have been expecting. As no one likes to "walk on eggs" to avoid hurting someone's feelings, their behavior reduces their social acceptance even more.

The Effect of Your Feelings on Risk

Your ego also influences the risks you are willing to take in life. A secure person can take reasonable risks because he feels that an occasional failure will not hurt his social approval too much. People with a low ego can't risk any further reduction in their already low social acceptance, so they're afraid to try anything where they might fail.

There are, however, some exceptions, which occasionally turn out even worse. A few people feel that nobody likes them anyway so they have nothing more to lose by a failure. So they do something bold, as in entering a beauty contest, starting a business, or trying for a movie career. However, those who do succeed are then terrified that others will discover that they don't belong at that high level in the hierarchy. They try to boost their weak ego with street drugs, promiscuous sex, or outrageous behavior to shut off their fear of falling back to what they consider to be their true level.

Improving Your Ego

It isn't easy to improve your ego, but it isn't impossible, either. It's a slow process, but you can do it if you go about it in the right way. You now know about social acceptance, how it originated, and how to keep it. You know that social acceptance is based on making contributions of value to the group while minimizing those behaviors that offend others. So you can start to improve your ego by increasing your contributions to your group. You become a member of a committee or do some volunteer work. You'll be surprised how much better this makes you feel. And in the unlikely event that you don't succeed in this activity, you'll find that nothing really bad has happened to you. Once you recognize that there's something to be gained and little to be lost, you can move on to bigger and better activities. Your successes will slowly but surely improve your ego.

Then you can start to eliminate the negative opinions you have about yourself that reduce your ego. Most of them aren't correct, anyway. You might think, "I can't do anything right." There isn't anyone who can't do some things right. Besides, where did you get this destructive idea? No doubt your parents (teachers, peers, bosses) said it in a fit of anger. Since you can't purposely eliminate any thought from your brain, add something that makes it more correct, such as, "My parents said that I can't do anything right." This addition converts the thought from a fact to an opinion, and you know how often your parents (teachers, peers, etc.) have been wrong about other things.

If you think, "Women (men) don't like me," degeneralize it to "Betty and Tina don't like me," or at worst to, "Some girls don't like me." Eliminating or reducing the generalization brings the statement closer to the fact. Get into the habit of modifying every negative thought about yourself comes into your mind in this way.

Okay, you have some shortcomings, real or imagined. You came from an ethnic background that some people make fun of, or you have a limited education, or you haven't much money. Take a look at other people who have the same shortcomings. You'll find

that most of them have sufficient social acceptance. Some are well liked, and those who aren't are disliked for other reasons, such as the attitude they use to cover up what they consider their shortcomings. This should help you realize that, whatever you think of yourself, you are at least as well accepted as they are.

30. EXPECTATIONS

The members of an early cooperative group were expected to behave in ways that helped the group to survive. As survival of the group also increased the chances of survival of its members, they enforced this behavior on one another through social pressure.

No one prepared a list of those behaviors that helped the group and those that hurt it. The effect of some behaviors was obvious to almost everyone. Hard work helped the group and injuries to its members hurt it. However, the effect of many behaviors on survival was unknown. Did having intercourse in a field really increase its fertility? Did giving that girl to the river god prevent floods? Because the result of some behavior was unknown, this behavior was valued not on its true contribution to survival but on the members' expectation of its contribution to survival. As a result, most behavior was based on the members' expectations rather than reality. Nevertheless, these expectations were enforced by social pressure as though they resulted in true benefits or losses.

As noted, the more powerful members of the group forced the weaker members to behave in certain ways, such as waiting until the superior members were finished eating before they could eat what was left. That is, the more powerful members expected the weaker members to behave in a certain way and punished them with injuries if they did not meet their masters' expectations.

As a result, there are two principal sources of expectations. One is the expected benefit or harm to the group caused by a certain behavior, whether or not that effect is correct or not. The other is behavior expected by some members strictly for their own benefit.

Involuntary Expectations

Involuntary expectations are those imposed on one person by others, whether he likes it or not.

The more powerful members, whether in an early group or a modern society, impose expectations on weaker members. Some expectations result in behavior that promotes the group and thereby benefits all members. Some expectations, however, do not benefit either the group or those whose behavior is being controlled, but only those doing the controlling.

Parents control the behavior of their children by expectations, enforced by punishment if the child does not obey. Most involuntary expectations teach the child how

to gain social approval by behaving appropriately with other members of the group. Some, however, are imposed to benefit the parents and might not benefit the child in any way, as in expecting a child to be seen and not heard.

Legislators, teachers, clergy, employers, peers, mates, and siblings also impose involuntary expectations on others. Here again, some expectations benefit the child while others benefit only those doing the expecting. As a result, everyone is subjected to a bewildering array of involuntary expectations, some of which are contradictory and many of which do not benefit anyone.

Over time, some involuntary expectations of behavior have been enacted into laws and regulations. Those who don't meet the group's formal code of expectations have been punished by fines, imprisonment, beating, branding, or execution. Force is also used to punish less serious breaches of expected behavior. Military cadets are forced to do push-ups if they don't make their beds in the expected way. Parents punish a child with solitary confinement in a bedroom if he or she doesn't behave as expected at dinner.

