

The Ten Essential Elements of Dignity

“Treat people as they want to be, and you help them become what they are capable of being.” ~Johann Wolfgang von Goethe

- **Acceptance of Identity**—Approach people as neither inferior nor superior to you. Give others the freedom to express their authentic selves without fear of being negatively judged. Interact without prejudice or bias, accepting the ways in which race, religion, ethnicity, gender, class, sexual orientation, age, and disability may be at the core of other people’s identities. Assume that others have integrity.
- **Inclusion**—Make others feel that they belong, whatever the level of relationship—whether they are in your family, community, organization, or nation.
- **Safety**—Put people at ease at two levels: physically, so they feel safe from bodily harm, and psychologically, so they feel safe from being humiliated. Help them feel free to speak without fear of retribution.
- **Acknowledgement**—Give people your full attention by listening, hearing, validating, and responding to their concerns, feelings, and experiences.
- **Recognition**—Validate others for their talents, hard work, thoughtfulness, and help. Be generous with praise and show appreciation and gratitude to others for their contributions and ideas.
- **Fairness**—Treat people justly, with equality, and in an evenhanded way according to agreed-on laws and rules. People feel that you have honored their dignity when you treat them without discrimination or injustice.
- **Benefit of the Doubt**—Treat people as trustworthy. Start with the premise that others have good motives and are acting with integrity.

- **Understanding**—Believe that what others think matters. Give them the chance to explain and express their points of view. Actively listen in order to understand them.
- **Independence**—Encourage people to act on their own behalf so that they feel in control of their lives and experience a sense of hope and possibility.
- **Accountability**—Take responsibility for your actions. If you have violated the dignity of another person, apologize. Make a commitment to change your hurtful behaviors.

The Ten Temptations to Violate Dignity

- **Taking the Bait**—Don't take the bait. Don't let the bad behavior of others determine your own. Restraint is the better part of dignity. Don't justify getting even. Do *not* do unto others as they do unto you if it will cause harm.
- **Saving Face**—Don't succumb to the temptation to save face. Don't lie, cover up, or deceive yourself. Tell the truth about what you have done.
- **Shirking Responsibility**—Don't shirk responsibility when you have violated the dignity of others. Admit it when you make a mistake and apologize if you hurt someone.
- **Seeking False Dignity**—Beware of the desire for external recognition in the form of approval and praise. If we depend on others alone for validation of our worth, we are seeking false dignity. Authentic dignity resides within us. Don't be lured by false dignity.
- **Seeking False Security**—Don't let your need for connection compromise your dignity. If we remain in a relationship in which our dignity is routinely violated, our desire for connection has outweighed our need to maintain our dignity. Resist the temptation to settle for false security.
- **Avoiding Conflict**—Stand up for yourself. Don't avoid confrontation when your dignity is violated. Take action. A violation is a signal that something in the relationship needs to change.
- **Being the Victim**—Don't assume that you are the innocent victim in a troubled relationship. Open yourself to the idea that you might be contributing to the problem. We need to look at ourselves as others see us.
- **Resisting Feedback**—Don't resist feedback from others. We often don't know what we don't know. We all have blind spots; we all unconsciously behave in undignified ways. We need to overcome our self-protective instincts and accept constructive criticism. Feedback gives us an opportunity to grow.

- **Blaming and Shaming Others to Deflect Your Own Guilt**—Don't blame and shame others to deflect your own guilt. Control the urge to defend yourself by making others look bad.
- **Engaging in False Intimacy and Demeaning Gossip**—Beware of the tendency to connect by gossiping about others in a demeaning way. Being critical and judgmental about others when they are not present is harmful and undignified. If you want to create intimacy with another, speak the truth about yourself, about what is happening in your inner world, and invite the other person to do the same.