

FEAT FACTSHEET

Conquering a feeling of inferiority

Feeling inferior is a horrible feeling. No one is born inferior. It's just a set of ideas that you've acquired in childhood. As these are simply ideas, you are free to change them.

What does it mean if we feel inferior? When we feel inferior, we see other people as being somehow larger and better than us. They are more vibrant, talented and successful than we can ever be. We long to be like them, but we tell ourselves that we can't. When we think about this, a horrible feeling wells up in us; a feeling of despair, disgust, envy and longing. We are sure that other people look down on us and see us as weak, unattractive and despicable. Then, an intense feeling of shame rolls over us. We wish the earth would open up and swallow us and, at the same time, we fear that it will. We'll be gone and no one will remember that we ever existed. Even as we feel this, we also feel angry. Why should others have so much and we have nothing? We find that we can distract ourselves from the shame of being inferior by concentrating on our resentment of others. So we swing between shame and resentment, and in neither state are we happy.

Why does this matter so much? Whether we feel inferior, superior, or just plain ordinary determines what we do in life and determines our big life choices - the work we decide to do, the relationships we make, and how happy or secure we feel. If we value ourselves, when life goes well we feel happy and secure, and when life goes badly we assure ourselves that we'll be able to cope. If we don't value ourselves, we never feel happy and secure, even when all goes well in our life.

For details contact Fife Employment Access Trust, Journey to work programme:
Telephone **01592 749880** or visit www.journeytowork.co.uk

Where do these feelings come from?

All babies are born with boundless unselfconscious self-confidence. They aren't born feeling inferior or superior. They watch what the people around them say and do, and draw their own conclusions about what they experience.

If their parents show them that they see themselves as not being as good as other people, small children are likely to conclude that they must be inferior too. If parents tell their children that they are not as valuable or talented as other children are, their children conclude that this must be so. Even when parents value their children, other life experiences, such as doing less well in school than others, encountering discrimination through racism or disability, being poor or living as a refugee, can create or worsen feelings of inferiority.

When we are small children, the conclusions we draw from our experiences take on the quality of absolute truths. We have no understanding of why our parents see themselves as they do, or why people treat us as they do. Moreover, our experiences as a child are first-time and unique, and so the conclusions we draw from them have a strength and power that later conclusions might not have. Our parents and other adults show us that they see us as inferior. We assume that we are born that way and can't change. However, feeling inferior is simply an idea, a conclusion we've drawn from our experiences. We can choose to change it.

What are these negative messages?

Our society tells us that some people are superior and that everybody else is inferior. Take, for instance, the class system. Although some people try to argue that class no longer matters in the UK, we're all very aware of when a person has a title in front of his name, or talks with a particular accent, or went to a particular school. Even many upper and middle class people are greatly troubled by feelings of inferiority, but that's not how other people see them. They're seen as being superior because they belong to a certain class.

We are surrounded by adverts, which tell us that we are inferior if we don't own their products. They add to this whopping lie by showing us that to be really superior we have to be young, vibrant, attractive and successful, both in our work and in bed.

What effect does this have?

Anger, envy and resentment may come to dominate our thinking. We can't resolve this anger, envy and resentment because we dare not show those people who treated us badly what we actually feel. Instead, we turn these feelings against the people we feel able to regard as being inferior to us.

What can happen if we feel inferior?

When we see ourselves as being inferior to other people, we become frightened of other people, because we fear that when they realise how inferior we are they will be unkind to us and reject us. Being frightened of other people means that we daren't get close to other people and really get to know them. This means that we're always lonely. When we see ourselves as being inferior, we become wrapped up in ourselves, worrying about how we look and what we do or say, and so we're often not aware of what concerns other people have. This, and our fear of other people, leads us to make some bad mistakes with other people, who are then hurt by us or feel that we don't like them.

We see the people that we believe to be more inferior as strange and dangerous and, when we encounter them in the ordinary way, we are too nervous to act with confidence and fail to see they are just like everybody else. We can end up feeling foolish, and believing the supposedly inferior person is laughing at us.

When we do something well, we can't take pleasure in our achievement but instead feel that, had we not been inferior, we could have done better.

We are always in danger of blaming ourselves for any disaster that may befall us. Thus it's very easy for us to turn the natural sadness, which follows a disaster, into depression.

Why do we hang on to this misery?

Whenever we do something that causes us pain, we try not to do that thing again.

However, suppose you have a mother who is quite cold and rejecting. As a small child, you accidentally put your hand in the fire and suddenly your mother is there, holding you, comforting you, giving you all the love and attention you'd been longing for. If, when you've recovered from the burn, your mother again ignores you, might you not be tempted to have another accident which, painful as it may be, will give you the reward you long for?

It's the hidden reward within the pain that keeps people persisting in doing something that they know is harming them. This is why people will go on believing that they are inferior, even though this belief brings them so much pain. There are advantages to holding this belief, and people won't give these up, despite their unhappiness.

What are the advantages?

You never lose any competition because you never enter any. Thus you avoid possible disappointment. When you talk about how inferior you are, your friends tell you that you're wrong; you're a wonderful person; you shouldn't underestimate yourself, and so on. They may also do things for you that you don't want to do yourself. You don't take responsibility for important things, but get others to do so instead.

How can I change?

In one way, thinking that you're inferior will ensure that you are inferior, because it stops you from being the person you are; a person with the talents, feelings, hopes, joys and sadness that everyone has. We all need to understand that no one is superior, no one is inferior, everybody is ordinary. We all suffer disappointment, loss, heartache, separation, failure and death. We all have to try to cope with life as best we can. Envyng others only makes our own life worse.

The advantages of seeing yourself as being inferior can be very seductive, because they can give an immediate reward. When other people take responsibility you can blame them when things don't turn out the way you think they should. Whatever happens, it's not your fault. You can tell yourself that, if other people hadn't forced you to be inferior, you would have been one of the most superior people in the world. By remaining inferior, you never have to put this to the test.

The big question is; are you prepared to give up these advantages? You will need to:

- Recall incidents from your childhood where you drew the conclusion that you were inferior. Look at this incident now, with an adult eye, and see that the incident did not prove that you were inferior.
- Be responsible for yourself. We have little control over much of what happens to us, but we have total control over how we interpret what happens to us. Always try to create interpretations that don't make your life worse, in the long term, and that can add to your contentment and satisfaction.
- Have a little mantra to say to yourself whenever you feel your self-confidence slipping; something along the lines of, 'I'm all right, I'm okay'.
- When you're confronted by some terribly important person and you feel a bit daunted, imagine what he looks like when he gets out of bed in the morning, or what she looks like in curlers and face mask. One way or another, we're all ridiculous and we're all important.

Many people waste their lives by feeling inferior. Don't you do the same.

Last updated: 14 July 2009

For details contact Fife Employment Access Trust, Journey to work programme:
Telephone **01592 749880** or visit **www.journeytowork.co.uk**



charity number SC022263