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Active Acceptance

By Tal Ben Shahar

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When the CEO of a company I had been consulting for expressed interest in a leadership seminar, I asked one of my closest friends, an expert on leadership and an excellent speaker, to help me. My friend and I planned the seminar together and then divided up the teaching between us. Looking at him from the side, seeing the participants captivated by his eloquent presentation, I could not help feeling some regret over asking him to join me. I was jealous.

I was so upset with myself that I hardly slept for three nights. How could I feel jealousy toward a close friend? How could I feel regret over asking him to work with me when I knew that everyone involved -- myself and the participants -- learned so much more because of him? Finally, I decided to tell him what I felt, partly as confession, partly as an attempt to ask for his counsel. He told me that, observing me teach, he felt jealous as well. On that day, and for a long time after, we discussed our respective experiences of jealousy; simply talking about it made us feel better and brought us closer together. Our only conclusion, though, was that jealousy is natural and, to some degree, unavoidable.

Certain feelings are natural, a predetermined part of our constitution. A success of a friend may elicit jealousy; a sign announcing auditions for a play in which we had always wanted to participate may evoke fear. In *Notes from the Underground*, Dostoyevsky captures the immutability of nature, and the futility of trying to deny it: "Two and two do make four. Nature doesn't ask your advice. She isn't interested in your preferences or whether or not you approve of her laws. You must accept nature as she is with all the consequences that that implies"

While, at times, our nature leaves us no choice about the onset of certain feelings -- such as fear or jealousy -- we can choose what to do with these feelings. Neither my friend nor I chose to feel jealousy -- we had no say in the matter -- but we did have a choice over our subsequent course of

action. Our first choice was whether to suppress or accept our emotional reaction, whether to deny or acknowledge that which is. Our second choice was whether to act in accordance with our initial reactions (stop collaborating with people we feel are better than we are, for instance) or not (create as many alliances with competent people as we possibly can).

Having the second choice -- of acting in accordance with our feelings or not -- presupposes choosing to accept them. If we choose to ignore or deny our feelings -- because we refuse to accept that we can be jealous of a close friend or are too afraid to try out for a play -- we allow our emotional responses to control us. For example, we act harshly toward our friend and then rationalize our behavior; or we decide not to audition for the play and convince ourselves that we didn't really want it anyway. Feelings, if not recognized, control us in the same way that repressed experiences do. Overcoming repression is about admitting that certain experiences had happened -- admitting to what is -- and thereby freeing ourselves from their control.

Refusing to accept reality for what it is initiates a vicious cycle. Had I denied that my feelings toward my friend were a consequence of my jealousy, I would have looked for an alternative explanation for my dis-ease around him. We are creatures of feeling and reason -- once we feel a certain way we have the need to find a reason for our feeling. Rather than dealing with the real reason for my emotional reaction, rather than admitting to feelings of which I do not approve, I would have, most likely, justified them by finding faults in my friend. Part of me, however, would know that I have deceived myself and committed a wrong -- and since my friend had been the cause of my self-deception, my resentment toward him would have increased. To pacify our conscience, we often condemn those whom we have wronged. At the end of the cycle that started with denying my real feelings, I would have harmed myself, my friend, and our relationship.

The approach we have to take toward feelings we dislike has to be one of active acceptance. Acceptance refers to our respect for reality, for those things we have no control over, for things as they are. Qualifying "acceptance" with "active" refers to the choice we have following the experience. Both action and acceptance are necessary: acceptance without action is resignation; and by acting without first accepting how we feel, we allow ourselves to be controlled by our reactions.

The serenity prayer of Reinhold Niebuhr captures the essence of active acceptance. It asks for "the serenity to accept the things we cannot change, the courage to change the things we can change, and for the wisdom to know the difference." I cannot change the fact that I feel jealousy, but I can change how I behave when I feel the way I do.

