



Building Self-Esteem Through Positive Self-Talk

What is Self-Esteem? Self-esteem refers to how you think and feel about yourself. It is your sense of self-worth, your belief about how valuable and worthy a person you are. People with high self-esteem feel good about themselves, and people with low self-esteem feel badly about themselves.

How do we get self-esteem? Self-esteem usually comes from messages you get about yourself. These messages can come from *other people* (like parents, teachers or friends) or from your self. When we get messages from other people that tell us we are 'bad,' we often learn to tell *ourselves* that we are bad or unworthy, and we develop *low* self-esteem. When we get messages from *other people* that tell us we are 'good,' we usually learn to tell *ourselves* that we are good and valuable people, and we develop *high* self-esteem.

What does self-esteem have to do with relationships? The messages we get from people we care about have a very strong affect on our self-esteem. If you are in a healthy relationship, your partner probably acknowledges your strengths and positive qualities, has confidence in your ability to make good decisions, trusts you and encourages you to pursue your goals. Having a supportive person like this in your life probably makes you feel good about yourself, so your self-esteem improves. If you are in an unhealthy relationship, your partner might put you down, blame you for all of the problems in your relationship, and discourage you from activities that will help you grow as a person. Even if you have high self-esteem when you start your relationship, if you are around an emotionally abusive person for long enough, your self-esteem will eventually get lower.

How can I build my self-esteem? Self-esteem doesn't only come from the messages other people send you – it also comes from the messages you send yourself, called 'Self-Talk'. If you are used to hearing negative messages from other people, chances are you will send yourself negative messages too. Things like "I'm so stupid," "I'm not good enough at this..." or "It's my fault this happened because..." are examples of negative self-talk. One way to build your self-esteem is to re-train yourself to engage in positive self-talk. Positive self-talk is when you focus on your strengths and positive qualities, reminding yourself that you are a good and valuable person. You have the power to override negative messages from yourself and others with positive self-talk.

Some examples of positive self-talk:

- "I am a good and caring person and deserve to be treated with respect."
- "I am capable of achieving success in my life."
- "There are people who love me and will be there for me when I need them."
- "I deserve to be happy."
- "I am entitled to make mistakes and to learn from them."

Finish the sentences below:

1. I am a strong person. An example of a time I was strong is _____
2. I am capable of being happy. A time I was happy was _____
3. I am a good friend. A time I was there for a friend was _____
4. I am capable of making decisions for myself. A time I made a good decision was _____
5. I am lovable. People who love me without abusing me are _____
6. I am talented. One thing I am good at is _____
7. _____

Repeat the above sentences to yourself regularly to get in the habit of positive self-talk.



Action Plan For Improving My Self-Esteem

After reading each of the strategies for improving self-esteem, check the ones you plan to use and fill in your personal plan for using these strategies.

★ Positive self-talk:

I will be aware of my self-talk. I will try not to put myself down, but to put myself up instead, with positive self-talk. Here are some examples of statements I will repeat to myself when I start to feel badly or get the urge to put myself down.

★ Journaling:

I can use a journal to help me sort out my feelings and to write down positive statements about who I really am (another way of practicing positive self-talk.)

I have a journal ___ Yes ___ No

If I don't have a journal, here is my plan to get and use one:

★ Exercise:

Exercise can relieve stress, give me time to think positively about myself, and make me feel good about my health and my body. It does not have to be strenuous, but I will try to exercise at least three times a week.

I have written the exercises I can do:

- ★ Walking
- ★ Riding a bike
- ★ Working out with weights in a gym
- ★ Dancing
- ★ _____

- ★ Jogging
- ★ Swimming
- ★ Taking an aerobics class
- ★ Taking a martial arts class
- ★ _____

★ Activities I feel good about:

I will try to put aside some time every day to do something I enjoy, like a hobby or activity I can do on my own. I have checked some of the things I can do, or written in my own activities.

- ★ Take a walk outside
- ★ Listen to music
- ★ Attend a support group
- ★ Play a sport
- ★ Make crafts
- ★ Work out
- ★ _____

- ★ Play a musical instrument
- ★ Write in a journal
- ★ Participate in a club or group
- ★ Do volunteer work
- ★ Meditate
- ★ _____
- ★ _____

(continued on next page)



Action Plan For Improving My Self-Esteem

(continued)

★ Assertiveness:

Speaking up for my rights will help others respect me and help me respect myself. I have learned about assertiveness by completing the assertiveness activities in this workbook or in other ways: Yes No
If yes, here are some of the people and situations I will be more assertive with:

If no, here is how I am going to learn about assertiveness and develop my assertiveness skills:

★ Increasing Independence:

One way to increase my confidence in myself is to increase my independence - this could be financially, emotionally, socially, physically or in other ways. I will work on becoming more independent in the following areas:

★ Working with a counselor:

A therapist, counselor or other supportive person can help me to explore any negative self-images I have and turn them into positive ones! The person or people who will work with me on this goal are:

★ Social life:

Spending time with people who allow me to feel good about myself and participating in healthy activities will help me improve my self-esteem.

