

Jealousy & Romance

Jealousy and envy arise from low self-esteem. They flourish where there is the belief or feeling that we are weak, unattractive and incapable of manifesting what we most deeply want. Jealousy is a reaction to those who appear, with emphasis on the word *appear*, to be stronger, better looking, more popular or more successful than we are. Jealousy is based on an illusion. Who we are is neither weak nor ugly nor unsuccessful. True, some people have more perfect features than others or seem to have more energy and better health or have accumulated more ‘symbols’ of success, but none of these characteristics are a measure of our real value. The philosopher Socrates, for example, was considered both ugly and poor, but that did not prevent him from attracting the best and brightest minds of Athens to his discourses or stop him from attaining distinction as the ‘father’ of western philosophy. Many great men and women, such as the painter Vincent Van Gogh, have died in complete obscurity, often poor and alone, only to become universally recognised and *loved* years after their passing. The poetess, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, was frail and bedridden much of her life, but she became renowned in her own time, had a true and lasting love relationship with her husband, the poet Robert Browning, and lived in an idyllic sea-side villa on the sunny coast of Italy. Each of these remarkable individuals had apparent disadvantages that could have crushed their self-esteem, but instead of allowing themselves to slip into an attitude of resignation they surpassed their limitations and attained greatness.

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Jealousy and envy are the children of low self-esteem, arising from decisions we have made about ourselves, usually during our early years. These self-defeating decisions are always based on faulty perception and limited understanding. Let’s look at the following example.

Henry, a husband and father, seemed to prefer one of his two daughters at the expense of the other. He gave the younger one, Mary, more attention, gave her more gifts and was more indulging toward her. Henry perceived Mary, whose birth was premature, as fragile and vulnerable and as a result was protective and solicitous toward her. The older sister, Elizabeth, interpreted this special attention as favouritism and felt slighted; she decided it was because she was less pretty or less loveable than Mary. Elizabeth resented this and began creating conflict with her younger sister. She developed a pattern of competing for her father’s attention and would undermine Mary at every opportunity. Henry saw his older daughter’s behaviour as bullying and responded with harsh words for Elizabeth and even more indulgence toward her younger, ‘vulnerable’ sister. Elizabeth took this as definite rejection and became extremely jealous. She felt inadequate in her relationship with her father and began to believe that there was something ‘wrong’ with her. She became convinced that she was ugly and unloved. The most important man in her life, her father, was passing her

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over for her more loveable and prettier younger sister. 'Its not fair', she would lament, and began to withdraw emotionally from her father. She became so depressed that from time to time she would entertain thoughts of running away from home or committing suicide. Her father could not understand his older daughter's attitude and was disturbed by it, but eventually came to accept that 'this is just the way things are'. Over the years Elizabeth and her father became increasingly emotionally distant, did not communicate except at the most mundane level, and the daughter's self-esteem, especially concerning her capacity to create an intimate and enduring relationship with a man, was seriously diminished.

As the years passed Elizabeth matured into a beautiful young woman who fell in love and became engaged to Philip, the 'man of her dreams'. Phil deeply loved Elizabeth but was uncomfortable with his fiancée's unreasonable jealousy toward any attractive woman whom Phil knew, such as a co-worker or a next door neighbour. Elizabeth felt threatened when she 'discovered' Phil and the pretty blonde neighbour talking and laughing with each other over the fence which divided their properties. She made a scene with Phil later, over dinner. Phil was perplexed and pained and reassured Elizabeth that his relationship with the neighbour was purely innocent. Elizabeth began to doubt his trustworthiness. She began to withdraw emotionally with Phil, just as she had with her father. The neighbour, of course, was *persona non grata* and, although she made efforts to create a friendly relationship with Elizabeth, found herself continually rebuffed. This is the insane logic of the jealousy pattern: sad and silly, but common and very destructive. Elizabeth's unreasonable jealousy eventually led to her divorce from Philip.

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As a child, Elizabeth did not understand her father's excessive attention toward Mary and interpreted this to mean that Henry loved her younger sister more than herself. This was doubly painful, because for the first three years of her life, before Mary was born, Elizabeth had been the exclusive centre of Henry's paternal love. In fact, Elizabeth misperceived her father's extra attention toward Mary as greater love for her sister when in truth Henry loved both equally. He was only doing what he felt needed to be done to support the weaker daughter. For Elizabeth, the result of her misperception was alienation from Henry and Mary, insecurity around men as well as any attractive woman, excessive jealousy and a string of broken love relationships.

Rebuilding lost self-esteem is a process of reflection and self-maturation. In later life, Elizabeth worked out her jealousy pattern by communicating her hurt to her father and 'discovering' that her father had loved her as deeply as he did Mary. She cried when he told her why Mary had received more of his attention. Henry was both saddened and relieved when he understood why his oldest daughter had become so distant. Together they realised the degree to which pain and conflict can result from a simple misperception and failure to communicate. They wept together over their lost years of mutual alienation, but their relationship was healed and Elizabeth got free of her jealousy pattern.

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Ultimately, self-esteem is not based upon anything relative or circumstantial such as our early relationship with our parents. Although we may have to do some repair work in order to clear issues arising from childhood or adolescence, self-knowledge and self-awareness form the real foundation of healthy self-esteem. True self-esteem, as opposed to an inflated ego, is based upon the Self and not upon historical events which have occurred in our lives. The Self here referred to is not the psychological self or ego. It is the ‘higher’ Self -- our true essence -- which remains untouched by the changing circumstances and fortunes of our human, worldly life. Until we explore this transcendental side of our nature through meditation and self-enquiry, we will live ‘at the effect’ of what other people say or do and whatever life throws at us. This ignorance of our true nature is the real source of our loneliness and suffering; and it keeps us stuck in unconscious ‘patterns’, such as jealousy, revenge and struggle, that sap our vitality, joy and capacity to give and receive love.

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