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## Love Me? Love Me Not?

Most oxymorons are benign and humorous. Found missing. Jumbo shrimp. Clearly misunderstood. But there is one oxymoron that has me a bit concerned: *self-love*.

Self-love (sometimes transparently disguised as "love yourself") has taken on a new meaning, a positive connotation, which contradicts its traditional definition. My Random House Dictionary defines love and self-love. Love has twenty-eight definitions, all of which place the object of love outside one's self. There are just three definitions of self-love and it's not a pretty sight: "excessive regard for one's self," "conceit, vanity," "narcissism."

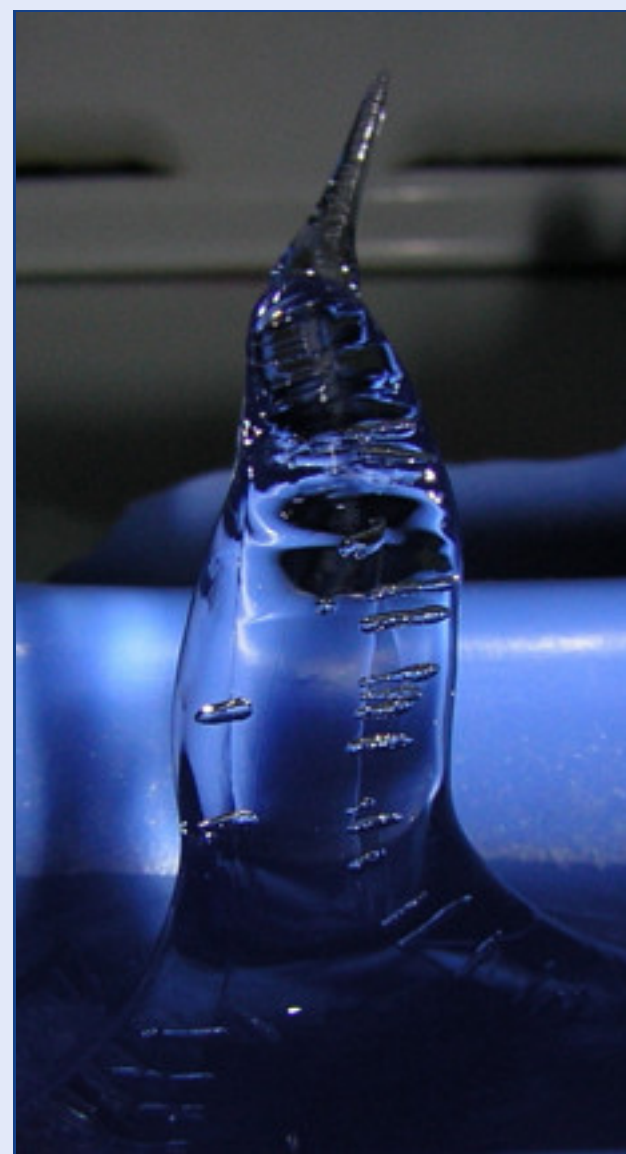
Has Random House lost touch with the times or have we inadvertently lost sight of an important distinction. To be sure, people are currently doing many wonderful things in the name of self-love! The contemporary twist on self-love inspires people to have a positive self-image, to eat right, and to exercise. As well, it has encouraged people to find the strength they need to get out of codependent, abusive relationships.

"You have to be able to love yourself if you're going to be able to love others." On the surface it sounds good. But there's a danger in forsaking the negative connotation that self-love traditionally has held. We can't spin the connotation of self-love 180° without it effecting the value of what it means to love others. Socrates said, "The beginning of wisdom is the definition of terms." He's rolling over in his grave.

All the positive things that are being done in the name of self-love can be accomplished just as well, even better, if done in the name of self-respect and self-worth. Nothing restores self-respect and self-worth like a healthy appreciation of the love one has for other people.

What is it then that has precipitated the ironic development of a positive, yet oxymoronic, definition of self-love? The answer is twofold. First, many people suffer from and are trying to break the cycle of abusive co-dependant relationships. Second, we have been experiencing a breakdown of community consciousness and the absence of a healthy sense of identity.

Those who suffer abuse in co-dependant relationships often feel unworthy of love and cater to a



domineering partner. In reaction to such situations, the term *self-love* is often used as a foundation for the construction of healthy boundaries. Establishing healthy boundaries is, of course, essential for stopping the pattern of abusive relationships.

Developing appreciation for the difference between turning the other cheek and participating in the perpetuation of bad behavior is the crucial issue. Simply put, those caught up in abusive relationships need to find wiser ways of loving their partners. Complete disassociation may at times be an appropriate boundary and should be viewed as an act of love that simultaneously restores self-respect and a sense of self-worth.

When we speak for healthy boundaries in terms of how this loves the abuser, we work with the value of love. This approach ends the cycle of abuse, restores self-respect, and preserves the traditional definition of self-love.

To combat a growing sense of spiritual isolation and disconnection from society we have started to speak in terms of loving ourselves. The redefinition of self-love as an expression of self-respect and self-worth has also become a tool to reestablish a sense of community. Woody Allen expressed perhaps best expressed a lack of self-respect and self-worth by stating "I would never wanna belong to any club that would have someone like me for a member."

The longing for a sense of self-worth and self-respect makes a positive connotation for self-love appealing. But self-worth and self-respect are best secured through loving others and graciously receiving love from others. Believing that we have love for others validates our sense of being lovable. This allows us to let love in.

In our attempts to restore self-respect and self-worth, there is no need to wipe out the age-long distinction that contrasts *love* and *self-love*. Love is the greatest. It is the greatest thing we can give and the greatest thing we can receive. Self-love has become a double-edged sword. While the fore edge is being used to cut away unhealthy boundaries and self-deprecation, the back swing carves out a place for self-centeredness.

Love is supposed to be what makes the world go 'round. If we keep aggrandizing self-love, this world is going to start spinning in the wrong direction. Words certainly need to have flexible and evolving definitions. But the downside of giving *self-love* a positive connotation is pretty ugly, and we should not be terribly pleased about this. An exact estimate of how much damage has already been done is anybody's guess to calculate. But we shouldn't need to reach for a pair of plastic glasses to see that we're beyond the definite maybe stage: *self-love* is a dangerous oxymoron.

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