

Self-Esteem

What is Self-Esteem?

Most people's thoughts and feelings 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 can all have a temporary impact on how you feel about yourself.

Your self-esteem, however, is something more fundamental than the normal ups and downs associated with situational changes. For people with good self-esteem, normal ups and downs may lead to temporary fluctuations in how they feel about themselves, but only to a limited extent. In contrast, for people with poor self-esteem, these ups and downs drastically impact the way they see themselves.

Poor 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 (e.g., compliments from friends) to counteract the negative feelings and thoughts that constantly plague them. Even then, the good feeling (such as from a good grade or compliment) is usually temporary.

Healthy self-esteem is based on our ability to assess ourselves accurately and still be accepting of who we are. This means being able to acknowledge our strengths and weaknesses (we all have them!) and at the same time recognize that we are worthy and worthwhile.

★ Check out these groups related to Self-Esteem:

[Personal Exploration Groups](#)
[Groups and Classes](#)



Where Does Self-Esteem Come From?

Our self-esteem evolves throughout our lives as we develop an image of ourselves through our experiences with different people and activities. Experiences during childhood play a particularly large role in the shaping of self-esteem. When we were growing up, our successes, failures, and how we were treated by our family, teachers, coaches, religious authorities, and peers, all contributed to the creation of our self-esteem.

Childhood experiences that contribute to healthy self-esteem include:

- Being listened to

- Being spoken to respectfully
- Getting appropriate attention and affection
- Having accomplishments be recognized and mistakes or failures be acknowledged and accepted

Childhood experiences that may lead to low self-esteem include:

- Being harshly criticized
- Being physically, sexually, or emotionally abused
- Being ignored, ridiculed, or teased
- Being expected to be perfect all the time. People with low self-esteem were often given messages—from parents, teachers, peers, or others—that failed experiences (losing a game, getting a poor grade, etc.) were failures of their whole self

What Does Your "Inner Voice" Say?

Our past experiences, even the things we don't usually think about, continue to impact our daily life in the form of an "inner voice." Although most people do not hear this voice in the same way they would a spoken one, it acts in a similar way, continuously repeating childhood messages to us.

For people with healthy self-esteem, the messages of the inner voice are usually accepting and reassuring. For people with low self-esteem, the inner voice becomes a harsh critic, punishing one's mistakes and belittling one's accomplishments.

Three Faces of Low Self-Esteem

Low self-esteem is not always easy to recognize. Here are three common faces that low self-esteem may wear:

1. The Imposter: acts happy and successful, but is really terrified of failure. Lives with the constant fear that she or he will be found out. Needs continuous successes to maintain the mask of positive self-esteem, which may lead to problems with perfectionism, procrastination, competition, and burn-out.
2. The Rebel: acts like the opinions or good will of others—especially people who are important or powerful—don't matter. Lives with constant anger about not feeling good enough. Continuously needs to prove that others' judgments and criticisms don't hurt, which may lead to problems like blaming others excessively, breaking rules or laws, or opposing authority.
3. The Victim: acts helpless and unable to cope with the world and waits for someone to come to the rescue. Uses self-pity or indifference as a shield against fear of taking responsibility for changing his or her life. Looks repeatedly to others for guidance, which can lead to such problems as unassertiveness, underachievement, and excessive reliance on others in relationships.

Consequences of Low Self-Esteem

Low self-esteem can have devastating consequences. It can:

- create anxiety, stress, loneliness, and increased likelihood of depression
- cause problems with friendships and romantic relationships
- seriously impair academic and job performance
- lead to increased vulnerability to drug and alcohol abuse

Worst of all, these negative consequences themselves reinforce the negative self-image and can take a person into a downward spiral of lower and lower self-esteem and increasingly unproductive or even actively self-destructive behavior.

Three Steps to Improved Self-Esteem

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 can change, there are three steps you can take to begin to improve the way you feel about yourself:

Step 1: Rebut the Inner Critic

The first important step in improving self-esteem is to begin to challenge the negative messages of the critical inner voice. Here are some typical examples of the inner critic and some strategies to rebut that critical voice.

- **Unfairly harsh inner critic:** "People said they liked my presentation, but it was nowhere near as good as it should have been. I can't believe no-one noticed all the places I messed up. I'm such an imposter." Acknowledge strengths: "Wow, they really liked it! Maybe it wasn't perfect, but I worked hard on that presentation and did a good job. I'm proud of myself."
- **An inner voice that generalizes unrealistically:** "I got an F 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." Be specific: "I did poorly on this 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 now I have a better idea of how to prepare and what I need to work on. I've done fine in other tough classes; I'm confident I can do this."
- **An inner critic that makes illogic leaps:** "He's frowning. He didn't say anything, but I know it means that he doesn't like me!" Challenge illogic: "O.K., he's frowning, but I don't know why. It could have nothing to do with me. Maybe I should ask."
- **An inner voice that catastrophizes:** "She turned me down for a date! I'm so embarrassed and humiliated. No one likes or cares about me. I'll never find a girlfriend. I'll always be alone." Be objective: "Ouch! That hurt. Ok, she doesn't want to go out with me. That doesn't mean no one does. I know I'm a nice person. I'm confident that in time I'll find someone who's as interested in me as I am in her."

Step 2: Practice Self-Compassion

Rebutting your critical inner voice is an important first step, but it is not enough. Practicing self-compassion (hyperlink self compassion to <http://www.self-compassion.org/>) means treating yourself with the same empathy you would show others. If a friend were having a hard time, you'd be likely to be extra caring and supportive. You deserve the same treatment! Rather than focusing on evaluating yourself, instead you can acknowledge when things are difficult and try to nurture

and care for yourself in these times especially. For example:

- **Forgive yourself when you don't do all you'd hoped.** Try to be gentle with yourself rather than critical of yourself when things don't go as you had hoped. This can be surprisingly hard if you are not used to doing it, but recognizing that such experiences are inevitable can help.
- **Recognize your humanness.** As humans we all make mistakes, and we are all impacted by external factors that we can't control. Accepting our "humanness" helps us to feel more connected to others rather than feeling we are enduring these types of experiences all alone. Recognizing that mistakes are an inevitable part of being human helps us to be more compassionate with ourselves and others.
- **Be mindful of your emotions.** If you do feel upset about a situation, try to allow yourself to experience that emotion in a balanced way, without suppressing it or getting completely swept up in the feeling. When practicing mindfulness, try not to judge yourself for having negative emotions. If you can remember that emotions come and go and eventually pass, it will help you to not become overwhelmed by your feelings.

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 other people can help to challenge the critical messages that come from negative past experiences. Here are some ways to reach out to others:

- **Ask for support from friends.** Ask friends to tell you what they like about you or think you do well. Ask someone who cares about you to just listen to you vent for a little while without trying to fix things. Ask for a hug. Ask someone who loves you to remind you that they do.
- **Get help from teachers & other helpers.** Go to professors, advisors, or tutors to ask for help in classes if you need it. Remember: they are there to help you learn! If you lack self-confidence in certain areas, take classes or try out new activities to increase your sense of competence. For example, take a math class, join a dance club, take swimming lessons, etc.
- **Talk to a therapist or counselor.** Sometimes low self-esteem can feel so painful or difficult to overcome that the professional help of a therapist or counselor is needed. Talking to a counselor is a good way to explore these feelings and begin to improve your self-esteem.