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Having healthy self-esteem can influence your motivation, your mental well-being, and your overall quality of life. However, having self-esteem that is either too high or too low can be problematic. Better understanding what your unique level of self-esteem is can help you strike a balance that is just right for you. This article discusses how self-esteem is defined, why it is important, and the factors that affect self-esteem. It also covers what you can do to help improve your self-esteem. Self-esteem describes a person's overall subjective sense of personal worth or value. In other words, self-esteem may be defined as how much you appreciate and like yourself regardless of the circumstances. Key elements of self-esteem include: Self-confidence Feelings of security Identity Sense of belonging Feeling of competence Other terms often used interchangeably with self-esteem include self-worth, self-regard, and self-respect. Self-esteem tends to be lowest in childhood and increases during adolescence, as well as adulthood, eventually reaching a fairly stable and enduring level. This makes self-esteem similar to the stability of personality traits over time. Self-esteem impacts your decision-making process, your relationships, your emotional health, and your overall well-being. It also influences motivation, as people with a healthy, positive view of themselves understand their potential and may feel inspired to take on new challenges. Four key characteristics of healthy self-esteem are: A firm understanding of one's skills The ability to maintain healthy relationships with others as a result of having a healthy relationship with oneself Realistic and appropriate personal expectations An understanding of one's needs and the ability to express those needs People with low self-esteem tend to feel less sure of their abilities and may doubt their decision-making process. They may not feel motivated to try novel things because they don't believe they can reach their goals. Those with low self-esteem may have issues with relationships and expressing their needs. They may also experience low levels of confidence and feel unlovable and unworthy. People with overly high self-esteem may overestimate their skills and may feel entitled to succeed, even without the abilities to back up their belief in themselves. They may struggle with relationship issues and block themselves from self-improvement because they are so fixated on seeing themselves as perfect. This video has been medically reviewed by Rachel Goldman, PhD, FTOS. Many theorists have written about the dynamics involved in the development of self-esteem. The concept of self-esteem plays an important role in psychologist Abraham Maslow's hierarchy of needs, which depicts esteem as one of the basic human motivations. Maslow suggested that individuals need both appreciation from other people and inner self-respect to build esteem. Both of these needs must be fulfilled in order for an individual to grow as a person and reach self-actualization. It is important to note that self-esteem is a concept distinct from self-efficacy, which involves how well you believe you'll handle future actions, performance, or abilities. There are many factors that can influence self-esteem. Your self-esteem may be impacted by: Age Disability Genetics Illness Physical abilities Socioeconomic status Thought patterns Racism and discrimination have also been shown to have negative effects on self-esteem. Additionally, genetic factors that help shape a person's personality can play a role, but life experiences are thought to be the most important factor. It is often our experiences that form the basis for overall self-esteem. For example, low self-esteem might be caused by overly critical or negative assessments from family and friends. Those who experience what Carl Rogers referred to as unconditional positive regard will be more likely to have healthy self-esteem. There are some simple ways to tell if you have healthy self-esteem. You probably have healthy self-esteem if you: Avoid dwelling on past negative experiences Believe you are equal to everyone else, no better and no worse Express your needs Feel confident Have a positive outlook on life Say no when you want to See your overall strengths and weaknesses and accept them Having healthy self-esteem can help motivate you to reach your goals, because you are able to navigate life knowing that you are capable of accomplishing what you set your mind to. Additionally, when you have healthy self-esteem, you are able to set appropriate boundaries in relationships and maintain a healthy relationship with yourself and others. Low self-esteem may manifest in a variety of ways. If you have low self-esteem: You may believe that others are better than you. You may find expressing your needs difficult. You may focus on your weaknesses. You may frequently experience fear, self-doubt, and worry. You may have a negative outlook on life and feel a lack of control. You may have an intense fear of failure. You may have trouble accepting positive feedback. You may have trouble saying no and setting boundaries. You may put other people's needs before your own. You may struggle with confidence. Low self-esteem has the potential to lead to a variety of mental health disorders, including anxiety disorders and depressive disorders. You may also find it difficult to pursue your goals and maintain healthy relationships. Having low self-esteem can