Nevertheless, most involuntary expectations are informal and enforced in more subtle ways. The social pressure of other members through shunning, exclusion from group activities, and nonverbal disapproval, discourages anti-social behavior that does not hurt others physically or financially. Parents, teachers, or clergy often punish children simply by making them feel bad for "disappointing" them.

You also learn some involuntary expectations by observing the behavior of others, even though you are not aware that you have adopted them. Nevertheless, these hidden expectations show up when you feel that you "should" or "ought to" do something you don't want to do.

In summary of this point, much of your behavior is controlled by the expectations imposed on you by others. Some expectations benefit you. Some are unnecessary. Nevertheless, you will be punished in some way if you ignore any of them.

Voluntary Expectations

Everyone adds some expectations voluntarily as he or she goes along in life. A young man expects to be a partner in a law firm by age forty. A young woman expects to sell a short story to a major magazine. When most people don't achieve their self-imposed expectations, they punish themselves with bad feelings at least as severe as they get for failing to meet involuntary expectations.

Expectations Become Objectives

You measure your achievements against the expectations that you have accepted, voluntarily or involuntarily. As a result, these expectations become your objectives in life. As with all objectives, you feel good when you meet or exceed your expectations and you feel bad when you fail to meet them.

Your expectations have at least as much effect on your happiness as your achievements. For example, two people become vice-presidents of a company on the same day. One is deliriously happy because he never expected to get this far. The other is unhappy because he expected to be president by this time. Same achievement, yet one man is happy because he exceeded his expectations and the other is unhappy because he failed to reach his.

Striving to meet an expectation sometimes does force you to achieve a little more than you otherwise would. Raising a hurdle another notch might induce you to jump a little higher. At some point, however, you not only don't jump higher, but you don't jump at all. Much misery occurs through expectations that a person cannot achieve, no matter how hard he tries.

An especially destructive variation sometimes occurs when a parent, boss, or mate imposes an expectation on you. You are expected to get a B average at school. When you get close to meeting this expectation, it's suddenly changed. "Well, yes, I did say that I wanted you to get a B average, but I think you can get half A's if you really try." It's like working hard to get the ball down to the five-yard line in football. Then, just as you are about to score, the officials move the goal line. Unnecessary and unrealistic expectations might seem harmless to the people who impose them on others, but they cause their victims a lot of unhappiness.

Obsolete Expectations

Expectations are not set in stone. Neither are they directly connected to the behavior they control. As a result, expectations might or might not change as conditions change.

Some external conditions are constantly changing. At one time, children as young as six were expected to go to work. Now that our society is richer, most students are expected to complete high school.

There's no problem when expectations change appropriately as conditions change. The problem arises when conditions change and the expectation remain as they were. A familiar example occurs as a child becomes an adult. Some parents expect the new adult to continue to behave as a child. Or the new adult continues to behave as a child even though the parents expect him or her to grow up, get out, and get a job.

The point here is that many obsolete expectations cause unnecessary unhappiness.

Reducing Expectations Imposed on You

Since the failure to meet your expectations makes you feel bad, you can feel better by eliminating or loosening unnecessary or obsolete expectations. The first step is recognizing them. This isn't as easy to do as it might seem because all your behavior

seems correct to you. However, you can spot some of your unnecessary expectations by noting those behaviors that make you uncomfortable. You don't like to visit Aunt Aggie or you get sick when you learn that your mother intends to visit. Some behavior is necessary to keep your social acceptance, so you can't ignore all unwanted expectations. But do you really need to be chairperson of another committee, have the biggest house in the neighborhood, or keep your children spic and span?

Then check for expectations that were reasonable earlier in life but are obsolete now. For example, some expectations that were okay when you were a child might not be needed now. Other expectations are obsolete because the world has changed. You don't need to wear a tie and coat to attend a neighbor's barbeque.

Reducing Expectations You Impose on Others

Having removed some of the burden on the expectations imposed on you by others, consider the expectations you are imposing on other people, especially your mate and your children. You can identify them by your feeling of "disappointment" at something the other person does or doesn't do. Is their behavior not appropriate, or is your expectation unrealistic? Think how bad you felt when you disappointed your parent or boss. Do you really want to impose this unhappiness on others?

Expectations are especially important to the happiness of the partners in any relationship, including marriage. Each partner has both conscious and unconscious expectations of how the other person should behave. These expectations are not based on a careful analysis of the behavior needed to promote the relationship but are usually adopted unconsciously along the way in life. That is, he or she wants the other person to behave as he or she expects, at least in certain areas. Is it really important if your partner is more liberal or more conservative politically than you are? Is it necessary for your partner to participate in your athletic activities? Nevertheless, most people press their partner, subtly or forcefully, to change his or her behavior to meet their expectations. This might succeed in making minor changes, but it usually causes more dissension than it's worth.

Re-examine your expectations to be sure they are all necessary. You can then eliminate or reduce those that are really not needed to maintain and improve the relationship. The more unnecessary expectations you can eliminate, the happier you both will be.