

## How Does Self-Reliance Differ From Selfishness?

Mental health professionals have not done a very good job of helping people to understand themselves. People find it convenient and easy to use personality traits to explain what they do and what others do. All too often, personality traits (like being selfish, lazy, immature, mean-spirited, or showing poor self-control) are expected to provide sufficient explanations for bad behavior in children and adults.

These phrases are more than superficial; they are harmful. They contribute to the misunderstanding of ourselves and others.

## Digging A Little Deeper For Meaning

For example, let's take the word, selfish. I don't believe that selfishness is always an accurate explanation for what is going on in the person's mind or even their intent.

Selfishness is purely a negative character trait and there are better explanations.

It is common knowledge that people tend to act in their own self-interest when they are frightened. So if we look at a particular situation or story, did that person act out of selfishness or fear? The truth is there is a myriad of possible explanations. Could that person be depressed, sad or otherwise unable to respond? If so, then why does selfish invariably apply if the words scared or sad would also explain the behavior?

## The Blame Game

The same case can be made for other character traits. Let's take self-blame or its cousin, being angry at yourself, for example. The fact is, all of these phrases simply support the same unhealthy process – blaming yourself and ignoring the situational demands.

Character traits are superficial explanations that are rooted in defining people as good or bad. More often than not people do considerable damage to themselves by simply using personality traits to explain their own behavior. This is a topic I have written about extensively, you can read more here.

For the purpose of this discussion, I believe that the commonly held beliefs about people's selfishness are a form of psychological self-harm. The person that blames himself or herself is harmed twice over. Others blame them and they blame themselves. They feel that the assumption of mutual responsibility in a relationship does not apply to them. Therefore, they excuse the other person's actions and take all the blame.

However, it is not ok for one person to shoulder all of the blame. Actions and reactions create outcomes. Whenever something happens in a relationship, it can never be only one person's fault.

I am not saying that the share of the blame is always the same in every case. I am saying that any problem in a relationship says something about both people. Except in cases of extreme violence and violation of a person's basic rights, there is usually something that both parties can learn.

Take an affair as an example. The person who cheats on their partner is responsible for damaging the trust in the relationship. They use the affair to act out on the partner and fail to honor the commitment to monogamy. What is extremely hard to do for the wounded party is to accept that the affair signals a crack in the foundation of the relationship, a crack for which both parties must assume responsibility.

This is almost impossible for the wounded party to accept and why affairs are so hard to heal. It can only be healed if each party assumes some responsibility, the cheater obviously more so than the partner.

#### The Relationship Between Parent And Child

Parents and children also have a relationship, but there is a different dynamic. Granted the parent has more power to mold the child and control access to family resources but the concept of shared responsibility still applies.

In most cases, the child has difficulty telling the parent what is wrong. They may have tried many times and been dismissed or told no. Instead of dissenting with respect, they resort to acting out in some fashion. The child must then assume responsibility for presenting their case in an

unhealthy way and the parent must assume responsibility for the emotional damage caused by their denial or unwillingness to listen.

Just because the child acts out does not let the parent off the hook.

#### Case Study: Ashley

Let us use the case of Ashley to illustrate my point. Ashley was a 19-year-old college sophomore and she believed that her mother was her best friend. Ashley did whatever her mother wanted. Ashley believed that her mother knew better than she did about what was right for her daughter. Ashley's mother used to tell her daughter stories about the difficult life that she had lived and she did not want Ashley to live the same life that she had been forced to live.

Ashley and her mom would both describe their relationship as "inseparable". Ashley would check with her mother before doing anything, and always tried to please her. Friends and relatives thought they were so cute together. Some even hoped they could be as close to their daughters as Ashley was to her mom.

Ashley's mom chose the college she thought would be best for daughter and even wrote her college essay for her. Ashley only saw this help as something positive, she never stopped to think of the damage it did to her belief in her own choices.

Neither Ashley nor her mother saw their relationship as toxic. This would only be revealed in the future in the form of broken friendships and a toxic boyfriend.

The dependency that formed the blueprint for the relationship with her mother also became the model for her relationship to all her friends and eventually, her destructive relationship with her boyfriend.

