

## What is Self-esteem?

Self-esteem is a term in psychology to reflect a person's overall evaluation or appraisal of his or her own worth. Self-esteem encompasses beliefs (for example, "I am competent", "I am worthy") and emotions such as triumph, despair, pride and shame. 'The self-concept is *what we think* about the self; self-esteem, the positive or negative evaluation of the self, is *how we feel* about it'.

Self-esteem also can be defined as feeling capable while also feeling loved. A child who is happy with an achievement but does not feel loved may eventually experience low self-esteem. Likewise, a child who feels loved but is hesitant about his or her own abilities can also develop low self-esteem. Healthy self-esteem comes when a good balance is maintained.

Patterns of self-esteem start very early in life. The concept of success following effort and persistence starts early. Once people reach adulthood, it's harder to make changes to how they see and define themselves.

For the purposes of empirical research, psychologists typically assess self-esteem by a self-report inventory yielding a quantitative result. They establish the validity and reliability of the questionnaire prior to its use.

Self-esteem is typically measured as a continuous scale. The Rosenberg (1965) 10-item scores each item on a four-point response system that requires participants to indicate their level of agreement with a series of statements about themselves. The Coopersmith Inventory uses a 50-question battery over a variety of topics and asks subjects whether they rate someone as similar or dissimilar to themselves.

People with a healthy level of self-esteem:

- firmly believe in certain values and principles, and are ready to defend them even when finding opposition, feeling secure enough to modify them in light of experience.
- are able to act according to what they think to be the best choice, trusting their own judgment, and not feeling guilty when others don't like their choice.
- do not lose time worrying excessively about what happened in the past, nor about what could happen in the future. They learn from the past and plan for the future, but live in the present intensely.
- fully trust in their capacity to solve problems, not hesitating after failures and difficulties. They ask others for help when they need it.
- consider themselves equal in dignity to others, rather than inferior or superior, while accepting differences in certain talents, personal prestige or financial standing.

Low self-esteem can result from various factors, including a physical appearance or weight, socioeconomic status, or peer pressure or bullying. Low self-esteem occasionally leads to suicidal ideation and behaviour.

A person with low self-esteem may show some of the following characteristics:

- *Heavy self-criticism* and dissatisfaction.
- *Hypersensitivity to criticism* with resentment against critics and feelings of being attacked.
- *Chronic indecision* and an exaggerated fear of mistakes.
- *Excessive will to please* and unwillingness to displease any petitioner.
- *Perfectionism*, which can lead to frustration when perfection is not achieved.

Parental habits, whether positive or negative, can influence the development of those same habits of self-perception in their children. Children are also likely to remember parental responses accordingly to their current emotional state at those certain times. For example, when the child receives positive reinforcement or praise when she or he currently has a high self-esteem, or receives criticisms in a low-self-esteem state, it is effectively embedded in their memories.

### **How to raise your self esteem**

Global self-esteem (about “who we are”) is normally constant. Situational self-esteem (about what we do) fluctuates, depending on circumstances, roles, and events. Situational self-esteem can be high at one moment (e.g., at work) and low the next (e.g., at home). Low self-esteem is a negative evaluation of oneself. This type of evaluation usually occurs when some circumstance we encounter in our life touches on our sensitivities. We personalize the incident and experience physical, emotional, and cognitive arousal.

This is so alarming and confusing that we respond by acting in a self-defeating or self-destructive manner. When that happens, our actions tend to be automatic and impulse-driven; we feel upset or emotionally blocked; our thinking narrows; our self-care deteriorates; we lose our sense of self; we focus on being in control and become self-absorbed.

Global self-esteem is not set in stone. Raising it is possible, but not easy. Global self-esteem grows as we face our fears and learn from our experiences. Some of this work may require the aid of a psychotherapist. In the meantime, here is what you can do:

- **Get sober.** Get help through 12-step groups to stop self-destructive behaviors. Addictions block learning and drag down our mood. Identify them and replace them with self-care.
- **Practice self-care.** Make new lifestyle choices by joining self-help groups and practicing positive health care.
- **Identify triggers to low self-esteem.** We personalize stressful events (e.g., criticism) by inferring a negative meaning about ourselves. A self-defeating action often follows. Each event can, instead, be a chance to learn about ourselves, if we face our fear of doing so and the negative beliefs about ourselves that sustain the negative meanings.
- **Slow down personalizing.** Target personalizing to slow impulsive responses. You can begin to interfere with these automatic overreactions by using relaxation and stress management techniques. These techniques are directed at self-soothing the arousal.

This allows us to interrupt the otherwise inevitable automatic reaction and put into play a way to begin to face the unacknowledged fears at the root of low self-esteem.

- **Stop and take notice.** Pay attention to the familiarity of the impulse. Our tendency is to overreact in the same way to the same incident. Awareness of the similarity can be the cue to slow our reactivity.
- **Acknowledge reaction.** Verbalize, “Here I go again (describe action, feeling, thought) . . .” Actively do something with the awareness rather than passively note it. The result is to slow the impulse and give ourselves a choice about how we want to respond.
- **Choose response.** Hold self-defeating impulses. Act in a self-caring and effective way. By choosing to act in a more functional way, we take a step toward facing our fears.
- **Accept impulse.** Be able to state the benefit (e.g., protection) of overreaction. We won’t be able to do this at first, but as we become more effective, we will begin to appreciate what our self-defeating impulse had been doing for us.
- **Develop skills.** We can provide for our own safety, engender hope, tolerate confusion, and raise self-esteem by learning and using these essential life skills:
  - **Experience feelings.** “Feel” feelings in your body and identify your needs. When we do not respect our feelings, we are left to rely on what others want and believe.
  - **Optional thinking.** End either/or thinking. Think in “shades of gray” and learn to reframe meanings. By giving ourselves options, we open ourselves to new possibilities about how to think about our dilemmas.
  - **Detachment.** End all abuse; say “no” to misrepresentations and assumptions. By maintaining personal boundaries, we discourage abuse by others and assert our separateness.
  - **Assertion.** Voice what you see, feel, and want by making “I” statements. By expressing our thoughts, feelings, and desires in a direct and honest manner, we show that we are in charge of our lives.
  - **Receptivity.** End self-absorption; listen to others’ words and meanings to restate them. In this way, we act with awareness of our contribution to events as well as empathize with the needs of others.