

“No one can make you feel inferior without your consent.” A quote commonly attributed to first lady and political activist Eleanor Roosevelt that—despite being apocryphal—certainly holds great impact, withstanding the test of time to resonate greatly even now. But is it right? Many would easily say no, after all “no one” is a strong word choice; everyone was once a child, and do young children have the mental fortitude to refuse insecurity? Others would be quick to focus upon the wording of "consent" and argue with trust in the human spirit that nothing can happen without your will, if you try hard enough.

In beginning to examine this quote, let's first determine the definitions and implications of some terms. In saying “feel inferior”, what does it mean to feel something? And can we “consent” to them? According to the APA, emotions are "a complex reaction pattern, involving experiential, behavioral, and physiological elements, by which an individual attempts to deal with a personally significant matter or event." Circling back to the statement at hand, do we “consent” to our feelings? If we could, why would negative feelings such as depression and anxiety exist in the first place? You could try and argue that the issue lies in not wanting to remove your consent for these feelings, metaphorically; however, in that case years of therapy or medication wouldn't be necessary for people hoping for recovery. One of the most popular forms of therapy is cognitive behavioral therapy—CBT. CBT relies on the basis that “psychological problems are based, in part, on faulty or unhelpful ways of thinking”, and using therapy to change those patterns of problematic emotion and behavior (APA). Ultimately, the purpose of CBT is to help a patient regain more control over their

feelings, similar to Roosevelt's statement on consenting to inferiority. But that begs the question: can we truly control our feelings?

To an extent: yes, in the sense of emotional regulation, and though not inherent, it is often a positive skill to develop and grow (Psychology Today). However, as established, emotions are not solely in your mind. Emotions influence your body, through the brain areas activated and chemicals released. As shown in a study mapping the effect of emotions of the body (Nummenmaa et al., 2013) that found that each emotion resulted in different, unique bodily topographies. What you feel is not just cognitive but also physical; you can control your thoughts to a certain extent (excluding intrusive thoughts), but it is not within human ability to control the hormones your body releases in response.

The next definition, and arguably one of the most generalized terms, is the inclusion of "you" and "your" in this statement. Not all brains process and react to external stimuli the same way, with psychiatric illnesses and varying character flaws or traits existing. Beyond this, you could even argue that a toddler or young child has yet to develop the emotional regulation to resist feelings of inferiority through their own will and deny such feelings. Going through childhood and into adulthood, there are many factors that influence a person's ability to regulate emotions, with differing ideas within psychology as to what exactly these factors are.

This quote and question relates greatly with the theories within the humanistic perspective, a branch within psychology that is characterized by the idea of individual potential and personal growth. On one hand, the humanistic perspective does emphasize the human will and individual ability, on the other, within the perspective is

Maslow's hierarchy of needs that contends individuals need to meet certain needs prior to later stages in order to fulfill esteem or achieve self-actualization. With this theory, the assumption is that those without access to the resources required to fulfill, for example, their psychological or safety needs, wouldn't be able to have control over their feelings of self-esteem—"Maslow considered physiological needs the most important as all the other needs become secondary until these needs are met. (McLeod, 2025)".

Putting similar importance on external environment rather than inner consent but instead through the lens of a well known behaviorist is Erikson's psychosocial theory of development. Particularly, I want to spotlight the fourth stage: inferiority vs. industry, from ages 6-12. In this period of an individual's life, a child will either become an industrious, productive member of society if they succeed, if not, they may develop a low self esteem and a sense of inferiority. This stage and the following feelings of the child are determined largely by having proper external support from guardians and the opportunity to develop their skills. If an individual doesn't have proper support, then they may later on be blocked from the ability to have such precise control over negative feelings and be unable to altogether reject them as proposed by Roosevelt, especially with outside influences enforcing such ideas of inferiority.

Earliest, prior even to birth, is also the argument of genetic predisposition. Genetics play a large role in the shaping of an individual character, in this case including their predisposition towards feeling a sense of inferiority and ability to "consent" to their emotions or emotionally regulate. In an association analysis consisting of over 329,000 individuals, results indicated that heritability of neuroticism "estimated from twin studies ranges from 30 to 50%" (Luciano et al, 2019).

Each definition and the relevant psychological evidence so far supports a ‘no’ in answering the question of whether Roosevelt was correct. However, I would like to look beyond the simple answer of yes or no, and examine the quote itself further. Perhaps we aren’t meant to interpret Roosevelt’s (or whoever’s) words so literally. Rather, it’s a normative claim, or a claim that “assert[s] what ought to be”, exaggerating the generalizability of the statement to make a point. After all, the use of “no one” could be seen as an overgeneralization, and therefore a logical fallacy, unless it’s taken as a rhetorical device for motivational purposes.

All this to say, the claim I will truly be examining in the following segments is whether no one *should* be able to make you feel inferior without your consent. On the surface, this may seem to offer an even clearer answer, being untrivially true. However, there are clear counterpoints: valid criticism—it can be argued that any criticism is pointing out a way you could improve, or an area of inferiority and therefore become a more “superior” version of yourself. Studies show that negative feelings are often far more memorable and impactful than positive ones, making them stronger possible drivers of motivation for change. For example, in a 2001 study by researchers Baumeister, Bratslavsky, and company it was found that “bad emotions...and bad feedback have more impact than good ones, and bad information is processed more thoroughly than good.”

There is also a core distinction here to make, when looking at the phrasing of inferiority, and that is the difference between discrimination vs. good-faith criticism (or bad-faith criticism). What *kind* of inferiority are we talking about here?

Taking into consideration the era and the background of Roosevelt, a woman in the 1950s known to be an activist for many social issues, it isn't a far stretch to assume that the inferiority Roosevelt was referring to was the kind induced by identity-based discrimination. In this case: does this put an unfair burden on the victim? Should they have to practice such strong control over themselves? Is Roosevelt right to make this claim if efforts should rather be focused upon those trying to make others feel inferior? Sure, it can be argued that it gives the victim more agency—after all, you can't necessarily control how others act, but you can control how you do. Echoing similar is the idea of “don't teach women not to get raped, teach men not to rape”. Though about a vastly different subject, it similarly deals with the idea of whether you should address the offender (the one making them feel inferior) or the person affected (the one being made to feel inferior). As supported by findings that such thinking excuses offenders from accountability (Brownhalls et al., 2020), in making strides within the civil rights movement and improving the quality of life for those deemed inferior by society, the best course of action may not be to focus the attention on those affected, but instead those perpetrating violence.

Throughout this essay, we've dissected this prompt bit by bit and viewed it from different perspectives, making for a potentially disconnected answer. But the bottom line is: Roosevelt was not right to say “no one can make you feel inferior without your consent.” Or to look at the question rephrased: are you the sole determinant of how you feel about yourself? No, because there are too many factors at play—genetics, environment—to assign human will to having full control over how we feel. Even in taking Roosevelt's statement as normative, it still falls short. First, claiming that no one

should make you feel inferior ignores the potential benefits of negative emotions, such as self-improvement and motivation. Second, using the quote as a motivational tool shifts the blame away from those perpetrating harm, placing it instead on those affected.

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