These are the people I will spend time with: _____

These are the healthy social activities I will participate in with them:

★ Other:

No more blame and excuses

Taking responsibility for your feelings and actions is key to building self-esteem; otherwise, you'll continue to feel like a victim and be dependent upon others' feelings and behavior over which you have no control. This is a losing formula. If you go from one relationship to another looking for someone to make you happy or fulfill you, you forfeit the opportunity to grow into your wholeness and strength. Instead, your codependency grows. Until you accept responsibility for yourself, you cannot change your life — and that includes improving your self-esteem. When you do, your future is in your hands. (See Chapters 3, 6, and 9 for more on self-responsibility.)

Of course, you aren't responsible for everything that happens to you. There are random acts of violence, accidents caused by others, acts of God and nature, genetic diseases, and so on. Although some philosophies suggest you're responsible for everything in your life, I think that view is extreme and can overwhelm and disempower you with feelings of helplessness. The Dalai Lama agrees there are many variables over which we have no control.

Living responsibly may be easier to understand than to actually put into practice. It requires self-awareness of your feelings and needs (see Chapter 9), noticing when you don't take responsibility, and ending blame, excuses, and attempts to change or control others. Then you're ready to take action to fulfill your needs and address your feelings. There are areas of your life in which you take more responsibility and feel better about yourself than other areas where you don't.

For many of you, taking greater responsibility for yourself requires nothing less than a 180-degree reversal from how you've lived your life so far. If you're used to looking to others to make you feel happy and secure, it may feel daunting to realize that they won't. But everyone has to grow up. The buck stops with you. You may not want the task. If you're angry, go ahead and have a tantrum! You don't have to do anything just yet. Let this realization sink in. When you start to take responsibility for yourself, the change is profound. Begin by trying the following:

- ↳ Notice when you think about what someone else should be doing. Stop and ask what you need to do (see Chapter 12). For example, you may tell someone to pursue his or her dreams when you're not pursuing your own dreams, or to get more rest when you need it.

- ✓ When you're feeling hurt, angry, or sad, do you focus on someone else's behavior? Think about your contribution to how you feel and ask what you can do. For example, allow your feelings, write in your journal, talk to a friend, or go have some fun.
- ✓ When something goes wrong or plans go awry, do you blame someone else? Do you get frustrated in dealing with people on the phone or driving in traffic and start to criticize them? Even if you didn't cause the problem, accept reality and take responsibility for your feelings. Breathe and relax.
- ✓ If you're late for an appointment or a deadline, do you make up phony excuses or expect concessions and extensions from other people, rather than owning your tardiness?
- ✓ When you have a problem, consider how you can help yourself.
- ✓ How do you feel when you are self-responsible? When you're not?
- ✓ In the areas where your self-responsibility is low, write about what you can do to start taking more responsibility. If you're tempted to focus on why you can't make changes, look for ways that you can. If you have a disability, find things that give you pleasure and people to help you do what you're unable to do yourself. Notice what beliefs and feelings stop you.

Write a paragraph, completing these sentences:

- ✓ I'm passive because . . .
- ✓ I allow the behavior I don't like because . . .
- ✓ If I accepted responsibility for my body, I'd . . .
- ✓ If I stopped blaming my spouse for my unhappiness, I'd . . .
- ✓ If it were totally up to me to get what I want, I'd . . .
- ✓ If I didn't blame my parents for my problems, I'd have to . . .
- ✓ If I treated my family more responsibly, I'd . . .
- ✓ If I took responsibility for my finances, I'd . . .
- ✓ If I stopped procrastinating about . . ., I'd . . .
- ✓ If I stopped waiting for things to change, I'd . . .

support this age-old wisdom. Taking self-affirming action, such as expressing yourself, setting boundaries, and doing what you want, can feel uncomfortable at first and create anxiety, guilt, and self-doubt. Shame and accompanying low self-esteem, fear, and anxiety about being judged, making mistakes, or failing all make it difficult to take risks. Additionally, having an external locus of control and having had controlling or shaming parents hinder your ability to identify needs and wants. Talking yourself out of self-affirming action can stagnate your growth. These are all obstacles to building self-esteem, making decisions, and putting yourself first.



Plan to expect this resistance — like soreness after using weak muscles — and know that it's a sign that you're doing the right thing. Give yourself credit for taking a risk. Taking reasonable risks builds a new self-perception. You get to know yourself, your preferences, and what you're capable of in a new way. You can then build on that and take greater risks, all building your self-confidence.

