

# Dignity

## Inside and Out

Seeking and Creating Dignity  
in the Lives of Autistic People



Scott Allen, MS, LPC-IT  
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# Definitions



# Internalized Shame (1)

- Internalized shame is a sense of shame that a person has adopted or absorbed into who or what they believe they are
- Internalized shame says “I am a problem” rather than “I am experiencing a problem”
- Ordinary shame can be resolved through self-reflection, apologies, self-improvement, etc.
- Internalized shame is believed to be a permanent stain or a personality trait, and therefore cannot be resolved (except by rejecting or moving past it)



## Internalized Shame (2)

- For autistic people, internalized shame most often results from chronic external shame from stigma, rejection, inability to meet (reasonable or unreasonable) expectations, etc.
- Internalized standards of a non-autistic society create, reinforce, and/or worsen internalized shame
- External standards make the internal shame appear “real” and therefore justified
- In intense cases, person has no sense of valuing their own life/self at all, because they only refer to external standards that they cannot meet; have no standards of their own



# Dignity (1)

- Many definitions/usages of “dignity,” but all have something to do with worth
- Since honor, esteem, etc. already refer to worth as defined by people other than oneself, it seems useful to define dignity as worth that comes from the self, in order to not have redundant words
- Worth, value, preference, approval, etc. are all essentially the same concept, and all are entirely subjective
- Hence: basic distinction between 1) subjective valuing of self by others and 2) subjective valuing of self by self



## Dignity (2)

- A dignified person will tend to behave in ways consistent with valuing their self
- A dignified person will tend not to . . .
  - . . . needlessly harm their self or their reputation
  - . . . be fawning, needy, or defensive
  - . . . agree to actions, standards, or beliefs that diminish their sense of self-value, except where compromise may be necessary for other reasons

# The Boundaries of Dignity



# An Ember, Always

- By this definition, dignified behavior is not what other people consider to be dignified, but what reliably demonstrates that a person values their own self
- Valuing one's own self does not mean 1) unreasonably or unfairly inflating one's sense of importance nor 2) not valuing other people
- Whether you value your own life is between you and the universe, not between you and anyone else
- If you have at least one small ember of dignity - one spark of value for yourself - you can grow it to value your life however you see fit



# Dignity, Applied

- I am trying to grow, gain, increase, improve, explore, expand, revise and refine myself and my life **for my own sake**
- Other people are also part of that, but only when they **need** to be or when I **choose** for them to be, not out of a sense of guilt, obligation, etc.
- If I feel an obligation is reasonable and doable, I will uphold it, but **I** set the standard of what is a respectable obligation for my purposes, **not** other people
- I am open to negotiating and updating my standards as long as I am treated fairly and I can sustain a particular standard

# Inside and Out: the Dilemma of Dignity



# Freedom of Respect

- Crux of the problem:

**Gaining respect has to be persuasive, not coercive**

- All people have freedom of conscience (the right to decide their own moral values) and freedom of association (the right to decide who they spend time with, and how)

- Everyone arguably deserves some basic human respect, but beyond that, both respect and disrespect are 1) subjective and 2) can and should be earned, not automatic

- Publically or institutionally using power to force someone to outwardly respect you tends to breed private resentment



# Nothing Notable About Wanting It Your Way

- Every group of people – every society, culture, organization, family, etc. – has its own standards, attitudes, and goals that it thinks are best and that it wants to act on (so do individual people!)
- It is, therefore, not even slightly remarkable that any given group of people wants things to go its own way, to want things to be as good as possible for its own purposes
- Anyone can rightly say “that group is only advocating for its own power and relevance, same as anyone else” – nothing inherently noble or righteous about this in itself



# The Dilemma

- Trying to live up to non-autistic narratives means always playing catch-up, since those narratives were (largely) designed without us in mind.
- If we create narratives that are clearly suited entirely to our own preferences, we risk "wish-listing" rather than genuinely advocating. Other people then can, with good reason, presume we're simply out for ourselves, like everyone else. Nothing remarkable/noble about favoring one's own perspective, or of one's own group.
- We need a third way: intermediate path that considers factors and perspectives both inside and outside our own group (whatever that means), a narrative that takes a broader view of how groups interact and that brings together shared or compatible values



# Lean Into Existing Values That Work

Appeal to existing value systems, including:

- Common-sense fairness
- Practicality
- The utility of investing in people & return on investment
- Relatability: Wouldn't you want support if you were in this situation?
- Relatability: Our interests, preferences, etc. have direct parallels to yours, differing in detail but not in theme



# “Flexify” Existing Values That Don’t (Yet) Work

Some values are not bad in themselves, but have been turned into rigid demands rather than useful goals or guidelines:

- Not every problem is a moral problem (HUGE issue)
- Ambition and work are good, but not when turned into extreme, unsustainable expectations
- Personal responsibility is good, but not when it blames the individual for systems that they didn’t create and that they can’t change alone
- Even therapeutic standards (e.g. mindfulness) are not helpful if not contextualized & customized

# Discussion