

THE BIG IDEAS

The Six Pillars
Of self-esteem.

Practice
Create self-esteem.

Living Consciously
Pillar #1.

Self-Acceptance
Pillar #2.

Self-Responsibility
Pillar #3.

Self-Assertiveness
Pillar #4.

Living Purposefully
Pillar #5.

What Must I Do?
Well, what must you do?

Self-Discipline
& Self-competence.

Personal Integrity
Pillar #6.

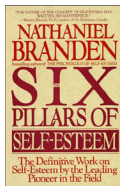
Pride
Vice or virtue?

On Following Your Bliss
Deeper reflections.

Small Improvements
Are big.

"But does anything take more courage—is anything more challenging and sometimes frightening—than to live by our own mind, judgment, and values? Is not self-esteem a summons to the hero within us?"

~ Nathaniel Branden



The Six Pillars of Self-Esteem

The Definitive Work on Self-Esteem by the Leading Pioneer in the Field
BY NATHANIEL BRANDEN · BANTAM © 1995 · 368 PAGES

“Apart from disturbance whose roots are biological, I cannot think of a single psychological problem—from anxiety and depression, to underachievement at school or at work, to fear of intimacy, happiness, or success, to alcohol or drug abuse, to spouse battering or child molestation, to co-dependency and sexual disorders, to passivity and chronic aimlessness, to suicide and crimes of violence—that is not traceable, at least in part, to the problem of deficient self-esteem. Of all the judgments we pass in life, none is as important as the one we pass on ourselves.”

~ Nathaniel Branden from *The Six Pillars of Self-Esteem*

[Nathaniel Branden](#) is a smart dood. Big brain. Very big brain.

He's the leading authority on the science of self-esteem and, in addition to the big brain/wisdom, he has a fascinating life story.

Nathaniel met [Ayn Rand](#) as a teenager and began an intimate relationship with Ayn and her work that lasted over 20 years and included highlights such as Ayn deeming Nathaniel the embodiment of her ideals and Nathaniel helping to create the Objectivist movement. Check out part one of his fascinating interview with Ken Wilber at his web site ([NathanielBranden.com](#)) for more mojo on that front and to get a personal look at his life and wisdom.

The Six Pillars of Self-Esteem is, as its sub-title proclaims: “the definitive work on self-esteem by the leading pioneer in the field.” Branden's style is rigorously smart yet still approachable (and almost Emersonially quotable :).

In this Note (as with all the others), I'm less interested in giving you an intellectual overview of the subject and more interested in pulling out some of the many Big Ideas we can *immediately* apply to our lives.

So, let's get to work. We'll start with a quick look at the six pillars and then explore some Big Ideas on how to bring them to life.

THE SIX PILLARS OF SELF-ESTEEM

1. The Practice of Living Consciously
2. The Practice of Self-Acceptance
3. The Practice of Self-Responsibility
4. The Practice of Self-Assertiveness
5. The Practice of Living Purposefully
6. The Practice of Personal Integrity

(Please note the use of “The Practice of...” Self-esteem is not an idea. It's a PRACTICE. :)

"To find it humiliating to admit an error is a certain sign of a flawed self-esteem."

~ Nathaniel Branden

THE PRACTICE OF SELF-ESTEEM

"What determines the level of self-esteem is what the individual does."

It's nice to talk about ideas, memorize inspiring words, and get an intellectual understanding of something. But it's what we DO that leads to our self-esteem.

Branden continues by saying: "A 'practice' implies a discipline of acting in a certain way over and over again—consistently. It is not action by fits and starts, or even an appropriate response to a crisis. Rather, it is a way of operating day by day, in big issues and small, a way of behaving that is also a way of being."

Beautiful.

Reminds me of [George Leonard](#)'s *brilliant* book *Mastery* (see Notes): "A practice (as a noun) can be anything you practice on a regular basis as an integral part of your life—not in order to gain something else, but for its own sake... For a master, the rewards gained along the way are fine, but they are not the main reason for the journey. Ultimately, the master and the master's path are one. And if the traveler is fortunate—that is, if the path is complex and profound enough—the destination is two miles farther away for every mile he or she travels."

So, let's remember it's NOT about memorizing inspiring words or having stimulating conversations, it's about practicing and living our core truths.

