

The Ego is an Enemy

From President Trump, to entertainers, to students on college campuses, there seems to be no shortage of individuals who are quick to take offense. They are reacting to what seems quite real to them, but truth is not established by one's interpretation of events.

We have all been there. Our defensiveness caused us to misinterpret the words and actions of others. We overreacted and put our foot in our mouth.

In conversations or in meetings, we may think we are listening to someone. All the while our mind-created static is thinking how the other person is wrong and how we'll respond. When we are defensive, we miss much of what is being said; our effectiveness and our relationships are being undermined.

We can learn to be less defensive and improve the quality of our life.

In his book [*The Ego is the Enemy*](#), Ryan Holliday defines ego as "an unhealthy belief in our own importance. Arrogance. Self-centered ambition... It's that petulant child inside every person, the one that chooses getting his or her way over anything or anyone else. The need to be better than, more than, recognized for, far past any reasonable utility."

I have heard people argue that they need a strong ego to be confident and successful. Is that true? Legendary football coach Bill Walsh explained that when the ego is in charge "self-confidence becomes arrogance, assertiveness becomes obstinacy, and self-assurance becomes reckless abandon."

Those who are arrogant often suffer from paralyzing insecurities too. How can that be? Arrogance and insecurity both come from the same place—an ego that won't get over itself.

Identifying with our ego sets up a reality distortion field which we then desperately defend. We overidentify with our transitory emotions, take offense, and use those feelings as an excuse for our bad behavior.

Focused on our self-importance, we categorize people as either affirming or threatening our sense of importance. We feel offended by those who threaten our self-importance.

Dave Chasen owned a famed Hollywood restaurant frequented by Humphrey Bogart. [A belligerent drunk](#) Bogart could be difficult to get along with. One day Chasen quipped, "The trouble with Bogart is that he thinks he's Bogart."

Bogart couldn't stop being *Bogart*, even when his interests were best served by holding his *Bogart* identity lightly. How troublesome to others are we when we act to defend our ego-created identity?

Actor Mandy Patinkin played the iconic role Inigo Montoya in *The Princess Bride*; currently he plays Saul Berenson in *Homeland*. [Reflecting on his obnoxious behavior](#) during his run on the series *Chicago Hope*, Patinkin said, "I struggled with letting in other people's opinions. I never let directors talk to me, because I was so spoiled... So there I was saying, 'Don't talk to me, I don't want your opinion. I behaved abominably. "

While behaving badly, Patinkin thought he was merely reacting to objective events. What if he had realized that he was reacting to his fallible interpretations of events?

Think of the last time you had a heated discussion. Did you say something that was unnecessary or get in the last word because an urge to be right seemed paramount? If so, take a good look at the importance you are placing on preserving your ego—your sense of self-importance, your "petulant child inside."

Is the importance you place on being right creating stress and dampening your enjoyment of life?

Ryan Holliday explains the damages the defensive ego inflicts on us:

As we sit down to proof our work, as we make our first elevator pitch, prepare to open our first shop, as we stare out into the dress rehearsal audience, ego is the enemy—giving us wicked feedback, disconnected from reality. It's defensive, precisely when we cannot afford to be defensive. It blocks us from improving by telling us that we don't need to improve.

Holliday writes "an amateur is defensive. The professional finds learning (and even, occasionally, being shown up) to be enjoyable." Do we want to be successful or do we place a higher value on being right? Individuals with real self-confidence don't take offense. They learn from their mistakes without being defensive.

Going pro by dropping defensiveness is a winning move—less stress, greater happiness, and increased effectiveness are the results.

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[Image Credit: Pexels]