After a while, such actions feel more natural and less anxiety-provoking, until one day, you find yourself spontaneously doing them — setting limits, asking for what you want, trying something new, expressing a minority opinion, giving yourself credit, and doing more enjoyable activities — even alone. You find you have less resentments and judgments and that relationships are easier. You start to like and love yourself and enjoy the process of living.



Make a list of things you'd like to do, and do them — don't wait for a friend to go along with you. Make a list of things you're afraid to do. Talk to a supportive, encouraging friend or sponsor to help you challenge your fears and take more risks.

Acknowledge yourself

Everyone likes compliments, a pat on the back, and recognition for a job well done. Why wait for the kindness of others? It's up to you to acknowledge and praise yourself. Have you noticed how the warmth of others' praise quickly fades? When you give it to yourself, the afterglow lingers. Talk to yourself about your successes, as you would praise a friend. You can repeat it and bask in it as often as you like. Doing this actually changes how you think about yourself and raises your self-esteem. It isn't the same as empty affirmations. It's giving credit to yourself that's backed up by experience — memories of positive actions that you can recall. Remember, positive affirmations are helpful, but they must be backed up by positive actions.



Do the following:

- ✓ Get into the good habit of listing three positive traits or behaviors about yourself each day. List ten if you can; even small things, like holding the door for someone or saying good morning to coworkers to whom you don't ordinarily speak.
- ✓ List things for which you're grateful. Gratitude blocks negativity. It's hard to be judgmental and grateful at the same time.
- ✓ Go over your list of self-criticisms and write encouraging statements to counteract each criticism. Think of what you would say to a toddler learning a new skill. Be gentle and patient with yourself. Tell yourself, "I love and accept you," "You're doing great," and "I'm so proud of your progress."
- ✓ Remind yourself of small, positive changes and how you've turned things around in the past.
- ✓ When you try new behavior, if the Critic and Perfectionist step in to minimize or negate it and look for mistakes or reasons to tear you down, confront and argue with them.

Self-Compassion and Self-Love

As discussed in Chapter 3, self-esteem is a self-evaluation. It's raised by improving how you think about yourself and living in congruence with your goals, values, and beliefs. Self-esteem varies depending upon how you act and to a minor extent upon external events and health challenges. Acting contrary to what you believe lowers your self-esteem. In contrast, acceptance of yourself is steady and unconditional. You accept yourself despite flaws, failures, and limitations, as in the earlier mirror exercise (see the section "Accepting imperfection when nothing's good enough"). If you hold on to guilt, your self-esteem and self-acceptance suffer.

Self-acceptance

Self-acceptance means that instead of thinking about how you need to be different, you accept who you are. Catch yourself making comparisons to others — both positively and negatively. Perhaps you're comparing your insides to others' outsides. Stop and remember that you and everyone else have a singular, unique fingerprint. Imagine that it includes all your assets and flaws, all your talents and limitations. Say to yourself, "This is who I am, and it's okay." If it's helpful, tell yourself, "This is how God made me and wanted me to be. God willed me to be as I am." Repeat the words of Walter Cronkite, "That's the way it is," and Popeye, "I am what I am."



This attitude of self-acceptance works magic. When you start accepting yourself, you stop struggling to present yourself as smart, strong, kind, sexy, or any other pretense. Self-acceptance allows you to be authentic. You can finally relax, and more of the inner real you comes forward. You have no shame or fear of revealing yourself when you accept yourself unconditionally. This attitude spills over onto others for whom you have more compassion and acceptance. You won't feel the need to control or change them or even convince them to agree with you.

Make a list of things you've done that you feel guilty about. Under each one, analyze these questions:

- ✓ What were my motives? Go deep with this. Was a deeper motive to feel secure or lovable? For example, childhood shoplifting may have been motivated by a desire for peer acceptance or adultery by a need for love or retaliation for hurt.
- ✓ What were the circumstances and my knowledge at the time?
- ✓ In what way was I trying to take care of myself?
- ✓ What made my choice seem the best at the time?
- ✓ Was anyone harmed by my actions?
- ✓ Do I need to make amends? To whom?
- ✓ What did I learn from this experience?
- ✓ How would I handle this differently today?

Write a compassionate letter to yourself, forgiving yourself as you would write to a child who'd made a mistake — a child that you love and want to teach and forgive.

In some cases, you may need to make amends to others, and although this may feel awkward at first, it's truly liberating and uplifting. You may be pleasantly surprised by the positive reaction of others. Remember not to justify your actions or blame the other person, but only apologize for harm done. In addition, you're not doing this for their forgiveness, but for self-forgiveness. Therefore, the other person's reaction isn't important; you're doing it for yourself. Finally, the main point is to decide not to repeat your behavior in the future. People with high self-esteem learn from their errors rather than castigate themselves.

