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T(r)IC(k)S #13: The Esteem Octopus I

This article and the one that will follow celebrates the multi-faceted wonder that is self-esteem. Self-esteem is a slippery, complex creature that I've come to think of as an octopus. An Esteem Octopus, I guess. Beyond my bulging file notes, handouts, and a dizzying number of research studies on the topic, Esteem Octopi manage to stretch and entwine their tentacles into places I never before could have fathomed possible. Many powerful, centrally controlled branches bear so many unexpected benefits. Its evolving influence is both humbling and remarkable. I've managed to catalogue a few of these branches throughout my journey, friends: I've managed to snag the occasional wriggly bit for further examination. No doubt my list isn't even close to being exhaustive; my Octopus continues to grow, and I continue to discover delightful new portions of it around fresh corners. Consider this an "update from the front", then, if you will –

☑ For years my perceptiveness allowed me to *see* injustices and my disinhibition allowed me to *voice* them, but my low self-esteem prevented me from *trusting* my viewpoint. At the slightest hint of discord I would back down, assuming that when I was TOLD I was wrong, I was. I simply could not tolerate an upset situation – my fragile self-worth needed consoling at any cost and so I would distribute unwarranted apologies to anyone I needed to in order to fix the situation. It is a very novel concept for me to think that someone else might have fault in a situation, or to think that discord may be an indication that I was exactly right in my position. By introducing this component, my octopus has supplemented my recipe and made it a much more winning flavour now: I am not swayed by exasperated sighs of 'it's all in your head', and will instead stand tall and assert, "No. It's not."

☑ This newfound assertiveness leads to fewer hassles in life. Many times my senses would tell me that a person was misleading me, but without the gumption to intervene I would allow myself to get short-changed, taken advantage of, or sent to the wrong line. I would buy the wrong part, take the poor advice, waste my time using the wrong procedure, and then ferment in "I knew it". No more. Now if I know it I say it, and by doing so sometimes save considerable time, money and stress.

☑ I am comfortable in confronting people now, or responding in a way that would not necessarily endear me to those people. Being free of insecurity permits me to respond based simply on the actions taken towards me. For this reason, if the person is then angry with or at me, or thinks or says inaccurate things about me, I have the strength to bear it. I no longer interpret it as much of a personal commentary at all – instead, it is an indicant of how well the person knows him or herself and how responsible (s)he is in being accountable for him/herself. Being liked, I've come to realize, is not necessary equivalent to being a person that you can feel proud of and like. In fact, some of my proudest moments in recent history have been times at which the actions I took or things I said I KNEW that I was pissing someone off royally. Don't get me wrong: it wasn't engendering the anger reaction that satisfied me. Rather, it was the knowledge that I was willing to bring about and endure a negative experience because I was standing up for what I believed in. And with your Esteem Octopus by your side, you are never left alone in times like that.

☑ Working so hard for approval, it never really occurred to me to be selective. I never stopped to think: do I even LIKE this person? Does it matter if I have their approval? I began to distinguish the relationships that I grew and benefited from, from those that were unhealthy for me. My octopus has helped me break the latter ties, and put some play in the line of others.



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☒ I used to persevere on things that people said or did that wronged me; trapped to the point of fury. With genuine self-comfort comes an assuredness that I AM OK. Things said or done to me really have no way of influencing that. They are merely reflections of the other person – it has very little to do with me at all, and therefore prompts little emotion now. Without emotion there is no arousal, and without arousal OCD's hold is slippery at best. There is no getting "stuck", and there is no sweating the small stuff. Suddenly, and blessedly, people can inflict enormously unfair things on me with little effect. With such little threat to MY image of myself, these things become much easier to live with. I guess I'm trying to say that my head has never been so.....QUIET. I allowed to issues of others to become my own for far, far too long. No longer.

☒ With a quieter internal life, I am increasingly free to live much more externally. I am able to be much more observant now. Noticing more around me enables me to make more, and faster, connections between things (geographical road directions, for example). My social skills and social maturity have leapt forward. Before, I could never ascertain when or why something was going to blow up in my face: politics and social games eluded me. Now I know, but if the expectations of that individual or circumstance are not compatible with my own internal code or moral standards, I will not play ball. Hence, things can still (and often do) blow up in my face, but now it is because of personal choice and personal convictions and not because of my obliviousness.

☒ By another token, needs that used to be pursued externally are now internal. To feel special, in the past I needed to be special to someone else. Accordingly, I imposed criteria on others for demonstrating my distinctiveness to them. Their not meeting these unrealistic standards would crush me, and end relationships. My worth was further drawn from the work I did, and so nothing could be permitted to interfere or imperil it, and nothing short of perfection was tolerable. Suggestions, revisions, opposing ideas, delegation, offers of help... these would all be taken personally as people unsuspectingly made commentary on my self-worth. Not now.

☒ As a result, I now make healthier decisions around what my priorities are and will be. I am neither the person I date nor the work that I do, and so I've begun factoring myself into the equation. For example, saying no to an unreasonable or an exploitive request. In the B.O. (Before Octopus) years I would accommodate anything, no matter the size, hour, or level of inconsideration. You see, I wasn't as important as these tasks were, and the people I did them for. The ensuing stress due to lack of sleep, tight timelines and, eventually, the birth of the knowledge that I was allowing myself to be used, interfered with my ability to be happy, well-balanced, and enjoy my relationships. It would also have led me to early burnout – I vividly recall an individual in the Tourette Syndrome Foundation of Canada once telling me he did not believe that I would still be involved 5 years from now. He viewed me as a shooting star that would inevitably fizzle. At the time, he was probably right. And while my productivity in the short term may not be what it once was, it is a fair trade-off for longevity.

Will conclude next time...

Cheers!

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