

Self and Other Relationships: Coping with Distressing Relationships

Jack A. Digliani, PhD, EdD

Most of us have many relationships, including those with spouses and other family members, friends, co-workers, supervisors, and so on.

We also have a relationship with ourselves. This is why you can be pleased with yourself, angry with yourself, and have various other thoughts about yourself. Self-thoughts are sometimes referred to as those that comprise our *self-concept*. Self-concept is related to how we feel about ourselves, our *self-esteem*. As you know from life experience, self-concept and self-esteem are interactive, mutually influential, and dynamic. They can and do vary, and they can change substantially over time. Where does this self-relationship capability come from? Most psychologists agree that we can thank the complexity of the human brain.

Hopefully, you have a positive, even if imperfect, relationship with yourself. If not, improving your self-relationship is possible. You can bring about desired self-relationship improvement by a self-assessment followed by implementation of various change-strategies. You can do this on your own or enlist the support of trusted others - including peer support team members and mental health professionals.

Self-assessment

A good place to begin a self-assessment is to ask yourself "who am I?" In response to this question, a second question inevitably follows, "what do I believe?" This second question is multidimensional...what do I believe about myself, any and all others, the world, the nature of reality, and so on. Responses to the "what do I believe" question range from the simple - "I believe I'm a good person," to the complex abstract - "I believe our universe is one of many holographic universes."

Self-assessment takes time and effort. Many of us do not take much time or exert much effort to look into ourselves this way. Instead, we stumble through life, often on "autopilot," frequently unaware that we may be influenced by conflicting or even contradictory compartmentalized beliefs.

If you take the time and effort to identify particular beliefs, you can move from "what do I believe" to "what is the evidence that this belief is accurate or true?" Evaluating evidence for a belief is called *reality testing*. For example, if you believe that you are a good person, what is the evidence that this is true? Do you act as a good person (as you define it) would act? Are you consistent in these actions?

If you believe that you are a good person, yet find yourself acting in ways that are inconsistent with how you believe a good person would act, you have an internal conflict that must be reconciled to improve your self-relationship. Another way of saying this is, to improve your self-relationship you must first sort out what you believe, then act in accordance with those beliefs.

Reality testing

Many beliefs can be reality tested. The actual process of reality testing a belief depends upon the belief and what a person accepts as evidence for or against it. As beliefs become more abstract, they become more difficult to reality test.

Over-generalized beliefs and reality testing

Many persons are prone to over-generalizing. Consider the over-generalized belief that "nobody likes me." This belief is most often observed in persons that struggle with relationships and report experiencing low self-esteem.

The veracity of the belief “nobody likes me” is immediately suspect. “Nobody” is an all-inclusive term. It includes everyone but yourself. It is a short-cut way of saying “no one in the world likes me.” (It is an interesting facet of the English language that “nobody” is similar to “everybody” in this way). This belief might be tested by first asking yourself - *nobody? Not a single person?* Even if you’re convinced that some, or maybe most, people don’t like you, generalizing this to “nobody likes me” is going a bit too far.

I have yet to meet a person that was absolutely disliked by everyone. I suppose it is possible, but it is not very likely. If you maintain the belief that “nobody likes me,” take a minute to think about it. Can you not identify at least one person for which this is not true? A fair self-evaluation of over-generalized beliefs such as this one most often results in a realization that the belief is inaccurate and thereby false.

A more accurate representation of the “don’t like me” belief genre might be “*some* people I know or am acquainted with don’t like me” or “*most* people I know or am acquainted with don’t like me.” If it is true that some or most people that you know or are acquainted with don’t like you, think about what this means...*some* or *most* is not *all*. Therefore, “some or most people that I know or are acquainted with don’t like me” necessarily means that either “some people do not dislike me” (are neutral about me) or some people like me. Either of these beliefs are significantly more likely to be true than the belief that “nobody likes me.”

Within this example, you can readily see how reality testing for over-generalization works. Whether you conclude that “some people do not dislike me” or “some people like me” (or both), your self-esteem is likely to improve, thereby improving your self-relationship.

Over-generalized false beliefs

A further difficulty with over-generalized beliefs such as “nobody likes me” is that not only are they generally false and negatively influence self-esteem, but they also often drive dysfunctional behavior. Dysfunctional behavior often creates additional or sustains existing self-relationship and other-relationship problems.

Of course, over-generalized beliefs at the other end of the “don’t like me” continuum can also cause difficulties. Consider the over-generalized belief “everybody loves me” or the related “I am special and superior to others.” Such beliefs are almost certainly false and are bound to create problems for persons that view themselves either way. In fact, in the extreme, such beliefs are components of narcissistic personality disorder* and several other mental disorders.

Beliefs and faith

Some beliefs are a matter of faith. Faith beliefs do not easily lend themselves to reality testing. This is understandable as beliefs based on faith are just that...taken on faith. Faith beliefs are normally developed in early childhood, taught by significant others, and influence us throughout our lifetime. Faith beliefs resist alteration, even when there is no supporting evidence or substantial evidence to the contrary.

