

INFERIORITY COMPLEX

Prevention in Children and Relief from It in Adults

Timothy Lin, Ph.D.

Everyone starts life with some feelings of inferiority. Subsequent success or failure is determined by the ability to adjust the inferiority feeling to the demands of life. Normal development requires the recognition of one's limitations and capacities in order to achieve a profitable balance in emotional maturity. The inferiority complex is different from the inferior feeling of which the former is the master but the latter can become a servant to the individual. As a master, the complex may cause a person to have ultimate failure and maladjustment; as a servant, the feeling may produce success in achieving valuable goals in life. No one succeeds without some inferior feeling and almost everyone who fails does so because of an inferiority complex. We will see the serious nature of an inferiority complex by considering the nature, the manifestations, and the cure.

Nature

The nature of the inferiority complex includes definition, distinction from the superiority complex, and causes. Inferiority complex may be defined as:

An abnormal or pathological state which, due to the tendency of the complex to draw unrelated ideas into itself, leads the individual to depreciate himself, to become unduly sensitive, to be too eager for praise and flattery, and to adopt a derogatory attitude toward others.¹

This definition is the basis of the following discussion.

How to Distinguish from a Superiority Complex: The genuine superiority complex is not superficial conceit but the consciousness of superiority developed from the feeling of personal cleverness, ability superior to their peers, and easy accomplishment of difficult tasks. The individual with a genuine superiority complex is truly a brilliant adult who retains the infant's egocentricity, has not grown up enough to recognize his own limitations, and will not have, emotionally, anything more than a precocious and somewhat spoiled child complex. However, over-compensation from an inferiority complex manifested in bluffing may be often mistaken for a genuine superiority complex. The distinction lies in the artificiality of the inferior-feeling bluffer expressed in aggressive boasting and in the genuineness of the superior-feeling egocentric expressed in intellectual aloofness.

Causes: Since every human being is born with inferiority feelings inherited from the fallen Adamic nature, no set of causes can be demonstrated conclusively as producing an inferiority complex. However, four external causes may be considered as aggravating

¹Paul Popenoe, "Your Inferiority Complex," *Scientific American*, 160 (May, 1939), 289.

inborn inferior feelings: parental attitudes, physical defects, mental limitations, and social disadvantages. Parental attitudes manifested by disapproving negative remarks and evaluations of behavior emphasizing mistakes and shortcomings determine the attitude of the child before the age of six.

In an extensive study of 1,000 parents having children between the ages of one to six, the findings conclusively indicated that most children are subjected to a constant barrage of critical faultfinding, and disparaging remarks.²

Since 75 per cent of these children heard ten remarks of condemnation and disapproval to one remark of commendation and approval, the result is that the children believe that they are inadequate, incompetent and inferior. Physical defects such as lameness, disproportional facial features, speech defects and defective vision cause emotional reactions and become connected with previous unpleasant experiences. Mental limitations brings feelings of inferiority when unfavorable comparisons are made with the superior achievements of others, and when satisfactory performance is expected even though the instructions cannot be comprehended. Social disadvantages because of family, race or economic status likewise aggravate feelings of inferiority by comparison with others.

Manifestations

One's natural inferiority feelings, often intensified by external causes, can be manifested through various symptoms of either withdrawal or aggressive tactics, and through the individual's self-adjustments made in trying to deal with his emotional problems.

Symptoms: Symptoms of inferior feelings are of two general types: withdrawal tactics, including self-consciousness, sensitiveness, and withdrawal from social contacts; and aggressive tactics, including excessive seeking for attention, criticism of others, overly dutiful obedience, and worry. Withdrawal strategies are more frequently used than aggressive strategies. The self-conscious individual may be excessively embarrassed and very timid in the presence of others, being either incapable of action from fear or overactive in a conspicuous way from bewilderment. Their sensitivity to criticism produces resentment to unfavorable comparisons, offense at friendly jests, rebellion at correction, defense of their self-chosen course of action, desire for praise, and an excessive attention to little things. It always suspects personal injustice and is ever ready to make a defense. Withdrawal from social contacts shows fear of people and lack of self-confidence, sometimes resulting in daydreaming about being the conquering hero or the suffering martyr type. Although aggressive tactics are used less frequently than are withdrawal strategies, the former are more violent in nature. Excessive seeking for attention and popularity often leads to the sacrifice of principle in order to gain the favor of others. The child may seek attention by stuttering, temper displays, and pretended illness. The adult seeks attention by explosions of temper, bitterness toward others, and constant irritability. Criticism of others is an effort to project inferior feelings onto others

