

Self-esteem

It's me who is my enemy. Me who beats me up. Me who strips my confidence.
~Paula Cole, "Me," *This Fire*

Low self-esteem is like driving through life with your hand-brake on. The word esteem means "to appreciate the value of." In human beings' low self-esteem is the destroyer of all success. When we are filled with low self-esteem it destroys our ability to love ourselves and to try to accomplish worthy goals without fear. We are supposed to see ourselves as worthwhile, changing, imperfect and growing individuals.

We often forget that we are also just human beings in need of love, acceptance and care. If we feel good about ourselves, we are confident and happier. It is also then easier to take care of other people.

Self-esteem is the opinion we have of ourselves. It is the way we feel and think about ourselves. Someone with a good self-esteem feels worthy and will experience good feelings about themselves. When we do not think too highly of ourselves, we have low self-esteem, we expect things will go wrong, we make many things difficult for ourselves, and we blame ourselves for things that aren't our fault and we underestimate our abilities.

We need to understand the benefits of having a good self-esteem. People with a good self-esteem will reach their goals and dreams more easily because they believe in themselves. They can set boundaries with others and themselves because they see themselves as important and worthy. They will not destroy themselves or let other people destroy them with negative behaviour or hurtful words.

The disadvantages of a low self-esteem can be that we try to control other people; we might have co-dependency problems, faulty communication with others, self-destructive behaviour, anger outbursts, irrational beliefs, and unproductive behaviour.

It can happen that we do not know who we are anymore or we can start feeling empty and lonely. This can be the result of unstable emotions especially when we are happy one moment and sad the next. When we feel depressed, we usually feel negative about ourselves and we can feel distant from everyone including ourselves.

When we experience trauma or losses such as divorce or losing someone close to us, we can also start feeling unsure about ourselves because our roles, our daily routine, our goals and many other things change in our lives.

Our roles play an important part in how we define ourselves. A woman who has invested all her effort in motherhood may become extremely unhappy when her children leave home, just as a middle-aged man who has devoted his life exclusively to his career may find himself unable to cope well with redundancy.

The way we interpret our experiences can affect our self-esteem. For example, consider a student who has just been ditched by his girlfriend. He could consider two statements: "My girlfriend broke up with me because I am unattractive" or "My girlfriend broke up with me because she was unable to appreciate my good points".

Thinking mistakes

The mistakes in the way we think about ourselves and how we view the world can have a major impact on our self-esteem.

When we see things in black and white it can make our lives miserable, e.g. when our performance is not perfect, we see ourselves as a total failure.

Another thinking mistake can be that we see a single negative event as a never-ending pattern. If we are currently experiencing problems with disciplining our children, we think it is going to last forever.

If we focus on a single negative detail and dwell on it exclusively, so that our vision of all reality becomes darkened, we can lose perspective. Our partner might have forgotten our birthday and now we just want to end the relationship. We do not consider the fact that he or she does daily things to show that he or she loves us.

We make a thinking mistake if we interpret something negative even though there are no definite facts that convincingly support our conclusion. We might think that our partner is having an affair but there are no facts to prove our concern.

We can think that someone does not like us because he or she did not greet us in a friendly way. We then think that the person is reacting negatively to us, without finding out if there were other reasons such as the person was having a bad day.

We can also make a catastrophizing 'thinking' mistake when we imagine extreme and horrible consequences to the outcomes of events, e.g. being turned down for a date means a life of utter isolation. Making a mistake at work means getting fired for incompetence and never getting another job.

Emotional reasoning can let our emotions control our lives, e.g. we will assume that our negative emotions necessarily reflect the way things really are. We will have a feeling about something and think that this is true.

We can also personalize things such as seeing negative events as indicative of some negative characteristics of ourselves or we take responsibility for these events that are not our fault.

Tips to improve your self-esteem

- Replace self-criticism with regular, positive self-talk. We send thousands of messages across our brains. Negative self-talk diminishes our self-image. We should not destroy ourselves with negative self-talk. It is important to practice a

friendlier inner dialogue. Do not allow self-destructive thoughts or fantasies into your mind.

- Focus on your potential instead of your limitations.
- Do not keep dwelling on the past. See the past as history.
- Make the best possible peace with your parents. If they have hurt you, acknowledge that they got you off to a bad start and express your anger. It is then important to forgive your parents.
- Do not choose the role of a victim if you went through trauma. Choose to be an over-comer.
- Find out what you want to do in life.
- Discover more about your inner self, e.g. spending time alone and by keeping a journal.
- Note the things that make you special. Rather than wasting mental energy thinking how to be more like the crowd, you might do better to spend some time thinking about how you want to set yourself apart from everyone else.
- Regularly redefine yourself. We and other people make the mistake that we think we are still the same person as a year or even ten years ago. If we work on improving ourselves, we will change and be different.
- Replace fear of failure with clear pictures of yourself functioning successfully and happily. Athletes play movies over and over in their minds. This is called visualisation or mental rehearsal or imaging.
- Break away from other people's expectations. Do not wear masks. It is tiring to be a pleaser.
- Learn to live independently.
- Be accepting of compliments and always say thank you.
- Look at mistakes as learning experiences.
- Learn how to handle criticism and how to grow from it.
- Treat yourself respectfully.
- Practise positive self-talk and remain positive in all situations.

- Do not destroy yourself in any way, e.g. hurting yourself or trying to commit suicide. Remember you are here for a purpose and to make a difference in this world.

(*Confidence & Self-esteem* by Alan Loy McGinnis Joanna McGrath @ Alister McGrath)

Affirmations

- I am unique and valuable.
- I am worthy of being loved.
- What I think of myself is what matters, not what others think of me.
- I think I am wonderful.

Quotes

- "The way you treat yourself sets the standard for others." Sonya Friedman.
- "If we really love ourselves, everything in our life works". Louise L. Hay.
- "Men harm others by their deeds, themselves by their thoughts. " ~Augustus William Hare and Julius Charles Hare, *Guesses at Truth, by Two Brothers*, 1827.
- "You must love yourself before you love another. By accepting yourself and fully being what you are, your simple presence can make others happy." Anon.
- "Love yourself, for if you don't, how can you expect anybody else to love you?" Anon.
- "If you aren't good at loving yourself, you will have a difficult time loving anyone, since you'll resent the time and energy you give another person that you aren't even giving to yourself." Anon.
- "To establish true self-esteem, we must concentrate on our successes and forget the failures and the negatives in our lives". Dennis Waitley.
- "The most important key to the permanent enhancement of esteem is the practice of positive inner-talk". Dennis Waitley.
- "A man cannot be comfortable without his own approval". Mark Twain.

Self-study

1. Why do we sometimes feel that we do not know ourselves?

2. Have you ever experienced feelings of:
 - a) Loneliness? _____
 - b) Emptiness? _____

When do you usually feel like that?

How can you handle those feelings?

3. List your successes that had a positive influence on your self-esteem.

How have the above-mentioned successes influenced your self-esteem?

4. List the mishaps or failures or disappointments or trauma that you carry with you every day:

How are the above-mentioned mishaps or failures or disappointments or trauma influencing your self-esteem?

5. How is your self-esteem supposed to be, even if you fail or when you experience trauma?

6. Write down five of your exceptional qualities. This is everything like your body, mind or spirit that makes you special.
7. Why is it important to work on your self-esteem?
8. On a scale of 1-10 (1 being the least, 10 being the most) how would you rate your self-esteem right now? _____
9. What is currently building your self-esteem?
10. What is destroying your self-esteem?
11. How are you going to protect and build your self-esteem?

Remember: What others think of you is none of your business.