How about some [Vernon Howard](#) mojo to bring the point home? "You see, knowing the words is not the same thing as living the meaning. Suppose I memorize the printed instructions on a first-aid kit. Does that mean I can give first aid? No. The full meaning comes when I admit I know nothing and then try, practice, succeed."

SENTENCE COMPLETIONS & LIVING CONSCIOUSLY

"Sentence-completion work is a deceptively simple yet uniquely powerful tool for raising self-understanding, self-esteem, and personal effectiveness. It rests on the premise that all of us have more knowledge than we normally are aware of—more wisdom than we use, more potentials than typically show up in our behavior. Sentence completion is a tool for accessing and activating these 'hidden resources.'"

The practice of living consciously is the first pillar of self-esteem.

Throughout the book, Branden brings us back to the practice of sentence completions as a powerful tool for living more consciously. Super simple, super powerful.

Basic idea: take a sentence stem (like "Living consciously to me means...") and create 6-10 completions of that sentence. Only rule is that each ending needs to create a grammatical sentence. Write quickly, don't stop to "think" and, as Branden says: "Any ending is fine, just keep going."

Try these on:

- Living consciously to me means...
- If I bring 5 percent more awareness to my activities today...
- If I pay more attention to how I deal with people today...
- If I bring 5 percent more awareness to my insecurities then...
- If I bring 5 percent more awareness to my priorities then...

"I cannot be truly myself, cannot build self-esteem, if I cannot accept myself."

~ Nathaniel Branden

THE PRACTICE OF SELF-ACCEPTANCE

"We can run not only from our dark side but also from our bright side—from anything that threatens to make us stand out or stand alone, or that calls for the awakening of the hero within

"Self-esteem is the reputation we acquire with ourselves."

~ Nathaniel Branden

us, or that asks that we break through to a higher level of consciousness and reach a higher ground of integrity. The greatest crime we commit against ourselves is not that we may deny or disown our shortcomings but that we deny and disown our greatness—because it frightens us. If a fully realized self-acceptance does not evade the worst within us, neither does it evade the best."

The practice of self-acceptance. It's the second pillar of self-esteem. In his chapter dedicated to this pillar, Branden beautifully and powerfully articulates the need to practice self-acceptance—which we might best be able to sum up as "my refusal to be in an adversarial relationship with myself."

And, in addition to the acceptance of our light, he advises us that "As a psychotherapist I see nothing does as much for an individual's self-esteem as becoming aware of and accepting disowned parts of the self. The first steps of healing and growth are awareness and acceptance—consciousness and integration."

Check out the book for more mojo on integrating the disowned shadows within yourself. For now, how about a spotlight on the light... Are you accepting your own greatness?

THE PRACTICE OF SELF-RESPONSIBILITY

"I am responsible for my choices and actions. To be 'responsible' in this context means responsible not as the recipient of moral blame or guilt, but responsible as the chief causal agent in my life and behavior."

The third pillar of self-esteem: the practice of self-responsibility. We talk about this one *a lot.* (As you know if you've read many of these Notes! :)

"Often what we call 'thinking' is merely the recycling of the opinions of others."

~ Nathaniel Branden

Responsibility. Break it up into its two little word-segments: response-able. It's simple: We're responsible when we're "able to respond" to life's challenges as healthy, autonomous human beings. NOT as victims, blaming this or that for our challenges or feeling shame or guilt for not living up to someone else's/society's standards, but as individuals who own our abilities to manifest our desires as we engage in life.

So, question time: Can you turn your response-able dial up a notch or two?

THE PRACTICE OF SELF-ASSERTIVENESS

"To practice self-assertiveness is to live authentically, to speak and act from my innermost convictions and feelings—as a way of life, as a rule."

The practice of self-assertiveness. It's the fourth pillar of self-esteem.

The essence of this pillar is to be REAL.

To drive this point home, remember the idea that "authentic" and "author" come from the same root. To be authentic is literally to be the author of your own story. Are you?

Here's another angle on the power and practice of self-assertiveness: "Warren Bennis, our preeminent scholar of leadership, tells us that the basic passion in the best leaders he has studied is for self-expression. Their work is clearly a vehicle for self-actualization. Their desire is to bring 'who they are' into the world, into reality, which I speak of as the practice of self-assertiveness."

