



## SELF-ESTEEM

### What is Self-Esteem?

Webster's dictionary defines self-esteem as a confidence and satisfaction in oneself; self-respect. Self-esteem (or self-image) is how you think and feel about yourself. Someone with healthy self-esteem feels they are worthy and able to cope with life's challenges. They have a positive, yet realistic view of themselves and their abilities. Even when things seem to go wrong, they are able to accept themselves and feel they are worthy. People with low self-esteem or low self-confidence doubt their abilities and have unrealistic expectations for themselves. Their sense of self-worth is excessively dependent on what others think and they often put themselves down or judge themselves very harshly.

To summarize, self-esteem is made up of the thoughts and feelings that you have about yourself and is influenced by the way you talk to yourself (i.e., your inner dialogue). As humans, one of our unique abilities is the awareness of ourselves. We are aware of what we do and our impact on others and ourselves. This ability allows us to live in a world with others and develop close relationships. Our internal voice judges our behavior on a daily basis and makes adjustments based on feedback from others. A person with low self-esteem has an overly critical voice with a negative slant; nothing is good enough, failures are highlighted and you are always criticized. Psychologist Eugene Sagan terms this voice "the pathological critic" - always looking for the negative and never seeing the positive.

### How Does Self-Esteem Develop?

Our sense of ourselves develops throughout our lives. As infants and young children, much of our sense of self comes from our parents. When parents provide an accepting and nurturing environment, children develop a solid foundation on which to develop good feelings about themselves. If parents are excessively demanding or critical (or discourage moves toward independence), children may begin to doubt themselves and feel inadequate or unworthy. As children grow, attend school and develop peer relationships, successes and failures in these relationships affect self-esteem as well. Thus, the messages we are sent eventually become internalized and can become the messages we send ourselves. We then develop a set of assumptions and beliefs about ourselves based on prior experiences.

### Critical Beliefs and Thought Patterns that Create Low Self-Esteem

There are many ways in which people talk to themselves. We may encourage ourselves during a difficult task, "Keep at it. You're almost done. You can do it." We may also talk to ourselves in a negative voice. Although it is important to evaluate ourselves accurately, if this voice is constant or very negative it can do harm to our self-esteem and is termed the "pathological critic". The pathological critic keeps up a negative stream of self-talk. "You can't do it. You're stupid. You'll never make it." Frequent techniques used by the pathological critic which undermine self-esteem are:

- **Overgeneralization.** If you did not do well in one situation, the pathological critic overgeneralizes to all situations - "I got a D on the quiz in Math today. I'm going to flunk that class and all the rest. I'll never be able to graduate from college."
- **Global Labeling.** Your pathological critic uses pejorative labels to describe yourself rather than accurately describing your qualities. If you withdraw from a class you're having difficulty in, your pathological critic may label you - "I'm a quitter. I never finish anything. I'm a loser."
- **Minimization of the Positive.** With the pathological critic, good things don't count nearly as much as bad ones. You focus on the negative and discount the positive - "I won four tennis matches but lost one and that makes me feel terrible about myself."
- **Comparing Yourself to Others.** The pathological critic scans the room and finds the people who are better in some way. Person A is prettier, person B is smarter and person C is a better athlete. Somehow these all get combined into one perfect person who has everything you should have and you are unworthy in comparison.

## Ways to Improve Your Self-Esteem

- **Be Patient** - Change takes time and is an ongoing process. Remember a time in the past when you learned a difficult skill. You didn't learn to ride a bike or swim or rollerblade the first time out. It involved many attempts and many mistakes (and many bumps and bruises). Improving your self-esteem is the same kind of process
- **Challenge your Pathological Critic**
  1. Notice the ways that you put yourself down. Make a list of the negative statements you make to yourself everyday.
  2. Challenge each negative statement.
    - a. "Just because I got a D on that test, doesn't mean I won't be able to graduate from college. I just need to talk to the professor and learn a new way of studying that material."
    - b. "Dropping one class doesn't mean I am a quitter. I've finished many other things in my life. It means that subject was difficult for me."
- **Emphasize the Positive** - Give yourself credit for everything you try, whether you succeed or not. Focus on the effort rather than on the end product.
- **Utilize "Thought Stopping"** - When you find yourself thinking a negative thought about yourself, imagine a large stop sign and tell yourself to "STOP". Switch to a more positive thought such as "I'm okay." "I'm a good person".
- **Set Realistic Goals** - Start with small steps and give yourself credit for each little step you achieve. When your confidence is low, it takes an extra effort to even begin. Instead of worrying about being perfect, praise yourself for making an effort.
- **List the Positive** - Make a list of positive things about yourself and post them in a place you see every day. Spend a few moments accepting the positive
- **Fake it 'til you Make it** - Tell yourself positive things even if you don't believe them at first. Sometimes it may take awhile to see that you really are a worthwhile person, that others like you, and that you are succeeding.
- **Be Compassionate with Yourself** - Frequently, we are more compassionate and accepting with others than with ourselves. Give yourself the same understanding and acceptance you give others.

## BOOKS: Available for browsing in the UI Counseling & Testing Center Self-Help Room

**Self-Esteem, Revised Edition.** By Matthew McKay, & Patrick Fanning, Oakland, CA: New Harbinger, 1995.

This book describes self-esteem and the negative messages we give ourselves. It follows with a discussion of ways to counter the "pathological critic" and how to deal with shoulds, mistakes, and criticism. Discussion of other techniques such as visualization and hypnosis are included.

**The Self-Esteem Companion: Simple Exercises to Help You Challenge Your Inner Critic and Celebrate Your Personal Strengths.** By Matthew McKay, Patrick Fanning, Carole Honeychurch, & Catharine Stuker. Oakland, CA: New Harbinger, 1999.

**Ten Days to Self-Esteem.** By David D. Burns, NY: William Morrow, 1993.

This workbook has many exercises focusing on the interrelationships of depression, anxiety and self-esteem. The emphasis is on self-exploration and on changing your moods through changing your thinking.

## Need Additional Help?

The University of Idaho Counseling & Testing Center offers free group and individual counseling/psychotherapy for these and related issues for full time UI students. For more information or to schedule an appointment, call the Counseling & Testing Center (Mary E. Forney Hall, Rm. 306, 1210 Blake Ave.) at 208-885-6716. All appointments are strictly confidential.