

SELF-ESTEEM AND HUMAN RELATIONSHIPS

10. TECHNIQUES TO ELEVATE SELF-ESTEEM

10.1. Improving Self-Esteem

A healthy sense of self can make a profound difference in how we feel and function. Self-esteem is our basic sense of worth or value. It is the degree to which we find we respect and like ourselves. Good self-esteem means self-respect, a sense of self-worth, a feeling of basic goodness about oneself. Low self-esteem can mean constant self-doubt and self-criticism, social anxiety and isolation, suppressed anger, loneliness, and even shame. Our self-esteem develops during childhood, and certain experiences may interfere with its development, for example: being subject to criticism or abuse from parents and caretakers; having early conflicts with peers; being stigmatized for unusual appearance or behaviors, or for one's race, class, or social identity; missing out on experiences that would foster a sense of confidence and purpose, or not receiving positive reinforcement for our accomplishments; a learning disability or physical impairment. Low self-esteem is a problem that affects many people, particularly adolescents and young adults, and it can have a seriously deleterious effect on one's day-to-day life. An individual with low self-esteem is prone to criticize himself heavily, fear mistakes, feel guilty for no reason, and be overly defensive without cause. While it is very difficult to overcome these problems, there are a variety of ways that one can learn to feel better about oneself through self-help techniques. Self-help for low self-esteem primarily involves developing a greater awareness of behaviors that contribute to low self-esteem in order to avoid them and to try to change them. Furthermore, self-help for low self-esteem can, in some cases, simply involve focusing on living a healthy and active lifestyle.

The first step in effective self-help for low self-esteem is realizing that one has a self-esteem problem. Excessive self-criticism, a generally poor opinion of oneself, an excessive need to please others, and an extreme fear of failure all indicate that one has problems with self-esteem. Upon realizing that one has a problem with low self-esteem, he should attempt to develop a greater awareness of moments when this low self-esteem manifests itself. When he notices such a moment, he should try to determine if the extent to which he feels bad about himself really makes

sense. Simple awareness of the thoughts that lead to feelings of low self-esteem is a major step in self-help for low self-esteem. Upon identifying the particular thoughts related to low self-esteem, one can use positive affirmations to counter them. If, upon looking in the mirror, one is struck by some particular quality that he does not like, he should pause and reflect on that thought. He should then comment on something about himself that he does like. While doing this does not have any power of its own, over time such affirmations can lead to the development of a more positive mindset that may greatly decrease the problem of low self-esteem. In some cases, simply living a healthier lifestyle is a good way to combat self-esteem problems. This form of self-help for low self-esteem involves eating right, exercising, and getting sufficient sleep. Doing so can help one to be more balanced and relaxed at all times and may also result in the development of a better body-image. Furthermore, this method of self-help for low self-esteem keeps one busy, and staying busy often prevents one from dwelling on problems. It is important to remember that, in some cases, low self-esteem results from bigger problems, such as depression. Self-help for low self-esteem is often not helpful in treating such conditions, which are often based in an imbalance of chemicals in the brain. If low self-esteem persists despite concentrated efforts to relieve it, one may want to seek professional help.

10.2. Therapy

Even a well-developed self-esteem can be challenged by sudden life changes or perceived failures, such as losing a job, ending a marriage, having legal or financial troubles, struggling with addiction or mental illness, having children with emotional troubles, medical ailments, and a host of other events that might cause us to question our worth or value. Therapy can help put such events in perspective and support our strengths to increase resilience, social support, and hope. When someone has low self-esteem, it could be as a result of many things, abuse, neglect or co-dependency. But overachievers can also feel a sense of low self-worth. Those who constantly compare themselves to others, or are highly competitive and set unrealistic, perfectionistic goals, may always feel less than adequate. Additionally, some people who have suffered a significant loss, from divorce, job loss, or even loss of health or youth, may have self-esteem issues. Low self-esteem comes from having a sense of no control over a situation. Therapists work with people to identify the cause of the emotional turmoil and set goals that will enable them to feel empowered and help them regain control. If the source of the problem is job related, then a therapist may focus on setting career related goals. If the lack of self-esteem comes from a divorce, a therapist may recommend that the client begin

