The Destructive Habit of Evaluating Everything We Do

You’re going through your day, and it’s like you’re a newspaper critic, constantly looking for things to praise and criticize.

Did a workout? Amazing job Leo! Spent too much time on Youtube? Bad Leo! Body is looking flabby as you walk past the mirror? You absolute slob.

Everything we do becomes something to judge: are we worthy of praise? Or criticism?

We are in the mental habit of constantly evaluating everything we do, to see if we’re worthy or not. (Btw, we do this with other people as well, and with life situations in general — everything is evaluated as “good” or “bad”).

This mental habit of evaluating everything — while completely normal and natural — is actually pretty destructive.

Why?

Because every time you evaluate yourself, you are hurting your happiness.

Here’s what happens:

1. You are going through your day, doing stuff.
2. Your mind is constantly evaluating: is what I did good or not? Am I worthy of praise or not?
3. If you do something worthy of praise, you are happy! Well, actually, you rarely take time to be happy about that. More likely, you’ll think about all the other things you haven’t done yet, and not think much about what you’ve done. Or maybe you think what you did is *okay*, but you feel it should be better. Or you should do more. Or you’re worried about losing what you’ve gained, messing up the next time. And you’re unsure of yourself even if you did OK at something.
4. If you did something worthy of blame … well, that doesn’t make you too happy about yourself. And this is the majority of the time.

So this mental habit isn’t helpful. It is constantly making us feel bad about ourselves, insufficient, frustrated, like we’re doing things wrong.

Why do we do it? Because we want to be worthy of praise. We are uncertain about our worthiness, so we’re constantly asking the question. And constantly coming up short, because we’re comparing ourselves to 1) every person who’s done awesome things, 2) our ideal about how we should be doing (spoiler: perfectly, with every possible thing), and 3)

what we think others would be impressed by. We can't possibly compare well to these kinds of ideals.

A Different Mental Habit

If the evaluation habit doesn't help, what can we do instead? And how do we change? Is it even possible?

I have to admit, mental habits are not easy to change. We have to be aware of what's going on, and constantly vigilant. We'll fall short of being constantly aware and vigilant … so we'll evaluate ourselves badly. That moment, of course, is a beautiful opportunity to practice letting go of evaluating!

The habit I recommend instead is **finding gratitude and contentment in this moment**. Yes, that's hokey, cheesy, corny and so on. But it works, like a badass.

Here's how it works:

1. You do something during the day.
2. You notice yourself judging yourself: "I've been lazy today! Ugh."
3. You say, "Ah, I'm doing it again. Don't waste one more second on that habit."
4. Instead, you pause and find a way to be grateful for something in this moment, about yourself or your life. You find a way to be content with what you have, who you are, and what is going on right now. You experience the sensations of this moment, as they're happening.

And repeat. **It doesn't matter if you sucked at doing whatever you were doing**, or you have been lazy or procrastinated or forgot to do something. It also doesn't matter if you did something good — your gratitude and contentment don't depend on how you do at anything. You can do something well and be grateful and content, or you can do something poorly and be grateful and content.

Some examples:

- I just finished writing a Zen Habits post — I'm amazing! Actually, I'm not going to waste my time on the ol' evaluation habit, and instead, I'm going to notice what's going on right now in this moment. It's a nice day outside. My body is feeling tired. I have a nice roof over my head, and I just ate a delicious meal. I'm grateful for those things, and for my kids, my wife, my family, my friends, my readers, life in general! This is all true whether or not I wrote the post.
- I just wasted time reading my favorite websites instead of doing my work — I suck! Again, not gonna waste another second on that habit. Again, I pause and notice what is happening right now: the air is still, there's a humming sound from the refrigerator,

there are squirrels outside, I am feeling restless, and I’m grateful for all the things I listed previously and more (music, for example, is awesome!).

You can do this at any moment, no matter what is happening: your father is dying in the hospital, you’re running late for a meeting, you just missed your train, you got another subscriber on your Youtube channel, you just ate some delicious vegan ice cream. Drop the evaluation habit, and practice the gratitude and contentment habit.

Practice by keeping something visible around you (a little drawing you made, a gift from your daughter, a flower you found on the sidewalk outside, a stone from the river on your last hike) to remind you about your new mental habit. Practice when you do a 2-minute meditation in the morning. Practice whenever you notice yourself feeling unmotivated, frustrated with yourself, depressed, overwhelmed.

The habit of gratitude and contentment will never fail you, like a good friend.