

# A LINE ON LIFE

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## Looking-Glass Self

David A. Gershaw, Ph.D.

Do you generally like yourself, or do you see yourself as possessing many unacceptable faults? One factor that contributes to how you see yourself is the concept of "*looking-glass self*." This is the picture you have of yourself from the way others react toward you.

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### Your self image is strongly influenced by the way others react to you.

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When you make mistakes (We *all* make mistakes.), if you are consistently called "*dummy*" or "*stupid*," soon you will see yourself as dumb and stupid. People who are repeatedly given negative labels soon begin to feel negative about themselves.

Some try to reduce the negativeness of their self-image by pointing out faults in others. They may label others with derogatory terms like "*four-eyes*," "*fatso*," "*clumsy*," "*sloppy*," "*bean-pole*" and others.

If you were labeled like that, you would tend to counterattack with labels of your own. "*Don't call me fatso, you sawed-off runt!*" Thus starts a downward spiral of events leading to a "*lose-lose*" situation. Both persons lose. One might believe he has bested the other, because he has lost less. However, after the conflict, both of them walk away, seeing themselves in a less favorable light. Both have suffered damage to their looking-glass selves.

In contrast, there are ways we can improve our looking-glass selves and help the looking-glass selves of others. To help others, **we should not label people**. Rather than classifying a person in a category (either good or bad), respond to what the person *does*. This is why psychologists advise parents to avoid calling children names. For example, some children are called the "*little devil*" or the "*little angel*" of the family. If the child is consistently called a "*little devil*," soon he will incorporate this into his looking-glass self — believing that he has to live up to his label.

Some might wonder, "*What is wrong with calling a child a 'little angel'?*" Seeing herself as an "*angel*," she may believe that *any imperfection* may be unacceptable. This child may develop unreasonably high standards for herself — almost guaranteeing she will see herself as a *failure*.



All of us have faults, and all of us have good points. Rather than "*damning*" people for their faults, it is better to **sincerely compliment** their good behaviors. If they get new clothes that really look good, tell them — "*I really like the way that outfit looks on you.*" If they do something well, let them know — "*Mom, that was really a good supper.*" or "*You really cleaned up your room nicely.*" If the compliment is taken as being sincere, watch the smile that develops. You will have really helped that person's looking-glass self!

If you don't typically compliment others, at first you may get suspicious responses like, "*Okay, what do you really want from me?*" However, if you let them know that you really mean it and are not looking for favors, they will eventually believe you.

Some others — who are not used to getting sincere compliments — may get embarrassed, possibly saying something like, "Oh, it wasn't really that good." However, inside they are enjoying the positive remark. (If you get a sincere compliment, the best response is a simple, "*Thank you.*")

Once you have gotten in the habit of sincerely complimenting others, they will tend to reciprocate with sincere compliments on *your* good points. In this way, not only will you be helping their looking-glass selves; they will also be helping your self-image! Instead of a downward spiral, you will have started an upward one.

The next time you notice someone doing something well, instead of just thinking the compliment, *say it!* Try it — you'll like it!

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