setting goals to discover who they are as an individual, apart from their spouse. Goal-directed therapy is one of the most common forms of therapy for people struggling with self-esteem issues. This type of therapy can be delivered individually, through a cognitive behavioral approach, in group settings, through brief strategic therapy or even using animals. People who have suffered loss of health, disfigurement or debilitation may benefit from animal assisted therapy. This form of treatment is very helpful for people who are struggling with self-esteem as a result of physical impairment. Animals that provide unconditional love, with no regard to physical appearance or limitation, can help strengthen a client's sense of self.

10.3. Therapeutics

Low self-esteem, lack of confidence, poor self-image, these are some of the many ways to describe feelings of worthlessness. Researchers have come to a working conclusion that low self-esteem is at the core of many surface illnesses: depression, codependency, lethargy, failure to thrive, low achievement, substance abuse, isolation, relationship issues, control issues, rage, arrogance, intolerance, parenting problems, frequent illness, stress and stress related illnesses and many others. People with chronic low self-esteem know that this illness is a demon that sits on their shoulder and constantly nags at them about our short-comings, failures, mistakes both real and imagined. It second guesses, ridicules and enslaves. They are distracted by the constant negative bombardment. They hear everything through this dirty filter. They misunderstand because low self-esteem twists comments, words, and conversation, actions and meanings. Every moment is an exhausting struggle because of this unbearable load. Ironically it can take many years to recognize low self-esteem. We tend to develop unhealthy relationships in which we are shamed because we believe that is what we deserve. Low self-esteem can be an illness because it is debilitating and destructive. It is an illness also in that it has hope for remedies, treatments and cure. It can't be proven that low self-esteem is genetic, but it only makes sense that infants born into homes where generations of people with low self-esteem interact, it will become part of the child's frame of reference. Low self is measurably developed in utero; a growing fetus can sense if he/she is loved and wanted. And even if he/she is loved, a mother who suffers from low self-esteem emits chemical signals to the baby, preparing the baby for an unfriendly world. It is essential that we find remedies for healing low self-esteem. There are many useful strategies for coping: diet, life management, yoga, massage, acupuncture, acupressure, drug therapy, stress

management, counseling, relationship therapy, group work, hypnosis and more. Here are additional techniques to put into practice immediately:

- 1. Remember that healing is a process of one day at a time.** You can do all the aforementioned strategies but there is daily 'homework' and 'practice' that can only be done by you. These techniques if practiced faithfully will work little by little. Self-esteem wasn't trashed overnight and true recovery takes a long time. But you will be energized as you begin to feel better.
- 2. Pause and listen to the negative messages you send yourself.** Learn to catch yourself and delete these messages. Generate some new positive images, memories and messages. Stop the old tapes and replay your new messages.
- 3. Learn to talk back.** This works for yourself and with others. If you are hearing negative messages about yourself, answer back. Speak up for yourself to others and to yourself. Be your own best friend. Learn to enjoy your own friendship. When you catch yourself saying something not nice about yourself, talk back to that idea as if it was a person. No you are not fat and ugly. You are strong and attractive. You are not stupid. You are logical. You think things through.
- 4. Remove yourself from 'dangerous' situations and people.** Detach from cruel, selfish, hurtful people. No one can make you feel badly without your permission. If your group goes out after work and gets carried away verbally, find a new group. Get away from painful people. This may only need to be temporary, but it will help to salvage your self-esteem.
- 5. Don't put a red flasher on your car for everyone else's crises.** Many of us have learned to give without counting the cost. That's a misnomer. It is important to count the cost to yourself and your needs. There are people who thrive on chaos and crisis. Even in the occasional crisis, if it's not yours, think before you leap in to lend a hand. You aren't obligated to bail everyone else out, especially if it is of their own making. You don't have to be the designated emotional ambulance driver. Remember 'poor planning on their part does not constitute a crisis on your part'.
- 6. Stop volunteering to be a victim.** Many of us who have chronic low self-esteem, cannot bear for anyone around us to be angry. We are afraid we've failed. Obviously we've really screwed up. Not necessarily. In fact probably not. Low self-esteemers go out of their way to be ultra nice, patient, forgiving, etc. Let them be angry, if you know you have done nothing hurtful. You don't have to join everyone in their misery. Even and especially loved ones. Don't buy into anger that's vengeful or chronic. Make a point of

