

How the ego inhibits personal development and social attachment

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According to social psychologist Roos Vonk, our ego impedes our social relationships and our personal growth. "If you're always trying to be likable, lovable, cool or smart enough, you'll never really feel

comfortable with the other person or feel truly connected to them," she writes in her latest book. "My Ego is Always Right. From Self-deception to Self-knowledge" will be released by Meulenhoff Publishers on 12 September.

The researcher argues that our ego plays a bigger role than we often think; it contributes to our self-image, to our choices and it plays a part in many social situations. Vonk says, "The ego has a bad name, but it's essentially that little voice in your head that says, I want to be good enough, I want to be liked, I want to matter." In the book, she combines insights from her own research with research that has been carried out by others.

In doing so, she focuses on her previous research on ingratiation. "People find it extremely irritating when others ingratiate themselves to someone, for example, as a means of currying favor with the boss. But it works like a charm on the person who is being ingratiated to," she explains. "The ego subsequently distorts the interpretation of ingratiation."

Spiritual narcissism

The professor believes that it is problematic that our actions are always determined by our ego. "As a result, you miss out on connecting with fellow human beings because you're so preoccupied with yourself.

For example, when you try to present yourself in the best possible light, you'll take offense at criticism. In addition to this, it hampers our development by justifying our flaws and moral transgressions." She consequently explains that the ego is always waiting in the shadows. "This can even happen when people take a spiritual training course that's been designed to help them transcend their ego."

She has also conducted her own research into said "spiritual narcissism," which is the belief that your spiritual development makes you more special than others. Spirituality is often seen as a way to transcend the ego. But as you progress through the spiritual training course, the ego will often still come into play, and you'll think, "I'm doing so well!"

Breaking free from the ego

In modern Western society, there is a strong focus on the personal individual self, writes the social psychologist. "Many people feel that they 'deserve' happiness, that they are 'entitled to' express their opinion, pass judgment and rely on their intuition, and that they have the right to explore their unique abilities and their 'passion'."

This emphasis on the individual means that there is less focus on the importance of connecting with others. We underestimate how strongly we are influenced by our surroundings, by the people around us. And the human sense of superiority will continue to have a serious impact. She argues that it has therefore become even more important that we achieve greater self-awareness and that we recognize our limitations.

Unfortunately, we won't be able to shake off our ego completely, but a deeper understanding of it will give us a clearer idea, which will make the impact less acceptable, believes Vonk.

"We can then explore and subsequently develop the better half of ourselves. A first step to achieving this is to become aware of your ego. If you want to get to know yourself, you have to realize that you're basically just like everyone else." Vonk's book provides more insight into this psychological basis, and her vivid examples show that this is no different for people who think: I'm so special, this has nothing to do with me.

Provided by Radboud University

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