seriously impact your quality of life and increases your risk for experiencing suicidal thoughts. Overly high self-esteem is often mislabeled as narcissism, however there are some distinct traits that differentiate these terms. Individuals with narcissistic traits may appear to have high self-esteem, but their self-esteem may be high or low and is unstable, constantly shifting depending on the given situation. Those with excessive self-esteem: May be preoccupied with being perfect May focus on always being right May believe they cannot fail May believe they are more skilled or better than others May express grandiose ideas May grossly overestimate their skills and abilities When self-esteem is too high, it can result in relationship problems, difficulty with social situations, and an inability to accept criticism. Fortunately, there are steps that you can take to address problems with your perceptions of yourself and faith in your abilities. How do you build self-esteem? Some actions that you can take to help improve your self-esteem include: Low self-esteem can contribute to or be a symptom of mental health disorders, including anxiety and depression. Consider speaking with a doctor or therapist about available treatment options, which may include psychotherapy (in-person or online), medications, or a combination of both. Hosted by Editor-in-Chief and therapist Amy Morin, LCSW, this episode of The Verywell Mind Podcast shares strategies that can help you learn to truly believe in yourself, featuring IT Cosmetics founder Jamie Kern Lima. Follow Now: Apple Podcasts / Spotify / Google Podcasts Though some of the causes of low self-esteem can't be changed, such as genetic factors, early childhood experiences, and personality traits, there are steps you can take to feel more secure and valued. Remember that no one person is less worthy than the next. Keeping this in mind may help you maintain a healthy sense of self-esteem. People are often confused about what it means to have self-esteem. Some think it has to do with the way you look or how popular you are with your friends or others. Others believe that having a great body will help you gain self-esteem, while others think you actually need to have accomplished something in order to have good self-esteem. Boiled down to its simplicity, self-esteem simply means appreciating yourself for who you are — faults, foibles and all. It seems like other cultures don't grapple with self-esteem as much as Americans do, perhaps because of the emphasis we seem to put on materialistic indicators of self-worth (like what kind of car you drive, what school your kids attend, what your grades are, how big a house you have, or what your title is at work). The difference between someone with a healthy or good self-esteem and someone who doesn't isn't ability, per se. It's simply acknowledgement of your strengths and weaknesses, and moving through the world safe in that knowledge. Which brings me to the question I'm often asked — how can I increase my self-esteem? Here's how. People with a good and healthy self-esteem are able to feel good about themselves for who they are, appreciate their own worth, and take pride in their abilities and accomplishments. They also acknowledge that while they're not perfect and have faults, those faults don't play an overwhelming or irrationally large role in their lives or their own self-image (how you see yourself). 1. Take a Self-Esteem Inventory. You can't fix what you don't know. This is one of the core components of cognitive-behavioral therapy (CBT). Before you get to work on putting CBT to work, you have to spend a fair amount of time identifying irrational thoughts and what-not. The same is true for your self-esteem. To simply generalize and say, "I suck. I'm a bad person. I can't do anything." is to tell yourself a simple but often convincing lie. I'm here to tell you that it's not true. We all suck from time to time. The solution isn't to wallow in suck-age as the core of your identity, but to acknowledge it and move on. Get a piece of paper. Draw a line down the middle of it. On the right-hand side, write: "Strengths" and on the left-hand side, write: "Weaknesses." List 10 of each. Yes, 10. That may seem like a lot of the Strengths side if you suffer from poor self-esteem, but force yourself to find all 10. If you're having difficulty coming up with a whole 10, think about what others have said to you over the years. "Thanks for listening to me the other night when all I did was talk your ear off!" "You did a great job at work with that project, thanks for pitching in." "I've never seen someone who enjoyed housework as much as you do." "You seem to have a real knack for telling a story." Even if you think the Strength is stupid or too small to list, list it anyway. You may be surprised at how easy it is to come up with all 10 when you approach it from this perspective. This is your Self-Esteem Inventory. It lets you know all the things you already tell yourself about how much you suck, as well as showing you that there are just as many things you don't suck at. Some of the weaknesses you may also be able to change, if only you worked at them, one at a time, over the course of a month or even a year. Remember, nobody changes things overnight, so don't set an unrealistic expectation that you can change anything in just a week's time. 2. Set Realistic Expectations. Nothing can kill our self-esteem more than setting unrealistic expectations. I remember when I was in my 