

A Self-Esteem Building Exercise
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What is self-esteem?

Self-esteem is how you think of yourself. It involves how much worth you believe you have. It is connected to self-efficacy, ongoing self-appraisal, how you believe others perceive you, and self-acceptance.

There are a number of factors and conditions that affect the development of self-esteem. Some of our self-esteem comes from childhood, where we adequately had our needs met. Some of it comes from our own dispositions which colors how we take in the information in our lives. Conditions and events from childhood that can influence development of self esteem include whether we received an adequate amount of love, respect, praise, attention, and opportunities. Our behavior influences our self esteem in how we act according to our values and adequacy of our performance in various roles in our lives. Perception of how others perceive us may also affect self-esteem. When you grow up in poverty and feel shamed, ridiculed, and rejected because of it or other conditions, your self-esteem is likely to be affected. Neglect, trauma, and being held to a standard of perfection can affect self-esteem. Unfavorable comparisons of ourselves to others can also affect self-esteem.

Many people who have poor or negative self-esteem have thoughts that help maintain low self esteem. Examples:

"I am not good enough."

"What will others think?"

"I can't adequately do anything."

"I am too tall/skinny/dumb/fat/ugly/etc."

"I can't do anything right."

"Why would anybody love me."

"It is horrible to make a mistake."

"I am never going to be good enough."

"There is no point in trying. I won't be able to do it anyway."

When you have low self-esteem, you probably keep adding to it by thinking distorted, negative thoughts, which may rule out any positive thoughts about yourself that could improve your self esteem. These thoughts appear to be accurate assessments of self. They are not. They are cognitive distortions associated with low self-esteem, that are self-perpetuating.

They seem to come out in full force when you make a mistake. When you have low self esteem and make a mistake, your inner critic has an opportunity to take center stage. The negative distorted thoughts your inner critic tells you about yourself only makes things worse. Then you worry about what others might think, and rob yourself of your

ability to focus, concentrate on others tasks at hand, decrease your effectiveness of whatever else you are working on, make more mistakes, which adds more negative thoughts about self.

How to improve your self esteem

1. Write down the things you like about yourself --- your strengths, your accomplishments, those personal points of charm -- things that are uniquely you. Believe them.

2. Give yourself credit. When you keep suiting up and showing up despite feeling frustrated or discouraged, give yourself credit for your fortitude. When you try something new despite anxiety that you won't be able to do it well, no matter how well you did it, give yourself credit for the willingness and/or courage to try. Think of five things daily to give yourself credit for.

3. Silence the inner critic. When you make a mistake, tell yourself that you are human instead of kicking your own butt. You are not perfect. You will never be perfect. Strive to be the best you can be, and accept yourself as less than perfect, yet worthwhile. Treat yourself kindly like the small child that seeks comfort when they make a mistake. Yet, when you make a mistake work on learning from that mistake. Don't shame yourself or blame others. Identify what happened and figure out how to do something different next time. Fix the problem. Don't affix blame. Don't "awful-ize" a mistake. Mistakes happen. Forgive yourself and move on. For most mistakes, give yourself a fifteen minute limit on assessing what happened and feeling badly. If you did something to hurt someone, make amends.

4. Move away from being overly concerned about what others think about you. Move into deliberately deciding for yourself what the next "right thing" is. Act according to what you value rather than what you believe others value or think that you "should" do. Who is the person that you strive to be? Work on being that person, rather than trying to measure up to some unknown standard that you "think" others have. Work on liking yourself and make that count. When you find yourself stewing on what others think, say to yourself, "Stop it. Stop mind-reading."

5. Stop making unfair comparisons of yourself to others. Most of time when you feel envy about the attributes, talents, looks, goods, opportunities of others, you are comparing what they look like from the outside looking in, to your own self-esteem. They look better than you feel. These are unfair comparisons. You don't know how they feel inside. They may be comparing how you look on the outside to how they feel on the inside too. When you feel envious of someone else, think of all that you have to be grateful for.

6. Face your fears and stop avoiding things. So what if you cannot do something perfectly the first time, the second time, or ever (for that matter). If you are procrastinating think about how your procrastination has derailed you, sabotaged you,

and stressed you out. Is fear at the heart of your procrastination? Face your fear; tackle the task and just do it. Look at the kinds of things that you are avoiding. Are you avoiding relationships, going to school, taking a new job, getting out of unhealthy relationships, learning the computer? How is fear connected to your avoidance? What is the worse thing that would happen if you stopped avoiding these things? Is your fear of the worse thing possible realistic? Probably not.

7. Practice appropriate self care. Don't sacrifice your own self care, thinking that it will be appreciated by others. People-pleasing and self-sacrifice is a deadly combination. People who engage in this often end up angry and resentful that no one even noticed their self-sacrifice. Self care involves the basics-- personal grooming, regular health checkups, eating right, getting adequate rest and nutrition, regular exercise, and doing something "special" for yourself sometimes.

8. Decide on some things that you would like to do that would help you feel good about yourself. Make a list. Identify the ones that are most easily within reach. From among these pick one to start with. Set the goal. Identify the steps needed to reach the goal. Start today. Ask for help as needed. Give yourself credit for your accomplishment. Then pick another goal to shoot for. Achieving goals helps you believe that you can do things. It helps you raised your appraisal of your own self-worth.

9. Pick positive people to be around. Find people to put in your life that are appreciative of your efforts, your talents, and your worth. Find people who are willing to be in a give and take relationship with you. Find people that will give you the respect and encouragement that you deserve. If you can't surround yourself with positive people like these, provide yourself with these things.

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