Integrity and self-respect.

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Integrity is a moral quality in which your attention is focused on carefully examining yourself. It considers the pure, deep-rooted motives and modes of action that correspond with your inner way of being. It makes you trustworthy, sincere, incorruptible, honorable, and gives you a robust self-confidence. This presupposes not only self-knowledge but also self-respect and inner strength. If you are positive about yourself, you have what it takes to withstand external pressure and to do what is good rather than what is expedient or convenient.

The biggest threat to self-respect is feelings of inferiority that can manifest as excessive self-doubt or false pride. If you have excessive self-doubt, you will not trust your own judgment. You therefore feel obliged to accept the demands of others. You do not want to ‘be difficult’ or to stand out. As a result, you find it difficult to resist pressure from outside and you will not remain true to yourself. Self-doubt makes you bend too much to others.

On the other hand, false pride means that you listen too little to other people. False pride comes from a distorted view of your own importance. It means that you see yourself as the center of everything, with a need to shine and to be on top. This makes you prone to bluffing and lying and covering up your vulnerabilities. A suppression of doubts and a hiding of mistakes means that you lose integrity and self-respect.

On the road to existential well-being, acting with integrity does not imply impeccable conduct, since that may make you appear cold, hard, and austere. Instead, it has far more to do with compassionately giving yourself the space to make mistakes, to voice doubts openly and to reveal your worries and dilemmas.

Integrity does not come automatically. Often, it requires honest feedback from others to achieve it. Carefully weighing feedback from others helps you to develop self-knowledge and to expand your comfort zones. Ethical behavior is behavior that can withstand the light of day, where you and others can jointly examine what is there.
An interesting finding concerning self-respect is that you get better at it with age.¹ Our culture tends to link aging with loss and deterioration, certainly where physical performance and social roles are decisive factors. The ‘positivity’ effect however contradicts this. The ‘positivity’ effect means that: ‘The pattern of development wherein a selective focus on negative stimuli during youth, is replaced by a relatively stronger focus on positive information during old age.’ Therefore as they grow older, people have less stress, fewer worries and negative feelings, and score higher on happiness and wisdom. Older people enjoy a ‘positive bias’, thanks to the selection processes in their brains. For example, memory tests have shown that younger people retain neutral information better than older people, but older people are better at remembering positive information. Even when viewing images, older adults more quickly focus attention on positive things like a smiling face, while younger adults are primarily absorbed by negatively charged scenes, such as a fight.

This positive bias is also found in day-to-day experiences: older people enjoy more positive experiences for a longer time and are less shaken by problems. Older people also select moment-by-moment objectives that enhance their self-respect, instead of looking for stressful confrontations - as young adults prefer to do. In this respect, the most important factor is not calendar age, but the realization that death is on the horizon. As life becomes increasingly more precious, attention shifts to what is meaningful and there is less investment in activities and contacts that do not nourish self-respect.

Reflecting on yourself broadens self-knowledge and deepens integrity. When this is approached with a friendly, non-judgmental attitude, you develop empathy for yourself. You will find that events and experiences become understandable within their context. Your ingrained habit of looking back in anger, or with regret, resentment or despair, can then be superseded by an ongoing overview of a complex web of events where everyone simply did what they did.

With this new perspective, it usually becomes unnecessary for you to go out of your way to avoid something or to maintain a false self-image. You may understand better that - given your personal limitations and difficult circumstances – there was nothing else you could have done. With a more realistic view of what was possible, you can often cope with pain better and thereby allow yourself to grow. Facing your vulnerabilities can deepen your understanding and acceptance of yourself.

Existential well-being is largely determined by the capacity to forgive yourself for your mistakes and to embrace yourself with all your character traits just as they are, believing that you did the best you could within your available resources in the (turbulent) course of your life.

Since vulnerability and suffering are always a part of every existence, you cannot do without compassion for yourself. Compassion for yourself is an attitude of loving care toward yourself in the face of painful experiences, but without indulging in self-pity. It helps you to do something for yourself, so that your suffering will bring less pain. This, in turn, will help you keep yourself from becoming depressed or demoralized. You will not let yourself persist with something that is way beyond your capacity. Or you will not get paralyzed by fear, which would increase your suffering. Compassion for yourself makes you more optimistic and relaxed in spite of all your difficult experiences.

Compassion for yourself does not deny suffering. You take your vulnerability into account and can treat yourself in a caring manner. It is also the engine that drives your ability to forgive.

Sometimes, we think of forgiving as something that you do to others. But in essence, it is a form of giving to yourself and of taking good care of yourself. In the words of Vaillant ²: “Forgiveness does not remove pain that is past. Forgiveness only removes pain in the future”. You give yourself the opportunity to rid yourself of a range of negative feelings such as lingering anger, hatred, indifference or bitterness. You make a deliberate choice not to let your suffering continue. Forgiveness is not necessary about forgiveness of specific people; it can be forgiveness of hurtful situations and suffering. Forgiveness means looking at something in a different way – a way in which (self)-empathy has the upper hand. Forgiving helps you to reconcile yourself with the past, to stop harboring negative judgments and feeding the roots of revenge. Forgiving helps you recover your power and restores your dignity and autonomy.

Sometimes, you need a witness to help you examine your vulnerability with sensitivity, bear the burden of your pain, and mourn what cannot be mended. When you have done this, you will not only be able affirm your forgiveness in words, but you are likely to experience it in terms of warmer feelings that may also translate into action. The positive effects of forgiveness are often stronger in you than in the person whom you have forgiven. In this way, you open yourself to a brighter future, no longer burdened by the baggage of the past.

Loving yourself is about fostering positive feelings and ideas about yourself, being aware that things are fine exactly as they are, and looking back at your life with satisfaction. Not continuing to hang on to how it could have been different, not worrying about what can no longer be changed, not perpetually agonizing over defects and deficiencies. The feeling that your life is a flow. That you are fully here - heart and soul.