Developing Self Esteem

Self-esteem refers to how we think and feel about ourselves at the most fundamental level. It affects our ability to relate to other people and to the world in general. With a firm foundation, we can build satisfying relationships and be successful in our work. With shaky self-esteem, our ability to relate to others and deal with difficult situations is at risk.

Even in adolescence and adulthood we aren’t immune to “attacks” on our self-esteem. Teasing at school, unpleasant dating experiences, getting fired from a job, unemployment, marital separation or a lack of friends may all damage self-esteem. An important factor is the individual’s interpretation of the events. Put another way, the crucial factor is what we say to ourselves about those experiences.

The inner critic
Become aware of your inner critic—we all have one—it slyly makes negative judgements about you. Notice when the inner critic compares you to others: “She always looks much better than I do” or “He’s so confident and smart, and I seem like an idiot”. Your inner critic sets unrealistic standards that no one could keep, reminds you of your failures and further exaggerates them. It even makes you forget about your positive qualities. Once you begin to look for these self put-downs, you can begin to notice the critic and counteract it. You can stand up to the critic with a short, powerful statement to yourself such as “Shut-up!”, “Get off my back!”, “Cancel!” or something even more powerful if you wish.

Affirmations
Another useful technique, particularly at the time that you’ve caught yourself being self-critical, is to affirm your own worth with something positive about yourself. These affirmations are short, positive statements about yourself and phrased as if they’re already true. For example, “I’m now enjoying my life and my relationships” is more powerful than “I’m going to be happy one day”. While it can be hard telling yourself positive things while you feel lousy, persistence pays off, particularly if you use some of the other strategies below as well.

Self-esteem versus social status
It is important not to confuse self-esteem with social status or financial wealth. Self-esteem built on external things, such as a job, a fancy car or even the respect from other people, is at great risk, because that external thing can be taken away. For example, many people suffer a huge loss in self-esteem and self-worth after job retrenchment or the death of a spouse. True self-esteem is built from the inside and not on external things such as how much money we make or how popular we are.

Damage to self-esteem
Researchers and therapists have found that early childhood experiences can have a big effect on our level of self-esteem. Excessive punishment from father, rejection from mother or simply not having had enough touch and affection could all lead to negative conclusions about ourselves which would in turn damage self-esteem.

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**Visualisation**
You can also use visualisation - the deliberate use of pictures or images in your mind. When you add pictures to affirmations, you’re really beginning to program your thinking. For instance, you may want to picture yourself as a confident and worthy person, who makes a positive difference to people in your life. Visualisation tends to be particularly effective when combined with deep relaxation.

**Other techniques**
Self-esteem doesn’t change overnight, and a broad approach to changing it over time is needed. Some additional strategies you might incorporate into your life include:
- Keeping a journal of all your successes (especially nice to look through when you’re feeling low)
- Doing the mirror exercise (talking to yourself out loud and in a positive way in front of a mirror)
- Reviewing your day every night (letting go of what didn’t go well and feeling good about what did)
- Trusting your own intuition.

**Some areas to focus on**
We can apply the above strategies to numerous areas of our lives to create a healthy self-esteem:

- **Optimism:** having an outlook, which focuses on positive possibilities
- **Confidence:** belief in your own ability to achieve a positive outcome
- **Emotional balance:** feeling stable and comfortable with your emotions
- **Self-direction:** developing plans and directions in life and acting on them
- **Mistakes:** accept them as opportunities to improve yourself
- **Strengths:** knowing what you do well
- **Cooperation:** working well with others and helping them make progress.

These are just a few facets of self-esteem. Find ones that are most relevant for your own life circumstances.

**Myths about self-esteem**

**Myth #1:** Self-esteem just means feeling good about yourself.
Self-esteem is much more than a mere feeling. It’s a tendency to see yourself as worthy of happiness and competently coping with the basic challenges of life.

**Myth #2:** Only a lucky few can develop high self-esteem.
People of average intelligence and average opportunities can grow into emotionally healthy adults. While some of us might have been scarred by negative experiences, it’s always possible to grow and improve ourselves.

**Myth #3:** Focussing on self-esteem leads to a “big ego”.
Ironically, people who tend to “big-note” themselves typically have poor self-esteem. When we’re confident about something, we don’t brag, boast or talk a lot about it. We just get on with living.

**Myth #4:** Good looks, popularity and lots of money almost guarantee self-esteem.
There’re many people who have physical beauty, adoring fans and millions of dollars, yet they still live with a fragile self-esteem with severe anxiety and depression. Good appearance, popularity and wealth don’t guarantee anything if one doesn’t have the self-esteem to support them.

**Myth #5:** Self-esteem is the consequence of approval from others.
Yes and No. When young, our self-esteem can be influenced by others who’re important to us. However, when esteem is solely built on the approval of others, it crumbles quickly if that approval is taken away. It needs to be built on deeper beliefs we hold about ourselves. As adults we possess the ability and responsibility to decide how to safeguard our own self-esteem.

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