

Practica Program



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Don't belittle

Nearly thirty years ago the founder of the American Mental Health Association said: 'Everything you need to know about mental health can be summed up in only two words: don't belittle'. If everyone would live by these two words: 'don't belittle', then 95 per cent of the mental health problems we deal with today could be eliminated.

To belittle is to put someone down, to make them feel small. It means to be judgmental and critical in ways that lessen another's sense of self.

There are innumerable ways of demeaning another's presence—superiority, discouragement, cynicism, sarcasm, irritability, dismissiveness, unkindness, not listening, advising, overprotection, impatience, non-celebration of key events in a person's life, comparison, competitiveness, dominance, distance, remoteness, lack of emotion. A lot of the problems we see today—crime, physical, sexual and emotional violations, broken homes, poor academic progress, addictions and conflict in the workplace—can be traced to belittling. How often you experience belittling (several times a week or a day), how fierce or severe the 'put-down' is, and how long over time (one month, a year, two years, ten years, twenty years) you have endured such blows to self-worth, are what need to be considered.

The frequency, intensity and endurance over time of being bullied are important determinants of how low the self-esteem of the person can go. Belittling can occur in all relationships—in homes, classrooms, communities, workplaces, hospitals, sports clubs, churches and countries.

Leaders (parents, teachers, bosses, supervisors, priests, politicians, club leaders, doctors, nurses) play a crucial role in determining the ethos of the social system of which they are in charge. The leader who belittles can create a dark ethos, wherein belittling of each other becomes the norm.

The antidote to belittling is to lift people up, to respect differences, to cherish the uniqueness and giftedness of every person and to encourage them to value themselves. Most of all, it means to love and be loved, and to celebrate each person's individual expression of their uniqueness. The antidote entails listening, encouragement, understanding, compassion and positive discipline.

Whilst I agree with the two-word ethos 'don't belittle', there is something fundamental missing from this important principle for mental health. The missing link makes it unlikely that the prescription 'don't belittle' will have any significant influence, which may be one of the reasons I am writing about this issue thirty years later. What is missing is that those who belittle others do so to protect their own poor sense of self and from a fear of being demeaned.

There is something truly revealing about the low self-esteem of those who knock others. When you break the words up into 'don't be little', you see that the prescription has to be applied to the self before you can be in a place to lift up the self of another.

There is a wonderful line in a poem by Marianne Williamson: 'Your playing small does not serve the world.' Indeed, when I play little or small, and when I belittle or make another feel small, I hurt both myself and the other person. I am subconsciously revealing my own low sense of self; the belittling of another is a projection of my experience of being demeaned, which is now being mirrored back to liberate me from my fears.

I may need support from friends, or from a counseling psychologist to help me free myself from my defensive behaviour.

If not, I continue to cast shadows on the presence of those with whom I defensively interact. Only when I recognize and take action against my belittling of others will I see that I must value myself before I can be ready to affirm and lift up others.