20s, I had thought, "I need to be a millionaire by the time I'm 30 or I'm going to be a failure." (Don't even get me started about how many things are wrong with that statement.) Needless to say, 30 came and I was nowhere close to being a millionaire. I was more in debt than ever, and owning a home was still a distant dream. My expectation was unrealistic, and my self-esteem took a blow when I turned 30 and saw how far away such a goal was. Sometimes our expectations are so much smaller, but still unrealistic. For instance, "I wish my mom (or dad) would stop criticizing me." Guess what? They never will! But that's no reason to let their criticism affect your own view of yourself, or your own self-worth. Check your expectations if they keep disappointing you. Your self-esteem will thank you. This may also help you to stop the cycle of negative thinking about yourself that reinforce our negative self-esteem. When we make set realistic expectations in our life, we can stop berating ourselves for not meeting some idealistic goal. 3. Set Aside Perfection and Grab a Hold of Accomplishments... and Mistakes. Perfection is simply unattainable for any of us. Let it go. You're never going to be perfect. You're never going to have the perfect body, the perfect life, the perfect relationship, the perfect children, or the perfect home. We revel in the idea of perfection, because we see so much of it in the media. But that is simply an artificial creation of society. It doesn't exist. Instead, grab a hold of your accomplishments as you achieve them. Acknowledge them to yourself for their actual value (don't de-value them by saying, "Oh, that? That's just so easy for me, no big deal."). It may even help to keep a little journal or list of things you accomplish. Some people might even do this on a day-by-day basis, while others might feel more comfortable just noting them once a week or even once a month. The key is to get to your smaller goals and move on from each one, like a connect-the-dots game of life. It's just as important to take something away from the mistakes you make in life. It doesn't mean you're a bad person, it simply means you made a mistake (like everyone does). Mistakes are an opportunity for learning and for growth, if only we push ourselves out of the self-pity or negative self-talk we wallow in after one, and try and see it from someone else's eyes. 4. Explore Yourself. "Know thyself" is an old saying passed down through the ages, to encourage us to engage in self-exploration. Usually the most well-adjusted and happiest people I meet are people who have gone through this exercise. It isn't just about knowing your strengths and weaknesses, but also opening yourself up to new opportunities, new thoughts, trying out something new, new viewpoints, and new friendships. Sometimes when we're down on ourselves and our self-esteem has taken a big hit, we feel like we have nothing to offer the world or others. It may be that we simply haven't found everything that we do have to offer — things we haven't even considered or thought of yet. Learning what these are is simply a matter of trial and error. It's how people become the people they've always wanted to become, by taking risks and trying things they wouldn't ordinarily do. 5. Be Willing to Adjust Your Own Self-Image. Self-esteem is useless if it's based upon an older version of you that no longer exists. I used to be good at many things I'm no longer good at. I excelled in math while in high school, but couldn't do a calculus problem today to save my life. I used to think I was pretty smart, until I learned just how little I knew. I could play trombone pretty well at one point, but no longer. But all of that's okay. I've adjusted my own beliefs about my self and my strengths as I go along. I've become a better writer, and learned more about business than I ever knew before. I don't sit around and say, "Geez, I really wish I could play trombone like I used to!" (And if I cared enough to really think that, I would go and take some lessons to get good at it again.) Instead, I evaluate myself based upon what's going on in my life right now, not some distant past version of me. Keep adjusting your self-image and self-esteem to match your current abilities and skills, not those of your past. 6. Stop Comparing Yourself to Others. Nothing can hurt our self-esteem more than unfair comparisons. Joe has 3,000 Facebook friends while I only have 300. Mary can outrun me on the field when we play ball. Elizabeth has a bigger house and a nice car than I do. You can see how this might impact our feelings about ourselves, the more we do this sort of thing I know it's tough, but you need to stop comparing yourself to others. The only person you should be competing against is yourself. These comparisons are unfair because you don't know as much as you think you do about these other people's lives, or what it's really like to be them. You think it's better, but it may be 100 times worse than you can imagine. (For instance, Joe paid for that many friends; Mary's parents have had her in sports training since she was 3; and Elizabeth is in a loveless marriage that only appears to be ideal.) I know I made this all sound easy. It's not. Changing your self-esteem takes time, trial-and-error, and patience on your part. Make an effort to be more fair and more realistic with your own self, however, and I think you may be pleasantly surprised by the results. Good luck!



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