

SELF-LOVE... WHERE HAS IT GONE?

The need to identify with someone, feel part of something, or to belong somewhere, is one of our most basic needs. Only self-preservation is probably a greater force. This need begins with our parents and extends to family and eventually broadens out to our peer group, culture, nation and world. This need to belong and identify with something more than ourselves is one of our normal human processes which exists because of our need for security and protection.

At the beginning of our life-journey we need to know that we are secure and can trust the world and so we look to our parents/guardians for that security and trust as they represent our whole world. We build through regular contact with them and those who are significant in our lives 'relationship bridges'. These bridges are how we first acquire a sense of our own importance and value. In fact, at the beginning of human development we are unconsciously measuring ourselves by the mirroring (responses) and the feedback we experience via these bridges of intimacy. The only way as children we have of developing a sense of ourselves and of our own worth is through a relationship with someone else. To begin with, we do not have an identity of our own. We are 'we' before we are 'I'. At first our identity is totally intertwined with those responsible for our upbringing, so their sense of self becomes our sense of self. Although with time we gradually become our own person, we still unconsciously carry some, if not all of the emotional baggage given to us by our parents/guardians, and so our real nature and purpose becomes largely overshadowed.

Low self-esteem (lack of self-love) begins with parents who themselves are emotionally impaired and are struggling with the legacy of their own upbringing. As a result of our overwhelming need to belong and feel a part of something, we identify with our parents/guardians because they are our first point of contact with the world - it is initially through them that we interpret and understand our experiences. This is the first step in what is called internalisation, which is the process of first absorbing and then integrating into oneself both the positive and negative messages that have been imparted by those who play key roles in our lives. These various messages then travel obediently along the 'relationship bridges' that we have formed and become the raw materials from which our self-image and feelings of self-worth are created.

Abandonment is the term that describes how we lose our authentic self. Parents/guardians who are shut down emotionally cannot positively mirror and affirm their child's emotional and psychological needs. This is a fairly common and very damaging form of abandonment but due to widespread social ignorance and lack of understanding in these matters, it continues unabated. Abandonment also includes abuse of any kind, as well as the entanglement and the sacrifice of the child's needs within the spoken and unspoken needs of the parents or the family system. Much of the abandonment that takes place within families is inadvertent, it takes place because the parents' own unmet needs continue to be unmet, and so their deficiencies filter down to the next generation via their moods, behaviours, attitudes and values.

The absence of self-love in our lives can be understood clearly when we realise how our family structures and systems help conceive and then evolve our self-image. Families are where we first learn about ourselves, and our core identity is constructed. So, if the family environment does not offer us unconditional love, meaningful attention, and real respect we will lack the personal resources to give ourselves what we need. We then learn to hide and conceal who we really are, because we are made to feel inadequate and not good enough, due to the lack of positive emotional regard within the family.