

Understanding and Changing Self-Esteem

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Self-esteem is the attitude or belief we have about our self-worth or value. Fundamentally, beliefs and attitudes about who we are come from our life experiences and interpretation of experiences, spanning from early childhood and adolescence to recent times. Events early in life -- how you were treated in your family, your parent's expectations, your family's place in society, school, religious and social experiences, critical incidents like illnesses or accidents, and the presence or absence of positive influences like praise, warmth, and affection that contribute to your sense of value and acceptability -- all shape your self-esteem.

Even highly self-assured adults can have their confidence shaken by the powerful effects on self-esteem when overwhelmed by pressures from work, job loss, stress or hardship, parental stress, marital dissatisfaction, loss of health, or abuse. Generally, if life experiences are positive, your beliefs about yourself will be equally positive. Most of us have both positive and negative experiences throughout life, and as a result, we have various thoughts about ourselves and apply these according to the particular circumstances. For example, we may feel very self-assured in certain situations, interacting comfortably and easily with close friends and family, but have doubts about ourselves in social or professional situations, leading to apprehension or anxiety or causing us to avoid such situations altogether.

If life experiences are mostly negative, however, our beliefs about ourselves will also be negative. At the heart of low self-esteem are the negative beliefs and judgments we make about the kind of person we are (i.e., our inherent worth, value, and competence). These beliefs are often habitually expressed in what we say and think about ourselves as a form of self-criticism ("I'm fat and ugly"), or as self-doubt ("I'll never be good enough), or as self-blame ("It's all my fault"). This may lead to discounting the positive about ourselves and focusing more on the weaknesses or shortcomings: "I'm a failure," or "I must never ask for help and always cope with everything."

Although negative beliefs can be rooted in the past, their impacts continue into the present. The negative statements we make about ourselves, once in place, tend to stick and continue to influence what we think, feel, and do on a daily basis. To negotiate our way through life with a low opinion of ourselves, we adopt strategies or standards for our actions and for how we can feel okay about ourselves. For example, children and adolescents can be strongly influenced by the implied or explicit standards of their parents. Young people, seeing themselves as failing to make the grade in relation to standards at school and at home, can feel great pain, which can have long-lasting effects on their self-esteem. Ongoing criticism or pressure to be perfect (or antithetically, a lack of praise or interest from parents) can lead a young person to conclude: "Unless I always get it right, I will never get anywhere in life." As a result, fear may come into play and cause the individual to underperform or avoid challenges or new opportunities, such as attending college, trying out for a sports team, applying for a job, or asking someone out on a date. Conversely, perfectionism may lead individuals to work long hours to get perfect every detail of a particular task. The anxiety of individuals, however, may be so high as to disrupt their ability to complete the task due to feelings of exhaustion, stress, or being overburdened. Relationships can also be affected when individuals feel that their value depends on achievement. They may be over-sensitive to criticism, be excessively eager to please, or need to be in control, which can affect

their social, professional, and intimate relationships. Avoidance caused by fear, or perfectionism due to anxiety and personal insecurities tend to strengthen the negative beliefs they have of their self-worth and lead to feelings of shame, guilt, sadness, and anger. This all feeds into the cycle of low self-esteem.

By understanding the experiences in life that have shaped how you see yourself, you may be able to recognize and change how your negative perspectives lead to unhelpful thinking and behavioral patterns. This is the first step toward developing positive self-esteem. Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT) may be useful for improving self-esteem as it focuses on the synergistic effects of thoughts, beliefs, emotions, and behaviors. It provides an opportunity to question the authority of our beliefs and to develop a more accurate and balanced portrait of who we are and a new attitude toward life and others. For example, a spouse loses his or her temper; Thought: "Here I go again, getting angry over nothing." Belief: "I've got to get a grip or I'll ruin everything, I am so pathetic". Emotions: guilt, discouragement, anger with self. Unhelpful behaviour: stomped out of the room and slammed the door; drank a beer, and played video games alone all night. The self-critical belief, "I am pathetic", undermines any sense of self and pulls the individual down. Instead of accepting negative beliefs as a reflection of how things truly are, beliefs can be challenged by asking questions such as:

- Am I confusing a belief with a fact?
- What is the evidence in favour of what I believe about myself? What is the evidence against what I believe about myself?
- Is this the only perspective possible? What evidence is there to support the alternative perspective?
- How are the beliefs helpful? How are they unhelpful?
- What perspectives would be helpful?
- Am I expecting myself to be perfect?
- Am I thinking in all-or-nothing terms?
- Am I condemning myself as a total person based on a single event?
- Is there anything I need to do to change the situation? Even if not, what can I do to change my thinking about it in the future?
- How can I experiment with thinking and behaving in a more healthy way?

Developing an awareness of negative thoughts and beliefs and working to question them may provide a fresher, more accurate and kind perspective of self and may help toward handling situations more constructively.

You think the way you do for a good reason. Whether low self-esteem has developed slowly since childhood or been caused by a recent traumatic event, you can gain a new sense of self-worth and knowledge of your value as a person and learn to relax in your experiences. The strategies and concepts used in Cognitive Behavioural Therapy can help you notice, understand and challenge negative thoughts and beliefs and experiment with new ideas, perspectives and behaviours. If this piques your interest and you're wondering whether to work on some of this in yourself, you might consider joining Arbour Counselling's group therapy offering, [The Self-Esteem Group](#). It offers a safe and supportive context to explore these important themes.