avoiding the angry outburst looking for a sacrificial lamb. Leave the room. Don't bite.

7. **And let people own their feelings.** I hear all the time, 'he doesn't like this' and 'it makes her angry when...' Let people feel their feelings, but don't stress out over what is essentially their problem. You can say, 'I'm sorry that happened' or something like that but don't apologize for yourself if you have done nothing wrong. If they need to talk and you are willing to listen, make sure it stays objective and does not become personal attacks on you. Also, set a limit. Some people can't get out of a dump session and it spirals way out of control. If they can't move on, you can. And pat yourself on the back for being a good friend.
8. **Discover what you need and get it for yourself.** Stop taking such good care of others that you don't care for yourself. Nourish and comfort your mind, soul, body and spirit. Some work right up until bedtime almost every day. They would fall asleep still doing something for someone else. But it is important to set a stop time. When that time comes, what didn't get done waits. Take time to sit and read or do whatever is needed to unwind. Take your time and be firm about it. If you've not done that before, others may be surprised or a little offended. Don't worry. Just do it. They'll get used to it if you do and if not, it's their problem.
9. **Vent your frustrations.** Call a caring friend. Go to your room for awhile. Go for a drive or walk and talk or scream it out away from others. Don't just smile and say I'm fine. If someone asks, you can say, no I'm not doing too well just now.' Be honest most of all with yourself. Don't cover it. Process it. Listen to yourself.
10. **Encourage yourself.** Progress seems slow sometimes. Give yourself a pat on the back for your hard work.

Lastly don't give up or give in. Keep trying. When you fall or fail, forgive yourself and start over.

10.4. Group Dynamics

Using group activities to build individual self-esteem is not only beneficial for the individual participants in the group, but also a great way to improve group dynamics and make it a more positive, supportive environment for all involved. Though some activities are more appropriate for kids or adults, it is possible to find group activities for self-esteem for people of any age. This can be something as

simple as standing in a circle and having people state something about themselves that they are proud of, or having each person pay a sincere compliment to someone else in the group. For younger groups, making a game of it might be a more effective way to do this. The key to using group activities for self-esteem is to make it fun and to avoid, as much as possible, making it feel forced. People should genuinely want to make other people feel good about themselves. It is also important not to make people feel uncomfortable in these group activities. Sometimes, allowing people to participate in the group while still keeping their thoughts private can be very effective. For instance, having people write down things they like about themselves, or draw a positive self-portrait, can help to boost self-esteem; allowing people to keep these things to themselves can increase comfort.

In general, however, the point of group activities for self-esteem is to encourage active participation from everyone, and to break down some of the defenses people have, so they not only feel better about themselves, but also better about participating in the group. One popular, yet relatively simple game is to have each individual in the group write his or her name on a piece of paper. That paper is then passed around the group, and all the other group members will then anonymously write something positive about the person on the piece of paper before it is given back. This is easier for some people than saying things aloud. Working together to accomplish something also is effective as a group activity for self-esteem; it provides a sense of accomplishment, and really forces people to depend on each other. Ropes courses are especially popular ways of accomplishing this, and are common group activities for kids. In order to successfully complete the obstacle course, it is necessary to work as a team, otherwise the whole group will fail. After the completion of the course, the group can go around and compliment each other on ways they felt the other people excelled.