

How to Have More Self-Esteem

What Is Self-Esteem?

Self-esteem literally means to esteem, or respect, yourself. Having high self-esteem means that you have a positive image of yourself. Let's look at where such a positive self-image comes from.

In her classic book *Celebrate Yourself*, Dorothy Corkville Briggs makes a distinction between the real you and your self-image. She says that the *real* you is unique and unchanging. Most of your self-image—what you think is true about yourself—is learned. It is not necessarily accurate at all!

Where are your beliefs about yourself drawn from? Where did you learn them? If you think about it, you'll see that they came from:

- What others said about you
- What others told you
- What others did to you

Your self-image is the result of all the messages you heard about yourself as a child. These messages added up to a set of beliefs about who you are. It may have nothing to do with who you *really* are.

For example, you may believe things like:

- I'm not very smart.
- I'm naturally passive.
- Girls aren't any good at math.
- I'm too old to start over.
- All of the women in the Breski family become doctors.
- I'm painfully shy.
- The Hurleys never lie.

In addition to learning to believe certain things during our early years, there are certain situations that make most people feel inferior or lacking in self-esteem.

Some examples are:

- Being criticized
- Not being loved
- Being rejected
- Experiencing failure

What Low Self-Esteem Feels Like

In situations like these above, it is not uncommon to feel emotions such as:

- Sadness, Inferiority, Anger, Jealousy, and Rejection

Cognitive Therapy

Cognitive therapy is one of the most successful methods for helping people feel better about themselves. Cognitive therapists help depressed and anxious people feel better by identifying how faulty ways of thinking are making them feel bad. They believe that faulty thoughts cause us to feel bad, which makes us feel bad about ourselves.

Cognitive therapists call these faulty ways of thinking “twisted thinking.” Cognitive therapy is a process where the client analyzes his or her thoughts and beliefs, and learns to substitute more healthy ways of thinking and believing. These therapists help their clients feel better in four steps: First, identify the upsetting events that cause bad feelings; second, record your thoughts about the event; third, identify the distortions in your thinking process; and fourth, substitute rational responses. When the client successfully completes these four steps, the client usually feels better about him- or herself.

Thinking the right kinds of thoughts is one way to feel good about yourself. Now let’s talk about a second way to increase your self-esteem: by taking a look at your life environment and seeing whether it supports you feeling good about yourself. You may find that some nourishing elements need to be replenished. Here are some questions to ask yourself:

Do you have people in your life who:

1. Treat you with love and respect?
2. Encourage you to do and be anything you want?
3. Help you find out what you want to do, and how to do it?
4. Encourage you to explore all of your talents and interests?
5. Are thrilled when you succeed?
6. Listen to you when you need to complain?
7. Help you bounce back from failure without making you feel bad?

Take a moment to think about each of the items on this list. Note where your environment is providing adequately for you, and where it is lacking. This can give you clues to how to build your own self-esteem.

Strategies for Esteem Building

1. Pay attention to how you are feeling from moment to moment. Tune in to what your five senses are experiencing. Take it down to the most basic level of “I feel warm right now,” “I feel light-headed,” “I feel a tightness in my stomach.”
2. Revisit your interests and goals. Make a list of things you’d like to do and learn. Today, take one step toward learning more.
3. Spend less time with critical people and more time with those who appreciate you.
4. Spend some time with yourself at the end of each day. Review what happened and how you were feeling. Write about it in a private journal.
5. If you are feeling bad about yourself, consider finding a therapist to help you get your life on a positive track.