

Overcoming low self-esteem

Disclaimer: These notes are intended for information only, and should not be seen as a substitute for professional advice.

What is low self-esteem?

Self-esteem refers to a person's fundamental sense of worth. It includes the beliefs, attitudes, and opinions you have of yourself and the value you assign to yourself. People with low self-esteem have a generally negative overall opinion of themselves, they judge or evaluate themselves negatively or place a generally negative value on themselves as a person. Sometimes low self-esteem can be an *aspect* of another problem such as depression. At other times, it may be a *consequence* of some other issue such as a traumatic event, difficult life circumstances, an illness, or from high anxiety. Self-esteem is not the same as self-confidence which develops as you learn what you can do well and what you may find more challenging. Even if you have high self-confidence about doing something, you can still have low self-esteem.

Low self-esteem can be reflected in many aspects of life including **thinking, behaviour, mood, and physical state**. Thus, someone with low self-esteem may have very critical thoughts about themselves, their behaviour may include hunched posture, minimal eye contact and speaking in a soft tone, they may feel shy, anxious or sad, and their body may be very tense.

How low self-esteem can develop and be maintained

Your sense of self-esteem is based on your central beliefs about yourself. Beliefs are not facts but are opinions which can be mistaken, biased, or inaccurate, and importantly, can be changed. Low self-esteem is not something that you are born with, but something that you learn through life experiences. If life experiences have generally been positive and you've grown up in a loving, supportive family and had happy experiences at school, if you've had success in study and work and been praised for these, then self-esteem is likely to be high. If experiences have been mixed with success in some situations such as study and work, but difficulties in personal relationships, then you may feel good about yourself in some situations but not in others. If experiences have been generally negative at home, school, relationships and work, then self-esteem may be low. Because beliefs underlying low self-esteem are often based on experiences from a very early age, situations would have been interpreted from a child's point of view. For example, "bad things happen to me, so I must be a bad person".

Negative early experiences will then lead to negative self-beliefs which in turn lead to ways of behaving to help cope, but which then reinforce the negative self-beliefs. For example, if someone believes that they are stupid, they may not take on new challenges because they think that it's better not to try than it is to fail. The negative self-beliefs can also lead to biased expectations and assumptions so that no matter how things work out, things are more likely to be seen in a negative way so that the negative beliefs are again reinforced and maintained. Once negative beliefs are reinforced, then self-critical thinking can be triggered and this in turn can lead to low mood and an increase in anxiety.

How low self-esteem can affect your life

Low self-esteem can affect many aspects of daily life. In **work**, a person with low self-esteem may strive relentlessly for perfectionism, or they may avoid seeking promotions for fear of failure. In **relationships** they may be overly sensitive to criticism or disapproval, they may be very self-conscious and not express themselves openly, they may always seek to please others no matter the cost to themselves, or they may put on a false front because they worry that if people see the “real person” behind the front they won’t like them. A person with low self-esteem may also not take proper **care** of themselves because they don’t think they deserve it or alternatively, they may spend hours making themselves look as perfect as possible to others. In **leisure** and sporting activities, they may avoid those in which they think they may be judged and they may not allow themselves time to relax because they feel undeserving.

Treatment options

It can be helpful to talk to someone. If you don’t have anyone that you feel you could talk to, you could see a counsellor at the **University Counselling Service**. Seeing a counsellor can provide you with an independent and confidential place to discuss issues of concern. Sometimes there are difficulties that are hard to talk about with other people and you may not be able to talk to family members easily. Professional help at these times can help solve problems and prevent future ones from developing. A counsellor can help you to achieve a more balanced view of yourself in place of the negative one that may be contributing to your sense of low self-esteem.

The Counselling Service is a free and confidential service where you can get help with academic support, personal counselling, and assistance with policies and procedures that you may not be familiar with in the University system. You can ring for a 50 minute appointment on the number below or come in and make an appointment.

COUNSELLING SERVICE AVAILABILITY AND ACCESS

Location: Building 109, Level 2

Hours

Monday - Thursday 8.00am to 6.00pm

Friday 8.00am to 4.30pm

Contact numbers

Telephone (08) 9266 7850

From outside metro area FREECALL 1800 199 008

Fax (08) 9266 3052

Web site

<http://counselling.curtin.edu.au/index.html>

Tips for self-help

- Remember that your negative self-beliefs are opinions not facts. They are based on what experience has taught you and how you have learned to see yourself. Try to become more aware of your self-talk and remind yourself that thoughts are not facts but just ideas you have. Rather than telling yourself that “You are no good”, learn to tell yourself that “You are OK but you *think* that you are no good”.
- Try to think of new ways that you can enjoy yourself and have fun. Do things for pleasure and widen your range of activities. Organise activities that give you enjoyment and make you laugh.
- Learn something new – join a club, sporting group, interest group, or become a volunteer.

- Look after your basic physical needs – eat healthily and regularly, make sure you are getting adequate sleep, and try to exercise regularly. Exercise is beneficial for improving mood and for managing stress and anxiety.
- Pamper yourself by changing your hairstyle or getting some new clothes.
- Make sure that you have time-out occasionally to relax and do something enjoyable just for you.
- Be aware of what you say to yourself – try not to be self-critical and treat yourself as you would a good friend. What would you say to a friend who was critical about themselves?
- Become more aware of the biases in your thinking about yourself. Are you jumping to conclusions? Are you thinking in all-or-nothing terms? Are you focussing on your weaknesses and ignoring your strengths? Are you expecting yourself to be perfect?
- Make a list of as many of your positive qualities as you can think of. Ask others to help you to do this. Begin a diary listing your positive achievements each day.
- Practise being anti-perfectionist. “Dare to be average”!
- Practise compassion towards yourself – treat yourself with warmth, understanding, care and concern, strength and wisdom, and acceptance. Learn to be kind to yourself and forgive yourself for things that go wrong.
- Write a letter to yourself from “Your perfect nurturer”.
- Think about the “shoulds” that contribute to how you live your life. If you are constantly comparing yourself to an ideal “you” and setting standards of perfectionism that are almost impossible to attain, learn to be more flexible and realistic in your thinking about what you can achieve.
- Reframe how you think about your mistakes – this means changing your interpretation or point of view. Learn to view mistakes as a natural part of life and respond more flexibly to them, learning from them and then move on.
- Learn to be assertive and acknowledge your own needs. Rather than being passive or aggressive in communication with others, learn to state your own needs in an honest, open, and respectful way. Use “I” language to do this. For example, “I feel uncomfortable when you..... Could we please discuss...”.
- Think about what you want out of life and set some goals – long-, medium- and short-term ones. Make them specific and list small steps needed to achieve them.

Further information and resources

Useful books

Feeling Good. The New Mood Therapy. (1980). By David D. Burns.

Overcoming Depression. (2000). A self-help guide using cognitive behavioural techniques.
By Paul Gilbert.

Overcoming Low Self-Esteem. Self-Help Course. (2006) A 3-part programme based on Cognitive Behavioural Techniques. By Melanie Fennell.

Reinventing your life: How to break free from negative life patterns. (1993). By J. Young and J. Klosko.

Self-Esteem. (2000). By Matthew McKay and Patrick Fanning.

Useful online resources:

[Improving Self-Esteem: Overcoming low self-esteem](#)

Urgent help:

Call Crisis care (24 hour telephone counselling service) on (08) 9223 1111.