

EMOTIONAL WELLNESS MATTERS

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Understanding Self-Esteem



How others treat us greatly influences the way we see ourselves. We all know people who genuinely like themselves and feel content with their lives.

Because they see the positive in themselves, they are able to understand and appreciate the good in other people. They treat others with a sense of respect – a skill they know well because this is how they treat themselves. When our feelings about ourselves are positive, we show others that we like and value ourselves – and then others tend to treat us well. But when we have negative feelings about ourselves, so that we are too critical, complaining and pessimistic, others tend to take this attitude toward us as well. How we treat ourselves helps determine how others will treat us.

The *thoughts* we have about ourselves, or how we define ourselves, contribute to our *self-image*. The feelings we have about these thoughts, whether these feelings are good or bad, are the building blocks of our *self-esteem*. Our self-image, and gradually our self-esteem, can be molded by our parents, family, friends, physical or intellectual abilities, education, and jobs. Just as we have definitions for most things in the world, we also have definitions of ourselves. We come to define ourselves the way others define us. Thus, if others treat us with love and kindness, as if we are special and unique people, then we will eventually define ourselves in this way as well. On the other hand, if other people treat us as if we are a bother to have around and not worth much, then we will also come to see ourselves in this way.

Some people confuse healthy positive self-esteem with *audacity* or *arrogance*, a false sense of superiority over



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other people. True self-esteem, however, means that we do not have to assert ourselves at the expense of other people. Indeed, it is those with negative self-esteem who must resort to the tactic of exaggerating their own worth, usually by putting other people down. Those with positive self-esteem can acknowledge their own worth and also validate the positive qualities of others.

Self-Esteem and Therapy

One of the things that therapy does best is to address issues of self-esteem. Many of us are wounded, in one way or another, by the way we were treated as we grew up. As adults it is our responsibility to put closure on the damage inflicted on us by others and to move on with our lives in a healthy way. A trained therapist can point out the ways in which we engage in destructive patterns of behavior. Therapy allows us to explore why we punish ourselves and why we see ourselves as being *less* than other people. We have the ability to change our negative self-esteem tendencies by developing self-nurturing, self-encouraging, and self-enhancing behavior. When we begin to treat ourselves in a more positive way, others pick up on our cues and respond to us in the special way we all deserve.

Techniques for Creating Positive Self-Esteem

Work on Your Private Thoughts

How we feel about ourselves privately, whether these feelings are positive or negative, influences how we interpret our own actions, the decisions we make, the goals we set for ourselves, and how we relate to other people. Negative internal feelings usually lead to lower expectations and achievements, while positive definitions usually result in higher aspirations. Consider some of the following ways in which these private, internal thoughts can be modified.

- **Examine your unrealistic expectations.**

Negative self-esteem is driven by thoughts couched in “shoulds,” “oughts,” and “musts.” These words imply that we should be something other than what we are. A more positive approach is to replace these words with “wants.” Instead of saying self-punitively, “I *should* be a better friend,” it may be helpful to change the thought to: “I *want* to be a better friend.”

- **Accept the fact that history cannot be changed.**

We often punish ourselves endlessly for certain regrettable actions we have taken in the past – and this feeds our negative self-esteem. But we all make mistakes, and we can learn from them. In fact, the positive spin on this is that we, as fallible humans, must make mistakes in life – and perhaps we should be

thankful that we have made them, for how else would we acquire wisdom and learn the route to a happier life? History cannot be undone, but we can focus on the present and future, drawing on our power to create the life we choose for ourselves.

- **Reflect on the good experiences in your life.**

Instead of dwelling on our flaws, it is more helpful to think about what is good in our lives. Think about your successes rather than your failures. We all have life experiences that make us feel good. Define yourself in terms of these positive experiences. Nearly every negative thought can be turned into a positive. For example, if you are in a financial crisis, it’s not the end of the world – because now you can get in touch with simpler pleasures and more meaningful experiences. If a friend has rejected you, you are now free to spend your time with other friends who will treat you well..

- **Set positive goals for the future.** Examine your personal needs, desires, assets and abilities – and think of how you can use them to achieve the life you want for yourself. Commit yourself to having the best life you can have – without feeling that you have to achieve perfection. Make your goals realistic and achievable, and work toward them, step by step, enjoying the successes and overcoming the occasional stumbles. Draw on the positive within yourself – with an awareness of how the old negative tendencies may show themselves. Setting positive goals draws on, and reinforces, your positive self-esteem and reminds you of the power you have to set your own course.

- **Try these techniques for working on positive thoughts:**

1. Write down your negative thoughts. This increases your awareness of them, and you can discover patterns in your negative thinking. You may also be able to see what triggers negativity.

2. Limit negative thinking. Whenever you find yourself having negative thoughts, tell yourself, “Stop!” Say this privately to yourself, or perhaps out loud – or give yourself a little tap on the wrist as a reminder.

