

# **Unmasking the Damage: A Closer Look at How Low Self-Esteem Holds You Back**

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

Individuals grappling with low self-esteem typically underestimate their inherent worth, perceiving themselves as inadequate, incompetent, unworthy, and unlovable. This negative self-perception closely intertwines with low self-efficacy, the belief in one's ability to influence outcomes positively.

Those with low self-esteem tend to doubt their ability to positively change, attributing their perceived limitations to an inability to achieve what others can. Feeling like victims of circumstances, they struggle to connect their decisions and behavior with the outcomes, believing they have a lack of influence over their lives.

Diminished self-efficacy extends to a mistrust of their feelings and judgment, making it challenging for them to identify "trustworthiness" in others. Similarly, difficulty being assertive leads to extremes of passivity or aggression, as they either let people take advantage of them or present an aggressive front to keep others at bay.

Boundary violations often go unnoticed or are attributed to personal shortcomings by individuals with low self-esteem. They may engage in people-pleasing behaviors, attempting to project an image of what they believe others expect them to be.

“Self-esteem” and “self-concept” are not the same, but the connection between self-esteem and self-concept is profound. Self-concept represents one's worldview and includes beliefs, attitudes, and opinions about oneself and relationships. Those with low self-esteem struggle to

define themselves, often viewing themselves as a sum of roles they poorly perform. Negative self-talk becomes common, with self-deprecating individuals focusing on their flaws and downplaying compliments.

Low self-esteem contributes to chaotic relationships, that are characterized by communication challenges and unmet expectations. People with low self-esteem often expect others to intuitively understand their needs without explicit communication, leading to frustration and conflict. Without assertiveness, effective communication is out of reach, and individuals with low self-esteem may vacillate between passive and aggressive behaviors.

Intimacy poses a particular challenge, with pursuits of closeness alternating with distancing dynamics. Fear of rejection or abandonment prevents the exposure of their true selves, which hinders genuine intimacy. Low self-esteem creates self-sabotage that may manifest as a fear of success or failure.

Thankfully, there are pathways to improving self-esteem and transforming self-concept. Self-discovery and self-acceptance can be attained with a mindfulness practice, and negative thought patterns can be changed through cognitive therapy. These are simple but effective tools. Embracing risk-taking, recognizing the benefits of these risks, and learning from new experiences enhance self-efficacy and confidence. Accomplishments feed self-esteem when people are able to accept and acknowledge them.

By taking responsibility for their decisions and investing in self-improvement, individuals can break free from the constraints of low self-esteem and empower themselves to lead more fulfilling lives.

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