

CHARACTER: A SENSE OF RIGHT AND WRONG

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To be of good character is a lofty goal, but how do you define good character? Obviously there is no universally accepted answer to this question. Good character is defined by people differently based on their individual, cultural, social and familial beliefs. Our character is comprised of our moral and ethical decisions and behavior, based on our beliefs and values. Our values are determined by our character. Our feelings are determined by our thoughts; our thoughts are determined by our beliefs.

When, where and how is character developed? Character development begins in early childhood. In those first years of life, we are taught right from wrong, to feel empathy for others who are suffering and to feel guilt when we do something wrong or hurt others. We also develop our values during those early years. A child learns to value behaviors that are believed to be held in high regard by others around him or her. Those behaviors and beliefs that are thought to please others are repeated, and become an intricate part of who we are. We determine which beliefs and values are acceptable by mimicking the behavior and following the thinking of those who influence us. These are the outward manifestations and processes of their values and beliefs.

Suppose you developed character traits that you no longer want to uphold? People who grew up in families and environments that upheld values to which we no longer choose to adhere may decide to adopt a new set of values. This is not easily done, as it requires a new way of thinking and changing the old beliefs that are not in line with the new value system one wants to implement. In order to do this, we must examine our current ways of thinking and our current belief system, and then make the necessary changes.

Like this:

- **Old thought:** I should have whatever I want and will do what is necessary to get it.
- **Old belief:** My wants and needs are more important than anyone else's.
- **Old behavior:** Take credit for the work of others to get a raise or promotion.

- ▶ **New thought:** I may not always get what I want, but I usually get what I need without hurting myself or anyone else. I would like to have that promotion; but _____ had more sales and deserves the job. I will get another chance in the future.
- ▶ **New belief:** I will not harm (emotionally or otherwise) myself or others to get what I want.
- ▶ **New behavior:** Give credit to co-worker for job well done.

A good way to learn these things about yourself is by following a structured program, such as a twelve step program. In twelve-step programs, members are encouraged to "take a searching and fearless moral inventory" of themselves, then make amends "whenever to do so would not harm others." You have to really want to make changes in your life to do this.

It takes becoming so distressed with your old way of life that you are willing to go through the agony of dredging up old hurts, asking forgiveness and granting forgiveness for every wrong deed you can remember. The agony and pain of your old ways has to be worse than that associated with making these internal changes. It is hard, but it works if you really put your heart and soul into it and take the necessary time needed to work the program. Most changes like these require that we become willing to face our greatest fears and become willing to accept whatever comes our way by removing our pre-conceived ideas, limitations and expectations.

Twelve step programs are not the only ones who have a blueprint for making these changes. Other examples are usually found in literature or in work by cognitive therapists. Other obvious catalysts for change include church or other religious or spiritual programs that emphasize pro-social behavior and positive values. See the references at the end of the article for more information about those.

How do you relearn right from wrong, good from bad? The concept of right and wrong, good and bad starts out being clear and becomes less obvious as we get older. Indeed, many things are not black and white, right or wrong. In fact, most things are not. However, we base most of our decisions and actions on our sense of right and wrong.

If your internal guide, also known as your conscience, is fully developed, you are presented with choices to make that are based on your ability to follow your inner guide. You may choose to do

things that you know are not right for several reasons. It may seem that most of these choices are made because of selfishness, greed, lust, simplicity or convenience. However, as mentioned in the previous column about our underlying needs, we have unconscious needs that drive our choices and actions.

Those unconscious needs are:

- ▶ To be capable and successful at something.
- ▶ To feel cared for and belong to a group.
- ▶ To have power and control.
- ▶ To give of ourselves and help others.
- ▶ To be stimulated and have fun.

For example:

- ▶ **Need:** To be capable and successful.
- **Old behavior:** Take credit for the work of others to get a raise or promotion.
- **Old underlying belief:** I have to outshine everyone else to be successful at work.
- ▶ **New behavior:** Give credit to co-worker for job well done.
- ▶ **New underlying belief:** I am a talented and valuable worker who is a part of a team. When others succeed, I am happy for them. Their success or failure does not affect my ability or success.

Can you change your value system as an adult? Sometimes it is easier to make these changes by changing your behavior first, triggering a psychological change. This is known as "acting as if" in therapeutic terms. According to this theory, we imagine our selves as we wish to be and begin to implement changes in our life to reflect those traits we wish to incorporate. If you are limited in your point of reference, identify someone who has the qualities you wish to adopt and mimic those qualities. As you begin to act as if you already possess those traits, they become a reality. For example, if you want to adopt the value of personal integrity, identify someone whom you believe has integrity. Note the qualities that the person exhibits that you find most appealing. You may even want to talk to them about their beliefs and values. Ask them what they base their

decisions on and what guiding forces or principles influence their decisions and actions. Note their responses and decide which of those you want to explore for yourself.

Like this:

- **Value:** Integrity
- **Traits:** Honesty and fairness
- **Beliefs:** I treat everyone the way I want to be treated
- **Behaviors:** Treats others with respect, dignity and fairness

Now, you try it!