While developing my theory of self-esteem, I initially believed that true self-esteem manifests itself in

complete independence from other's evaluation. For years I refused to accept that what others thought or felt about me mattered, and every time I felt hurt by criticism I reproached myself for being so weak. Yet, my need for approval did not only persist -- it intensified.

A few years ago I attended a lecture by a psychologist whose work focused on the need for complete independence from approval as a prerequisite for happiness. I had admired his work for years and could not wait to meet him, so after his inspiring and brilliant lecture I introduced myself. We exchanged a few words and then he asked me, "So, what did you think of my talk?" I told him how much I loved it and then told him how much his work had influenced my thinking. A few minutes later a woman came by to talk to him and after a few exchanges he asked her: "So, what did you think of my talk?" She told him that she thought it was great. For the rest of the evening I watched him, as he moved from person to person -- from admirer to admirer -- and the same pattern continued. After a few minutes into a conversation he would ask what the person thought of his talk, and he seemed pacified only when the response was unequivocally positive. When one of the attendees said, "Overall the lecture was great" the psychologist's lightning-speed reaction was: "What do you mean 'overall'? What didn't you like? What was wrong with it?" It seemed to me that, throughout the evening, his questions were primarily motivated by a strong need for approval -- not by a desire to learn and grow. Here was a sixty year-old man, brilliant, accomplished, revered, a champion of independence -- and apparently obsessed with approval.

My experience that night helped me recognize two notions concerning psychological health. First, that our need for approval is innate, part of our nature. Second, that any attempt to suppress innate feelings lead to their intensification -- sometimes to the point of obsession and loss of control.

Refusing to accept my jealousy because I don't like feeling as I do toward my friend or refusing to accept my need for approval because I don't like feeling dependent, is like refusing to accept the law of gravity because I don't like the fact that I cannot fly. We have no choice about the existence of the law of gravity, it simply is, just as we have no choice about experiencing jealousy at times or about wanting others to admire us. If we refuse to accept the law of gravity because we don't like it, we will pay a price the first time we try to defy it by jumping out of a window. Similarly, we pay a price -- a high psychological price -- when we choose to ignore or deny that which is in the realm of our feelings.

What would our life be like if we refused to accept the fact that we can neither fly nor run at 200 miles per hour? Imagine the self-reproach, the feelings of inadequacy that would dominate our daily existence. And yet, so many of us reproach ourselves and feel inadequate for emotions that are as much a part of our constitution as our physical limitations. If we accept the law of gravity as a given,

we can design machines that can help us fly at high speeds; if we accept our feelings as a given, we can choose the course we want our life to take.

We are not doing ourselves justice when we reproach ourselves for feeling a certain way. Moral evaluation -- whether something is good or bad -- presupposes choice. We may not like the law of gravity, but the law in and of itself is neither good nor bad -- it simply is; we may not like feeling the need for approval, but the feeling itself is neither good nor bad -- it simply is. Feeling jealousy toward my friend does not make me a bad friend; if, however, I jeopardize my friend's success because of my jealousy, then I am a bad friend. We all have an image of our ideal self, an elaborate construct of the kind of person we would like to be. While it is not always possible to feel as this constructed self would (fearless and devoid of jealousy, for example), we can act in accordance with its ideals (courageous, benevolent, and so on).

Active acceptance is about recognizing things as they are and then choosing the course of action we deem appropriate and worthy of ourselves. It is about recognizing that at every moment in our life we have a choice -- to be afraid and to act courageously, to feel jealousy and to act benevolently, to want approval and to act autonomously -- to be human because we accept our humanity.

About the author:

Tal Ben-Shahar, Ph.D., author of *The Pursuit of Perfect: How to Stop Chasing Perfection and Start Living a Richer, Happier Life*, is the *New York Times* bestselling author of *Happier*. He taught one of the most popular courses in Harvard's history, and he currently consults and lectures around the world to multinational organizations, the general public, and at-risk populations. He obtained his Ph.D. in organizations behavior and his B.A. in philosophy and psychology from Harvard.

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