

A LINE ON LIFE

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Self-Monitoring in the New Year *

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As the New Year approaches, we try to take stock of ourselves, so we can make improvements. However, depending on what type of person we are, we may view different changes as being appropriate. Let's explore one factor that can cause this difference.

Self-monitoring has been extensively studied by psychologist Mark Snyder. Self-monitoring refers to how much people *monitor* – observe, regulate and control – the image of themselves that they display to others in public.

Some of us are **high self-monitors**, who are very sensitive to situations and expectations. "*Who does this situation want me to be, and how can I be that person?*" In general, persons high in self-monitoring take a flexible approach to defining themselves. They are very interested in their "*public image*."

In contrast, low self-monitors are less interested in controlling the impression they make. Some people seek to faithfully express what they really think and feel. It is as if they want to know, "*Who am I, and how can I be me in this situation?*" They try to accurately present their beliefs and principles no matter what the situation is.

To measure this personality variable, Snyder developed the *Self-Monitoring Scale*. With this scale, Snyder found significant differences between those who were high and those who were low. To help you to determine what your monitoring style is, here are some differences that have shown up in psychological studies.

First, *highs* are keenly interested in the actions of others and in trying to "*read*" their motives, attitudes and traits. Presumably, they do this so they will know how to present themselves to a particular person, like a date. In contrast, *lows* seek to match their public behavior to their private attitudes, feelings and beliefs. They tend to speak their mind no matter who is listening.

Secondly, *highs* are flexible and adaptable – they display different behavior from situation to situation. On the other hand, *lows* change little from situation to situation. They value the match between who they believe they are and what they do. *Lows* do not want to change opinions to please others or win their favor.

Thirdly, *highs* tend to declare who they are by listing their roles and memberships – student, post office employee, school orchestra member, tennis player and so on. Contrary to this, *lows* identify themselves in terms of their beliefs, emotions, values and personality.

Next, *highs* choose friends who are skilled or knowledgeable in various areas. They tend to have specific friends for specific activities. However, *lows* are more likely to have friends who all tend to be alike in basic ways. No matter what the activity, they prefer to get together with the same friends.

Highs are concerned with outer appearances. They choose their clothes, hair style, jewelry and so forth to project an image. That image can change from situation to situation. Varying from this, *lows* have a wardrobe that is less varied. They do not believe they have to look different as often as high-monitors do.

Another point is that *highs* initiate dating based mainly on the date's appearance. Along with this, they believe it is possible to love two people at the same time. Conversely, *lows* are more interested in a potential date's personality, and they believe there is only one real love for a person.

Lastly – at least for this article – *highs* prefer jobs where their role is clearly defined, but *lows* prefer jobs where they can "*just be themselves*."

Depending on the situation, we can change from one level of monitoring to another.

As you can see, there are advantages and disadvantages to being at either extreme. In general high self-monitors are adaptable and present themselves well in social situations. However, they tend to reveal little about their private feelings, beliefs and intentions. Not only does this create gaps between their attitudes and actions; it might have a negative effect on relationships.

The primary drawback to being low in self-monitoring is the tendency to be unresponsive to the demands of different situations. Low self-monitors want to "*just be themselves*" – even when some adjustments in self-presentation would make them more effective. With the time close at hand for New Year's resolutions, your level of self-monitoring may well influence what resolutions you make. Persons high in self-monitoring would be more likely to take steps to improve their "*public image*," while low self-monitoring people would probably resolve to learn more about their "*true self*."

In truth, most of us have both high and low aspects of self-monitoring. It seems best to strive for a **balance** between the two tendencies. First, we need a greater knowledge of who we really are and what our principles are. Along with this, developing better ways of presenting ourselves can help us communicate our beliefs, values and principles to others. This balance can help you achieve a happier and more prosperous New Year.

* Adapted from Dennis Coon's *Psychology: Exploration and Application*, West, 1989, pages 463-464.