Dear Alice,

I have a problem with self-confidence. Whenever a person complements me about something, in my head, I disagree with them. This has also affected my love life. When I am in a relationship, I can't help but to ask myself, why is this person interested in me? Well, that's all I wanted to say. Please help me by giving me advice.

? seeking advice

Answer

Dear seeking advice,

It's natural to doubt ourselves from time to time when we receive compliments or appreciation. Accepting compliments graciously can seem arrogant, or the compliment can make people feel undeserving, but really it is about self-acceptance and self-respect. In fact, learning to accept a compliment may be a first step in healing. (If someone says to you, "I love your dress!" instead of responding with, "Oh this? I've had it forever," you might say, with appreciation, "Thank you for noticing.") After you say it, see how you feel. Also, notice the response you get. It's possible that attracting positive attention is something you find challenging, and that can keep you down. Loving yourself is a way to improve relationships with yourself and others. When you feel confident and secure, these qualities radiate through you, and influence your behaviors, so that you act confidently and securely. You then also attract attention, including compliments.

Perhaps you can identify reasons for your lack of confidence and self-worth. Can you recall a specific episode that led you to feel less confident or worthy? A turning point? Or, has it always been hard for you?? To counter negative thoughts, you might verbalize the reverse of what you usually tell yourself. In other words, reframe the sentences to reflect a more positive perspective. For example, if you think you're a slow worker, instead emphasize how it's because you are detail-oriented ? that you focus on quality rather than quantity. When trying these approaches, pay particular attention to how you are feeling during those times, and record your thoughts and behaviors in a journal.

Another tool to use is visualization. For instance, imagine or picture yourself feeling confident and secure. How would you act, dress, walk, stand, and speak? Find a role model ? someone you know or someone famous ? whom you feel exudes confidence and well-being, and take notice of his or her behavior(s). Focus on the role models' stature, and the way they speak...
and live. If you can, ask them to help you learn about how they think, how they have overcome a tragedy or a challenge, or pick their brains to understand their thought processes and personal life philosophy. For those you can't ask in person, it may help to watch a video and/or read an (auto-) biography of some folks you admire to learn about their personal adversities and how they learned to be their confident, gracious selves.

Additionally, there is the "act as if" strategy. You act "as if" you are a secure, confident person, and then you may find yourself living it. The more you act "as if," the more you incorporate positive self-talk in your life, the more you can reflect this change to others, as well as own it for yourself, the more the confidence from within will build and start to shine through.

You can also help yourself feel more capable, more worthy, by helping others and/or by providing community service or volunteer work. This way, you can think about others rather than focusing on (the negative part of) yourself. Volunteer at a shelter, soup kitchen, or a hospital, or tutor children or adults to read. The rewards are priceless and it will likely take you out of yourself a bit.

No matter what strategies you use, boosting your self-confidence is neither an easy process, nor one that will work itself out overnight. Enlisting the help of others, such as a therapist, family member, or friend ? anyone you feel comfortable confiding in ? can make a difference. If you're unsure where to find a mental health professional, you can ask your health care provider for a referral, or read How to find a therapist in the Go Ask Alice! Emotional Health archives.

So, remember to give and accept those compliments ? you deserve them!

Alice!
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Stress & Anxiety

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