

ALL ABOUT RESPONSIBILITY

To achieve a healthy level of self-esteem, you must be able to accept who you are and be confident about your decisions and behavior.

But there is another important ingredient in the development of self-esteem that is often overlooked—the ability to take responsibility for your future. To live self-responsibly, you must be able to influence your behavior freely in three major areas ...

- Taking action in ways that will help you reach your goals.
- Being accountable for your decisions, priorities and actions.
- Thinking for yourself by examining and actively choosing the values that will guide yourself, rather than blindly accepting whatever you're told by family, friends or the culture in which you live.

Since being responsible for yourself requires effort, thought and a range of difficult decisions, many people convince themselves that it is an impossible challenge. Some blame others for their problems. Others hope that someone will come along and make everything all right.

Remember: You cannot respect or trust yourself if you continually pass on to others the burdens of your existence.

THE POWER OF SELF-RESPONSIBILITY

Self-responsibility is an active orientation to life, rather than a passive or victim-like orientation.

Key: Ask yourself the following two questions—“What possibilities for action exist? What can I do?”

Self-responsibility helps determine satisfaction and success in all areas of our lives.

Example I: In business, people who succeed don't limit themselves to doing only the tasks to which they are assigned. They constantly look for ways to contribute outside the parameters of their job descriptions. When successful people see a problem, they analyze it and create possible solutions.

Example II: In personal relationships, people who are most fulfilled go beyond saying, “I want ...” They ask, “What am I willing to do to get what I want?” They pay attention to the quality of the time they spend with their spouses, children and friends. They notice whether or not communication is clear, acknowledge their own feelings, are sensitive to the feelings of others, face conflicts and deal with them.

KNOWING OUR BOUNDARIES

Self-responsibility should not be confused with the popular New Age notion that we have caused everything that happens in our lives. This false belief can be calamitous for self-esteem, leading us to reproach ourselves for all kinds of things that are outside our control.

To be intelligent about living responsibility, we must know our boundaries. There are cases in which we really are powerless to achieve the results we want. What we must do is evaluate what aspect of the situation we have control over, act on that part and let go of the rest.

Proper self-responsibility should not be confused with taking inappropriate responsibility for others. Taking on inappropriate burdens is an act of irresponsibility toward oneself. And parents or managers to not help when they solve problems that should be solved by their children or

associates. They merely contribute to a lack of responsibility.

Trap: Focusing inappropriately on others' problems can be a way to avoid dealing with our own problems.

The principle of self-responsibility entail a profoundly important moral idea. Taking responsibility for our own existence implies respect for other people—the recognition that they do not exist simply to satisfy our needs.

We are not entitled to treat others as means to our own ends, nor to take their contributions for granted ... and we ourselves should not tolerate such treatment.

When we have goals requiring the cooperation and participation of others, our obligation is to offer them incentives that are meaningful in terms of their interests and needs. This is one of the meanings of self-responsibility.

HOW TO DEVELOP SELF-RESPONSIBILITY

Most of us are more responsible in some areas of our lives and less responsible in other areas. In fact, it is overly simplistic to say that an individual is or is not self-responsible.

Example: Someone may be a dynamo of self-responsibility in the office but passive and reactive at home, leaving the task of nurturing the relationship completely to his/her spouse.

Although total and unfailing self-responsibility may be unachievable all the time—we all slip sometimes—I believe we can learn to operate more self-responsibly if we become aware of the issue and take it seriously.

Strategy I: One of the most useful tools for moving toward this goal is to ask yourself the following question in as many situations as possible: “If I wanted to be fully self-responsible right now, what would I be doing?”

In most cases, you will know the answer. It's just a matter of listening to the response and acting upon it. If you ask yourself this question and think about the answer several times a day, you will find yourself developing the type of awareness that leads to self-responsibility.

Strategy II: A highly effective variation on this concept is to work with sentence-completion exercises. During the past 25 years, I have developed this technique and tested it on thousands of people and have had remarkable results.

For the next two weeks, begin each day by writing six to 10 endings to each of the following sentences:

- If I operate 5% more self-responsibly at work, I will ...
- If I operate 5% more self-responsibly in my relationships, I will ...
- If I accept full responsibility for my own happiness, I will ...

Don't concentrate intensely as you write. Don't worry if some of the same answers come up day after day. You'll find that this exercise—like the more general question mentioned earlier—stimulates the mind to make new connections. From this new way of thinking can come a more responsible approach to the world.

RAISING SELF-RESPONSIBLE KIDS

Although people can grow more responsible at any age, the best time to begin encouraging responsibility is during childhood.

It's almost never too early to begin instilling in children an understanding of control, consequences and active orientation. Strategies include:

Control: Turn over age-appropriate decision-making tasks to children as soon as they can reasonably handle them.

Example: Although you are the one who decide that your five-year-old needs to wear a sweater today, you can ask him, "Do you want to wear your blue sweater or your red sweater?" Keep looking for opportunities for your child to experience a sense of control through the choices he makes.

Consequences: Make sure your children are aware of the responsibilities that accompany appropriate privileges.

Example: You make it clear to your teenager that she is welcome to borrow the family car from time to time—provided she first asks permission and returns home at the time promised. If these conditions are not met, the privilege will be suspended.

Active orientation: Take your child's desires and dreams seriously, and follow up with action-oriented questions.

Example: When your adolescent share his fantasy of becoming a photographer or a doctor, help him brainstorm ways he might plan to reach his goal.