

self-esteem

Students, just like many people in society, struggle with self-esteem issues on a daily basis, since our self-esteem can affect almost everything we do. Self-esteem is the opinion we develop about ourselves in terms of our ability to meet the many challenges of life, and achieve happiness and success. Self-esteem relates to so many areas of our life that we can have high self-esteem in one aspect, and low self-esteem in another. High self-esteem also makes us somewhat “immune” to psychological distress and therefore, we can’t have too much of it. Some people believe that if our self-esteem is too high we will become arrogant, but this is not the case. With true self-esteem comes humility. The following describes common characteristics of people with high and low self-esteem.

People with high self-esteem tend to:

- Love themselves, and feel worthy of love by others.
- Act in an independent fashion.
- Achieve greater success in life.
- Assume responsibility for their lives, and their choices.
- Take more risks in life.
- Be more creative artistically, and as problem solvers.
- Feel proud of their accomplishments.
- Accept who they are, flaws and all.
- Not be self-centered or egotistical.
- Deal with problems using healthy coping strategies.
- Tolerate greater levels of frustration.
- Be excited by the future, and meet it with a sense of optimism.

On the other hand, people with low self-esteem tend to:

- Feel unworthy of love and respect.
- Avoid attempting new activities for fear of failure.
- Constantly fear rejection.
- Put down their own abilities and skills.
- Achieve less success in life (or become over-achievers).
- Be passive in their interactions with others.
- Blame others for their problems and mistakes.
- Constantly seek out the approval of others.
- Have poorly defined self-identities, and instead change to fit in to the situation.
- Be anxious and insecure around others.
- Use addictive behaviors (i.e., drugs, alcohol, food, sex, gambling, smoking, shopping, work, etc.) to cope with their painful feelings.
- Be filled with many kinds of fears, particularly about the future.

Given all the potential benefits of having higher self-esteem, the question then becomes can we do anything to raise it and, if so, how? The answer to the first question is that self-esteem is indeed affected by the daily choices we make, and by the actions we take. The following strategies can help you raise your self-esteem.

coping strategies

1 develop consistent self-care activities

Just as how others treated us in the past impacted significantly on our self-esteem, how we treat ourselves everyday influences how we value ourselves. Self-care includes such things as: eating a healthy diet, getting optimal amounts of sleep, doing regular exercise, practicing good hygiene, taking time to do things you enjoy, wearing clothes that you really like, treating yourself well each day, and making your living space somewhere you really enjoy to be. Feeling out of shape, exhausted, unattractive, and unhappy leaves us very vulnerable to feelings of insecurity.

2 keep a record of all of your accomplishments

Accumulate all of your accomplishments and put them in a scrapbook, file, drawer, chest or room. This may include: trophies, awards, certificates, transcripts, diplomas, degrees, cards of appreciation, or other documents which in some way recognize you. Remember also, you don't need to focus on just your monumental accomplishments, but you can keep a list of more minor victories. Then spend some time at least once a week looking at these accomplishments and congratulating yourself for this success.

3 develop a list of your strengths or positive qualities

Write out a list of all the strengths you possess and then add to it as you recognize new ones. Then post this list on your refrigerator, bathroom mirror, or other visible location to remind yourself of these strengths and qualities.

4 ask for feedback from people who know and appreciate you

One of the best ways to improve your self image is to get honest and accurate feedback from people who know and value you. As well, once you ask for the feedback, fight the urge to discount it, since this is a common response for anyone who isn't used to positive feedback. Most people would be willing to take this time with you. Also don't forget to write down the feedback, so you can refer back to it at times you are struggling.

5 indulge yourself in activities you enjoy

By indulging yourself, you are communicating to yourself that you deserve to be treated well. This could include anything you love doing like: reading, going to a movie, seeing a friend, having a nap, playing with a pet, going for a walk, riding a bike or getting a massage. The list is endless, depending on what you enjoy.

6 quit comparing yourself to others

Comparing yourself to others might help your self-esteem, if you in fact compare yourself to people who are less skilled or talented than you are. However, most people who struggle with self-esteem issues do the opposite and compare themselves to others who excel in the areas they value, and therefore end up feeling defeated. Instead, compare yourself to yourself and look for the progress you have made in your pursuit of competence and success.

7 fill your life with healthy, positive and supportive people

Leave or distance yourself from any relationship that does not support your healthy sense of self, particularly with people who are highly negative and unsupportive. It is difficult to support your own sense of self when others are tearing it down.

8 set yourself up for success

Seek out situations and opportunities where you have a high probability of success. However, make sure that some of these situations test your abilities to give yourself a true sense of accomplishment. When you are successful, celebrate your success rather than simply moving on to another challenge.

9 don't dwell on your weaknesses

Accept the fact that every human being has weaknesses and that they are inevitable. Just look around you and you will easily discover this. It's not just you. No matter how much you try to eliminate your weaknesses, they will exist, so instead accept them. At least accept most of them and if you really feel motivated to do so, isolate a few and work on them if they are indeed changeable.