Ashley would always do whatever her friends wanted to do. She would never ask to do what she wanted to do for fear that her friends would be mad at her. She could never get angry at the imbalance with her friends and she blamed herself for being selfish if she even thought of voicing her opinion.

By being a friend instead of a parent, Ashley's mother inadvertently set the stage for her daughter to be a doormat for her friends.

The issue of Ashley's dependency on her mother became apparent when Ashley went away to college. At first, she was severely homesick. Eventually, she wanted to drop out and come back home. Ashley's mother agreed, but her father won out and insisted she stay.

At that point, Ashley quietly turned to alcohol and drugs to cope with the pressures of making new friends and the high academic workload. At first, she seemed no different than her peers who drank heavily and partied all weekend long. Pretty soon, Ashley started drinking every night, and started engaging in one night stands on a regular basis. She even scared her roommates who knew she was not acting like herself.

Subsequently, Ashley began dating Ben and they became inseparable. At first, Ben seemed to help Ashley, as he demanded that she stop drinking so much so that they could spend more quality time together. His demands on her time got stronger and stronger. Her friends began to worry about her even more, and that worry grew to high alarm after they noticed the bruises on her arms and face.

Ashley's parents knew none of this and they were kept in the dark. She called her mom every day and act like nothing was wrong. Her parents finally knew something was wrong by the Christmas break. When Ashley's parents asked her about her grades, she had to come clean. Ashley admitted that she had flunked several courses and was now on academic probation. She was facing expulsion if she did not earn a 3.0 GPA in the second semester. Ashley never told them about Ben or the concerns that her roommates had shared.

So what was wrong with Ashley? Was she being selfish? Did she not care about wasting her parents' money? Did she care too much about being the life of the party, eventually partying her way to probation and suspension? Or was she just immature and irresponsible?

The answer to those questions demonstrates the difference between selfishness and self-reliance.

## The Case For Being Self-Reliant

Ashley does not lack discipline and she does not need to party less. Ashley lacks self-reliance. Her mother never fostered her independence and the belief in her ability to make decisions. Doing what mom wanted was easier for Ashley and it prevented her from taking the risks to make her own decisions and her own mistakes. Her fears stunted her emotional development.

Ashley's mother felt she was being protective of her daughter and saving her from experiencing the growing pains of learning from trial and error. It made her feel good and the closeness with Ashley was her reward. She would never have admitted that she felt distant from her workaholic husband or that the relationship to Ashley filled those emotional holes. Ashley's mother felt that what she did was for Ashley, and not herself. She was so wrong.

Ashley's father didn't help the situation either. He stayed away from Ashley much like he stayed away from his wife. His justification to himself was that he didn't want to interfere with the mother-daughter bond. So he watched from a distance and turned a blind eye to his marital conflicts. It was easier to lie and convince himself that the excessive closeness was good for both mother and daughter. He knew it wasn't. He just didn't want the emotional backlash that would inevitably occur if he pulled back the curtain.

In the end, Ashley paid the price for her mother and father's emotional denial. Ashley's success as an early teen provided the cover for the problems in the marriage. Mom had a friend and dad had his work. It worked to keep the marriage together, but Ashley paid the price.

So what did Ashley really need?

Ashley needed to learn to trust her own judgment and to be alone. She needed to grow her awareness of her natural emotions and make decisions based on her own natural reason. To do that, she needed a healthy distance from parents and friends. If she could survive on her own and give herself the right to learn by trial and error, she would learn how to represent her needs to others and defend her opinions in the face of challenges from any opposition.

Ashley would need her anger to defend herself. She would have to learn how to recognize the disguised forms of her anger and face her fears about conflict. She would need to learn about her emotional world, how to manage her emotions and use them to solve problems with others.

Self-reliance does not mean that Ashley should reject the advice of others or isolate herself. Self-reliance means that she gives herself the right to make the final decision after consulting with the people she trusts. Bouncing her ideas off of close friends and family would help her to organize her own reactions and clarify how she truly feels. Ashley's reactions to their opinions enable her to clarify her own position. She would be able to practice defending her beliefs in a safe bubble before she has to defend them with people less interested in her well-being.