Change strategies and becoming meaningfully aware

The best change strategies begin with belief awareness. Becoming *meaningfully* aware of beliefs is the primary goal of self-assessment. Becoming meaningfully aware of your beliefs involves reality testing the beliefs that can be tested, making any necessary belief adjustments based upon the reality test, and altering your thinking and behavior in accordance with adjusted beliefs. In other words, becoming meaningfully aware of your beliefs means that they will be reflected in the manner in which you choose to live your life. This is nothing less than *life-by-design* (Digliani, 2010/2023).

In addition to self-assessment and reality testing, there are other specific change strategies thought to improve the self-relationship. They include: separating feelings from facts, greater self and other forgiveness, avoiding or limiting "shoulds" and "musts" (everyone must like me or I'm a failure), avoiding false dilemmas (sometimes called *either or thinking* – either I'm a total success or I'm a total failure), engaging in fun activities, and changing your circumstances or environment.

Relationships with others

What of your relationships with others? If most of these relationships are satisfying and rewarding, congratulations, you're doing okay. But if some of these relationships are distressing and unrewarding, you can accept the status quo or consider the following:

- Talk to those with whom you would like the relationship to change – be clear, avoid ambiguity ("I would like to talk with you without us yelling at one another" **not** "I would like better communication") To be maximally effective, this option usually requires a change in thinking and behavior of all involved persons, including yourself
- Work on developing new ways to interpret others behavior so that it is less distressing to you ("It's not about me, maybe they're just having a bad day").
- Avoid certain topics. It would be great if we could discuss any topic with anyone without ending up angry, hurt, or distressed. But this is not the case for most of us. Avoiding discussion of particular topics with certain others, especially if such past discussions have consistently done nothing more than lead to undesirable negative outcomes, is a good way to manage and maintain a more positive, less distressing, relationship.
- Minimize contact. You may need to consider minimizing contact with a distressing person. While this can be difficult with some persons, like family members, co-workers, or supervisors, it can be done. Avoid "minimizing contact" in ways that create other and possibly more significant difficulties.
- Withdraw. If nothing else works and you feel the relationship is beyond improvement, consider withdrawing. Remaining in a distressing, barely tolerable, or toxic relationship is detrimental to your psychological and emotional well-being. When do such relationships cross the line to become intolerable? There is no single answer to this question. This is because toleration of maltreatment varies widely. Factors include: relationship expectations, sense of psychological/emotional abuse and/or dependence, threats of or actual physical violence, and an assessment of what is possible for you within your value system and current circumstances.

***Narcissistic personality disorder.**

Narcissistic personality disorder is a mental health condition in which people have an unreasonably high sense of their own importance. They need and seek too much attention and want people to admire them. People with this disorder may lack the ability to understand or care about the feelings of others. But behind this mask of extreme confidence, they are not sure of their self-worth and are easily upset by the slightest criticism.

A narcissistic personality disorder causes problems in many areas of life, such as relationships, work, school or financial matters. People with narcissistic personality disorder may be generally unhappy and disappointed when they're not given the special favors or admiration that they believe they deserve. They may find their relationships troubled and unfulfilling, and

other people may not enjoy being around them. Treatment for narcissistic personality disorder centers around talk therapy, also called psychotherapy.

Narcissistic personality disorder affects more males than females, and it often begins in the teens or early adulthood. Some children may show traits of narcissism, but this is often typical for their age and doesn't mean they'll go on to develop narcissistic personality disorder. Symptoms of narcissistic personality disorder and how severe they are can vary. People with the disorder can:

- Have an unreasonably high sense of self-importance and require constant, excessive admiration.
- Feel that they deserve privileges and special treatment.
- Expect to be recognized as superior even without achievements.
- Make achievements and talents seem bigger than they are.
- Be preoccupied with fantasies about success, power, brilliance, beauty or the perfect mate.
- Believe they are superior to others and can only spend time with or be understood by equally special people.
- Be critical of and look down on people they feel are not important.
- Expect special favors and expect other people to do what they want without questioning them.
- Take advantage of others to get what they want.
- Have an inability or unwillingness to recognize the needs and feelings of others.
- Be envious of others and believe others envy them.
- Behave in an arrogant way, brag a lot and come across as conceited.
- Insist on having the best of everything — for instance, the best car or office.

At the same time, people with narcissistic personality disorder have trouble handling anything they view as criticism. They can:

- Become impatient or angry when they don't receive special recognition or treatment.
- Have major problems interacting with others and easily feel slighted.
- React with rage or contempt and try to belittle other people to make themselves appear superior.
- Have difficulty managing their emotions and behavior.
- Experience major problems dealing with stress and adapting to change.
- Withdraw from or avoid situations in which they might fail.
- Feel depressed and moody because they fall short of perfection.
- Have secret feelings of insecurity, shame, humiliation and fear of being exposed as a failure.

(Narcissistic Personality Disorder information quoted from Mayo Clinic, www.mayoclinic.org)

Digliani, J.A. (2010/2023). *Reflections of a police psychologist*, 3rd-R ed., Bloomington: Xlibris.