

What is Self-Esteem And Why Do I Need Some?

By Peggy L. Ferguson, Ph.D.

Self-esteem is more than just feeling good about yourself. Self-esteem comes from how you think and feel about yourself. The concept encompasses not only the cognitive and emotional appraisals of self, but also has behavioral components. These three components reinforce each other in a circular fashion.

Self-esteem is an evaluation of self, which involves thinking about oneself and how you measure up to what you value and aspire to be. When you look inward and find yourself to be lacking those attributes or behaviors that you value, the emotional component comes into play. Perceptions of self and how they measure up to perceptions of others may set the stage for shame, guilt, sadness, loneliness, fear, and anger. The feelings you have when you think that you are less worthwhile than others, also sets the stage for your behavior.

If you evaluate others from an outsider's position and perception, then evaluate yourself from an insider's position and perception, you may fall short in the comparison. Most people forget when looking at others that they see a tiny portion of who that person is. They compare their "idealized perception" of the other person to the harsh intimate awareness of themselves--warts, fears, and all. Valuing comes into play here, as well. When you apply your values or standards to the idealized version of others, they look good. They appear competent, confident, worthy, and happy. When you apply the same standards or values to yourself, you may feel less competent and less worthy than they. When you determine that you are worth less, you may think you deserve less. These perceptions and assessments influence your behavior in all areas of your life.

If you lack self-worth and self-confidence, you may be reluctant to take risks to try new things for fear of failure. If you fail, you might be exposed as incompetent. If others know how incompetent you are, you would be abandoned or rejected. Because you don't want your incompetence to be exposed, you may adapt a host of defensive maneuvers that keep people at a distance and keep them from knowing you. You may act arrogant or egotistical. You may be judgmental or contemptuous of others. You may manipulate or put others down to feel better about self. Because low self-efficacy goes with low self-esteem and self-confidence, you may do everything you can to avoid responsibility for self, and blame others for your shortcomings.

Low self-esteem is related to all kinds of living problems in all three domains, cognitive, emotional, and behavioral. Some of these are: domestic violence, (on the receiving and offending side of the equation), alcoholism and other drug addiction, depression, anxiety, teen pregnancy, giving up on educational pursuits, eating disorders, and acting out behavior like delinquency, bullying, pathological lying, theft. Low self-esteem is linked to lack of assertiveness. If you do not demand to be treated appropriately, you will not be treated with the respect that you deserve. Low self-esteem and lack of self-efficacy is related to inability to make decisions, procrastination, and

perfectionism. Lack of self-esteem, self-confidence, and self-worth keeps people quiet when they need to speak up to have their needs met and to take care of self.

If you don't think that you deserve good things in your life, this belief will determine in a negative way, a huge range of choices that you make. You may be afraid to take a risk to learn something new, to enter into a relationship, to take a new job, to move to a new place, to get out of a bad relationship, or to even nurture and take care of yourself. Your self-esteem determines the quality of the life you choose.

Self-esteem is not about being narcissistic, self-absorbed, or arrogant. It is about having a realistic appraisal of self. It is appropriately perceiving your value to self, others, and society in general. It is about identifying your strengths (as well as weaknesses), achievements, areas of competence, and determining that you have inherent worth. It is about believing that you have the most impact over your life and that you can determine your own destinies. It is also about knowing that you deserve all the happiness and success in your life that you can bring to yourself. It is also about taking responsibility for your own happiness and doing what is necessary to achieve it.

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