



HEALTHQUEST

A QUARTERLY NEWSLETTER FOCUSING ON
MENTAL HEALTH ISSUES AND CONCERNS.

THE POWER OF PRAISE

How often have we heard that we can get more bees with honey than vinegar? Yet how often do we minimize or overlook the positive and focus on the negative or "the next step" instead?

Why, indeed, do we withhold praise? Often, it's because we want better performance and think criticism is the surest way to get it. Many people operate under the misconception that praising family members, colleagues (or even themselves) will just breed complacency or vanity.

In fact, praise is the oil that greases the wheels of performance. "It helps us to see the good in ourselves, to build on success, overcome difficulties, and not feel defeat by failure," says Warren Shepell's Montreal counsellor Guylaine Bouchard.

Everyone experiences failures. If these are repeatedly emphasized without being balanced by praise, we may gradually develop a way of thinking (conscious or otherwise) that says "this isn't worth the effort" or, on a deeper level, "I am not worthy."

The word praise comes from the Latin verb "pretiare" (to value highly). Maybe you have noticed that people who know how to give praise hold themselves and others in high esteem. They find it easier to acknowledge mistakes and accept new challenges because they do not perceive mistakes and uncertainty as evidence of unworthiness. Somehow they are able to inspire with their confidence: if you can do this, I bet you can do that.

Perhaps you've withheld praise because you were not sure how it would be taken. As Bouchard indicates, "what's important is the honesty and intention behind our words. As long as people sense we are being sincere - that we are not humouring them, giving them mixed messages or trying to serve our own purposes - our praise will likely be well received."

Here are some factors to keep in mind:

Praise recognizes effort as well as achievement. Bouchard recalls her experience in a classroom: "It was a particularly challenging lesson and many of us gave up hope of ever catching on; but at the end, the instructor made a point of honestly praising our efforts. That encouraged us to keep coming back and master the material."

Whenever possible, link praise to personal skill and effort as opposed to factors over which an individual has little or no control. Telling a colleague, "the way you followed up on that request made the client very happy," is more meaningful than congratulations on your fifth year with the company!"

Offer praise relevant to the issue. If someone is feeling discouraged about losing weight, be there for him or her. Let the person know you believe he or she is still a good person, but find a way to support so that he or she does not give up. "Better to remind them of the progress they have made so far. That tells them you share their concern and encourages them to continue" Bouchard says.

Don't make yourself the issue, she adds. "For example, when I say I'm proud of you, it means I'm happy; it does not tell you what you have done right."

With children, it is especially important not to confuse your pride or love for them with what they have or have not done right. Otherwise, they may have trouble separating parental approval from the personal satisfaction to be gained from their own efforts. When offering praise to others, put their deeds in the spotlight. Instilling a sense of pride in children is easier when we say, "That's something you can be proud of."

Try not to delay praise. Giving credit where and when it is due can go a long way toward avoiding misunderstandings and injured feelings. In meetings, for example, try acknowledging others' contributions as a normal part of the conversation: "Your idea sounds interesting," or "Thanks for pointing that out."

Find different ways to recognize people. This will prevent praise from becoming mundane. At work, recognize good performance with an upbeat note, praise in a company bulletin or in front of others in a meeting. With friends or family members, why not honour someone's achievement with a special dinner or outing or perhaps, with an amusing story or poem.

Tailor the reward to the person, but try to keep things fair. For example, don't recognize one sibling's scholastic achievements with a pat on the back and another's with a new computer game!

Break the "yes-but" habit. Yes, but...it's good, but...but not good enough. That's what we are really telling people when we let the word "but" slip into our expressions of praise. It's a word that "cancels out all satisfaction, all pleasure, all sense of accomplishment for what has gone before," states psychiatrist Dr. Arthur Freeman, in his book *The Ten Dumbest Mistakes that Smart People Make*. The word "but" may even turn the whole conversation into a fault finding exercise that prevents people from focusing on solutions.

Getting back to that report card (or any situation that may require problem solving as well as praise) try replacing "but" with "and". For example: "Yes, you've done really well in history - and I bet you can improve that math grade." "Yes-but...only gives excuses," says Dr. Freeman "Yes-and...is an agenda for action."

LEARNING TO PRAISE YOURSELF

Shakespeare wrote, "there's not one wise person among twenty that will praise himself," but when you think about it, most of the characters in Shakespeare's plays were not very happy campers! Recognizing the good in others is easier when we can see it in ourselves. Here's how to begin making that "little critic" in your mind move over a bit to accommodate your "cheering section":

Start looking at the 'Big Picture'. It's important to realize that all human traits have both positive and negative qualities. Stubbornness, for example, can prevent us from hearing others out and from learning. It can be the "glue" that keeps us sticking to a challenging task. Being meticulous will reduce the likelihood of errors. On the other hand, it can keep us from moving on to other tasks.

As Guylaine Bouchard suggest, whenever your "little critic" starts rehashing your faults, why not tell it firmly "this isn't the issue here, the issue is developing my judgment about when to use, for example, my stubbornness: when and where to use it - and to what extent."

Praise yourself for the steps that you make in exercising good

judgment - or for any action you have taken towards meeting a goal. Many successful people are in the habit of doing a nightly "inventory" where they take 15 minutes or so to review the events of the day; note how they reacted towards them and where improvement may be needed, and where they can give themselves a pat on the back.

Praise yourself for small improvements. Remember that big improvements are the accumulation of many little ones. As your self-confidence grows, so will the size of your improvements.

Did you ever stop to think of the impact that you make on someone, simply from the way you interact with that person? You may not ever realize the influence that you have over some, and the influence others have over you. All of this accomplished by language and communication. You may not be able to change the attitude of people you answer to, but you can encourage the people you deal with - those who answer to you - children, employees, and family and friends. And remember that no one wants to hear that they're disappointing you by not doing what is expected.

Would you like to know if there is a way that you can become a more positive and encouraging person, to those around you, and yourself?

You may speak to an EAP counsellor to learn how to get yourself into the habit of using positive language and praise in place of what you use now. And, if you're on the "receiving" end of negativity, please speak to one of our counsellors, because we know that under those conditions, self-confidence can become very fragile and coping can be difficult.

If you have any questions about this topic, or if you wish to discuss a personal situation you may be experiencing, we invite you to contact your EAP counsellors to arrange a telephone or in-person counselling session.

All contact between you and your counsellor is completely confidential.

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