



THE COMPLIMENT MYTH

By Yvonne Thomas, Ph.D.

Sometimes, people have misconceptions about certain things. One of these incorrect beliefs is if you often tell a person something GOOD about him or herself, then he or she will become conceited and get a “swollen head.” Isn’t it interesting that those same people apparently don’t recognize that if you mostly tell someone what is wrong or bad about him or her, that he or she can develop what I call a “shrunken head”? I define a “shrunken head” as low self-esteem and feeling quite negative and insecure about oneself.

The effects of mostly being told NEGATIVE rather than positive things about yourself can be more lasting and damaging than people may realize. Even if someone grew up primarily being exposed to a “NEUTRAL” environment in which he or she wasn’t recognized as good OR bad, that person probably has suffered LESS damage than someone raised in a more negative setting. In a neutral situation, you may feel INVISIBLE to people, but you are NOT directly being demeaned, snapped at, judged, or excessively criticized when you are “seen” by a parent, sibling, teacher, peer, etc.

Also, the damage is that much deeper the YOUNGER a person is when this treatment is happening to him or her, since that individual is much more malleable and shaped by one’s environment at this time when his or her personality, self-esteem, and self-image are developing and solidifying. Thus, the younger the person is who receives this type of treatment, the more self-doubting, insecure, and negative he or she may learn to feel about oneself. Even if it wasn’t until you were an ADULT when you were criticized more than complimented by someone who plays a significant role in your life (i.e., romantic partner, boss, etc.), your self-esteem and self-confidence can become significantly lowered. Some ways that a person OF ANY AGE can be affected by getting more negatives than positives include feeling unlovable, unlikable, not “stepping out of one’s box” due to fear of failing at new things, not feeling deserving of good things, self-sabotaging one’s own efforts, fear of closeness due to fear of someone knowing the real “inadequate” you, etc.

Note that it is important to identify if you are being criticized in “below the belt,” UNFAIR and DISRESPECTFUL ways. For instance, if someone starts yelling and/or swearing at you and/or calls you derogatory names, you need to recognize that this type of treatment is considered a form of EMOTIONAL ABUSE, and shouldn’t be allowed.

There are many reasons why people may tend to judge instead of compliment another person. Sometimes, this behavior is all someone really knows because of how that party was raised. Or a person may feel uncomfortable and too VULNERABLE being so complimentary and NURTURING to another. Others may buy into that erroneous belief that a person can get “too big for his or her britches” if told about his or her good qualities and/or accomplishments. Sometimes, a person may take the positive things FOR GRANTED, yet is very aware and expressive about what he or she considers to not be “up to par” or good enough. Or an insecure person may feel diminished or “less than” another party if he or she sees something good in, let alone compliments, someone else.

For whatever the reason/s a person may be more negative than positive towards others, it is important to change this behavior because it is NOT HEALTHY or productive in creating or sustaining positive, open relationships with others. A recipient of such treatment (if one is healthy) will probably end up feeling resentful, emotionally attacked, and, if the situation isn’t changed, may limit or end the contact. BOTH parties involved need to be aware of the negative communications and make a point of stopping them as soon as either one hears this happening. Talking to a Psychologist may help you to better understand WHY you do this behavior or are involved with a demeaning person and how to resolve these issues.