

How to Tell If You Have Low Self-Esteem And What to Do About It **By Peggy L. Ferguson, Ph.D.**

People with low self-esteem have a low estimation of their inherent worth. They tend to see themselves as inadequate, incompetent, unworthy, less than others, and unlovable. Low self-esteem is closely related to low self-efficacy. Self-efficacy means that you have power to produce effects.

People who value themselves poorly do not believe that they have the power or the ability to make positive things happen in their lives. They believe that they have many limitations and are incapable of the things that they see others be able to accomplish. They tend to see themselves as a victim of circumstances and have a hard time connecting their own decisions and behavior to their outcomes. They don't believe that they have much influence or power over their own lives.

This sense of low self-efficacy also extends to not being able to trust their feelings and judgment. They tend to have a hard time sensing "trustworthiness" in others. They distrust their own gut reactions to others. Since they have a great deal of difficulty being assertive, they tend toward extremes of passivity or aggression. They may tend to let people walk all over them, until they reach some threshold of tolerance, then they withdraw into passive aggression or become aggressive. Or they may generally present an aggressive stance that keeps people at a distance.

When people trample on their boundaries, they either don't notice, don't believe that there is anything they can do about it, or think that it's because of something that they did. These self-doubting folks tend to people-please, trying to project an image of what they imagine others want them to be.

Self-esteem and self-concept are deeply related. Self-concept is that world view of self, or how you think about who you are. Self-concept includes beliefs, attitudes, and opinions that you hold about yourself and your relationships with the environment and people in it. People with low-self esteem have great difficulty describing self, their beliefs, and opinions. They don't know who they are.

They tend to see self as a sum of the roles they play and usually believe that they don't do well at the roles. They are self-deprecating. People with low self-esteem engage in negative self-talk. They say hurtful things to themselves inside their own heads that they would not say to others. When complimented they down play the compliment with qualifications or rejection like, "yes, but", or "you're just saying that; you don't mean it". Self-deprecating people focus on the negative aspects of themselves, while ignoring, discounting, or negating positive attributes.

People suffering from low self-esteem tend to have chaotic and conflicted relationships. They have trouble communicating wants and needs. They tend to expect others to know what they want and need and to give it to them without having to be asked. They expect that because that's how they interact with others. Self-effacing folks

tend to feel angry and hurt when others don't reciprocate and do the same thing. They believe them to be self-centered and selfish. Conflict is inevitable due to inability to take risks and put themselves out there.

If they can't risk letting down defenses long enough to directly tell others what they want and need, the potential for confusion and conflict is immense. Without assertiveness no one can be direct and effective in their communication with others. Folks with low self-esteem tend to vacillate back and forth from passive to aggressive or to engage in passive-aggressive communication. They tend to be emotion driven. They over-react to interpersonal situations in their lives. They believe that their perception of an interpersonal event is the way that it is or was, that there is no other possible way to view it.

They don't know how to be truly intimate, so they tend to engage in pursuing/distancing dynamics. This is where one person needs a higher level of closeness at any given moment than the other person. The person with the higher need for closeness takes the other's lower need for closeness as evidence of a lack of caring, regard, or interest, and pursuing reassurance that they are still loved. People with low self-esteem have trouble being intimate with others, because to do so, they have to let down their defenses and risk exposing who they really are to someone else. They can't let others see who they really are, because they don't know who they really are. If you don't have a solid sense of self, you can't share it with another person. That is what intimacy is.

Sometimes they are self-sabotaging. They may fear success, or failure, or both. That fear is acted out in subtle ways that keeps things status quo. Fortune-telling of dire consequences of taking chances on change for growth and development keeps them stuck. They fear change. Fear of the unknown is much worse than any discontent and discomfort that they have with present circumstances.

Fortunately, it is possible to improve one's self-esteem and to change one's self-concept. To improve self concept it is necessary to get to know oneself. This includes getting to know and appreciate one's body, feelings, thoughts, relationships, tastes, opinions, and motives. This is a process. In the midst of self-discovery, it is appropriate to practice self-acceptance, recognizing oneself as less than perfect, yet still worthwhile. Changing how you think is necessary to improve self-esteem. Using cognitive therapy to challenge negative cognitive distortions about oneself, the world, and the future will help. A change in feelings follows a change in thinking.

Willingness to risk is crucial. While practicing taking risks, one should begin looking for the benefits of those risks. You cannot learn new things without risking. With trying out new things and discovering one's own competence, more self-efficacy is gained. Taking risks to reveal glimpses of the real person you are, is usually met with acceptance from others rather than their anticipated abandonment. These outcomes help increase self-confidence and a sense of worthiness. When you take the risk to tell others what you want, need, and feel, you learn assertiveness and practice intimacy skills. When you spend time thinking about the connections between your decisions and your

situations, you begin to take responsibility for your own decisions and happiness. When you take responsibility for self, you are empowered.

Copyright 2009, Peggy L. Ferguson, Ph.D., <http://www.peggyferguson.com>
Hubbard House Publishing, Stillwater, OK.