

Embodying Hope



Kindness, Not Contempt

Contempt is regarding something or someone as inferior, vile, or worthless. When you intervene, reserve this potent weapon for extreme cases of causing harm for selfish ends. Interact with kindness when you can.

Contempt hurts. Whether hidden or overt, contempt hurts. We are social beings who care about the approval of people around us. Contempt from anyone erodes our sense of worthiness. Contempt from the people we physically and emotionally depend on feels like a threat to our survival. No one should have to endure an atmosphere of contempt.

In particular, children never deserve contempt. Some people aim corrosive contempt at children for their age-appropriate smallness and weakness. Those children swallow the idea that weakness is bad and go on to treat themselves and others with contempt, since we all have weaknesses.

Culture of contempt. As we become aware of how we and the people around us use contempt, we can minimize its presence in our lives. Where we find a culture of contempt, we can work to replace it with a culture of kindness and care.

Did you experience a culture of contempt in your family, community, or school? What qualities were held in contempt? Who was treated with contempt? Was contempt used as a way of signaling who was included and who was excluded? Was contempt discussed directly, or was it an acid drip in the background?

Inner contempt. If an inner voice treats us with contempt,

that part is usually worried that we will be seen as contemptible by the outside world. It is trying its best to help us survive with the tools it has. We can spend time with it and warmly listen for what it is worried about and what it wants for us instead. This part is often far younger and more terrified than it seems at first.

A young part that receives and collapses under contempt also needs to be heard with compassion. Spending time with these parts can give them the kind adult company they so desperately need, and help them shift toward kindness themselves.

Listening kindly to a contemptuous part is an inside job for the person containing that part, perhaps with professional help. You are not responsible for tolerating contempt from a friend or partner, even if you want to rescue them from their self-contempt, or you want to learn how to handle contempt better.

External contempt. Do you sense that someone in your life treats you with contempt? It might be as obvious as rolled eyes and silent treatment, or as subtle as a remark that stings and stays with you even though you are not sure why. We have sensitive detectors for contempt as part of our social survival skills.

People have contempt for someone they abuse, bully, or manipulate in order to distance themselves from their victim's inherent dignity and worth. Contempt is a symptom and a red flag, not a justification for abusing someone.

The way to handle external contempt aimed at you is to get away from it. You do not become immune by ignoring it. You cannot become good enough or work hard enough to deserve respectful treatment from someone who regards you as inferior, because you already deserve respectful treatment.

Contempt is emotional abuse and a relationship killer.

Limitations deserve care. As you find more compassion for yourself, you will also find more compassion for others. We tend to project inner contempt onto the people around us. We often have the most contempt for something we recently learned not to do.

When you notice contemptuous thoughts about others, silently acknowledge them. In what areas do you think of yourself as superior and others as inferior? If you were taught that, for example, people with intellectual disabilities are inferior, seek out information to counter that belief. Disabilities and limitations deserve care, not contempt.

Signals a problem. Contempt can also be a strong signal about a situation that needs your attention. When you feel contempt for someone's egregious behavior, pause to consider your options. You could distance yourself or ignore the problem, or you could take action to interrupt or change the behavior. If an individual is behaving badly, you could draw their attention to the problem and/or reach out to others for help. For larger social problems such as voter suppression or climate change denial, you could join an organization that is already taking action.

Culture of kindness. A culture of kindness is created by people who know how to be kind and considerate. Seek them out and learn from them. Notice how your body responds to being treated like a person who is already good enough. Pay attention to how they talk about and treat others, and practice those skills.

Where did you see a culture of kindness growing up? Were children allowed to be appropriately capable for their age and lovingly corrected for mistakes? Did you hear, "People do their best with the resources they have?" Did

you celebrate people's successes rather than dwell on their failures? Was anger expressed openly with care, rather than leaking out as contempt?

Kindness includes empathic acceptance and clear boundaries, warm appreciation and respectful disagreement. Kindness is authentic, rather than being nice from behind a mask. In this time of isolation, simply acknowledging someone with kind eyes is a gift.

Struggle together. We are under tremendous strain from the pandemic, political upheaval, and increasing natural disasters. Contempt causes us to hide our struggles. The more we can be kind to ourselves and each other, the more we can struggle together rather than struggling alone.