THE PRACTICE OF LIVING PURPOSEFULLY

"To live purposefully is to use our powers for the attainment of goals we have selected: the goal of studying, of raising a family, of earning a living, of starting a new business, of bringing a new product into the marketplace, of solving a scientific problem, of building a vacation home, of sustaining a happy romantic relationship. It is our goals that lead us forward, that call on the exercise of our faculties, that energize our existence."

"To trust one's mind and to know that one is worthy of happiness is the essence of self-esteem."

~ Nathaniel Branden

"It's not that achievements prove our worth but rather that the process of achieving is the means by which we develop our effectiveness, our competence at living."
~ Nathaniel Branden

Living purposefully. It's the fifth pillar.

Lest you think goal setting is not for "spiritual" peeps, consider this: "Understood correctly, there is nothing intrinsically 'Western' about a strong goal orientation. When Buddha set out in search of enlightenment, was he not moved by a passionate purpose?"

So, what're your goals?

What deeply inspires you?!? Not what you think you *should* do or that you think would impress others, but the visions that deeply resonate with your highest values and ideals!

Are you clear?

Are you living in integrity with 'em?

WHAT MUST I DO?

"People rarely ask themselves, 'If my goal is to have a successful relationship, what must I do? What actions are needed to create and sustain trust, intimacy, continuing self-disclosure, excitement, growth?' ... When a couple is newly married and very happy, it is useful to ask, 'What is your action plan to sustain these feelings?'"

First question: What do you want?

Second question: What must you do?

Whether it's a powerful relationship, business or body, what's your ideal and *what must you do?*

As Branden reminds us: "Purposes unrelated to a plan of action do not get realized. They exist as frustrated yearnings."

SELF-DISCIPLINE & SELF-COMPETENCE

"No one can feel competent to cope with the challenges of life who is without the capacity for self-discipline. Self-discipline requires the ability to defer immediate gratification in the service of a remote goal. This is the ability to project consequences into the future—to think, plan, and live long-range."

Self-discipline and delaying gratification.

Two hallmarks to psychological health we discuss often in these Notes.

I love [Nietzsche](#)'s wisdom on self-discipline (see Notes on [Thus Spoke Zarathustra](#)): "He who cannot command himself should obey. And many can command themselves, but much is still lacking before they can obey themselves."

And [Lao-tzu](#) (see Notes on the [Tao te Ching](#)) reminds us this isn't a "Western" thing: "He who controls others may be powerful, but he who has mastered himself is mightier still." And: "Don't think you can attain total awareness and whole enlightenment without proper discipline and practice. This is egomania. Appropriate rituals channel your emotions and life energy toward the light. Without the discipline to practice them, you will tumble constantly backward into darkness."

So... How's your self-discipline practice?

PERSONAL INTEGRITY

"Integrity is the integration of ideals, convictions, standards, beliefs—and behavior. When our behavior is congruent with our professed values, when ideals and practice match up, we have integrity."

Observe that before the issue of integrity can even be raised we need principles of behavior—moral

"The challenge for people today, and it is not an easy one, is to maintain high personal standards while feeling that one is living in a moral sewer."
~ Nathaniel Branden

*" Integrity means congruence.
Words and behavior match."*

~ Nathaniel Branden

convictions about what is and is not appropriate—judgments about right and wrong action. If we do not yet hold standards, we are on too low a developmental rung even to be accused of hypocrisy. In such a case, our problems are too severe to be described merely as lack of integrity."

The practice of personal integrity. It's the sixth and final pillar of self-esteem. Without it, the preceding practices "disintegrate."

Do your ideals, convictions, standards, beliefs AND behavior all line up?

And, perhaps even more importantly, do you even have a sense of what your ideals, convictions, standards and beliefs ARE to use as a basis for your measurement of how you're doing?!?

Well, do you?

... And, are they? :)

PRIDE: VICE OR VIRTUE?

"Pride is the emotional reward of achievement. It is not a vice to be overcome but a value to be attained."

Why are we conditioned to believe pride is a vice? I prefer Branden's take: "Self-esteem contemplates what needs to be done and says, 'I can.' Pride contemplates what has been accomplished and says, 'I did.'"

While we're here, time for a quick Top 5.

What are the five things you're most proud of?

