

Counselling Services

WHAT IS SELF-ESTEEM?

Self-esteem describes the values, beliefs and attitudes we have towards ourselves. It reflects the overall opinion we have about ourselves. Our opinion may be positive, (eg. "I am a worthwhile person) or it may be negative, (eg, "I am a bad person"). Healthy self-esteem is about accepting ourselves for who we are, warts and all. Part of being human means that we are not perfect and that at times we will all make mistakes, or do things of which we are not proud. Building healthy self-esteem means letting go of your mistakes and accepting your bad points or weaknesses as part of being human. It is about being comfortable in accepting yourself just as you are. However, for some people their self-esteem is often fragile and easily affected by day-to-day events such as a poor mark on an assignment or a poor performance on the sports field. These people fall into the trap of mixing up who they are with what they do, instead of valuing themselves for their own unique contribution to the world. Would you agree that a person who is a bad driver is a bad person? Or that a person who is a great cook is a great person? Most of us would disagree with such extreme generalizations.

What is Low Self-Esteem?

You will probably know when your self-esteem is low. That little voice inside your head will probably be saying things like, "I'm no good", "I'm worthless", "I'm useless" or "I'm unlovable".

Low self-esteem impacts on every area of your life including your university work, your personal relationships, your emotional state and it sets you up to behave in self-defeating ways. Where does it come from and what can you do about it? At the heart of low self-esteem lie the negative beliefs you have about yourself. You accept these beliefs as statements of fact instead of treating them as unhelpful opinions based on the experiences you have had in your life. To put it simply, if your experiences have generally been positive, your beliefs about yourself are likely to be equally positive. If your experiences have been generally negative, then your beliefs about yourself are likely to be equally negative. While you can't do anything to change the past, what you can do is become more aware of your self-critical thoughts that help to keep low self-esteem going. For example, if you are particularly nervous about an upcoming oral presentation and begin to remember all the times you have been incompetent, embarrassed or made a mistake, you will most likely come to believe that you are useless at class presentations and a hopeless failure. Having a poor opinion of your ability to do oral presentations doesn't mean you are a failure and worthless; it just means that you are hooked into unhelpful thought patterns or 'thinking traps' that lead you to think about yourself rather negatively.

Here are five of the most common thinking traps that people with low self esteem fall into. When you catch yourself using a thinking trap, look at all the evidence and try to find an alternative view of the situation that leads you to a gentler opinion of yourself.

Jumping to negative conclusions - people with low self-esteem usually jump to whatever conclusion reflects badly on them without first considering all the evidence. For example, a friend is not very talkative and you jump to the conclusion that you must be a boring person when in fact you really have no idea what might be behind their behaviour.

Setting unachievable standards - typically people with low self-esteem are very hard on themselves, setting higher and more rigid standards for themselves than they would expect others to meet. If this is you, be aware that setting double standards like this only gives more ammunition to the self-critic inside you. Instead, ask yourself if a friend came to you with a similar problem, would you be as hard on him/her as you are on yourself?

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WHAT IS SELF-ESTEEM? (cont.)

Black and white thinking - Do you see things in black and white terms? For example, "I failed that unit; my whole course is ruined; nothing ever works out for me" or "I'm always useless at everything I try". This type of thinking oversimplifies things. Things are rarely all good or all bad but usually somewhere in the middle.

Losing perspective - if you have low self-esteem then you are likely to judge yourself on only one aspect of yourself. Difficulties may often lead you to such global judgements as "I'm useless" or "I'm worthless". For example, one person in your tute group doesn't like you so there is something wrong with you. Do you ever use the opposite side of the coin? For example, if you did one thing really well would that make you a totally fabulous person? Take a step back and look at the big picture and remember that low self-esteem leads you to look at the world with a negative filter, only spotting things that confirm your negative opinion of yourself.

Discounting or disqualifying the positive - you reject successful experiences by insisting they don't count for some reason or another. In this way, you can maintain a negative belief that is contradicted by your everyday experiences. For example, you manage to take the bus all the way to work, but discount it by saying, "It wasn't really full today, so it doesn't really count."

Self-Esteem Building Habits

- Here are six self-esteem-building habits you can use on a daily basis:
- Reward yourself
- Stop comparing yourself to others
- Laugh more
- Take care of yourself
- Do something for someone else
- Keep a diary of all the good things you notice about yourself

Low self-esteem can often be part of a larger problem. If you wish to visit a counsellor to discuss issues around self-esteem or any other problems you may be experiencing, please contact QUT Counselling Services and make an appointment with a counsellor.

Self-Help recommended reading:

- *Fennell, M. (19), Overcoming Low Self Esteem*
- *Page, A. & Page, C. (19), Improve your Self-Esteem*

QUT Counselling Services offers professional assistance with this and other issues

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