

What Kind of Person Do You Want to Be?

By Steven Stosny, Ph.D

Don't ask yourself what kind of person you are.

I receive a dozen or so emails every day from strangers wanting psychological advice. Although they focus on complaints about family members and co-workers, hidden between the lines in most of these rather long missives is the implicit query, "Why do I put up with this?" And that begs the deeper question, "What kind of person am I?"

Of course it's impossible to give responsible advice by email, even if there weren't so many requests, but I would like to tell these unhappy authors to focus on behaviors within their control. To achieve meaningful behavior change, the most salient question is this:

"What kind of person do I want to be?"

No easy question to answer. But a good starting place is to decide what you want to motivate you.

There's always a choice, provided that you don't spend your life on automatic pilot or wondering what kind of person you are. This post and the next will cover the motivational choice most likely to produce growth and psychological well being: the *creation of value*.

Value

There is a unique drive within humans to create value, to invest appreciation, time, energy, effort, and sacrifice in certain persons, groups, objects, and behaviors. Note that we don't literally experience value so much as create it. A sunset has value only if we actively invest the time and effort to appreciate it. Civilization is not a by-product of the instinct to survive and reproduce, as I recently read; it is a result of the drive to create value.

Unlike mere excitement or indulging in what you like and enjoy, creating value makes you feel like a better person. I can be exhilarated by a basketball game, enraptured by a

What Kind of Person Do You Want to Be?

By Steven Stosny, Ph.D

bowl of ice cream or fascinated with a flickering candle, but my life has more meaning when I help my daughter solve a problem or recognize the basic humanity of a criminal.

In heightened states, the creation of value gives a keen sense of well being and vitality - you feel more alive and alert looking at a sunset or connecting to a loved one or expressing genuine compassion or appreciating something creative, committing to a cause, connecting to a community, or achieving some sort of spiritual knowledge.

Core Values

The specific values we create are highly personal, but they tend to fall into broad categories of *core values*: basic humanity, attachment/love, appreciation of beauty in nature and created objects, a sense of community, and some notion of spirituality or transcendence.

Your core values are what you regard as the most important things to and about you. They inspire a wish to improve, appreciate, connect, and protect. They are what you "stand for" and how you would like to be remembered. Adherence to core values gives a sense of authenticity (you know who you are), meaning, and purpose. Breach of them stimulates guilt, shame, anxiety, and eventual identity diffusion. Not investing enough in core values is what people regret the most at the end of their lives.

Value Flows Outward

Value needs to pour out of us, not into us. In other words, an authentic sense of personal value depends on the amount of value we create, not on how much we are valued by others.

For example, it does not feel good to be loved when we do not love. Though it may be an ego boost at first, one-way love inevitably produces guilt for not returning it or inadequacy for the inability to return it or self-doubt for getting something we don't deserve.

What Kind of Person Do You Want to Be?

By Steven Stosny, Ph.D

More importantly, if we seem to need value poured into us, we necessarily see ourselves as empty and powerless and become vulnerable to self-abuse or manipulation by others. We will lead lives of little meaning, rife with numbness, anger, or resentment; we'll become depressed or rebels without a cause.

Those who approach love under the illusion that they have a hole inside that someone else must fill tend to find lovers with very small cups.

That's because people with big cups - a lot to give - look for other people with big cups, so they can get as much as they give. Those with small cups look for lovers with big holes who will appreciate what little they can give. The illusion that value must be poured into us leads to failure in many endeavors but is especially disastrous in love relationships.

Emotions and Value

Emotions are necessarily embedded in the creation of value. To paraphrase Silvan Tomkins, with emotion, anything is important, and without it, nothing is. Positive emotions signal increase in value-creation; negative emotions indicate loss of value. Thus emotional pain and emptiness are not punishment for bad behavior, as my well-meaning elementary school teachers drubbed into my head (and behind). Rather, emotional pain and emptiness are motivations to create more value, which is the only thing (besides drugs and distraction) that alleviates them. You won't stop being hurt, angry, or depressed over an argument with a loved one until you look at yourself and your loved one with more compassion. You won't stop being irritated by charitable solicitations until you give what you truly believe is right to give. You won't stop feeling depressed or anxious until you appreciate more.

There is one big problem with emotions and values in regard to motivational choices. The emotions embedded in values are all but indistinguishable from those stimulated by the environment. The well being engendered by loving, for instance, is often confounded with that of being loved. The shame of hurting a loved one is easily confused with the pain of being hurt by a loved one.

What Kind of Person Do You Want to Be?

By Steven Stosny, Ph.D

Our inability to distinguish emotions that are motivations from those that are reactions is what makes feelings such a lousy guide for behavior. Consistently acting on feelings leads to frustration and powerlessness - reactive feelings are controlled by your environment. The value you create depends entirely on you.