We are not born doubting ourselves. We learn to do it. In fact, we are usually taught to doubt ourselves. Often we are taught to do so by otherwise well-meaning people, who are passing along their own doubts and uncertainties and who believe they are being protective and caring. What these people (usually parents and other significant adults) want are strong, capable and self-confident people, but they often inadvertently teach us thought processes that lead to something else. That's the bad news. The good news is that we can understand some of these processes and learn new ways of coping that allow us to become more accepting of ourselves. Following are six behaviors you may have learned that can be unlearned and allow you to move toward greater self-acceptance.

OVER-GENERALIZING

Another thing that might cause you not to accept yourself is over-generalizing about something you've done that you don't like. So, for example, if you fail a test you might generalize and say, "I'm really a stupid person." When you do this you are making a statement about all of you all of the time, and not just about this one situation at this time. Instead, you might decide that your grade on this test, in this subject, at this time was indeed poor, and then go on to decide what you want to do about your poor grade, if anything. Getting stuck in over-generalizing discourages you from taking steps that might allow you to do better on the next exam and builds an expectation of future failure.

MORALISTIC SELF-JUDGMENT

One way to really dislike yourself is to always judge yourself in a very moralistic way. People often spend a lot of time and energy labeling their behavior with moral adjectives such as "bad," "hateful" and "mean." When you apply these kinds of words to yourself, you make liking yourself much more difficult. There is a more productive way of looking at yourself that will allow you to begin to like yourself more. Instead of evaluating yourself in this moralistic way, begin to ask questions like: "Did I do what I really wanted to do in this situation?" "How can I correct the misunderstanding that occurred?" In other words, you can start to view what you've done as productive or non-productive rather than as good or bad. If something is non-productive, you can focus on what you have learned from it and try another approach that might be more productive.

IMPOSSIBLY HIGH STANDARDS

Having standards that are impossibly high is a third way you can not accept yourself. It may not come as a surprise to you that most of us are more demanding of ourselves than we are of others. Somehow we can tolerate the fact that other people fail, that they aren't always kind, that they've done things they aren't proud of, but we have difficulty accepting those very human aspects of ourselves. The need to be perfect is another way to set yourself up for failure and enhance the feeling that you are not acceptable. We all make mistakes. Accepting less than perfection simply means recognizing the limitations inherent in being born a human being. Learn to value who you are rather than who you could become, if you were to do everything you can imagine doing and doing those things perfectly. To quote Linus, a sober and often worried character from a popular comic strip, "The world's heaviest burden is a great potential." The good news is that we don't always have to choose to try to live up to our "great potential." Wouldn't it be overwhelming if we always had to do what we imagine we could do? Nobody has the time and energy to do all of that. We must make choices about what we will pursue, and do them the best we can under the circumstances (which aren't always ideal, by the way).

NOT ACCEPTING THAT THERE ARE REAL LIMITS TO YOUR ABILITIES

The idea that you should always be able to attain your goals as long as you work hard enough is another factor interfering with self-acceptance. You will reach many of your goals and should give yourself credit for having done so. Some of us have trouble seeing our successes because we focus so much on our failures, and many times the failures come after a lot of hard work and personal suffering. It seems that all that hard work should pay off in our having reached the goal we set out to achieve. It is hard to accept that a given goal may be out of our reach, and that may be because of many factors, including the fact that we may not have the talent or skill needed to reach the goal. Of course there may be other factors in operation that make the achieving of that goal at that time impossible—health concerns, financial problems, family difficulties, extraneous stressors, or any number of other factors acting alone or together. The real trick to self-acceptance is to see that the goal is unattainable, at least for now, and shifting your focus to accomplishing what you can accomplish under the circumstances. That could include evaluating your original goal and deciding whether or not to continue with it. It also means giving yourself credit for what you have accomplished and what you have learned from your experiences.
The Comparison Trap

Judging yourself by what others have accomplished is a sure way to lower your self-acceptance. Have you noticed that you never compare yourself to people who seem to aspire to less than you do and that you always chose those people who are the top performers or the most popular as your yardstick for success? Are you as good as your friends, your brother or sister, your parents or Joe Blow? And how about trying to be like "normal" people are? (And who or what determines what is "normal"?) Can you only be good if you’re better than someone else? When we use other people as our yardstick, we aren’t taking into consideration our own personal limitations or talents. For example, if someone seems to be more articulate than you, you can respond in one of two ways: You can become upset and depressed by telling yourself that you should be as articulate as that person, or you can recognize and accept the fact that there are probably a lot of people out there who are more articulate than you, at certain times and under certain circumstances, and that is OK. It doesn’t mean a thing about you. Playing the comparison game is a dead-end street. By doing that you are probably missing some other qualities by which you can judge your own worth, like your honesty, friendliness, caring nature, dedication and so forth. And really, people don’t value you for how much you are like someone else. They do value you for the ways you are being you.

Passivity

Just passively letting your life happen may make it more difficult to accept yourself. Part of accepting yourself is engaging in activities that help you like yourself. Think back to those times when you weren’t concerned about your acceptability. What kinds of things were you doing? How were you spending your time? To accept and like yourself means that you approve of how you are living your life. If you aren’t accepting yourself, you probably don’t like the activities you’re engaged in. You are feeling dissatisfied. A way to increase your self-acceptance is to become more actively engaged in your life. Look for those activities and relationships that give you the most enjoyment—not necessarily the most enjoyment you could possibly have, but the most you can get from your choices at the moment. Try new things, perhaps things you have always wanted to try but didn’t because you felt you couldn’t do them. Try them with the attitude that you want to know what it would actually be like to do them. You may find that they are enjoyable and that you want to continue them. You may find that they are OK, but not worth continuing. You may find that you don’t like them at all and feel fine about crossing them off your list of things to do. Trying and getting real experience is a way of feeling better about yourself and gaining more confidence in your abilities.

Summary

To feel better about yourself, stop morally evaluating your behavior. Rather than condemning yourself, ask yourself what you have learned. Second, stop over-generalizing. When you do make a mistake, view it as a situation-specific, not as a statement of about all of you as a person. Third, resist the temptation to set unrealistically high goals. You are sure to fail if your goals are too high. Fourth, remember that it is an illusion to believe that you will always get what you want to get. You need to accept that you are human, have all of the normal human failings. Fifth, avoid using others as the yardstick by which you judge yourself. Don’t get into the trap of saying: “I’m only good if I’m as good as, or better than, someone else.” And last, become actively involved in your life. Do things that make you feel good about yourself and experiment with finding new activities that you actually try, rather than just imagining what it would be like to do them.