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____
5. _____

(Well done! :)

ON FOLLOWING YOUR OWN BLISS

"Discussing the complexities of moral decision making in a lecture once, I was asked what I thought of Joseph Campbell's counsel to 'Follow your own bliss.' Did I believe it was ethically appropriate? I answered that while I liked what I believed to be Campbell's basic intention, his statement could be dangerous if divorced from a rational context. I suggested this modification (if I were forced to condense my ideas on morality into a single sentence): 'Live consciously—take responsibility for your choices and actions—respect the rights of others—and follow your own bliss.' I added that as a piece of moral advice I loved the Spanish proverb 'Take what you want,' said God, 'and pay for it.' ... But of course complex moral decisions cannot be made simply on the basis of statements such as these, helpful though they may sometimes be. A moral life requires serious reflection."

I've created three Notes on [Joseph Campbell's](#) work (see Notes on [Pathways to Bliss](#), [The Power of Myth](#), and [A Joseph Campbell Companion](#)) and I've been asked, "What happens when evil people follow their bliss?" a number of times, so I dig this distinction:

"Live consciously—take responsibility for your choices and actions—respect the rights of others—and follow your own bliss."

Amen.

*" At the simplest level,
personal integrity entails
such questions as: Am
I honest, reliable, and
trustworthy? Do I keep
my promises? Do I do the
things I say I admire and do
I avoid the things I say I
deplore? Am I fair and just
in my dealings with others?"*

~ Nathaniel Branden

"A commitment to lifelong learning is a natural expression of the practice of living consciously."

~ Nathaniel Branden

SMALL IMPROVEMENTS ARE BIG

"These practices are ideals to guide us. And—this can hardly be overemphasized—they do not have to be lived 'perfectly' 100 percent of the time in order to have a beneficent impact on our lives. Small improvements make a difference."

Love it. Perfection is NOT the standard we're looking for here. In fact, perfection is the LOWEST standard we could possibly set. Why? Because it's impossible to attain.

Let's remember to honor the power of small improvements. As the [Buddha](#) says in [The Dhammapada](#) (see Notes): "Little by little a person become evil, as a water pot is filled by drops of water... Little by little a person becomes good, as a water pot is filled by drops of water."

And, [Vernon Howard](#) reminds us: "Do not be impatient with your seemingly slow progress. Do not try to run faster than you presently can. If you are studying, reflecting and trying, you are making progress whether you are aware of it or not. A traveler walking the road in the darkness of night is still going forward. Someday, some way, everything will break open, like the natural unfolding of a rosebud."

How about [Nietzsche](#)? "He who would learn to fly one day must learn to stand and walk and run and climb and dance; one cannot fly into flying."

Yep. It's clear. Let's honor the small improvements we're making as we develop our self-esteem and live more and more radiantly conscious lives,

B

Brian Johnson,
Chief Philosopher

If you liked this Note,
you'll probably like...

[Ken Wilber](#)

[Strength for Life](#)

[Mastery](#)

[Meditations](#)

[Thus Spoke Zarathustra](#)

[The Power of
Your Supermind](#)

[The Dhammapada](#)

About the Author of "The Six Pillars of Self-Esteem"

NATHANIEL BRANDEN



Psychotherapist and philosopher Nathaniel Branden, Ph.D. is a lecturer, practicing psychotherapist, and author of twenty books on the psychology of self-esteem, romantic love, and the life and thought of Objectivist philosopher Ayn Rand. His work has been translated into 18 languages and has sold over 4 million copies, and includes such titles as *Taking Responsibility*, *The Six Pillars of Self Esteem*, and *My Years with Ayn Rand*.

The name Nathaniel Branden has become synonymous with the psychology of self-esteem, a field he began pioneering over thirty years ago. In that time, he has done more than any other theorist to advocate the importance of self-esteem to human well-being, a mission which began with his involvement in Objectivist philosopher Ayn Rand's "Inner Circle." (from [NathanielBranden.com](#) where you can learn more!)

About the Author of This Note

BRIAN JOHNSON



Brian Johnson loves helping people optimize their lives as he studies, embodies and teaches the fundamentals of optimal living—integrating ancient wisdom + modern science + common sense + virtue + mastery + fun. Learn more and optimize your life at [brianjohnson.me](#).