

Improving Your Self-Esteem



Improving Your Self-Esteem, Towards a Stronger You

Self-esteem is a term that we hear frequently these days and we associate it loosely with having confidence in ourselves, being able to be assertive, and generally having the ability to manage life and all that it brings with it.

Many people who consult me have problems with self-esteem and low self-esteem often underlies problems in other areas such as business, relationships, and general achievement.

In this eBooklet, I want to look a little more closely at what self esteem really is and then discuss ways that you can help yourself to improve and strengthen it. While low self-esteem may involve many issues which require professional help (and I will discuss these too), I have tried to keep many of my suggestions as practical as possible so that they are easily achievable.

What is self-esteem?

The term 'esteem' means to have respect or high regard for something or someone. If you 'esteem' yourself highly, therefore, you would have respect for yourself as a person and value the attributes that you have and the achievements that you have made. This does not mean that someone who is opinionated and egotistical has a healthy self-esteem! This type of person is more likely to be behaving as if he is the greatest in order to mask insecurity. True self-esteem implies a realistic assessment of one's abilities and potentials.

Where does self-esteem come from?

In order to answer this, we need to look at how a person develops a sense of 'self' in the first place.

Newborn babies do not have a sense of themselves as individuals. This means that they have no sense of 'self' as separate from their mother or from the environment in which they find themselves. They don't know what they look like or what qualities and abilities they have.

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As they become a little older, they gradually begin to develop a sense of 'me' and 'not me', although they usually see the mother as part of 'me'.

By the age of two or three, toddlers have begun to realize that they are separate individuals. They begin to develop strong likes and dislikes and discover the words 'NO' and 'ME DO IT!' This can be a difficult stage for parents as their sweet little babies seem to turn into willful, oppositional tyrants before their eyes!

How this stage is handled forms the basis for the development of a healthy self-esteem. Parents need to reinforce their children's strengths, use lots of praise and encourage their young children in an age appropriate way to learn new skills. They need to find a balance between setting clear and consistent boundaries and not stifling the emerging sense of self. Another difficult thing to do is to protect the child from harm and injury, while still allowing her to explore and develop confidence in her own abilities.

Most parents get it right most of the time!

The 'messages' that children get in their formative years play a large part in determining their confidence levels and the way that they perceive themselves. Are they constantly being told that they are 'naughty', 'stupid' or 'clumsy'? Are they praised and encouraged to try new skills? Are they often compared with brothers and sisters and found lacking? Or are they treated with respect as individuals in their own right?

All these things contribute to the formation of a sense of self and a concept of 'Who am I and how do other people see me?'

Later in life, other people begin to play increasingly more important roles in contributing towards a person's sense of self and therefore their self esteem. This includes teachers, friends, siblings and, later in life, employers, colleagues, husbands, wives, etc.

As we go through life we collect perceptions of ourselves along the way. Some of these may be positive perceptions (I am a good soccer player, people find me attractive, I can cook well, I work well under stress, people look up to me, etc) while others may be negative (I am fat, I can't dance well, no-one likes me, people think I am stupid, I struggle to cope at work, etc)

If the foundation of a healthy self esteem was well established during childhood, people are more able to retain their confidence even in the face of negative reactions from others. So long as there is a reasonable balance between positive and negative feedback from other people and the environment, self-esteem will not be too badly affected. However, if childhood years were characterized by more criticism and harsh discipline than praise and encouragement, then self esteem will be low and the person will tend to be overly sensitive to negative responses from others and lack confidence in their own abilities.

Is it possible to change one's self esteem in adulthood?

Most definitely! This can work both ways.

Sometimes people who feel relatively confident and good about themselves experience a situation of failure (e.g. going bankrupt) or they are badly hurt and disappointed in a relationship. This can affect their self-esteem to such an extent that they almost



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undergo a personality change. Without help, it can take a long time to recover from trauma like this and professional help is often necessary.

Fortunately it is also possible to improve self-esteem and to change a negative perception of oneself into a positive one.

Here are some practical suggestions:

Make a list of strengths and positive attributes

Sit down with a pen and paper and list all the strengths that you have as well as all the positive things that you can say about yourself. This could include skills that you may have (e.g. cooking) or attributes that you possess (e.g. pretty eyes, a lovely voice).

Include in this list all the positive things that you have ever heard people say about you. These do not need to be things with which you necessarily agree. For example, if someone has told you that you have attractive handwriting, but you don't agree - include it on the list. After all, the opinions of others are just as valid as yours, aren't they?

It is also a good idea to go to close friends, colleagues, and relatives and ask them to name three positive things about you - include these on the list as well.

Take a few days to do this exercise. You will be surprised at what you will come up with!

Some people find it hard to make a list of positive things about themselves. If this happens to you, it probably has its root in your childhood. Many people are taught that it is conceited and 'bad' to say anything positive about themselves. If it makes you uncomfortable to write down complementary things about yourself, there is all the more reason to work at it. Do it even if it makes you feel uncomfortable.

Learn to accept compliments

Are you the sort of person who feels awkward when other people compliment you? Do you find it difficult to know what to say in response to a compliment?

