

"For two decades, I have watched the wonderful impacts that Sami Cohen ... have had on people's lives and organizations ... I am delighted for the benefit this book will bring to many people."

Peter Senge, Best selling author of The Fifth Discipline



"2 - The problem we don't know we have"

By

SAMI COHEN & PARTNERS

"Only when you enter the Now you can *truly* be with your customers, your employees, your spouse, your children..." *Sami Cohen*

The problem we do not know we have

Introduction

For many decades, psychologists have argued that people need high self-esteem. This idea has taken root in many countries, perhaps nowhere more so than in the United States.

When new parents are asked what they want most for their children, many say that they want them to have high self-esteem. To boost their self-esteem, parents praise their children's abilities when they do well, and try to protect them from experiencing failure (Dweck, 2000).

In schools, children complete assignments about the ways they are "special." In some children's sports, every child is declared a "winner" and sent home with a trophy.

The focus on self-esteem has become so great that psychologist Jean Twenge called today's American youth "Generation Me" (Twenge, 2006).

This focus on self-esteem seems to have had a measureable effect. Studies show that in most Western cultures, and particularly in North America, most people have high self-esteem (Twenge & Campbell, 2001).

Despite this, something seems amiss for many people. Over recent decades, as self-esteem has increased among Western populations, so have anxiety and depression (Twenge, 2000). *Rising levels of self-esteem do not seem to be solving our problems. They might even be contributing to our problems.*

According to Cohen's model of the Ego, every time we succeed in an Ego-driven goal, we raise the bar for our ideal self, putting that ideal farther out of reach.



Self-esteem is "the worst sickness known to man or woman, because it says, "I did well, therefore I am good," which means that when I do badly—back to shithood for me." --Renowned rational behavioral therapist Albert Ellis, quoted in *The New Yorker*, October 13, 2003, p. 42.

The Ego Gap is a constant preoccupation; we focus on it even in situations where we seem to be acting in altruistic or selfless ways.

For example, many of us take on leadership roles at different times in our lives. We may act as coaches, mentors, teachers, or guardians of children. There is a selfless element to these roles, of course – we take them on for the benefit of our students, trainees, kids, etc.

But from experience, we know that in taking on these roles, part of our focus is on ourselves, and what we will receive in return for our actions – most likely praise.

We want our students to perceive us as competent, or smart, or tough. We want our kids to perceive us as cool, or wise, or kind.

There is nothing abnormal about that. It is a common, human phenomenon.

But what does it tell us about our motivations, our needs and ourselves?

It tells us that even when we are carrying out selfless tasks, we still expend a great deal of energy projecting our desired images, and focusing on the Ego Gap.

Focusing on the gap usually reminds us of our perceived shortcomings. When we constantly focus on the gap, whether we are aware of doing so or not, we feel a constant need to prove ourselves, to perform, to achieve, and to get positive feedback.

Remember the concept of the “fabric of the moment” outlined in An Invitation to enter the Now. According to this concept, every moment of our lives is woven out of threads of Presence, Love and Connection, or out of fear and lack.

When we are constantly focused on our perceived shortcomings, either consciously or unconsciously, with which kind of threads do you think we are weaving most of our moments?

To ask the question is to answer it. Of course, they are moments of fear and lack. The cost of constantly focusing on the Ego Gap, and of constantly seeking to be

reassured about our self-worth is living our lives in an almost constant state of fear and lack.

In such a state, the main motivation for our actions and choices is often to escape from the **painful emotions triggered by focusing on the Ego Gap.**

In the best-case scenario we are distracted and not present. In the worst case, we can become paralyzed and discouraged.

We are unlikely to be aware that our focus on the Ego Gap is filling up our brain space, leaving no room to perceive what we really want.

So a coach, instead of being fully present for his players, may be devoting a great chunk of his mental energy trying to live up to his self-image as a tough guy. A business mentor may be spending an inordinate amount of time worrying about whether or not the depth of her wisdom is apparent. A parent may be uselessly wasting energy trying to project a cool image of herself to her kids.

But how much time and energy do we really want to spend trying to close a gap that can't ever be closed?

Do we really want to continue spending our lives in moments of fear and lack?

To weave moments out of the fabric of "Presence, Love and Connection," we need to be in that "Presence, Love and Connection" state at the moment's inception. But very often we are not in that state precisely because of the problem we don't know we have.

If I told you that you have a serious problem you do not know you have, you would probably deny it.

But you have this problem. I have this problem. Everyone has this problem.

The most difficult aspect of this problem is that we don't know we have it.

Other people cannot help us with it because they have the same problem.

This problem has significant consequences for our quality of life. Because of this problem, we frequently feel misunderstood. We feel overwhelmed. We feel lonely. We feel unsupported by others. We feel inadequate.

Our problem also causes suffering for other people in our lives. They do not feel heard, understood, or supported.

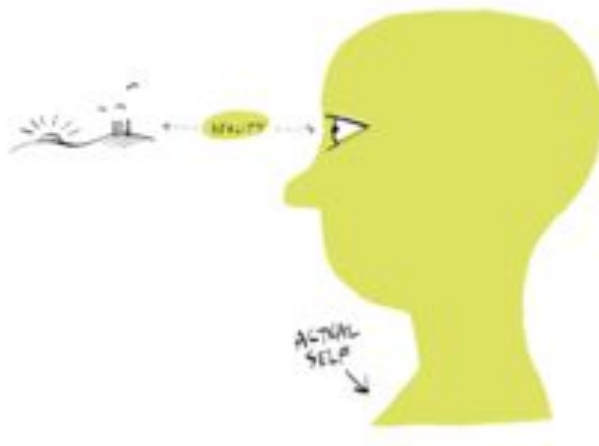
So what, exactly, is this problem that we don't know we have?



In a nutshell, the problem is this:

We go through our lives with a divided focus.

Because our attention is so often focused inward on that unbridgeable Ego Gap within our constructed self, we are unable to give our undivided focus to the beauty and wonder of the world in which we actually live, or to the needs and desires of our actual Self.



We may not always be aware that we are doing so, but we are constantly shifting our focus inward to check up on our constructed self.

we make many of our decisions and take many of our actions in order to relieve the emotions emerging from that focus.

When we focus on the Ego Gap, and conclude that we are lacking in some way, we need to compensate, we need to show off, we need to perform, we need to prove something, we need to accumulate.

We may get a short-term ego-reward by doing these things. Our anxiety over our perceived shortcomings may be lowered for a while. But the Ego Gap won't go away, and neither will our focus on it. The vicious cycle will continue.

The problem we don't know we have is so embedded in all aspects of our life that it pollutes almost all of our decisions, actions, and choices. It usually occupies most of our time.

It keeps us from entering the Now, and makes us lose our sense of Presence.

How much time does this preoccupation take out of our lives? In a time seminar in 2011, some participants estimated that they spent more than 85 per cent of their time on activities designed primarily to close their Ego Gap!

How do we solve the problem? It's simple in theory, but **it takes** some practice to stop focusing on our constructed self. It requires a commitment to remain vigilant and conscious about creating the fabric of each moment of our life, **and to re-adjust many** of our goals. We will explore **why and how** in the coming chapters.