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You Are Not Your Fear

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When something is very important to us, we tend to invest not only our energy but also our hopes and dreams into it. Although having goals you are excited about can be very stimulating, this kind of mindset can also lead you to make conclusions about yourself, based on the level of your success.

For instance, if you strive to become better at public speaking, one small incident during a single speech can lead you to strongly negative, unrealistic conclusions, such as “I am a loser” or “I’ll never become good in this.” These presumptions may also include other people and the world in general.

The banner features the Explorable logo at the top center. Below it, three quiz cards are displayed in a row. Each card has a small image at the top and a title below. The first card shows a pair of red roller skates on a wooden deck, with the title 'Quiz: Psychology 101 Part 2'. The second card shows a fan of colorful pens, also with the title 'Quiz: Psychology 101 Part 2'. The third card shows a Ferris wheel at sunset, with the title 'Quiz: Flags in Europe'. To the right of the cards is a link that says 'See all quizzes =>'.

What Are Generalizations?

You may recognize similar conclusions as overgeneralizations, a form of cognitive distortions you already know a lot about. Although we tend to engage in such dysfunctional conclusions with no effort at all, the consequences can be detrimental to our well-being. Nevertheless, generalizations that correspond to reality can be quite useful. We use them to categorize everything we encounter during our lives, and thus using them conserves mental energy. That is why generalizations can be time savers, but at a high price.

The Effect of Generalization

When we meet someone for the first time, we deduce certain things about them, based on the available information. We can, therefore, perceive this person, with whom we have not interacted before, as reliable, outgoing, artistic, intelligent, etc. However, we are also inclined to use stigmatizing labels, such as hipster, nerd, fashionista, jerk, etc. As you can probably see, whatever categorizations may come to mind, the key point is that we are likely disregarding vital information about this person, to cram them into an effortless perception.

The Mechanism of Stereotypes

The simple truth, which you are probably well aware of, is that no person is represented by a single one of his or her traits. For instance, an individual can encompass many of the characteristics listed above, by being a hipster devoted to fashion, with a nerdish taste for movies, who is outgoing and friendly, as well as a reliable friend and professional. If we choose to label this person only with one of his or her traits, we neglect all the others. What is more, on a subconscious level, we tend to attribute to that person all the characteristics we believe they should have, regardless of whether or not that is the reality. As you might have guessed, this phenomenon is well illustrated by stereotypes - when we make assumptions about an entire group of people, based on a single trait of one or few of its members.

Errors of Assumption

We are all prone to using these “shortcuts”. For example, if we see a mother yelling at her kid at the mall, we may think that she is a bad parent. Someone else may empathize with her and believe that she must be exhausted. Everyone who witnesses the event may come to a different conclusion, and none of them may be the truth. Remember, that mother might be all of that - tired, overwhelmed, sad, nervous, impatient, even a truly bad parent, but she might also be a kind, loving, caring, concerned and genuinely wonderful parent. Neither alternative is more plausible than the other because they’re both based on scarce information.

We Choose What to See

Labeling people as “bad” or “good” can help us categorize them and decide how to approach them, without spending too much of our psychological resources on that. However, the assumption, and therefore our approach, may also be incorrect, because we base our conclusions on insufficient data. Besides, once we brand someone as good or bad, we tend to see only the traits and behaviors that will confirm our conclusions, overlooking all the others, especially those that can prove our label wrong.

We Label Ourselves

As strange as it may sound, people label themselves as well. If you ask someone: “Who are you?” The answers you might receive would likely be something along the lines of, “a lawyer”, “a mother of two”, “a janitor”, “a football player”, “a student” etc. We tend to use our occupation, or only one of the roles we have in life and perceive ourselves in that way. But the

truth is that we are a lot more than one role, occupation, or interest. One can be a teacher, loyal friend, devoted parent, hesitant driver, terrible in math, etc. As you see, this list can be very long, and all of the items on it make a person who they are. As prominent as a single item may be, it does not embody all that you are.

Self-Fulfilling Prophecy of Labels

You have probably guessed by now, that thinking in labels is detrimental not only for your perception of other people but your self-esteem as well. If you label yourself as a loser, only because your last public speaking event wasn't what you expected it to be, you can start to believe that you are a loser. And what do "losers" do? They don't fight, they don't face their fear, they don't strive to become better. Instead, they deeply believe in their inferiority to others. If we remove the word "loser" from the example and look at these traits and behaviors in more detail, we will probably see that the person we are talking about is someone unhappy, with low self-esteem, and labeling them as a "loser" is just mean and wrong. The same principle is applied to ourselves as well – deciding to brand ourselves one particular thing, means that we will believe we are that, and therefore act accordingly, thus creating a self-fulfilling prophecy.

Before You Label

Next time you see someone who seems like a perfect fit for one of your categories and labels, have in mind that this person may be facing struggles you know nothing about. And remember - neither you nor anyone else, is just those negative traits we label them with, as there is something positive to everyone.

At the moment, you might not be the most brilliant public speaker, but that fact does not define you. You are neither your public speaking skills nor your fear and anxiety. You are not your trembling voice or shaking hands. You have within you many traits and qualities, both positive and negative, that create your unique personality. Focusing on the positive, and avoiding to beat yourself up regarding the negative, will inevitably change your behavior for the better.

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