If you are, begin to practice receiving compliments graciously. If some one compliments you, say 'Thank you' and smile at them. Do not try and discredit the other person's words by pointing out negative things about yourself ('It's just an old dress', 'I was just lucky', 'I usually mess up') Receive the compliment and learn to take pleasure in it. This may be difficult at first, but if you practice it will become easier.

If you allow other people to compliment you, you will help yourself to feel more positive and may even begin to like yourself more.

Don't keep putting yourself down!

People with low self esteem often say negative things about themselves and may even go out of their way to put themselves down in company and point out their faults when it is not necessary to do so.

Pay attention to how you speak about yourself. Do you say negative things about yourself and your abilities? 'I can't.....' 'I'm not good at' 'I always make mistakes' Do you deliberately point out your perceived faults or imperfections?



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If you recognize this tendency, begin to work on avoiding negative references to yourself. Ask friends and family to remind you when you do so and correct yourself. Change 'I can't' to 'It's difficult, but I can try'. Find positive things to say about yourself rather than criticism. Practice this as much as you can.

Stop apologizing!

Are you always saying 'I'm sorry'? People with low self-esteem often have a habit of apologizing for themselves all the time. If they meet someone in a passage, they say 'I'm sorry'. If they want to speak to someone, they say 'I'm sorry'. Whenever they have to get someone's attention, they say 'I'm sorry'.

Sorry for what? For existing?

Stop apologizing and recognize that you have a right to be around and to be heard. Instead of saying 'I'm sorry' all the time, begin smiling at people - it is much more positive!

Try new things

If your self-esteem is low, the chances are that you avoid trying new things and meeting new people. This only reinforces your negative perception of yourself. What you need to do is to provide yourself with the opportunity to experience success and pleasure in what you do. This will increase your self-esteem and will make you more confident to try even more new things.

So take up a new hobby, begin a sport, sign up for gym membership or join a hiking club or dance class. Do things that you have never done before like go for a massage or a facial. Buy a cookbook and try out new recipes. Invite some friends around for dinner. The list is endless!

Spend time with people who help you to feel good about yourself

This is an important one! People with low self-esteem will often allow themselves to be used, bullied and abused. Sometimes they behave like doormats and allow other people to order them around and take advantage of them. They may also seek out people who are negative about life and have difficulty seeing the positive in anything.

If you are being pushed around and feel unappreciated, learn to say 'NO' when you feel 'No'! Choose to spend time with people whose company you enjoy and spend less time with people who do not contribute to a sense of well being. If you are in an abusive or destructive relationship, get out of it or seek professional help.

Do an 'audit' of your relationships and stop spending time and energy on people who bring nothing positive to your life. The longer you allow yourself to be unappreciated and taken advantage of, the worse you will feel about yourself. You can change that!

Treat yourself with respect and consideration

If you do not respect yourself and see your needs as important, then no one else will do so either. Learn not to always put yourself last and be in touch with your needs.

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Look after your physical self. Have your hair cut, dress in clothes that you like and take care of your grooming and your health. Spoil yourself with things that you enjoy like bubble baths and special treats. Do things that help you to feel good.

Look after your environment. Keep your home tidy and spend time and energy making your environment beautiful. Polish a table, buy yourself some flowers, use scented oils in your bedroom, open the curtains and let the sun come in. Organize your work space and personalize it to express your personality. All these things are important ways of showing yourself that you are worth caring for. If you do them often, you will be surprised to find other people beginning to do them for you as well!

Smile at other people and look them in the eye.

People who lack confidence often avoid eye contact and spend their time looking down at the ground.

Stop looking down! Look up and greet people. Look them in the eye and smile. Say 'Hi!' Most people will smile back and the friendly response will feel good. This may seem like a small thing, but it will also help you to feel more positive about yourself.

Be aware of your body language

Stand up straight! Put your shoulders back and your head up. Posture plays a more important role than we realize in how we feel about ourselves. Stooping and making your body less noticeable is a subconscious way of communicating that you are not worthy to take up space in your surroundings and conveys a message of subjugation and humility to others - an 'I'm not good enough' message.

Help yourself to feel better and more confident by standing straight and tall!

Sometimes [Natural Remedies](#) help

If you feel chronically 'down', insecure, negative and unworthy, you could benefit from a course of a natural [Anti-Depressant](#) like [MindSoothe](#). [MindSoothe](#) contains St John's Wort and Passiflora in therapeutic dosage and can help to boost your mood and assist you to feel more optimistic and positive about yourself. For more information, go to [Native Remedies](#).

If nothing changes, get help

These are all practical exercises that you can do to help yourself to feel more confident and to increase your sense of self worth. Obviously you cannot expect to change overnight and old habits and perceptions are hard to break.

However, if you have really tried to change the way that you feel about yourself and find that you are fighting a losing battle, don't give up and feel that you can never change. An experienced counselor can help you to change the negative ways that you relate to yourself and help you to develop a more positive sense of self-esteem. It is well worth the investment in time and money to work on your self-esteem. One of the great joys of being a therapist is seeing people's lives change drastically for the better once they begin to see themselves in a more positive light!

Good luck and be well!



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Michele Carelse is a Registered Clinical Psychologist and Licensed Counselor with more than 15 years experience running her own private practice.

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