

## What is All This Talk About Self-Esteem?

**By Peggy L. Ferguson, Ph.D.**

Every magazine you open, every website you visit, and even the news has something to say about self-esteem. What's the big deal? Self-esteem is more than just feeling good about yourself. It comes from how you think and feel about yourself. The concept encompasses cognitive, emotional, and behavioral components, which circularly reinforce each other. It affects your personal development, the risks you take, your decisions, how you communicate, and ultimately the quality of your life.

Self-esteem is an ongoing process of self-evaluation. It involves actively assessing your attributes, how they measure up to your values and goals, and how those around you appear. When self-reflection and comparison to others make you feel lacking, you may value yourself as "less than." Comparing yourself to how others appear can lead to shame, guilt, sadness, loneliness, fear, and anger. This process can also involve feedback from others based on how they have valued you in the past.

People saying things that imply you are not good enough can lead to low self-esteem, and negative self-talk can perpetuate these feelings. If you evaluate others from an outsider's perspective but yourself from an insider's perspective, you may fall short in comparison. Most people forget that they see only a tiny portion of who another person is. They compare their idealized perception of others to their intimate awareness of their flaws and fears. Valuing comes into play here as well. When you apply your standards to the idealized version of others, they seem competent, confident, worthy, and happy. Applying the same standards to yourself may make you feel less skilled and less worthy. This can lead you to think you deserve less. These perceptions and assessments influence your behavior in all areas of your life. The feelings of being less worthwhile set the stage for your behavior.

If you lack self-worth and self-confidence, you may be reluctant to take risks or try new things for fear of failure. You might fear being exposed as incompetent, leading to abandonment or rejection. You may adopt defensive maneuvers to keep people at a distance to avoid exposing your incompetence. You may act arrogant or egotistical, be judgmental or contemptuous of others, or manipulate and put others down to feel better about yourself. Low self-efficacy often accompanies low self-esteem and self-confidence, leading you to avoid responsibility and blame others for your shortcomings.

Low self-esteem is related to various living problems. Poor self-esteem affects you cognitively, emotionally, and behaviorally. It increases the risks of domestic violence, alcoholism and other drug addictions, depression, anxiety, teen pregnancy, giving up on educational pursuits, eating disorders, and acting out behaviors like delinquency, bullying, pathological lying, and theft. A lack of assertiveness is linked to low self-esteem. When you can assertively communicate how you are to be treated, you will get the respect you seek. Low self-esteem and lack of self-efficacy are related to an inability to make decisions, procrastination, and perfectionism. Lack of self-esteem, self-confidence, and self-worth keeps people quiet when they need to speak up to meet their needs and take care of themselves.

If you don't think you deserve good things in your life, this belief will negatively impact your choices. You may be afraid to take a risk to learn something new, enter into a relationship, take a new job, move to a new place, get out of a bad relationship, or even nurture and take care of yourself. Your self-esteem determines the quality of the life you choose.

Self-esteem is not about being selfish, self-absorbed, or arrogant. It is about having a realistic sense of your worth as a human being. Good self-esteem involves appropriately perceiving your value to yourself, others, and society. It is about identifying your strengths (as well as weaknesses), achievements, and areas of competence and determining that you have inherent worth. It is about believing that you have the most impact on your life and can decide on your destiny. It is also about knowing that you deserve all the happiness and success you can bring to yourself, taking responsibility for your joy, and doing what is necessary to achieve it. **Note:**

This article has been revised and edited from its original version, which was previously published in 2016 on this site. The content has been updated for contemporary language and concepts, clarity and accuracy.

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