Self-love

Whereas acceptance is an attitude toward yourself, love is a combination of both feeling and action. Many think self-love is egotism or narcissism, but actually egotists and narcissists don't love themselves at all. A "big ego" is compensation for lack of self-love. Codependents think too little of themselves, not too much.

Love for your Self is healthy. The Bible says, "Love thy neighbor as thyself." You're a human being as worthy of love as anyone else. Contrary to the idea that self-love is selfish and takes away from your ability to love others, the opposite is true. The greater is your love for yourself, the greater will be your ability to love others. Moreover, you only allow yourself to receive as much love as you give to yourself.

Love involves understanding, respect, acceptance, responsibility, and compassion. These virtues are not compartmentalized, but are experienced for your Self and for others. Love is not divisible. As you develop these aspects in yourself, your ability to love yourself and others grows.

Practicing compassion

Love requires focused attention, discipline, and patience. It's not easily attained, particularly in Western society with its many distractions and emphasis on speed and productivity. In addition, loving includes empathy and compassion, which enables you to feel with acceptance, caring, and understanding what someone else is feeling and to extend this compassion toward yourself. Compassion is expressed with gentleness, tenderness, and generosity of spirit — quite the opposite of the Tyrannical Trio (see the earlier section "The Tyrannical Trio — the Critic, Pusher, and Perfectionist"). Notice if, when you're stressed, overwhelmed, or exhausted, you attempt to do even more instead of caring for yourself. This is challenging if you didn't feel accepted or nurtured as a child. You have no role model to emulate and treat yourself harshly or with indifference — the way you were treated.



Self-love also means having goodwill toward yourself. Try seeing yourself through compassionate and understanding eyes, as you may see a child, pet, or close friend. Look for the positive motive behind your actions — it's usually self-preservation — and that's okay. Your actions are a result of what you've learned from your parents and experiences to date. By compassionately observing and thinking about your behavior, you increase your opportunities to change it in the future.



Self-love is very different from self-pity, which is a blend of fear, judgment, and anger about troubles that have befallen you. With self-compassion and empathy, you're present to your raw feeling experience and are able to allow it and comfort yourself with understanding and care. Self-pity implies, "It shouldn't be this way," but with self-love, there's compassion for and acceptance of what is, with no attempt to resist or fix it.

Centering

The ability to do this requires faith, just as love requires faith when you risk committing your heart. The faith required in self-love is what enables you to allow your feelings, without lapsing into anxiety or judgment. Centeredness and calmness contain and support your emotions and afford you some objectivity. You know that despite this, "I'll survive." This objectivity permits you to comfort yourself. Naturally, there are times when you have no objectivity and no faith, but you continue to strive for it. Spending time alone with yourself is essential, and a meditation practice is helpful in developing the ability to witness and contain your emotions.

Imagine a little kitten sitting on your chest. You're stroking, cuddling, and speaking lovingly to it. Allow your heart to open. Hear it purring and feel the warmth of its body next to yours, as your chest rises with each breath. Listen to your heartbeat. Now imagine the kitten inside your heart, and continue stroking and speaking lovingly to yourself about all that you've suffered and all your burdens, conflicts, and worries. Let everything just be for a few minutes. You don't have to solve or do anything. Tell yourself, "At this moment, I'm safe." Ask yourself, "What is the most loving thing I need right now?" Practice this every day.

Practicing self-love

Loving yourself is a life journey and goal that starts with self-knowledge (see Chapter 9). It's the core of recovery and rewards you with enormous benefits — increased self-esteem, peace, well-being, health, and loving relationships with others. You can consider it a spiritual practice because it requires awareness, reverence, and kindness toward yourself as one of God's creations. Loving yourself for ten minutes a day is a good start, but it's an ongoing process. You have opportunities to do so throughout the day — often moment to moment — in your actions and the way you listen and speak to yourself.

Working with the Tyrannical Trio heightens your awareness of your automatic negative inner dialogue. Then it's up to you to change it into a positive one. You may feel foolish at first but try saying, "I love you" to yourself and aloud in the mirror. It's nice to hear from others and even from you.

You may notice that much of your behavior throughout the day is routine — what and how you have your breakfast, check messages, get to work. Interrupt your routine and listen to your heart, mind, and body. Ask yourself several times a day, "What am I feeling?" "What do I need and want?" and "What is the most loving choice I can make right now?" Wait for answers, and give yourself what you need, including rest, healthy food, joy, compassion, and socializing. Choices made out of fear, anxiety, or guilt are usually not in your highest interest.

Loving parents gently discipline their children. Self-love requires curbing your automatic behavior that's self-defeating or unhealthy. You may need to set limits on procrastination, gluttony, sloth, tardiness, or the opposite — working, playing, or exercising more than is healthy. When you want to reach for a second dessert, try being with yourself quietly. See what you're feeling — perhaps anxiety or restlessness. You may need to calm or comfort yourself or may find deeper feelings to explore.