



# YOUR EGO: ASSET OR LIABILITY?

By Steve McClatchy

*I went to my 7-year-old nephew's soccer game last weekend. All the kids went after the ball at the same time and I heard the parents and the coach yelling "Same team! Same team!" I remember my kids at that age doing the same thing. They competed against their own teammates because they forgot what they learned about passing, positions, and teamwork and got caught up in their impulses to get a kick. It's cute, age-appropriate behavior for a 7-year-old, and they move past it as they learn the game.*

*How often do we compete against our colleagues, friends, partners, or family because our ego got in the way? The following article discusses how our competitive drive is what's getting in the way of our relationships*

## ...Hey, can we talk about your ego?

That doesn't sound like a compliment is coming your way. In most circles outside psychology journals, *ego* has a negative reputation meaning an inflated opinion of yourself. How did this vital part of the human psyche which determines our self-image get reduced to an annoying personality trait?

It's because the ego has an important job to do and it tends to put in a lot of overtime. In our inexhaustible built-in drive for survival, we have to believe that we are *worthy* of survival and of favorable things happening to us; that positive self-worth comes from the ego. It helps us thrive by driving us to succeed. It's that little voice inside you that roots you on, seeks approval, and tries to figure out a way for you to be right. It's bolstered by compliments, accolades, and likes on social media.

It drives desires like looking your best, performing at your best, being proud of your accomplishments, seeking justice, demanding equality, negotiating a fair deal, and avoiding things that aren't in your best interest. When it comes to competition, your ego is your best asset. It helps you dig deep and perform at your best. That's a force that we can benefit from in any win/lose situation.

Despite this wing man capability, when you hear the word *ego* in general conversation, it has a negative connotation. *Oh, she has a great ego!* You never hear that. So where did it get this bad reputation? There's one aspect of life where the ego works against you, it's in your relationships.

Relationships don't work on a win/lose basis. Bringing competition into a relationship will destroy it because they work on a different premise than win/lose. The success of relationships is governed by people's needs. They work when *both* people get their needs met in the relationship.

For example, a simple relationship with few needs is between you and your favorite restaurant. What you need is good food, good service, a clean environment, a good atmosphere, and a fair price. When those needs are met, you will probably return to that restaurant. After a bad experience in one of these categories, you probably wouldn't return.

Let's add some complexity. How about the relationship you have with your employer? There are probably many needs in your life that you're able to meet

because you have a job. Now think of all the needs that you are meeting for the organization, all the work you do and all the problems you solve. This relationship only works if both you *and* your employer are getting your needs met. If you aren't getting your needs met then it isn't working for you. If they aren't benefiting enough from the work that you do then it isn't working for them. Some people start a job and leave after three months; some people start a job and stay their whole career. We each decide: *what are my needs that this relationship has to meet and what am I willing to sacrifice in order to have these needs met?* The governing principle is that both sides must get their needs met in order for it to succeed. This is true for any business relationship whether it's employer/employee, client/vendor, etc. If one side is no longer meeting the other side's needs, then the relationship is no longer a good fit.

This principle is vital to personal relationships as well. You have important needs of friendship, family, or romance through the people in your life. Each of these relationships will only work if both you and the other person are meeting each other's needs. At many times this requires prioritizing many different needs so that both people are satisfied.

It seems like such a simple principle, until you add the egos of the two people involved. If someone is trying to win, then they are trying to make the other person lose. This is where relationships have trouble and it's where the ego gets a bad name. When two people should be trying to meet each other's needs, there's no room for competition. People who don't understand this will bring winning and losing into absolutely everything. Have you ever had a conversation with someone who is trying to "one-up" you? Do you know the one-upper? It snowed a foot at your house; it snowed two feet at theirs. You got a new car, they got a newer one. Every time you get in a conversation with this person you are either wrong about something, or you lose at something. That's the displacement of the ego. That's the ego wanting to win in a situation where winning and losing is not appropriate.

The win/lose factor of the ego is what gives us a little pause before we introduce ourselves to someone; it prevents us from initiating relationships, being vulnerable, and going first. It stops us from saying "I'll

*work in your best interest even though I'm not sure you will work in mine."* The ego, with its win/lose inclination, doesn't want us to take those risks. Sometimes the ego prompts people to feign disinterest, bravado, or superiority in order to avoid vulnerability or conceal insecurity. It stops us from apologizing when we are wrong so that we don't give the other person the imagined "upper hand". These things damage relationships, prevent us from initiating relationships that could be great for us, and prevent relationships from prospering to a higher trust level.

The ego's drive to keep us alive, unique, and valued can occasionally result in us being impulsive and emotional. Have you ever thought "I can't believe I said that!"? That's because your ego took over in that moment. It happens to everyone occasionally but, on an everyday basis, our level of ability to keep the ego under control and in moderation, and use it appropriately for our benefit while keeping the needs of others in mind, depends on our maturity level and will determine our success or failure in relationships.

If we're going to have great relationships, we have to understand needs, especially our own. We have to take risks to meet those needs, including sharing them with the people who are in relationships with us. Most importantly, we have to recognize when our ego is working against us and when competitive impulses keep us from trying to meet the needs of the people in our lives, both personally and professionally.

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