Coping with College Series

Self-Acceptance Key to Making Changes

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I often encounter students who think they don't measure up. They feel unlikable, unattractive or shy. They lack skills to get in shape or manage their time, or make friends. Some carry an image of themselves that mirror the taunting and teasing they endured before college. Many of these students move on with their lives, achieving success and making positive changes, while others seem stranded on a sea of self-criticism. What makes the difference?

A difference I've noticed involves an attitude of self-acceptance. Knowing one's flaws is important to developing an accurate self-image. Ironically, critical feedback needs to be tempered with self-acceptance to be constructive.

Critical feedback can let you compare your "real" to your "ideal" self, highlighting places for change. However, if you are too self-critical you won't have the energy, or belief in yourself, to help you make positive changes. Tempering critical feedback with self-acceptance involves being able to see the positives as well as the negatives, recognizing that one failure does not mean total failure and valuing and respecting yourself even through you aren't perfect.

There are several thinking styles that are common in excessive self-criticism. One is "ignoring the positive". This occurs when you overlook the 97 out of 100 things that went well during the day, and spend all your time reliving the 3 things that went poorly. It is important to spend some time identifying and focusing on what you do well.

Another thinking style that can fuel excessive self-criticism is "either/or thinking". This involves viewing life in over-simplified terms and ignoring the "gray areas". An example might be telling yourself that "either you must get elected to this committee, or you are a complete failure". A more self accepting thought might be, "I know I did not get elected this time, but I wonder what I could do differently next time to achieve success".

"Over-generalizing" is another thinking style that can lead to excessive self-criticism. This involves exaggerating the meaning of a negative event. For example, after a fight with a friend, you think "nobody likes me!" A more self accepting thought might be "I wonder what we are both contributing to this argument? What do I need to do to feel good about the way I've handled this disagreement?"

Many lessons in life are ironic -- like losing a love by holding on too tightly, or trying so hard that your fail. There is also some irony in mastering positive change -- critical feedback must be balanced with self-acceptance in order for you to feel energized to change.