



TIP SHEET: SELF-ESTEEM

Self-esteem is not having an unrealistic positive view of yourself. It is not pretending to like things about yourself that you don't. Instead, self-esteem is:

(1) having a healthy and realistic understanding of one's personal strengths and weaknesses, and
(2) being capable of coping with the challenges of life without letting those difficulties rule your mood.

It is important to remember that your self-esteem is not likely to be in a constant state of positive elevation—it wouldn't be grounded in reality if it were. Alternatively, being too hard on yourself on a regular basis can be quite harmful as well. As we go through struggles and successes in life, our self-esteem will likely fluctuate. Like most things in life, a healthy balance in self-esteem is the key.

Low self-esteem can be a struggle to improve, but there are strategies that help. With improved self-esteem, you will probably find that many areas of your life seem to become easier to manage.

For Parents

- Provide positive feedback for your child reaching his goals and for his efforts (even if goals aren't reached).
- Create a safe, warm, loving home environment with lots of spontaneous affection.
- Make sure your child participates in cooperative activities, not just competitive ones.
- Model high self-esteem: Make sure you talk about yourself in a kind way.
- Give constructive feedback, directed at a specific behavior and not at the whole child ("Let's try kicking the ball in the middle like this" instead of "You are so clumsy").
- Be accepting of mistakes and failure. Make sure your child knows that not succeeding is a normal part of life and can be learned from.
- Provide your child with age-appropriate opportunities to problem-solve, to try to do things on her own, to make decisions and choices.

7 Self-Esteem Tools

- **Catch negative thoughts.** It's true that we tend to be our own worst critics. We say things to ourselves that we generally wouldn't say to other people. Problem is, we don't often recognize that we do this. Start paying attention to the harsh things you say to yourself, and think about ways to handle it differently. Say the same type of things you would say to a friend who was feeling as you feel. Examine your thoughts with our Realistic Thinking Tip Sheet: Are they accurate? Or, try thinking mindfully (see our Mindfulness Tip Sheet).
- **Think about yourself accurately.** There is no benefit to pretending that you love things about yourself that you don't. On the other hand, there is also no benefit to letting the things you don't like about yourself outweigh all of the things you do like. Keep in mind that negative information tends to weigh more heavily in our evaluations of ourselves than positive information. To balance things, create a list of specific things you like about yourself in the areas of your physical appearance, your relationships, your personality, your cognitive abilities, and so on. Review the list daily.
- **Make yourself a priority.** Many people with low self-esteem put other people's needs ahead of their own. Treat yourself well, not only in how you talk to yourself (as discussed above) but also by taking good care of yourself. Learning to say no and set clear boundaries can also improve self-esteem. See our Assertiveness Tip Sheet for more details.
- **Examine how you respond to criticism.** Many people with low self-esteem perceive others to be more critical of them than they really are. Or, they may completely discount constructive feedback. Try to think about feedback in an accurate way, using it to guide self-improvement when valid and disregarding it when it is less valid. It is also helpful to work on viewing others in a nonjudgmental way.
- **Remind yourself that it's ok to make mistakes.** Low self-esteem can lead us to beat ourselves up more than we should when we make a mistake. Remember that everyone makes mistakes; it's what you learn from them that matters.
- **Think about how your memories influence low self-esteem.** Many people with low self-esteem look back on their lives and are only able to remember all the things they did wrong. Make a list of the things you did right, of the positive feedback you received (even if it feels "phony") during your life thus far.
- **See a mental health professional.** Low self-esteem can be somewhat hard to change on your own, and it can even be a symptom of an additional problem, such as depression.

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