

The 8 Kinds of Humility to Help You Stay Grounded by Ravi Chandra

Humility has been lauded as a virtue in most world cultures and wisdom traditions. More recently, scientists have started to study humility, and they're discovering its many benefits.

"Psychologists have recently linked intellectual humility to a host of benefits: showing more persistence in the face of failure, holding less polarized beliefs and attitudes, and being received as warm and friendly by others," writes Tyrone Sgambati in *Greater Good*.

As a psychiatrist, I think humility springs from deep awareness that the world can only come through our own eyes, experiences, and insights. No matter how knowledgeable or skillful I might be, there's always more to learn. There are always people with different perspectives, life experiences, knowledge, and skills. There are always different people to cherish, be present with, and learn from. Humility helps us cultivate empathy and relatedness. Without those, where are we?

We're also learning that there are many different kinds of humility—and that each one can have limitations. I'm wary of those who counsel deferential or pious humility to contain and admonish those who have strong opinions and perspectives. For example, the stereotype of humble Asians and Asian Americans acts to silence important messages that are quite critical to our time of change and distress. To be bold and not "humble" per se risks being called "arrogant" or "difficult to deal with."

I think it's possible to be both brave and humble, but it requires constant internal and interpersonal work, and risks rupturing or distressing relationships. That perspective keeps me grounded even when I express myself and my concerns for marginalized peoples quite strongly. In that way, a sense of responsibility and allyship fuels both bravery and many forms of humility.

Here's an overview of eight varieties of humility—and of all the ways they can keep us grounded even in the face of injustices.

Cultural humility. We all have biases based on our cultural experiences and identities. Our experiences might give us only partial understandings of people from other cultures, and, all too often, we might carry stereotyped assumptions about other cultures that will inevitably cause harm. We all live in perspective bubbles, though these bubbles are now more porous than ever.

Familial (or intergenerational) humility. It would do the world a lot of good if parents (and older people generally) would be humble in the face of their children's perspectives in life. They are literally seeing a whole new ballgame. Similarly, older folks have often accumulated wisdom and experience, and younger people could afford to be humble as

well when hearing them out. Perhaps everyone in the family, older and younger, could afford to be more humble in the face of uncertainty and the need to negotiate relationships in times of distress.

Intellectual humility (particularly around opinion). A study published in the *Journal of Personality Assessment* proposed two key dimensions of intellectual humility: self-directed vs. other-directed and internal vs. expressed. These can be mapped out into a two-by-two grid with these four domains:

- Internal and self-directed intellectual humility: requires inquiring within and questioning yourself and your assumptions.
- Internal and other-directed intellectual humility: requires asking yourself whether you can understand and relate to others' beliefs and perspectives.
- Expressed and self-directed intellectual humility: requires behaving in ways consistent with your internal sense of humility.
- Expressed and other-directed intellectual humility: requires relating to others in good faith. I think cultivating a sense of common humanity, and feeding common humanity with our actions, despite differences of opinion is really important here.

The therapeutic adages “you can be right or related” and “you can be right or happy” are helpful here. Also, we might try to remember the folk Buddhist saying: “The world is divided into those who are right.”

Humility of knowledge. As much as any of us might have known or learned, there's always more to learn and understand. There are also obviously different perspectives on the same body of knowledge or even the same event. I think it's important for those in the dominant culture to be humble when trying to relate to those with lived experience and close-to-the-ground knowledge in the areas in question.

Humility of skill. No matter how skillful we might be, it's good to stay humble in the face of new situations, the potential for errors, and the inevitability of change. Humility can help us stay grounded and mindful in the situation for which our skills are required.

Humility of wisdom. I think we'd all like to eventually be respected and appreciated for our wisdom, accomplishments, skill, talent, or knowledge accumulated through life experience and lifelong learning and growth. However, as Socrates said, “the only true wisdom is in knowing you know nothing.” Holding a position of power and privilege predisposes to erosions of empathy, relatedness, and wisdom. Humility, holding true to the bigger picture, and deep relationship to a wide variety of people guard against these erosions and corruptions.

Humility of awe. “The fate of this man or that man was less than a drop, although it was a sparkling one, in the great blue motion of the sunlit sea,” writes T. H. White in *The Once and Future King*. White is capturing how simultaneously important and small we are in the universe, a feeling researcher Dacher Keltner describes in his scientific understanding of awe: “being in the presence of something vast that transcends your understanding of the world.” He goes on to highlight the evolutionary benefits of awe (which is linked to humility): “Awe binds us to social collectives and enables us to act in more collaborative ways that enable strong groups, thus improving our odds for survival.” Awe helps us to

see that the whole is truly greater than the sum of all parts. Which brings us to...

Humility in the face of suffering. Suffering is a vast subject. Research has shown that we are often pulled to help others, but we can become overwhelmed and shut down when faced with large-scale suffering and catastrophe. How do we keep an open heart? I believe the answer lies in cultivating presence, humility, and humor in the face of suffering and potential suffering. That kind of humility will help us to go beyond the scope of our current capacity—and keep us honest, open, ready, and alive.

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