



# mindset

BY KAREN STEWART, MA

## love yourself!

I often think that my most important job as a therapist is to teach people to love themselves, as the song goes, “truly madly deeply!” I find that most of us have a much easier time loving our partners, children, parents, or friends than we do ourselves. Many people spend their lives looking for someone to love and care for them. While there is nothing wrong with wanting one special person in our lives, having a partner is no substitute for loving ourselves.

I want to clarify what I mean by loving one’s self. The kind of love I am talking about is not self-indulgent, not narcissistic, and not selfish. Real self-love leads to real self-care, generosity and compassion. Real self-love is based on the recognition of that part of ourselves which is good and pure. As a Quaker, I call it “that of God”—God being however one conceives of the Divine. However, one does not need to have a belief in the Divine to recognize that pure essence within each of us, our best self, our wise self, our guide. Called by any name, it is the same.

Real self-love is not self-indulgent. We can justify a piece of cake or a purchase of something we don’t need as a “treat” for ourselves. But if we are overweight or cannot afford the purchase it is not a treat but a self-destructive act. Rather than taking real care of ourselves by choosing to eat only as much as we need and living within our budget, we may jeopardize our physical or financial health.

We need to comfort ourselves, but it would be so much better if we did it in ways that really enrich us—taking a walk, taking a hot bath with candles around us, being with a friend, meditating, practicing yoga, going for a run, going fishing. The list of good things we could do is inexhaustible.

Self-love helps us turn our thinking upside down. Rather than feel deprived by dieting, we feed ourselves as we would our beloved child. We eat nutritious food that tastes good and is satisfying and we eat only as much as we need. There would be nothing wrong with eating something frivolous now and then, but we would do so realizing that

the pleasure is momentary and not a substitute for what we are really craving: reassurance? a hug? a friend to talk to?

We take time to figure out what we are really craving and provide that. We shower our self with love, really feel it, really imagine being held—by a friend, parent, or in the embrace of the Divine. It might seem like an empty gesture, but in fact, it is the real thing. We know ourselves better than anyone, we know exactly what we need to hear and feel and we can provide it to ourselves.

Real love is not narcissistic. Narcissism is a pale substitute for real self love; it is an ego pretending. We can easily tell the difference between someone who is boastful and needs constant adoration and the person who is quietly self-confident, going about doing the right thing. When we really love ourselves we do not need the praise of others; our own self-appraisal is the most important. When we are in touch with our own inner wisdom we move with self-confidence and grace.

Real self-love is not selfish. When we are in touch with that source of deep knowing we do not act at the expense of others. We recognize that all people everywhere have that same source of goodness within them and we want to honor that. We come from a place of compassion and concern for others. When our giving comes from this deep place of self-love, we actually have more to give others; we don’t wear ourselves out by giving from an empty place. We take time to replenish ourselves.

Impossible you say? No, it is not impossible, but it does take patience and remembering what you want. It is a life work, but what could bring more satisfaction?

How do you get started? Make a list of comforting, nurturing things that you can do for yourself ranging from minimal to maximal effort. When you are stressed, take time to do one of the things on your list. Better yet whenever you think of it, take a few breaths and remember who you are, who you *really* are and send some love your way. Start with being compassionate with yourself, faults and shortcomings and all. **h&h**

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