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What is self-esteem?

We use the phrase self-esteem to talk about the beliefs you have about yourself – what you think about the type of person you are, your abilities, the positive and negative things about you and what you expect for your future.

If you have healthy self-esteem, your beliefs about yourself will generally be positive. You may experience difficult times in your life, but you will generally be able to deal with these without them having too much of a long-term negative impact on you.

If you have low self-esteem, your beliefs about yourself will often be negative. You will tend to focus on your weaknesses or mistakes that you have made, and may find it hard to recognise the positive parts of your personality. You may also blame yourself for any difficulties or failures that you have.

People think I am confident because I can address a room full of people. The reality is that I spend most of my time thinking that I'm not good enough. If I give a speech, I spend the next few days thinking about all the mistakes I made.

What causes low self-esteem?

It is not possible to identify one cause of low self-esteem for everyone. You form your beliefs about yourself over a long period of time and this process is likely to be affected by a range of different things.

What causes low self-esteem?

Some factors that can contribute to low self-esteem include:

- **Difficult childhood experiences** – negative experiences in childhood, such as bullying, difficult family relationships or having a hard time at school, can be particularly damaging for your self-esteem.
- **Difficult life events** – difficult experiences as an adult, such as the end of a relationship, long-term illness, the death of someone close to you or being unemployed, can lower your self-esteem, particularly if you experience several difficult events over a short period of time.
- **Personality and temperament** – elements of your personality, such as a tendency towards negative thinking or finding it hard to relate to other people, could contribute to a poor self-image.
- **Feeling 'different'** – feeling like the 'odd one out', or under peer pressure to conform to social norms you don't agree with, can affect the way you see yourself.
- **Relationships with other people** – other people may feed into your low self-esteem, being negative about you or making you feel like you have little worth. Or you may feel you don't live up to other people's expectations.
- **Stress and excessive pressure** – if you are under a lot of stress and finding it hard to cope, this can lead to feelings of low self-worth.
- **Negative thinking patterns** – you may learn or develop thinking patterns that reinforce low self-esteem, such as constantly comparing yourself to others or developing high standards for yourself that you can't achieve.
- **Discrimination and stigma** – if you are discriminated against for whatever reason, this can affect the way you see yourself.

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- **Social Isolation and Loneliness** – if you have limited social contact with other people, or find it hard to maintain relationships with other people, this can lead to poor self-image.
- **Trauma, abuse or bullying** – trauma, physical, sexual or psychological abuse and bullying can all lead to feelings of guilt and low self-worth.
- **Mental health problems** (see below).

How is low self-esteem related to mental health?

Low self-esteem is not a recognised mental health problem, but self-esteem and mental health are closely related.

Low self-esteem can lead to mental health problems

- Negative thinking patterns associated with low self-esteem, such as assuming you will fail at things you do, can develop over time and lead to mental health problems such as depression or anxiety.
- Low self-esteem can make it hard to try new things or complete tasks, such as starting a new hobby or completing a job application. This can stop you from living your life the way you want, and lead to frustration and depression over time.

Low self-esteem has severely limited my career development. It has kept me in a place of low confidence, so that I'm less willing to take on challenges at work.

- If you find certain situations difficult because of low self-esteem, you may start to avoid them and become increasingly socially isolated. This can cause feelings of anxiety and depression that can develop

How is low self-esteem related to mental health?

into mental health problems over time. (See Mind's booklet *How to cope with loneliness*.)

I'm my own worst enemy at times... When I feel low, I hide myself away so I don't do or say anything I regret... I just ride it out in the hope I'll feel better the next day.

- Low self-esteem can cause people to develop unhelpful behaviours as a way of coping, such as forming damaging relationships, taking drugs or drinking too much. This often causes problems in the long-term and makes life more difficult, which can then lead to mental health problems.

