

Humility

What does it mean to be humble?
Is there a connection between humility and happiness?
Can we learn to be more humble?

Humility is the attitude of experiencing the world and what it contains with wonder and awe. It's about seeing ourselves as a small part of a vast cosmos inhabited by people and creatures from whom we can learn. Humility comes at the beginning of the [16 Guidelines](#) because it is a starting point. How can we grow and develop if we think we have nothing to learn?

Humility is quiet strength. The person who is humble possesses a profound respect for the skills and experience of others and a willingness to listen and learn. Paradoxically, it is often the most talented and successful people who are humble because they have the wisdom to realize their limitations while giving their very best in their chosen field. There have been many world leaders and high achievers who were quietly confident about themselves and their ability to act positively in their own life and in society without feeling the need to go around convincing others of the fact.

A person with humility can see beyond their own viewpoint and interests. They acknowledge that we are all dependent on other people, and that the badge of self sufficiency and independence that we all like to wear is a sham. Even the most superficial analysis reveals that every single aspect of our material existence - our house, clothes, food - was provided by others. We all depend on practical and emotional support from others for our existence. To realize this is to be in touch with reality. Humility will arise naturally if we can deepen our understanding of the kindness of others.

Humility is also relaxing, because with humility we do not have to erect false images of ourselves, nor spend time safeguarding them and our 'reputation.' We can be ourselves. "Humility does not mean thinking less of yourself than of other people, nor does it mean having a low opinion of your own gifts. It means freedom from thinking about yourself at all," said the theologian William Temple. The suggestion that perhaps we can shed all our concerns about our own status is radical. Many of us spend an enormous amount of time worrying about what other people think of us, and can allow these worries to dominate the way we behave. What would life be like if we managed to get free of such concerns? What if we shifted our perspective from "me" to "others?" Humility makes this shift possible.

When we are open to others, and ready to listen, we draw people to us. In this way humility is a highly attractive quality. It allows people to get closer to us, and can help to counteract the feelings of loneliness, isolation and alienation that many people experience in modern life. Humility can transform our lives into an exciting voyage of

discovery. It encourages us to take on new ideas, new ventures and new acquaintances; to expand our horizons and enrich our lives. Bigotry and bias begin to disappear. Extraordinary things can follow from this more gentle confidence.

The opposite of humility is arrogance. Arrogance is a powerful and brittle emotion that can create painful barriers between people. Many of us know someone who judges and criticizes others, who talks too much about their achievements, or who doesn't seem to care about anyone else. That person is often behaving like this precisely because they are lacking in self-esteem. Looking down on other people is a lonely, disconnected and ultimately unhappy way to go through life. Humility allows us to admit that we are fearful and vulnerable, that we don't always get it right, and don't always know what to do. In a mysterious way, this creates the conditions for self-acceptance and for inner calm.

Humility is a realistic state of mind in which we admit that perhaps we don't know as much as we think we do. It can be quite a relief to do this! It's a tricky business, because even considering that we are humble can be a form of pride. As soon as we feel we are making progress, we are in danger of losing our hard-won humility. As Benjamin Franklin observed, "Alas, I know if I ever became truly humble, I would be proud of it."

(Excerpted and adapted by L. Brown from, The 16 Guidelines for a Happy Life, 2012.)

"It is well to remember that the entire population of the universe, with one trifling exception, is composed of others." *Andrew J. Holmes*

"When science discovers the center of the universe, a lot of people will be disappointed to find that they are not it." *Bernard Baily*

"A man wrapped up in himself makes a very small bundle." *Benjamin Franklin*

"I never met a man so ignorant that I couldn't learn something from him." *Galileo Galilei*

"Humility is not a peculiar habit of self-effacement, rather like having an inaudible voice. It [humility] is a selfless respect for reality." *Iris Murdoch*

"The first responsibility of a leader is to define reality. The last is to say thank you. In between, the leader is a servant." *Max De Pree*

"Level 5 [humble] leaders channel their ego needs away from themselves and into the larger goal of building a great company. They are incredibly ambitious - but their ambition is first and foremost for the institution, not themselves." *Jim Collins*

“The fellow who worries about what people think of him wouldn’t worry so much if he only knew how seldom they do.” *Unknown*