

TIP SHEET

Your mind is a garden, your thoughts are the seeds, you can grow flowers, or you can grow weeds.
- Anon.



Improving Self-esteem

What is self-esteem?

Self-esteem refers to our own sense of worth as a person. It's a complex issue, but essentially self-esteem is our internal rating of whether we are adequate or inadequate: it is our opinion of how well we respect and like ourselves.

It is common for our esteem to vary across different experiences and areas of our life, such as work, relationships, and recreation, particularly as we face the highs and lows of success and failure (situational esteem).

Overall however, our general level of esteem about ourselves seems to stay relatively constant (global esteem). High self-esteem means a person has a strong sense of self-respect, self-worth, confidence, and a feeling of basic goodness and acceptance about themselves. In contrast, low esteem usually involves self-doubt, timidity, insecurity, self-criticism, self-punishment, negativity, feelings of inferiority, anger, guilt, and shame.

Why is low self-esteem a problem?

Whilst it's difficult to feel great about ourselves all the time, some people unfortunately deal with a consistently low sense of esteem—thinking poorly of themselves, not feeling worthy of love or attention. This is problematic as it may lead to strained relationships, loneliness, social isolation, poor health (both physical and mental), missed opportunities, unfulfilled potential, and unhappiness.

How healthy is your esteem? Do you recognise any of the following?

- **Thoughts:** Do you have a low opinion of yourself? Do you typically think of yourself in negative or critical ways? Do you compare yourself unfavourably to others? Do you doubt your decisions and actions, fearing you can't do things well
- **Feelings:** Do you feel like you aren't worthy? Do you feel guilty or ashamed about your place in the world (feeling like a "fraud")? Do you feel inferior when you compare yourself to others? Do you feel depressed or anxious due to your poor self-belief?
- **Behaviours:** Do you avoid tasks because you lack belief that you can do them properly? Are you timid and insecure around others? Do you talk down about yourself with others? Do you minimise compliments you receive?

What can I do differently? Here are some ACTIONS:

Believing in my value as a person

You may believe that you don't have any natural good qualities – feeling inherently “worthless”. Challenge yourself: every single person in the world has worth, including you. You are the only one that can make this statement real for you – to acknowledge that it can be true. This may take some time – perhaps you've had decades of criticism (from yourself or others). Notice your negative self-talk; “I'm no good”, “I can't do it”. Our thoughts are powerful – if we constantly think in negative ways this becomes a selffulfilling prophecy, impacting our confidence, self-belief, and actions.

How we THINK influences how we FEEL which influences how we BEHAVE. Believe in yourself. Appreciate who YOU are. You might not believe that you are the most excellent, wonderful, and perfect person – but you don't have to. Perhaps you can start with just being “okay”. I AM OKAY. Become comfortable with that. Then you can work on making the best version of you.

Be kind to yourself – would you dare treat other people the way you treat yourself? Encourage yourself – research shows that benefits come from being hopeful, optimistic, and embracing positive language and thoughts.

Explore: Self-acceptance; cognitive-reframing; positive psychology; optimism; REBT

I'm good, not perfect

We may think that we need to be perfect otherwise people will see our flaws. We don't like making mistakes or failing in case it gives others “proof” that we are not good and shouldn't be valued. We are our harshest critics – condemning our performances, minimizing our positives, and setting excessive standards ('musts').

Our need for perfection overwhelms us, holding us back from making decisions, or taking actions and opportunities. Aim for good, not for perfect. Be selective in applying your high standards – think about why you are setting them and for whom? Practice setting realistic goals and try not to compare yourself with others. Take small risks and fail often – mistakes are essential for learning: we get good at things by being bad at them first. Give yourself credit for each step you achieve.

Explore: Perfectionism; fear of failure; procrastination; indecisiveness; SMART goals

Building my skills and confidence—achieve by starting

We might not think we have the skills or competence to do anything well. Realistically we CAN and DO achieve more than we give ourselves credit for. Sometimes we can strengthen our esteem just by “giving things a go”. Find an activity you want to achieve. Break the task into smaller tasks to get a realistic appreciation of what's involved.

Allow yourself freedom to explore with trial and error; attempt small steps which are within reach, enabling you to get “quick wins” which boost confidence. Ramp up the difficulty as you go. Most achievement is hard work – keep trying – effort builds momentum.

Explore: Achievement; positive risk-taking; willpower; motivation; ACT therapy

Challenge your
low self-esteem!

Thought

I often think that I'm no good at all.



Alternative

Perhaps instead of looking only at what I'm NOT, I can look at what I AM. I can acknowledge my positives and boost myself UP rather than drag myself DOWN. Other people would objectively be able to list many positives about me – perhaps I can give these more weight.

Thought

I feel so worthless. I feel I have to be perfect before people will value me.



Alternative

Most people are very accepting of others. I accept others who aren't perfect. Perhaps I can accept myself as I am – flawed, imperfect, valuable.

Thought

I avoid doing things because I'm “not good enough” to do them.



Alternative

I am much more capable than I admit. I may not be the best at everything, but I've got plenty of skills. It's good for me to give things a go even if they are challenging – I'll gain more confidence over time.



TALK TO OTHERS

ADAVIC can refer you to therapists who specialise in working with self-esteem. You may also want to share your experiences – we can link you to peer support groups and online forums.

BOOKS

10 days to great self-esteem: 10 easy steps to brighten your moods and discovering the joy in everyday living. Burns, David, Dr. (2000).

ONLINE

A series of online resources from self-esteem assessments to overcoming low self-esteem learning modules is available at

>> For more tips and resources see <https://www.adavic.org.au/PG-fact-sheets-self-esteem.aspx>

