

#4 Respect

Recall a time when you were honored for one of your strengths. When someone pays you respect, they are making an effort to let you know that they value you. We glow in the dark when we are treated with respect. Keeping commitments, showing empathy, being honest and treating others with kindness—all are ways of showing respect. Because the virtue of respect is so intimately linked to the other virtues, the level of respect determines the quality of the love.

If you do not have the kind of friendships you want, begin to look at the quality of the friendship you have with yourself. Respect for yourself is one of the hardest qualities to acquire, but is the key to the successful quest. As you increase your self-respect, the ways you respect others also expands. When you have a high level of self-respect, you can reliably expect to be treated with regard.

Respect is a cherished expression of love.

Because I value respect, the challenge is to not be defensive when I feel that someone is acting in a disrespectful manner. Many negative feelings are activated when I am treated disrespectfully. The dynamics are complex, but basically it comes to this: I want my values respected even when they are not in alignment with someone else's. We can have conflicting opinions without being in conflict.

The person who I feel is being disrespectful of me may express themselves inappropriately. Even so, there might be some truth in what they say. I find it useful to ask myself, "Have I done anything that has promoted being treated this way?" If the answer is yes, then I ask, "How can I clean up my act?"

At the same time, I need to protect myself from someone who is upset and just trying to draw me into his or her drama. Asking, "What is their level of self respect?" helps me to engage my rational mind when my emotions run away with me. People who abuse themselves will likely try to treat me in a similar way if I let them. The trick is not to be triggered by someone who has a lower level of self-respect than me. When I am able to recognize this dynamic, I am less likely to get hooked and feel disrespected.

During an encounter in which I don't like the way someone is treating me, it is often the case that they are feeling bad and are invested in making me feel bad too. I resist the urge to retaliate with a nasty comment. If they can manipulate me into being disrespectful towards them then, in a perverse way, they have proof that I am a bad person and somehow they were justified in being rude to me in the first place. I do not wish to be dragged down to such a level. I am increasingly less willing to be in relationship with people who are not working toward improving their levels of self-respect and respect towards others.

Respect for the Relationship

What is important to you? Whatever it is, you naturally want respect for what you value. The more intimate you become with your friends, the greater the need for an increased level of respect. You want to know that they can care about themselves and you at the same time, and that before they act, they will take your feelings into consideration. It is our birthright to be treated with consideration. Earning deeper levels of respect beyond this base is dependent on one's actions being grounded in integrity. There is a need to re-inspect the relationship on a regular basis, to see if there are behaviors that are causing the level of respect to drop.

Acceptance is not permission to be a jerk. Some people falsely believe if you truly love them, you must take them the way they are. Any action you take that they interpret to be a desire to change them is seen as disrespectful and they assume a defensive posture. Such resistance demonstrates their failure to understand that entering into relationship is the most powerful means of personal transformation.

A relationship is a living thing that needs to grow or it will die. An agreement to love implies a willingness to grow. The goal is to be true to ourselves, and also to grow and change.

With respect, we accept our friends for who they are, just as we know how to accept ourselves as we are. We are only caught in our own projections when we see our friends as we want them to be rather than who they are. With respect, we see that there is no need to change the other person. We can be thrilled that our friends are different.

Disagree or Disrespect

It is easy to respect someone who does something that you admire, or who agrees with you. However it is rare that two people's priorities match up and remain in perfect alignment. The challenge heats up when you must act in a respectful manner toward someone close to you who is doing something contrary to your beliefs. Kindred spirits are intimately involved, so differences are more evident than they would be with casual friends. To respectfully disagree is not easy for us humans. To hold one or more different opinions with respect taxes our flexibility. The greater the frequency of interactions, the greater the need to be respectful of the differences. For deep bonds to form, respect and forgiveness are essential.

My intention is to respect a friend even when I have trouble understanding them. We must accept both the ways our paths are parallel and the ways they differ. I require respect for my right to be different. I want a friend to respect me even when he or she does not like certain actions of mine. I like having the kind of friends who will let me know if they feel I have been disrespectful

When someone I care about and who cares about me makes a mistake, I am able to forgive. But I find it hard to respect someone who is constantly disrespectful of me. At the end of the day, in such cases, they have the right to be themselves and I have the right to stay away from them.

Respect also means refraining from unfair judgement when there is a difference of opinion. When we mutually respect each other, we realize there is often no right or wrong, just different opinions: we are free to be ourselves without fear. Listening to our friend's point of view does not necessarily mean we agree. When a friend listens with respect during a disagreement, we feel great, because we feel heard. There may be areas in which we strongly disagree, but we don't become disagreeable toward each other. Your warning light should come on if friends never disagree with you. Either they are afraid of your response, they are not expressing their feelings honestly or they do not have enough respect for you to exert the energy. Being too agreeable to take a stand weakens the connection.

I mean no disrespect, but I do not like this about you. I care enough about you and our relationship to speak up and voice my opinion.

This is difficult to say and can be hard to hear, but true friends are willing to risk speaking the truth as they see it. Instead of avoiding areas of conflict, good friends learn skills in conflict resolution and prevention.

Seek friends who help you see past your blind spots.

Debate or Discussion

I vividly remember the expression on my high school teacher's face when I disagreed with him on a point of theology. He tried to convince me that I was wrong because he was a Christian Brother and a religious scholar. When I repeated that the principles upon which I had based my opinion were sound, he tried to pressure me to give in by showing me that every student in the class agreed with him, so he must be right. When I said that just because I was outnumbered forty to one did not mean that I was wrong, he dismissed my point of view and went on with the lesson.

To his credit, two weeks later Brother Williams apologized to me in front of the class and admitted that I was right and that he had been wrong. He had taken the time to consult with Rome regarding the official stance on the topic of the debate, and was informed that my position was correct. He explained that he had made an error in his thinking. "Either I am right or I am wrong, and since I do not like being wrong then you must be wrong." He also said he was wrong for the way he treated me. A strong bond formed between us that we enjoyed during our years at school together.

Quite often, disrespect is unintended. I pay attention to the intentions behind a person's words and actions. When a friend acts in a way that I think is disrespectful, I try to determine if that person made an innocent mistake or if the behavior was a result of not caring about my needs. Most of the time when I feel that someone has been disrespectful, I find, upon closer examination, they were unconscious of their actions and unaware of the effect on me.

It is my responsibility not to be easily offended. When I feel mistreated, I try to step back to see if it is in any way due to a misunderstanding on my part. I am responsible for how I feel and I am learning not to blame others for my unhappiness. As we have seen, even when someone acts in a disrespectful way it doesn't mean I have to feel disrespected. The higher the other person's level of distress, the greater likelihood they will act in an unconscious or disrespectful way. This doesn't excuse the behavior, but I do take into consideration the person's state of mind. The better I become at establishing guidelines for the ways I do and do not want to be treated, the better most people treat me.

Like many other well-meaning people, I have always wanted to please people, to be nice. This has been misunderstood as weakness by some who think it gives them license to take advantage of me. Such people never seem to change their behavior, no matter what I say or do. As I have learned self-respect I no longer let them hurt me. Though I have compassion for those who try to hurt me, knowing that likely they were hurt by others, I don't have to take what they dish out. I act to prevent reoccurrences. I ask myself: What action best serves me and is most effective with others?

How can you increase your self-respect?