²Barney Katz, "The Inferior Complex, Some Essential Causes," *Education*, 69 (January, 1949), 293.

and to minimize personal failures by pointing out the faults of others. Overly dutiful obedience or extreme submission is often used to compensate for known weaknesses. Also, undue worry about many things may be the result of a lack of self-confidence. Indeed, the mistakes of the past and the attainment of success in the future can be constant objects of too much concern.

Compensation: Compensation is a method of adjustment to either inferior feelings or an inferiority complex, utilizing a group of defense mechanisms to atone for either of them. **Some defense mechanisms are: denial of reality, distortion of reality, retreat from reality, attack on reality, and compromise with reality.** Reality is denied by repressing a given impulse and denying its existence; however, emotions are difficult to repress, and they often occur later in disguised form. **Reality is distorted by rationalization, projection, segregation of motives, and displacement.** **Rationalization** is the unconscious giving of a minor or fake explanation for an action that was motivated by some reason too painful to admit. It occurs in two forms: the sour grapes attitude illustrated by the fable of the fox and the unattainable grapes that he later decided were sour anyway; and the sweet lemon attitude described by Barrie as “not in doing what you like, but in liking what you do is the secret of happiness.”³ **Projection** blames other people or circumstances for personal defects and helps to absolve the individual of his feelings of personal failure. **Segregation** of motives keeps two different set of practices from interfering with each, which involves accepting truth in one situation while rejecting it in another. This often leads to contradictory actions of a hypocritical nature. **Displacement** is the transfer of an unpleasant and destructive emotion caused by one person or set of circumstances to another person or situation. **Retreat from reality** involves regression in returning to infantile behavior, substitution of fantasy for reality, and conversion of feelings into physical illness of a psychosomatic nature. **Attack on reality** consists of the physical aggression of the juvenile delinquent and the verbal aggression of a rowdy adult. **Compromise with reality** assumes three forms: substitution of failure in one area by success in another area, sublimation by changing the mode of expression of the inferiority complex, and identification with something bigger and more important manifested in the hero worship of the child and the company pride of the businessman. From a psychological viewpoint, compromise with reality is the most desirable defense mechanism because it is relatively healthy for the individual, often leads to better relationships with others and does not interfere with the usual goals of life.

Cure

Suggested cures for an inferiority complex are presented from psychological and Christian viewpoints in relation to prevention in childhood and solution of the problem in adulthood.

Prevention in Childhood: Basic psychological measures to prevent an inferiority complex in childhood are: love for the child, respect for the child as a person, and understanding of the particular needs of the individual child. Practical suggestions for parents are: focus of the child’s attention on objective tasks not on subjective feelings

³Floyd Ruch, *Psychology and Life*, Chicago: Scott, Foresman, and Company, 1953. P. 165.

and acceptance of liabilities and wise victory over them; have a sense of humor and make provision to have activities in line with the child's ability; challenging encouragement for praise and substitute competition with the child's own record instead of comparison with others; create opportunities for success in areas of the child's interest and concentrate on the child's special abilities and talents. Security for the child is developed by the personal security of the parents manifested in deep affection for each other and the absence of quarreling, by the constant expression of love for the child, and by the proper, consistent maintenance of discipline standards. The best way to teach the child self-reliant independence is to make him responsible for certain home tasks and give an appropriate reward for his efforts. Teach the child to overcome fear by the positive development of skills that will enable him to overcome threats of failure.