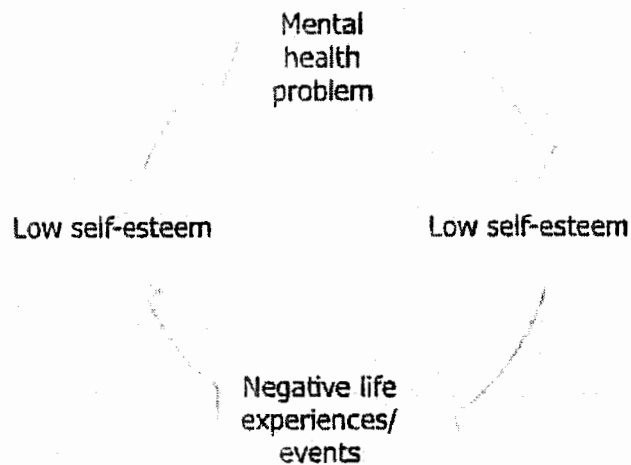
Mental health problems can cause low self-esteem

- Some mental health problems, such as eating problems, depression and social phobia, involve developing negative thinking patterns about yourself.
- A mental health problem can make it hard to do day-to-day tasks, such as using public transport or maintaining a paid job. This can have a negative impact on the way you see yourself.
- A mental health problem could cause you to withdraw from social contact, if you are worried how other people may see you. This can lead to feelings of isolation and loneliness, which can then cause low self-esteem.
- Stigma and discrimination about mental health problems could mean you develop a negative opinion about yourself.

How to increase your self-esteem

Cycle of low self-esteem and mental health problems

Low self-esteem and mental health problems can reinforce each other, creating an unhelpful cycle.



Low self-esteem contributed to my developing depression – and the depression made my self-esteem worse, as I thought that if I were a more worthwhile person, I'd be better able to cope.

What can I do to build my self-esteem?

In order to increase your self-esteem, you need to challenge and change the negative beliefs you have about yourself. This might feel like an impossible task, but there are a lot of different techniques you can try to help you.

Do something you enjoy

Doing something that you enjoy, and that you are good at, can help build your confidence and increase your self-esteem. This could be anything from paid work, volunteering, caring or a hobby.

What can I do to build my self-esteem?

Work

Work can provide identity, friendship, a steady routine and a salary. Some people thrive in a busy environment and enjoy working to ambitious targets. Other people see their job as a means to an end or work in unpaid, volunteering roles. Whatever you do, it is important that you feel confident and supported in your role, and that the balance between your work and your home-life feels right for you. (See Mind's booklet *How to be mentally healthy at work* for information about looking after your mental health while in paid employment.)

Hobbies

This could be anything from learning a language, to singing, to a painting class. Think about where you feel you have some natural ability, or things that you have always wanted to try. Try to find activities that will not challenge you too much to begin with so that you can feel you have achieved something and have a chance to build your confidence. The internet, your library and adult education colleges should have details of local clubs and classes that you might want to go along to.

What helps me feel more positive about myself is crafting things. When I see what I created and I feel good about it, I automatically feel better about myself because I feel I found something I'm good at.

Try to build positive relationships

Try to associate with people who will not criticise you, and who you feel able to talk to about your feelings. If you spend time around positive and supportive people, you are more likely to have a better self-image and feel more confident.

In return, if you are caring and supportive to other people, you are more likely to get a positive response from them. This will help you feel better about yourself and how other people perceive you.

How to increase your self-esteem

If you have low self-esteem, there might be people close to you who encourage the negative beliefs and opinions that you hold. It is important to identify these people and take action to stop them from doing this, perhaps by becoming more assertive (see 'Learn to be assertive' below) or by limiting how much you see them.

Learn to be assertive

Being assertive means you value yourself and others, and can communicate with mutual respect. It will help you to set clear boundaries.

The following things will help you act in a more assertive way:

- Pay attention to your body language as well as to the words you say – try to be open and confident.
- Try to express your feelings if you have been upset – wait until you feel calm and explain clearly how you feel.
- Say 'no' to unreasonable requests.
- Tell people if you need more time or support with tasks that you find challenging.
- Try to speak in the first person where possible – e.g. 'When you speak to me like that, I feel...'. This allows you to explain what you want to happen without appearing aggressive or scared.

Assertiveness can be a difficult skill to learn, and you may need to practise by talking in front of a mirror or with a friend. Many adult education institutions, such as colleges or universities, also offer assertiveness classes. There are also several self-help books with practical exercises and tips available to buy or use online.

What can I do to build my self-esteem?

Look after your physical health

Looking after your physical health can help you feel happier and healthier, and improve your self-image.

