

Life Relationship Notes

From: The Center for Relationship Enrichment

What is Self-Esteem?

Most people's feelings and thoughts about themselves fluctuate somewhat based on their daily experiences. The grade you get on an exam, how your friends treat you, ups and downs in a romantic relationship all can have a temporary impact on your wellbeing. Your self-esteem, however, is something more fundamental than the normal "ups and downs" associated with situational changes.

Poor Self-Esteem vs. Healthy Self-Esteem

People with poor self-esteem often rely on how they are doing in the present to determine how they feel about themselves. They need positive external experiences to counteract the negative feelings and thoughts that constantly plague them. Even the good feeling (from a good grade, etc.) can be temporary.

Healthy self-esteem is based on our ability to assess ourselves accurately (know ourselves) and still be able to accept and to value ourselves unconditionally. This means being able to realistically acknowledge our strengths and limitations (which is part of being human) and at the same time accepting ourselves as worthy and worthwhile without conditions or reservations.

Consequences of Low Self-Esteem

- It can create anxiety, stress, loneliness and increased likelihood for depression.
- It can cause problems with friendships and relationships.
- It can seriously impair academic and job performance.
- It can lead to underachievement and increased vulnerability to drug and alcohol abuse.

Three Steps to Better Self-Esteem

Before you can begin to improve your self-esteem you must first believe that you can change it. Change doesn't necessarily happen quickly or easily, but it can happen. You are not powerless! Once you have accepted, or are at least willing to entertain the possibility that you are not powerless, there are three steps you can take to begin to change your self-esteem:

- Step 1: Rebut the Inner Critic
 - **Critical voice:** "I got a D on the test. I don't understand anything in this class. I'm such an idiot. Who am I fooling? I shouldn't be taking this class. I'm stupid and I don't belong in college."
 - **Specific voice:** "I did poorly on this one test, but I've done O.K. on all the homework. There are some things here that I don't understand as well as I thought I did, but I can do the material-I've done fine in other classes that were just as tough."
- Step 2: Practice Self-Nurturing
 - Practice Basic Self-Care
 - Get enough sleep, eat in a healthy fashion, get regular exercise, practice good hygiene, etc.
 - Reward Yourself For Your Accomplishments
 - You could take the night off to celebrate good grades, spend time with a friend, or compliment yourself for making that hard phone call.
- Step 3: Get Help from Others
 - Getting help from others is often the most important step a person can take to improve his or her self-esteem, but it can also be the most difficult. People with low self-esteem often don't ask for help because they feel they don't deserve it. But since low self-esteem is often caused by how other people treated you in the past, you may need the help of other people in the present to challenge the critical messages that come from negative past experiences.