Christian training is the solemn responsibility of every parent (Prov. 22:6). Love for the child will dispel most of the inferiority complex, for mature love destroys fear (1 John 4:18). Spiritual training teaches the child to respect himself and to find compensation for his weaknesses in other areas of endeavor. Parental responsibility includes discipline (Prov. 13:24) administered in love to prevent discouragement (Col. 3:21), and the teaching of firm Christian faith by being a living example like Abraham was (Gen. 18:19), and by precept, like Lois and Eunice did for Timothy (2 Tim. 1:5, 3:15). A spiritual home with well-adjusted parents, a vital, continuing family altar, and a well-balanced spiritual approach of parents doing all things for the glory of God is the best prevention of an inferiority complex in childhood.

Solution in Adulthood: The basis psychoanalytic cure for an inferiority complex is twofold: raise the repressed complex to the conscious level by analytical technique and encourage the person according to the following three expressions: "Know thyself, accept yourself, and be yourself."⁴ Popenoe lists four curative steps: "recognize your disabilities; overcome your disabilities if possible; if you can't overcome a handicap, act as if you don't have it; and develop your strong points."⁵ Since the complex is a problem of deep-seated, emotionally toned ideas about one's self, psychology considers that it can be eliminated or minimized only by understanding how it originated, why it persists, and then compensating for the inferiority by developing other abilities.

However, these psychological suggestions are not sufficient, especially for a Christian. The truths expressed in the Scriptural injunctions are to forget the past (Phil. 3:13), to realize one's position in Christ (Phil. 4:11-13), and to aim for future goals in Christ (Phil. 3:14). To remember the accomplishments of the past would only produce pride, and to remember the failures of the past would produce regret and fear; therefore, as a Christian, all worldly gains should be counted as loss for Christ (Phil. 3:4-7), and the total forgiving and forgetting of his sins by God through personal confession should be continually realized (Is. 44:22; 1 John 1:9).

Spiritual realization of the position of a believer in Christ can cure the inferiority complex. Believers are the heirs of God (Gal. 4:7), and have power in prayer (Phil. 4:6),

⁴Arvid Runsetam, *Psychoanalysis and Christianity*, Rock Island: Augustana Press, 1958, p. 76.

⁵Popenoe, *op. cit.*, p. 289.

peace that gives perfect confidence (Phil. 4:7), victory over the old nature through realizing the past act of crucifixion with Christ (Gal. 2:20), and the abiding presence of Christ (Matt. 28:20). Moreover, the unchanging love of the Father (Rom. 8:28), the impossibility of separation from the love of Christ (Rom. 8:35-39), the provision of escape out of every temptation (1 Cor. 10:13, Heb. 2:18), and the sympathetic understanding of the interceding Christ (Heb. 4:15-16) can all be comfort for any inferiority-ridden Christian.

The basic law of Christian growth is that in losing one's life for Christ that life may be regained and vastly multiplied (Matt. 10:39). However, since an inferiority complex is centered on self, spiritual life is often stunted and deformed by one's inferiority complex. On the contrary, substituting or sublimating personal weakness in striving for spiritual maturity can produce self-confidence and greater faith in Christ and banish the inferiority complex. Especially, the glorious realization that the believer is a prince in training for future reigning with the King of Kings and the Lord of Lords (Rev. 5:10) will always give the Christian an abundant motivation to overcome the complex.

Conclusion

In conclusion, an inferiority feeling is an emotional feeling of incapability common to all in varying degrees, inherited at birth from the fallen Adamic nature. It may be intensified by circumstances in early life and become an inferiority complex. It finds manifestation in symptoms of withdrawal or aggression and seeks compensation by defense mechanisms in reaction to reality. The spiritual cure for children lies in the preventive measures of a vital Christian home life, and for adults the cure is to be found in their spiritual understanding of the believer's position and privileges in Christ. There is abundant provision in Scripture to meet all the emotional needs of every believer. Many believers will be able to see and apply these truths on their own. Others may need to receive guidance and insight from a gifted pastor or Christian counselor. Attending a good church where there is faithful teaching and preaching of God's Word by gifted and called leaders will help immeasurably.

© 1997 Biblical Studies Ministries International, Inc. All rights reserved. For permission to copy, see our Reprint Policy at www.bsmi.org. Direct all questions and comments to us at bsmi.org.