Physical activity

Physical activity helps improve people's sense of wellbeing and image of themselves. Exercise releases endorphins – 'feel-good' hormones that can help improve your mood, particularly if you do it outside. (See *Mind tips for better mental health: physical activity* for ideas on how to get active.)

Sleep

Lack of sleep can cause negative feelings to be exaggerated and means you can feel less confident, so it's important to make sure you get enough sleep. (See Mind's booklet *How to cope with sleep problems* for help establishing a good sleep routine.)

Diet

Eating a well-balanced diet at regular meal-times with plenty of water and vegetables will help you to feel healthier and happier. Stopping or reducing your alcohol intake, and avoiding tobacco and recreational drugs can also help improve your general wellbeing.

Set yourself a challenge

If you set yourself goals and work towards achieving them, you will feel satisfied and proud of yourself when you achieve your goal, and feel more positive about yourself as a result.

Make sure the challenge you set yourself is one that you can realistically achieve. It doesn't have to be anything particularly large but should have meaning for you. For example, you might decide you are going to write a letter to your local paper or start going to a regular exercise class.

How to increase your self-esteem

Learn to identify and challenge negative beliefs

If you are going to improve your self-esteem, it may also help to understand more about your negative beliefs about yourself and where they came from.

This could be a painful process, so it's important to take your time, and perhaps ask a friend or partner to support you. If you are feeling very distressed, it might be better to seek professional help from a therapist to help you do this. See 'What other help is available?' on p.15 for more information.

It might be helpful to write down notes, and questions such as these could help to structure your thoughts:

- What do you feel are your weaknesses or failings?
- What negative things do you think other people think about you?
- If you could sum yourself up, what word would you use – 'I am...'?
- When did you start feeling like this?
- Can you identify an experience or event that might have caused this feeling?
- Do you find you have certain negative thoughts on a regular basis?

It might be also helpful to keep a thought diary or record over a period of several weeks. Write down details of situations, how you felt and what you think the underlying belief was. For example:

What can I do to build my self-esteem?

Situation	Reaction	Underlying belief
Asked to deliver a presentation at work	Felt very anxious, but told boss it was fine	No one will want to listen to me because I am not engaging
I was invited to a party	I lied and said I had something else to do	I can't say anything interesting and I'll look stupid dressed up
I saw a job ad that I liked in the paper	I got angry and tore it up	I'm not clever enough for that sort of work or someone would have offered me a job like that already

As you identify what your core beliefs about yourself are, and where they come from, you can begin to challenge and change them. One way you can do this is to write down evidence to challenge each belief and begin to explore other explanations of a situation.

For example, if you think that no one likes you, you can start to record situations that show a different pattern:

- My mum called me on my birthday.
- My brother didn't answer my call, but then later told me he had been really busy at work – it wasn't personal.
- I have been asked to go to a friend's wedding next summer.
- I had a really nice conversation with my colleague over our coffee break.

These might feel like small examples, but as your list gets longer over time you can look back at it and challenge the negative opinions that you have been holding on to.

low to increase your self-esteem

A therapist once set me a task. Every time somebody said something that hurt me, [I had] to try and put myself in their shoes and think of reasons why they might have said that, so I didn't interpret it as aimed at me. His advice really did help.

Focus on positive things

If you have low self-esteem, it can take practice to get used to thinking more positively about yourself. One way you can do this is by making a list of several things that you like about yourself.

You might include:

- things about your personality
- things about the way that you look
- things that you do
- skills you have developed.

Take your time and aim for 50 different things, even if this takes several weeks. Keep this list and look at a different part of it each day. If you are feeling down or worried about an event that is coming up, such as a job interview, you can use it to remind you of the good things about yourself.

If you struggle to come up with a list of good things, you could ask your partner or a trusted friend to help you begin. This may also help you to see how others may have a higher opinion of you than you do yourself.

Another technique is to write down at least three things that went well or that you have achieved that day before you go to sleep. Some people also find it helpful to keep objects, such as photos or letters, that make them feel good about themselves.

I have a feel-good box, and in it I keep happy memories, positive affirmations and just little things that make me feel good.

How to increase your self-esteem

Challenging negative thoughts

Use this space to write down negative thoughts and give examples of how they aren't true (see 'Learn to identify and challenge negative beliefs' on p.12 for more information).

Negative thought

Evidence against it