10 let go of perfectionism

Feeling like you need to be perfect robs you of the opportunity to appreciate your daily accomplishments and achievements if they are not up to your unrealistic expectations. If the only time you feel good about yourself is when you have a perfect performance, this will be rare. You have the ability to lower your expectations for yourself and by doing so, your self-esteem can soar. View mistakes as simply opportunities to learn, not a reason to beat yourself up.

11 replace negative self-talk with positive self-statements

What we tell ourselves day after day is what we come to believe. This being the case, we need to create a new, more positive script for ourselves. Stop listening to your inner critical voice and if you like, even give your critical voice a name so that you can begin to see it as something separate from yourself. Foster a new voice which is more positive, self-accepting and supportive.

12 Develop and use daily affirmations

Daily affirmations are self-statements that you have usually written down and can repeat to yourself on a daily basis. Some typical self-esteem building affirmations include:

- Despite my weaknesses, I accept myself.
- I accept my thoughts, feelings, beliefs and values, even if they are different than other people's.
- I do not have to be perfect to love and appreciate myself, or be loved and appreciated by others.
- I am successful in many aspects of my life and need to remind myself to focus on these.
- I am a unique individual and will be appreciated by others for this.
- Mistakes are simply a unique opportunity to learn; I can't be afraid of them.
- I have the power to forgive myself for past mistakes.
- I am worthy of other's respect.
- I am responsible for my own choices and have an obligation to myself to fulfill my needs (when my needs are fulfilled, I will best be able to help others).
- I have a right to stand up for my rights, beliefs, values, opinions and feelings and need to do so in a very assertive manner.
- I am the only person who can choose my purposes and goals in life; no one else can decide my future.

- I need to strive for moral consistency, practice what I preach, keep my promises and honor my commitments.
- I am able to achieve the basic challenges of life.
- If these affirmations do not fit you, sit down and write out what you think you need to hear from yourself to build your sense of self.

13 be aware of your own needs and meet them

To the degree that we are aware of our needs and meet them, we are communicating to ourselves that we are valuable. By disregarding our needs, we are saying to ourselves that we don't matter and other people will see this as well, and potentially take advantage of us. When our needs are being met, we are healthy, both on a physical and emotional level.

14 be assertive with the people in your life

Assertiveness builds self-esteem because it communicates back to yourself that your needs, values and beliefs are important. This means expressing your feelings in a way that is open and honest, but still respects the other person. Each time you are assertive, your self-esteem grows a little bit.

15 live your life with purpose and goals

Setting and achieving goals builds self-esteem. Living a life that is aimless and purposeless gives no sense of achievement, which does not build your sense of self. As well, do not let others, such as your parents, establish your goals and purpose in life. They will rarely fit for you and will ultimately lead to unhappiness and failure. You need to set a goal, develop a plan of action, implement the plan, and evaluate your success.

16 take responsibility for your life and your choices

Too often in today's world, people, particularly students, have not learned to take responsibility for their lives and their choices, and end up relying on their parents to continue to be responsible for many aspects of their existence. These could be related to financial issues, vocational direction, life happiness and life choices, to mention a few. Self-responsibility for these matters can be difficult at first, but when achieved, builds our sense of self.

17 determine what you can change and what you can not

If your discontentment with yourself relates to aspects of yourself that you can change, then develop a plan for improvement and execute it. If instead it is related to something you cannot change (i.e., such as your age, height, intelligence, family background, etc.), then you need to develop a sense of acceptance. Put your energy where it will be most likely to pay off.

18 make a decision to help others

Helping others, whether it is through your job, by volunteering, or through donating, fills us with a sense of pride and accomplishment. This accomplishment in turn, feeds our positive sense of self.

19 live your life consciously

To cope with feelings or events, many people live their lives in denial on many levels. Unfortunately, we cannot effectively deal with what we are not conscious of, and then we give ourselves a reason to beat ourselves up when issues are not resolved. By being conscious of everything that is happening, in both our inner world and the outer world, we can more effectively deal with things, which in turn builds self-esteem.

20 strive for moral consistency

What this means is that we need to make choices that are consistent with our values and moral code. Each time we make a choice which is inconsistent with our values, our self-esteem takes a beating. This includes honoring our commitments, keeping our promises and practicing what we preach.

21 meet age related developmental tasks

To feel good about yourself as a young adult, you need to take on and meet many developmental tasks, including:

- Developing your individual identity and autonomy.
- Becoming independent from your family.
- Learning to manage basic life tasks (i.e., financial, household, school, work, etc.).
- Developing healthy intimate relationships.
- Establishing a variety of social networks.
- Shifting your relationship with your parents from child/adult to adult/adult.

22 reward your achievements

Too often we focus on our failures and ignore our achievements. Instead, find a way to celebrate or reward what you have accomplished by: giving yourself a break, treating yourself with your favorite food, going on a holiday, doing one of your favorite activities, allowing yourself time to relax, spending time with a friend or verbally complimenting yourself, to mention a few ideas.

* Created by U of A Counselling and Clinical Services. For additional resources, visit: uofa.ualberta.ca/current-students/wellness/mentalhealth

