

## Why Do We Have Such a Hard Time Accepting Compliments?

### Description

*“That was such beautiful playing...”*

*“Your have such a gorgeous sound!”*

Compliments are a funny thing. Given a choice, most of us would probably prefer to receive glowing compliments from our peers, colleagues, teachers, and audiences, than scathing criticisms.

So why are we so bad at accepting them?

We know that the most gracious response is a simple “thank you!” But often, we can’t help ourselves, and end up stammering out a clumsy response that just makes things awkward.

*“Uhh...thanks...but I was sooo nervous...did you hear my bow shaking?”*

*“Oh...yeah...I’m trying out some new strings...my violin is so bright, I feel like I have such a harsh sound.”*

Even if we’re being honest, responses like these can make the complimenter feel uncomfortable and maybe even a tad foolish, since we’re essentially telling them that they don’t know what they’re talking about.

And by dismissing sincere compliments about our playing, our confidence stays kind of stuck too.

So what’s wrong with us? And how can we get better at internalizing the nice things people say?

### Self-theories

We all have certain theories about ourselves. How talented we are, what kind of personality we have, whether we are capable of baking a cake from scratch...in other words, our sense of value and worth.

These self-theories (or self-esteem) are often inaccurate – but tend to be pretty stable, and reeeeeeally difficult to change. Largely, because we tend to prefer information which *confirms* our theories, rather than information which is contradictory. After all, there’s something about knowing who you are that’s comforting – even if your sense of self is heavily skewed in a negative direction.

### Biased information processing

Indeed, people who are low in self-esteem seem to process information differently than those who are high in self-esteem. A low-self-esteem individual, for instance, might be receiving plenty of “acceptance cues” (like a smile or approving nod) from people around them, but often, they’re not getting through and sticking.

And not because low self-esteem individuals are incapable of noticing these cues. When it comes to acceptance cues directed towards *other* people, low self-esteem folks [seem to be](#) just as perceptive as high self-esteem individuals.

## Self-esteem bubbles

The difference appears to be that because positive cues don’t jibe with their negative self-theory, these cues are dismissed or filtered out. After all, it’s easier to say *“Oh, that person must not know this piece very well”* or *“They’re probably just being polite and saying nice things because they feel bad for me”* instead of revamping a sense of self that’s based on a lifetime of experience – even if the self-theory is totally outdated.

Like holding onto a theory that you have sub-par technique, even though that hasn’t been true since sophomore year when you began dedicating yourself to scales, etudes, and other fundamentals and had a teacher who whipped you into shape.

## Paradoxical effects

In fact, for those with negative self-theories, compliments can actually trigger *more* self-doubt, anxiety, and even lead to little mini identify crises instead of enhancing confidence.

So how can we help the compliments get past our negative self-theory firewalls, so we can take them in and build confidence?

## Three groups

A [team](#) of researchers recruited 105 participants who were currently in a romantic relationship<sup>1</sup> (you’ll see why in a minute).

Everyone started with a self-esteem assessment, and then a third of the participants completed an exercise that was designed to induce a more “concrete” mindset (**concrete** group), while another third completed an exercise designed to induce a more “abstract” mindset (**abstract** group).<sup>2</sup> A third group of participants was not presented with an exercise of any kind (**control** group).

Umm...what’s a concrete or abstract mindset?

## Mindset induction

Well, the concrete folks were given a list of words, and asked to provide a more specific example of each word. Like if they were given the word “soda,” they could respond with the word “Coke.”

The abstract group, on the other hand, was asked to respond with a more generalized category for the word. Like “drink” in response to “soda.”

Why is this important?

Previous research suggests that when we’re focused on the details of a situation, we’re less likely to let our self-theory color our interpretation of events. Whereas when we’re focused on the big picture overview of a situation, we tend to use our self-theories to decide what it all means.

Like concluding we have to work more on slower, more fluid shifts in a particular excerpt (concrete), as opposed to dwelling on the frustration of getting cut, and reinforcing the narrative that we don’t perform well under pressure (abstract).

## A compliment from your partner

Then, everyone was asked to consider the following scenario:

*Imagine that you are in the middle of your work or school day, and you decide to phone your romantic partner. You tell your partner about how your day is going, and even though you are not expressing any concern about your performance at work / school, your partner tells you “You’re doing a great job. You must be really charismatic with your colleagues, because it sounds like everyone there really likes you. I’m proud of you.”*

And finally, participants completed a short “perceived regard” survey to get a sense of how well they accept and internalize their partner’s compliments (with questions like “I am confident that my partner accepts and loves me”).

## Results

As predicted, participants with low self-esteem scores generally had a more muted response to their partner’s compliment than those with high self-esteem scores.

But this difference was significant *only in the **control** and **abstract** groups.*

The low self-esteem individuals in the **concrete** group had pretty much the same favorable response to the scenario as those with high self-esteem. And significantly higher positive regard scores than their counterparts in the abstract and control groups.

In other words, adopting a more concrete mindset helped the compliment get through their negative self-theory bubble and boost up their confidence a tiny bit<sup>3</sup>.

## Take action

So how can we apply this finding in our own efforts to respond more effectively to compliments?

James Pawelski is director of education at the University of Pennsylvania Positive Psychology Center. And in a [book](#) co-authored with his wife Suzann, they recommend a 3-part response to compliments – **accept**, **amplify**, and **advance**.

### 1. Accept

Take the compliment. Offer a sincere and heartfelt “thank you!” instead of trying to deflect, redirect, or minimize the feedback.

### 2. Amplify

Take it in and savor the nice sentiment for a moment. Avoid scrolling past it like an unwanted ad in your Facebook feed, and burying it under the pile of imperfections you’re already starting to dwell on.

### 3. Advance

If the compliment comes from a colleague, ask for some concrete feedback about one thing they feel you did particularly *well* – so that you could either do it again, or make that part of the performance even more awesome the next time. Interesting, right? Most times, I think we automatically look for feedback on what we did *poorly*.

Accept. Amplify. Advance. Not the way most of us typically respond to compliments, but much more productive from the sounds of it!

### Date Created

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