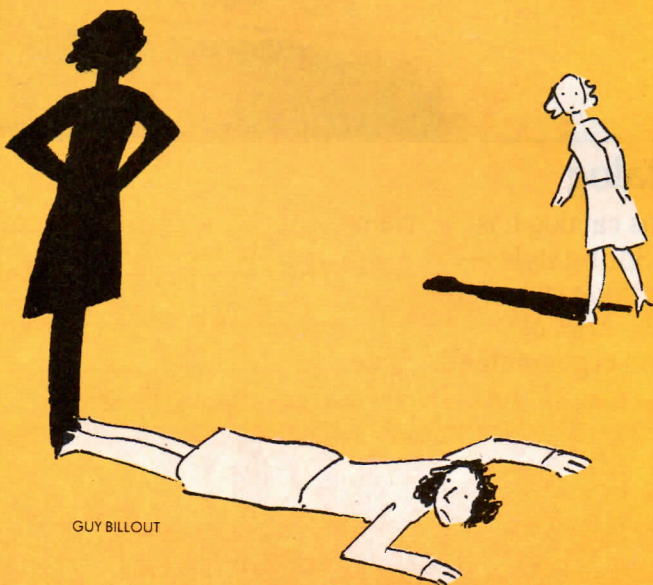


HOW TO STOP PUTTING YOURSELF DOWN



GUY BILLOUT

I've been putting myself down for so long that it's become as much an involuntary reflex as blinking. It started somewhere in my childhood, when I could boast a klutziness second to none; a figure that resembled a tennis ball; a math ability slightly above that of a chimpanzee; and an older sister who was always there to pull me down a notch if I started feeling good about myself. As a teenager, I had my fair share of acne and rejection, which kept self-esteem at bay and helped me refine the art of putting myself down. As I grew older there were enough academic failures, social fiascos, professional setbacks, and romantic catastrophes to keep me in practice. But by then I hardly needed these outer confirmations of my insufficiency; putting myself down had become a habit.

Most people indulge in the self put-down occasionally. Even those with the healthiest of egos give themselves a kick in the pants every now and then. But some of us do it so continuously you'd think we'd confused it with breathing. We zero in on all the negative events in our lives—all our supposed failures—and at the same time, we disregard all the positive events. We may just have received a raise at work, but what sticks in our minds is that we've put on weight. Conversely, we may take off a dozen pounds, but we focus on the fact that we don't make enough money to buy new clothes. In our minds, the good is always outweighed by the bad, even when the scales are clearly tipped in good's favor.

According to New York psychologist Janet Bachant, Ph.D., those of us who are so hard on ourselves have internalized the negative, critical voice of an important figure in our lives—a parent, perhaps—and find ourselves unable to offset that voice with a more reasonable, balanced viewpoint. For example, my friend Amy can make a fabulous dinner for half a dozen people, then toss and turn all night because, during the introductions, she forgot the last name of one of her guests. In turn, I can spend literally days after her dinner party berating myself for the fact that when I try to duplicate Amy's ginger chicken, it comes out tasting like something that's been stored in a bank vault for several years.

In contrast to Amy and me is my friend Sue. A commercial artist in her early thirties, she has a wonderful sense of humor about herself, can admit to her shortcomings, but feels good about herself and doesn't dwell on her failures or imperfections. She says she knows her failings, such as the fact that she is, at a party, "a complete social cripple." ("I latch on to one or two people I know and don't let them out of my sight. I follow them around the room—to the bathroom if I have to—in terror that I'll lose sight of them and have nobody to talk to.") Instead of putting herself down for freezing in a crowd, Sue says she looks at the flip side, the fact that she really enjoys herself, and can make herself enjoyable, in a small group of friends. As I see it, the difference between us is that Sue recognizes there is a flip side—she hears a positive voice—while Amy and I don't.

Until recently, anyway. Lately I've been making some headway in my attempts to counter the voice of my inner critic with the sound of self-approval. I began to notice, for example, that one of the more ingenious ways I have of putting myself down is to focus on all my "bad" thoughts and feelings, and use them as evidence against myself. It's what all of us who put ourselves down do. If we were decent people, we ask, would we feel such envy at a friend's success, such mean-spirited satisfaction at her stumbling, such murderous rage at her infraction of the

(Continued)

by **Bette-Jane Raphael**

SELF PUT-DOWN

Continued

rules of friendship? Surely we can't feel all these terrible things and still be decent human beings, can we?

Yes, we can.

In fact, without selfish feelings, we'd be less than complete. As Dr. Bachant points out, those feelings are part of our basic human nature; they serve as much of a purpose as our more benevolent feelings. She believes that feeling okay about our "bad" feelings is vital to self-acceptance.

I've been helped by realizing that "bad" feelings are generally not my *only* emotions at any given moment. I may ache with jealousy over my friend's success, for instance, and use it to point out my own relative failure to myself, but there *are* other things going on in my head: respect for her achievement; pride that she is my friend; hope that my turn for success will come also; and happiness at this new proof that deserving people sometimes get their just rewards.

I'm beginning to understand that the point is not *what* I feel about my friend's success, but *which* of my many feelings I act upon. Do I hang up the phone when she calls to tell me of her triumph? Do I tell her she doesn't deserve her success and predict she will shortly flop? Or do I warmly congratulate her, listen to all the details of her good fortune, and call someone I know who could be of further help to her?

It's my *actions* that I must judge myself on, because they are far more vital to my friend than my more complex feelings or

negative thoughts—which, happily, she can't read anyway. Since I am much more likely to rejoice with her than hang up on her, this judgment forces me to a more positive conclusion about myself than if I look only at my feelings, the way I used to do.


What I'm doing here is what Dr. Bachant talked about—squelching my critical inner voice. I'm doing it by adopting for myself that which comes so naturally to people like Sue; I'm lowering the standards of perfection that allow me no negative feelings at all.

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Now I'm trying to see other components of my life—my personal relationships and my work, for instance—in a more positive light. The trick is to find some objective standard of judging that offsets the critical voice inside me and allows for a more mellow opinion of myself. Maybe, even though I'm not Jane Austen, I can still be proud of my writing. Maybe, even though I can't count every person who lives in the same city I do as a friend, I'm not the social misfit my resident critic would have me believe.

The area of personal relationships seems a good place for me—and for a lot of us who

regularly put ourselves down—to start looking for positive input. When a friend says, "You're the only person I can talk to about this," or "I knew you'd understand," don't dismiss it. She is giving you her good opinion as surely as if she were writing you a testimonial. When people loan you their favorite books because they think they will appeal to you, when they ask your advice, introduce you to someone they care about or give you exactly the right present for your birthday, they are demonstrating positive feelings about you which you can use to counterbalance the critical voice inside. Friends are the people you think enough of to choose as intimates in your life. Don't ignore them when they tell you in so many ways how valuable you are.

The dawning thought that I may not be as rotten a creature as I've imagined has not come without a certain amount of consternation on my part. It's hard to change the mental habits of a lifetime. It takes quite a bit of effort to listen to the new voices trying to make themselves heard above the old, entrenched monotone. I'm finding that it does become easier with time, however. It might even become a substitute habit—a much more enjoyable one than I've been used to—given enough of a chance. I don't know for sure, though. This is an area of life I'm just now exploring, the uncharted land of the healthy ego, unfamiliar—and yet, somehow, known. It is, after all, the place we all started out from. 

Bette-Jane Raphael writes Glamour's "Can This Be Love?" column.