

Self-Esteem

What is self-esteem?

Self-esteem describes how people think and feel about themselves, how they regard themselves, the degree of worth they attribute to themselves. If someone likes himself and feels deserving of good things in life, we say he has high self-esteem. If he dislikes himself or puts himself down, we say he has low self-esteem.

High self-esteem is important because confident people usually have better relationships with others, can accomplish more, and lead fuller, more satisfying lives. People with good self-esteem are usually optimistic and expect others to like and welcome them. They make better parents and are able to manage life's struggles. In contrast, those who think the worst of themselves may distrust others and may be afraid to try doing things that could bring them success. Those with low self-esteem may fall into destructive behavior and may get along poorly with friends and with their own parents and children.

How can I tell if I have good self-esteem?

If you agree with five or more of these statements, your self-esteem is good:

- I do not feel I must always please other people.
- I generally feel that I like myself.
- I speak up for myself and feel I have rights.
- I am happy most of the time.
- I feel that my struggles are normal ones and not my fault.
- I do not need to prove that I am better than others.
- I do not need constant validation or approval from others.
- I can make friends easily.
- I feel good about myself without praise from others.
- I feel pleased, rather than envious, when those I care about have success in life.

How can I increase my self-esteem when it is low?

Some people have low self-esteem at certain points in their lives and higher self-esteem when they have accomplished some of their goals, like having a good marriage or doing a well at a challenging job or at school. Struggling against low self-esteem is a common problem. It requires effort, particularly if poor self-esteem is a result of experience with childhood caretakers.

Ways to increase self-esteem include:

- Be assertive in work situations and at home. When you **act as if** you deserve something, you will tend to value yourself more.
- Use affirmations, positive statements about yourself (such as, "I am a kind and caring person), written on cards. Look at the cards several times a day no matter how you feel. This can remind you of the goals you have regarding your self-esteem.
- If something goes wrong, be aware of when you are inappropriately blaming yourself. If you are responsible for a mistake, accept the responsibility, repair the error, and move on. You can make mistakes and still be a good person.
- Think of others. Commit regular time in your life to helping others. When you help others, their response can help you feel good about yourself. It is easier to have better self-esteem when you are being loving, if that is one of your goals for yourself.

- Become more aware of negative self-statements in your mind, for instance saying to yourself, "I did that badly." Counter the negative statements with positive ones, such as, "That didn't turn out well, but it wasn't entirely my fault."
- Talk with others about the sources of low self-esteem in your childhood. An accepting and trusted friend or a therapist can help you understand experiences that were not your fault.
- As you become aware of how your life experiences contributed to your low self-esteem, replace criticism with praise. Learn to be your own "best fan."
- Take good care of your body. Eat well, be well groomed, get enough sleep, and get regular exercise. If you feel well physically, you will feel better emotionally.

Written by Lee Scheingold, M.S.W.

This content is reviewed periodically and is subject to change as new health information becomes available. The information is intended to inform and educate and is not a replacement for medical evaluation, advice, diagnosis or treatment by a healthcare professional.