Developing Enlightened Self-Interest

The ability to act in your own interests follows on from self-acceptance and confidence. As we shall see, it is also important to take into account the interests of others. The principle of enlightened self-interest takes into account both parts:

1. **You place your own interests first.**
2. **You keep in mind that your own interests will be best served if you take into account the interests of others.**

Human beings are fundamentally self-interested

Notwithstanding any precepts that say we should be otherwise, human beings appear to be intrinsically concerned first with their own welfare.
Hans Selye has argued that the desire to maintain oneself and stay happy is the most ancient – and one of the most important – impulses that motivates living beings. All living beings protect their own interests first of all. Selye points out that this begins with our basic biological make-up, in that the various cells in our bodies only cooperate with each other to ensure their own survival.

Human beings are also motivated by social interest

Selye has pointed out, though, that we are also strongly motivated by altruistic feelings. As well as self-interest, we also possess social interest – the wish to ensure that the social system as a whole survives and develops.
How is that two apparently contradictory tendencies can co-exist? The answer is that we help others in order to help

ourselves. In other words, our self-interest is enlightened. It appears that like self-interest, social interest is also inherent within human beings – both have biological roots. Collaboration between body cells promotes the survival of each individual cell and enables the total organism to function.

In effect, individual interests are best served by mutual cooperation. Accordingly, self-interest without social interest is misguided. So is social interest without self-interest. Always putting others first leads to resentment or a martyr attitude. People who believe they are acting purely in the interests of others are dangerous. By denying (to themselves) that their own self-interest is involved, such people may justify all types of manipulative and controlling behavior toward others. You are both self-interested and socially interested.

This dual tendency is built in to your very being and begins with your basic biology. By accepting this about yourself, you will be able to do a better job of acting in your own interests – in an enlightened manner.

What is it to be enlightened?

The word enlightened as several related meanings. It is humanitarian – charitable, liberal, and idealistic; and at the same time utilitarian – useful, beneficial, and practical. Can you see how merging an enlightened attitude with innate self-interest can apply at all levels – to yourself, to your family, to your town or city, to your country, and to the world as a whole?

Consider the effect on this planet if every person acknowledged their self-interest and then practiced it in an enlightened manner. What if every country based its external and foreign policies on the humanitarian and practical principle of enlightened self-interest? Why enlightened self-interest is important to stress management If human beings

did not have an inherent will to protect themselves and further their own interests, they would not survive. If you don't attend to your own interests, who will?

Knowing what is in your interests will help you get what is best for you and avoid what is harmful. It will keep you moving toward your goals – and ensure that your goals are the right ones for you. But you had better simultaneously take into account the interests of others. Getting people to have positive feelings toward you is a good idea. They will be more likely to treat you well and less likely to harm you. Contributing to their welfare will encourage them to contribute to yours. And contributing to the development and survival of the society in which you live will mean a better environment in which to pursue your interests.

If you acknowledge that self-interest is inherent in your nature, you will feel less guilty about looking after yourself. If you acknowledge that altruistic behavior is in your interests, you will be more likely to cooperate with others. If you do both, everyone gains.

Developing enlightened self-interest

Begin by practicing enlightened behaviors. Here are some ideas to get you started now: Go out of your way to show positive feelings towards others – gratitude, respect, trust – which in turn will arouse goodwill from them.

Choose some new activities in various life areas – work, family, leisure – that will bring goodwill. At the same time, act assertively. Ask for what you want, say No to what you don't, and tell others (when appropriate) what you think and how you feel. Make a point of doing something just for you each day for a while.

Until enlightened self-interest becomes part of you, consciously seek to get more of what you want while facilitating the interests of the other people in your world.