

Being Cruel to Oneself



The act of attempting suicide is probably the cruelest thing one can do to oneself. Many years ago, I created a suicide prevention site for those who are despairing and contemplating suicide as I was shocked to discover that there were websites encouraging people to take their own lives. Most people who attempt suicide do not want to die. They simply want relief from the pain they are experiencing and can see no end to their suffering.

Cruelty to oneself, regardless of degree, originates from unexpressed suffering. Some people who wrote me shared that they suffered from various forms of eating disorders such as bulimia and anorexia, or were involved with self-harm such as cutting their bodies.

Cruelty to oneself can be a misguided attempt to build self-esteem in being able to endure pain, or can be a means of self-punishment because one feels unworthy, or to simply have the sensation and visual physical proof that one is alive. The roots of these acts stem from a desire to be heard, listened to and treated with humane respect and love. Sadly, these people never learned how to cope with stress or overwhelming feelings. Often, these people have suffered physical and mental abuse as children, and were discouraged from expressing emotions, particularly anger and sadness.

Cruelty to oneself can also take the form of over-eating, smoking, drug taking, the excessive consumption of alcohol, over-exercising, workaholism, reckless driving, pathological gambling, compulsive shopping, excessive risk taking and self-sabotaging behaviors. In each of these situations, the individual has lost the sense that she or he is an individual of unique quality and has become fixated on what they perceive they do not have, whether this may mean money, prestige, "looks," power, intelligence, education, a nurturing relationship or whatever the individual feels is missing in one's life.

While the above examples of cruelty to oneself are physically manifested, many more people suffer from self-defeating and self-criticizing behaviors. This negative self-talking robs the individual of the inherent creativity within their being through emphasizing on past failures, having impossibly high standards, ignoring past accomplishments and successes, or calling oneself names like "stupid," "weak," or "incapable." Frequently these behaviors are learned in childhood where the individual was told repeatedly that he or she was stupid, weak or incapable.

Cruelty to oneself can also take the form of looking to external sources for validation of approval and lying to oneself and others. So often we hear about a battered spouse who endures a violent and destructive relationship because she or he, although most frequently she, is incapable of facing and telling the truth about the situation she is in, and lies to herself and others about the degree of suffering experienced. The lying results from the desire to have external validation which includes the wish to be always well thought of.

Another form of self-cruelty takes the form of denying oneself simple pleasure or delight in the goodness that life does offer because one feels that one is not worthy or that other people are worthier. It is a form of self-punishment that is never fulfilled because life frequently presents opportunities for one to enjoy living. This joy in life may come from the kindness of others, a compliment, a token of affection, the appreciation of nature or simply the company of good friends and family.

Thinking bad of others, gossiping, excessive distrust and doubting, hating and repeatedly finding fault with others are other forms of self-cruelty because they allow the individual to be stuck in negative thought processes that lead to one taking life too seriously. Life is a serious event, but when we take life too seriously, we rob ourselves of the spontaneity and creative intelligence that full living provides.



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I experienced being cruel towards myself.

Jot down a few notes about your experience:

What were you doing?

What were you thinking about?

What were you feeling?

What were you aware of?

