

Self-Esteem

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Providing Opportunities to Value Yourself and Others

Self-esteem has become one of today's social cure-alls from everything to losing weight to better marriages. Americans are encouraged to begin programs as early as infancy to learn to accept one's self and in the process build a better you.

Drug abuse, school dropout, teen suicide, and divorce have all been associated with poor self-esteem.

One in 10 Americans believe they suffer from low self-esteem. Over half believe it exists elsewhere in their own family.

Today's market is flooded with thousands of self-help and self-acceptance manuals designed to aid Americans in the fulfillment of their dreams.

With all the media coverage about self-esteem, many folks associate self-esteem with conceit. Other common misconceptions are that participating in a special program or courses can raise self-esteem forever, or that taking time to focus on yourself will lead to selfishness.

To sort out common myths about self-esteem, let's begin with a definition of self-esteem. It is simply your self-image or how you feel about yourself. These thoughts and feelings can be both positive and negative and are based on your experiences and relationships. Positive experiences and relationships can help raise self-esteem, while negative experiences and relationships can hinder self-esteem. As we grow older, another important factor is how we handle these experiences throughout our lives. It is

important to remember no single event or person can determine your level of self-esteem. Developing self-esteem is a lifetime process.

Activity 1

- ◆ Give every member a sheet of paper and pencil.
- ◆ Ask the group to take a few minutes and list some positive and negative experiences and/or relationships that have impacted their self-esteem.
- ◆ Ask participants to mentally note how they may have overcome negative experiences or relationships and turned them into positive ones.
- ◆ Encourage members to share one experience if they feel comfortable.

The Importance of Self-Esteem

Why should we work at feeling better about ourselves? Will it really impact my life and those around me? Research has shown that persons with high self-esteem accept challenges, work to develop new skills, enjoy meeting new associates and being with others, remain flexible, and adapt to change effectively. People with low self-esteem often have limited confidence in their own skills, may be reluctant to try new opportunities, and may have a distorted view of themselves and others. They may believe others to be superior to them. They may feel that their lives and self-concept are always the result of things happening to them and not realize that they can make things happen.

Can Your Self-Image be Changed?

Yes, self-image can be changed. But it won't happen overnight and not as the result of one educational opportunity or personal experience. Working on your self-image is a lifetime commitment to improve the quality of your own life and the lives of those around you. To begin the process, take a hard look at yourself and pledge to give yourself the following:

- ◆ *Acceptance* of your own strengths and weaknesses. Change weaknesses that you can change; enhance and build upon your strengths.
- ◆ *Encouragement*. Believe you can accomplish goals. Begin by listing short- and long-term goals and breaking those goals into reasonable steps. Plan to succeed; remember the words of Dr. Robert Schuller, "Life is a cinch by the inch, and hard by the yard."
- ◆ *Respect* for being the unique individual you are. There's absolutely no one else on this earth quite like you. Celebrate your uniqueness and you will be a model for others.
- ◆ *Time* to concentrate on you own personal roadmap to becoming the person you want to be, and time to celebrate your lessons learned and your successes. In the process, learn to enjoy being yourself. You will be more enjoyable to be around for others.

Activity 2 — Road Map to Success

- ◆ Provide every member with piece of colored or plain paper.
- ◆ Ask members to write down one short- or long-term goal they would like to achieve.
- ◆ Ask members to map out steps they can take beginning today to get closer to achieving the goal. Be sure to remind members that they need to break down the goal into obtainable steps and focus on one step at a time.
- ◆ After members have completed the process, encourage them to take the map home and post it somewhere.

- ◆ As a follow-up for next meeting, ask members if they would like to report on their progress. Plan a destination party.

Can We Help Others Feel Better About Themselves?

With all the emphasis on self, what about friends, family members, and acquaintances? While we are responsible for our own reactions, thoughts, and feelings, we can help others by:

- ◆ *modeling* a good self-image, and not putting yourself or others down;
- ◆ *practicing* positive talk—not flowery compliments, but looking for good qualities in others; (family members need at least two minutes of positive feedback each day);
- ◆ *helping* children and young adults set reasonable goals and objectives and encouraging youth to develop new skills and new interests;
- ◆ *celebrating* the small and large successes of others by sending a note or phoning others to say you have noticed their good work and/or progress toward a goal;
- ◆ *letting* others know you care about them for themselves not because of their success; and
- ◆ *sharing* positive and uplifting reading materials and tapes with others.

Activity 3 — Practice Positive Talk

- ◆ Provide every member with one sheet of paper.
- ◆ Give every member a pen or colored pencil.
- ◆ Tape paper to every member's back.
- ◆ Ask members to write down honest positive sentences on each person's paper. Try to focus on positive personal traits and be specific so each member can appreciate positive feedback. Be sure everyone is included.
- ◆ Encourage members to keep these papers and to re-read these positive remarks when they have periods of self-doubt.

Activity 4 — Practice Positives

Setup for lesson instructor: Prepare easy sentence completions and cut them into strips. Put sentences into a basket, along with a piece of candy or treat and ask each member to complete. The objective is to promote discussion about oneself in a group setting.

Begin by reflecting and practicing positive self-talk. We can easily do it about others, but it's hard to talk about ourselves. Encourage members to listen carefully to one another and provide support to each person.

Examples of sentences:

An important project I have completed is

I'm proud that I

I like when I

I am glad that I have helped

My new goal for this year is

In Summary

Self-esteem is simply your self-image or how you feel about yourself. Everyone has positive and negative thoughts and reactions to experiences and relationships.

As we grow older, how we handle positive and negative experiences and relationships is an important factor in our self-esteem.

Our self-image can be enhanced by a lifelong process of building upon strengths, overcoming obstacles, learning from negative experiences, and enriching our life with lifelong learning opportunities. Enjoy the journey.

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