

Enhancing your Self-Esteem

What is self-esteem?

Self-esteem is our sense of self-worth. It is how we view and judge ourselves. When we have healthy self-esteem we accept ourselves and know that we are worthy, valuable, likeable or loveable. Self-esteem is not determined by our abilities – that's called self-confidence. For example, someone may know that they are capable or that they have certain skills, but they may still not feel worthy and valuable. The following ideas are some ways we can nourish a positive self-esteem.

Identify and challenge your Inner Critic

First of all be an observer of your thoughts or self-talk. Identify what you say about yourself and the things you do. Are you critical, judgemental and/or expect yourself to be perfect? Do you give yourself lots of 'shoulds' (I should be nice to people all the time) or 'musts'? (I must get a distinction for this assignment). Do you label yourself in derogatory ways? (I'm stupid/ugly/not good enough)? Do you use extreme words like 'never' (I'll never get anywhere in life) and 'always'? (I always goof up). Be non judgemental as you identify your Inner Critic and make a commitment to yourself that you will change the ways you think about yourself as this is an important key to enhancing your self esteem.

Keep a record of negative self-talk and practise confronting it. Use the following headings at the top of 6 columns on a page:

1. Event/Situation; 2. What I say to myself; 3. How I feel; 4. How helpful is this self-talk and how realistic is this self-talk?; 5. What is more realistic and helpful self-talk that I could give myself?; 6. How I feel when I hear more helpful and realistic self-talk.

Replace your Inner Critic with an Inner Supporter

As you learn to identify your Inner Critic, experiment with ways to block and silence it. Some people find a phrase they can use to silence it like 'get off my back' or 'stop it – that's poison'. Some people imagine they can shrink their Inner Critic right down until it fits into a matchbox, or they can turn the volume down.

Someone who supports you is someone who encourages you, nurtures you and cares for you. A supporter is also someone who helps you solve problems, someone who encourages you to think of lots of options, the pros and cons of each option and how to go about implementing a solution to your problem. It's great to have friends who are supportive, but you can also develop your own internal supporter.

At the end of each day write down the things you feel pleased about that you have done (I'm glad I talked to Jane at the bus stop), acknowledge positives in yourself and give an example (I'm caring – I listened to a friend who was feeling sad) and the things you appreciated about the day (the warmth of the sun, delicious food, interesting lectures).

If you find this difficult, start with one thing on the first day, two on the second and build up at your own pace.

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Treat yourself like a best friend

This includes how you talk to yourself about yourself and how you behave. For example, if your friend was feeling down you would not tell them that they are stupid, nor would you lock them away and not let them do things that would help them feel better. You would listen to them, support them and help them to think of something that might make them feel better. You might also say 'It's OK to feel sad/angry/ fearful' and not make them feel bad because they have feelings.

Set realistic goals

Work out what is important to you. What are your goals in life? Think about your long-term goals (write yourself a letter from the future saying what you have achieved), medium term goals (what do I want to achieve for myself over the next semester/month or even the next week) and short-term goals. When thinking about a short term goal, ask yourself: 'What do I want to do TODAY that will lead me to feeling good about myself and in control of my life?' or 'What do I want to achieve in this study session?' Writing down your goals is a great motivator and guide to achieve what is important to you.

Time for self care

Care for yourself and nurture yourself each day, especially if you are going through a difficult period. For example, take a long warm bath, play your favourite music, watch a funny film, spend time with a friend. When you do this, watch out for your Inner Critic who might say you don't deserve this. You do!

Create your own powerful affirmations

Affirmations are powerful antidotes to negative self-talk and your Inner Critic. Create them in the first person, present tense and in the most positive way you can. For example 'I am a worthwhile person' or 'I am capable'. Write them down and/or repeat them to yourself many times a day. Rather than dwelling on the negatives, think about things, events, people, conversations in the past, present and the future that remind you of your strengths, your worth as a person and the things you enjoy.

Conclusion

Self-esteem is essential to our psychological well-being. If you find it difficult to nourish your self-esteem you may find it beneficial to talk to a Counsellor. There are also lots of books, CDs, tapes and web sites on this subject, including the audio recording from Student Assist titled 'Enhance Your Self Esteem'

For further information contact the UNE Counsellors at:

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