



How Self Worth Affects Identity



Those growing up in dysfunctional family environments may lack a fundamental sense of self-worth, causing them to seek a sense of significance in ways that are unhealthy, unsustainable, and dependent on external validation.

To gain a sense of significance, some take on the hero role, seeking praise for their achievements. Some become jokesters, making others laugh while suppressing their inner turmoil. Some become rebels, seeking approval from deviant peer-groups. Lastly, some may retreat into isolated fantasy worlds.

Coming from a dysfunctional family plagued by addiction, individuals take on one or more of the above roles, carrying the negative long-term effects into adulthood.

These may include underdeveloped coping strategies, low self-esteem, acting out, attention-seeking, self-isolation, drug use, gambling and sexual addiction, hoarding, work addiction, codependency, in addition to heightened levels of mental health issues including depression and anxiety.

Overcoming these negative effects requires confronting the unique role one has played throughout childhood, develop personal boundaries, and regain a sense of significance.

Let's take a closer look at the hero role mentioned previously.

One way individuals attempt to gain a sense of self-worth is through the identity of the hero. At an early age, this consists of over-achievement and praise seeking, but can later turn into codependency.

This occurs when the individual becomes dependent on an addict/alcoholic for their sense of identity.

Under the guise of being “the responsible one”, they feel like a victim, living in a state of anxiety amidst the chaos of addiction. The enabler feels like they need to hold everything together, taking on extra responsibilities, while trying to change the alcoholic through manipulation that quickly fails, breeding discontent.

“If I don’t do it, who else will?” the enabler asks.

While they manage to hold the dysfunctional household together, they are also unknowingly contributing to the addiction by making excuses for the addict, taking on the extra responsibilities so the addict does not experience the full negative consequences of their behavior.

Specific enabling behaviors may include calling the addict's workplace to lie about why the addict cannot show up, taking on extra employment to compensate for financial strain, in addition to keeping the household in working order to compensate for the addict's neglect. This role sacrifices one's personal boundaries, leading to resentment.

The identity of the victimized hero provides a false sense of self-worth, rooted in a mutually destructive codependent role.

Without the enabler, the addict faces the full consequences of their behavior; without the addict, the enabler loses the unhealthy foundation to their false identity that protects them from having to experience their inner lack of self-worth. Their high achievements and/or moral excellence in the eyes of others provide external validation, but this is still only a thin veneer hiding their inner guilt and sense of “not being enough”.

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This criticism of others causes resentment among others who begin to perceive the hero as arrogant and difficult to be around because of the high expectations placed on them. But this high expectation of others is a projection used to cope with their high expectations of themselves.

The problem is that the expectations of the hero are just as unattainable for others as they are for the hero, leading to a spiral of constant disappointment and distancing social relations.

Identities gained from toxic roles fueled by a low sense of self-worth are the opposite of identities gained from healthy roles fueled by a secure sense of self-worth.

Rather than being drawn to play a dysfunctional role to gain a sense of self-worth, individuals who have a sense of self-worth pursue healthy roles and maintain a sense of personal boundaries. Secure attachments during early childhood foster this fundamental sense of self-worth.