3. Replace the negative with a positive thought – and do this immediately after stopping the negative thought. (It may take some creativity and effort to learn how to change negative thoughts into positive ones.)



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Diagnose the Cues which Lead to Negative Self-Esteem

We all tend to respond to triggers in ways that lower or raise our self-esteem. Identifying the experiences which influence our self-esteem can take some work and a genuine commitment to improving the quality of our lives. A trained therapist can help in the task of identifying certain themes which we may not be able to discover through our own efforts. For example, if negative thoughts occur when you spend time alone, you may be dealing with abandonment issues. If negativity is triggered when you are criticized, you may have issues surrounding rejection. If you have negative thoughts in the presence of a person who tends to dominate and control, the theme may have to do with authority, judgment and evaluation. When we come to understand these underlying themes, we can start to view them objectively and get closure on them so that they no longer have the power to influence our self-esteem.

Take Good Care of Yourself and Your Appearance

Appreciate your own individuality, your own combination of strengths and weaknesses that make you a special person. Without a strong sense of who you are, it is easy to become vulnerable to others who treat you in a negative way. Engaging in an exercise program (even if it is only walking twenty minutes every other day) is a good way not only of taking care of your body, but also in making you and others aware that you value yourself. It is important to groom yourself well and to wear clothing that brings out your best qualities. Feeling good about yourself, presenting yourself to the world in a positive way, and getting positive feedback from other people are essential components of developing positive self-esteem.

Examine Your Relationships with Other People

Improving one's self-esteem involves engaging in productive and enhancing relationships with others. There comes a time to examine our destructive relationships – and this may be difficult since we are drawn toward relationships that reinforce our old ways of seeing ourselves. Try to understand how destructive relationships in your life reinforce old negative self-esteem patterns. And try to change the tone of the relationship so that positive self-esteem can be expressed by both parties. If that is not possible, it may be time to end a destructive relationship and move on to other, more productive friendships. Here are a few guidelines for finding new friendships that have a positive tone:

- Try to be pleasant with others. Talk to them in a positive way. Show an interest in them by listening, and share appropriately with them in a balanced way.

- Show respect for the boundaries of others. Let them be who they choose to be and accept the differences between you.
- Don't expect everyone to be perfect. They're not.
- Some people will not like you. Accept this. This is their choice, and you gain nothing by trying to win their approval.
- Don't talk about problems all the time. Others usually find it difficult to deal with negative conversation, and they may avoid you. This reinforces your negative self-esteem. Save your problem-solving talks for dear and trusted friends – or a therapist.

Learn to Meet Your Own Needs

Negative self-esteem leads to doubts about your own ability to take care of life's problems and challenges. This is why people with negative self-esteem may be so demanding of others – at a certain level they may want others to come through and take care of their problems for them. People with negative self-esteem, then, may idealize others and, alternately, denigrate them. If others help you, you idealize them. If they don't help, you don't want to waste your time with them. These "all or nothing" themes appear frequently in the thoughts of those with negative self-esteem.

A mature adult life requires integrity. While others may assist you here and there, ultimately you are responsible for meeting your own needs. Acquiring positive self-esteem is essential to this task. The mature adult relies on his or her own resources to find ways of meeting such basic needs as —

- Loving and being loved. Allowing love into your life is one of the most important human pursuits. This may come in the form of romantic love, close friendships or spiritual fulfillment. Our lives improve when we finally give up unrealistic demands and expectations that block our ability to love.
- Having fun in your life. We need pleasure to function well. Try to give yourself at least half an hour a day of something that you see as fun. Indulge yourself in some guilt-free pleasure.
- Pursuing worthwhile work. Balance your fun with work. Work, whether it is from a paid job or not, gives us a sense of feeling worthwhile and contributing to the larger social sphere.
- Understanding that you are responsible for your life choices. Your past does not have to control your future. It is your responsibility to find love, to feel pleasure, to quest for spiritual fulfillment, and to do good work.

THE BACK PAGE

COMPARING NEGATIVE AND POSITIVE SELF-ESTEEM

NEGATIVE SELF-ESTEEM

- Blaming others for problems
- Looking suspiciously at compliments
- Holding on to guilt from the past
- Nagging, judging, and controlling
- Letting oneself go physically
- Making decisions based on external feedback
- Avoiding risks, sticking with the known
- Ridiculing others when they appear foolish
- Seeing mistakes as failures, expecting perfection in others
- Not dealing well with criticism, becoming angry and defensive

POSITIVE SELF-ESTEEM

- Taking responsibility for one's own feelings and actions
- Giving and taking compliments graciously
- Focused on the present and future – learning from the past
- Listening openly to others
- Taking good care of body and appearance
- Making decisions from internal values
- Taking risks and challenging oneself
- Laughing at oneself, but never putting another person down
- Accepting mistakes as part of life, open to feedback
- Listening to criticism without anger, and not necessarily agreeing with the criticism

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