

HOW CONFIDENCE IS DIFFERENT THAN SELF-ESTEEM & WHY IT MATTERS

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As a professional athlete, I was **measured, celebrated, and praised** for *outcomes* that I produced, rather than *who* I was. It is the nature of competing for a living; and living in the public eye. My coaches treated me better when I performed well, and my friends at home only praised me when the media covered me, which was only when I did well in my races.

It wasn't until I went to law school that I bumped up against a very uncomfortable truth: I began to realize that my self-worth as a person was totally tangled up in *achievement*. This painful realization finally became clear because, at the time, I wasn't exactly getting the best grades in my class, and I had no idea what I wanted to do with my life. For literally the first time in my life, I wasn't achieving. And I felt *bad* about myself.*

Intellectually, I understood the danger of having my self-esteem hinge on external outcomes. And as a yoga instructor, I was ashamed of my inability to grasp my inherent self-worth and to practice self-compassion. I began to recognize that I had an unhealthy attachment to achievement, but that didn't erase years of conditioning. Like many athletes, my brain was hardwired to believe that I didn't matter, unless I did great things.

I believe that I experienced a real-life demonstration of what is now a hot debate in psychology: what is the difference between self-esteem and confidence? After all, you may have noticed, often times the two terms get conflated or are used synonymously. People assume that one who is confident, necessarily has high self-esteem. I'd argue that assumption is mistaken.

At my lowest-low of law school, I was still a confident person. I confidently led yoga classes and believed in my ability to, say, write strong papers in school. But deep down, I felt bad about myself. My self-worth was low. Because I wasn't achieving at the same rate or at the same level that I had grown accustomed to, I started to feel like I wasn't worthy of being liked or appreciated as a human being.

Katty Kay, co-author of *The Confidence Code*, explains that **self-esteem is the value you see yourself having in the world, while confidence is related to action and is a belief that you can succeed at something.**

There IS a difference. And, of course, *both* are important.

So, what does this mean for coaches? As a coach, your responsibility is to help athletes improve. This by definition has to do with action, or the realm of confidence-building: evaluating your athletes, critiquing them, celebrating their successes, and motivating them after disappointments. Carving out room for an athlete's "self-worth" or "value as a person" rarely makes it onto a coach's radar. For those coaches, however, who are interested in cultivating their athletes as *people*, just be aware that your athletes are people before they are athletes. Treat them with respect, demonstrate that you appreciate them as people independent of how they perform.

Finally, what does all of this mean for parents? It is simple: love and support your child(ren) unconditionally. Regardless of how she performs or the outcomes she achieves, make sure your athlete knows that you love and support her exactly the same. She will inevitably be treated conditionally based on her achievement by her coaches and friends, just like I was. The parent's role, more

than anyone else, is simply to be the counterexample and to provide UNconditional love.

When I was growing up, never was there a day when I thought that my parents loved me more or less depending on how I performed. After competitions, they always greeted me with a smile and were genuinely proud of me. Not once did I hear my parents boasting about my achievements to their friends or colleagues. That love and support built a foundation of self-esteem that I eventually found my way back to after my law school low-point.

Confidence is important. Really important. As Katty Kay says, confidence is “life’s enabler. It is the quality that turns thought into action.” But that’s not to say that self-esteem isn’t important too. Amidst the conversation on building confidence in young people (especially girls), we should never neglect self-esteem; that thing that makes us feel whole. After all, we all deserve to feel worthy, independent of what we achieve.

**More about this in another blog on another day!*