

Understanding Selfishness, Self Responsibility, and Self Care

With LaShelle Lowe-Charde

During these times of great transformation and change, it's more important than ever to be able to discern among selfishness, self-responsibility, and self-care. Isolation due to COVID-19 served as a catalyst for many people to become more aware of self-care. By participating actively in social justice movements, organizing around the upcoming U.S. elections, or working as a healthcare provider you may have gained more awareness of what it means to engage from self-responsibility. And, at times, you might find that you are accusing yourself or others of being selfish.

How can you engage with these three terms in a way that is useful and life serving? Let's do some sorting so you have clear points of reflection to consider.

Selfish Behavior, Thought, and Attitude

Let's begin with some possible definitions of selfish and what might be going on when you find yourself caught in that type of behavior or judgment. Selfishness can be defined as any action taken without regard to the impact or cost of that action on oneself or others in the short- or long-term. It can most easily be recognized in these ways:

Selfish behavior often includes an attempt to control others or situations.

Selfish thoughts contain frequent judgment of self or others.

A selfish attitude has inflexible expectations or attachments regarding things, people, or ideas of how things "should" be.

A mind gripped by selfishness is viewing the world through a narrow lens that only seeks the answer to self-focused questions like:

"How will this contribute to my safety?"

"Will this be pleasurable for me?"

"What could I lose?"

"What could I gain from this?"

By themselves, these questions don't imply selfishness; rather, it is the lack of additional care and concern for a diversity of needs in oneself and others that denotes them as selfish. Like any harmful behavior, selfish behavior arises out of unconscious fear, pain, ignorance, or reactivity. Accusing others of selfishness, however, may most often come from reactive self-neglect. There is a positive correlation between chronic poor self-care and sudden occurrences of selfish behavior along with accusations of others as selfish. When it comes to poor self-care, selfishness might be expressed as a kind of thinking that separates you from others, i.e., "Others need rest to thrive, but not me. I am different."

Self Responsibility

Self-responsibility, on the other hand, includes an active effort to live from the truth of interdependence, bring compassion to fear, pursue transformation and growth, manage reactivity, and return to love. When you engage in self-responsibility, you consider your needs equally with the needs of others. Your thriving is as important as the thriving of the other living beings that you serve. Orienting to self-responsibility means asking questions like:

“Am I aware of my needs and responding to them in a non-reactive way?”

“Am I willing to make changes when I realize that I am taking action or making decisions that cost the needs of others or myself?”

“What unique strengths do I bring that could be of service to others?”

“How can I care for myself in a way that allows me to offer service joyfully and love easily?”

Self Care

Understanding what is truly self-care is, perhaps, the most complex. You often may find yourself having an inner conflict about whether you deserve a particular comfort or form of support/nourishment. First, it's important to remember that the mind that tries to decide if you “deserve” something or not is not the mind that can access clarity.

Marshall Rosenberg, the founder of Nonviolent Communication, spoke of the concept of deserve as the most violent concept on our planet. Deserve is not about responding to life. Deserve is about passing judgment and deciding whether you or another should be punished or allowed to thrive based on invented standards of the one judging. All beings are worthy of having their needs met and living in safety and care. Thus, when you notice that the concept of deserve has entered your thinking, label it as reactivity and take time to become grounded and resourced before returning to the decision at hand.

When the following three qualities of mind and heart are present, you will be able to access clarity about self-care: open flexibility, curiosity, and responsiveness.

1. **Open flexibility:** Attending to your needs in harmony with others requires open flexibility — a profound letting go of your fixed ideas and expectations about how things or people should be. Life is constantly in flux in this interconnected web of life. It is naturally light, creative, and flexible, allowing movement in all directions. Your needs are most easily nourished when you remain open to life's flow, when you follow the natural arising of generosity and care in your heart, when you tread lightly with reverence, and, most fundamentally, when you deeply know that when our social and structural systems do not support thriving for all, they do not support thriving for anyone. Each time you wake, bathe yourself in gratitude, then notice what's new in you, in others, and in nature.
2. **Curiosity:** A mind gripped by fear cannot get curious. A heart shut down in worthlessness and insecurity cannot enjoy a pregnant stillness. Curiosity is one of the most reliable signs that you are grounded in love and compassion. Cultivate curiosity. Ask questions. Train yourself to catch the symptoms of fear and insecurity like judgment, assumptions, and rehearsing old stories and beliefs. Remind yourself to wonder.
3. **Responsiveness:** Open flexibility and curiosity help create an internal spaciousness that

allows you to remain attuned to life and to respond in the moment with care and creativity. When you are responsive to the life in you and in others, you often surprise yourself. You enjoy a sense of grounded spontaneity that goes with the flow. The lack of resistance is a palpable sense of lightness and ease. Perhaps the most enjoyable aspect of responsiveness is discovery. Something seems to move through you and you discover it as it appears. Watch for signs of resistance like frustration, anger, resentment, crankiness, and contraction. Give yourself the directive, "Melt!" Melt the body tension. Melt the fixed ideas. Melt the fear and insecurity. Anchor. Turn toward what's actually happening in the moment.

In sorting any complex experience, you might get lost in a shower of words and concepts. Remember, you can always return to noticing and beginning from a basic felt-sense of contraction or expansion. When you resist life or are caught by reactivity, you will notice a feeling of contraction.

You are fundamentally an expansive being. When you are aligned with your own authenticity and the flow of life, you will notice a feeling of expansiveness. When you start with this baseline of awareness, sorting experience in more complex ways will fall into place more easily. Selfish behavior, thought, and attitude are accompanied by contraction. Self-responsibility and self-care are accompanied by expansiveness.

Practice

Take a moment now to review these three qualities of open flexibility, curiosity, and responsiveness. Identify a recent example of your own expression of each.