



## Improving Self-Esteem

### What is Self-Esteem?

Self-esteem is a term used to describe the value that we place upon ourselves as people. Our self-esteem is constantly changing and evolving in response to the situations that we find ourselves in. It can trigger thoughts and feelings about ourselves and other people that influence the way we respond to our experience throughout the day, and that often take the form of self-talk, opinions or judgements that may be helpful or unhelpful, for example:

*“Other people are better than me”: “I am a failure”*

**or**

*“I deserve to be treated kindly”: “I’m not perfect, but I’m basically OK”*

These judgements can become so habitual that we are unaware of their influence on us from day to day.

Whilst we generally think of self-esteem as something we either have or don’t have, the reality is that there is a scale of self-esteem that we may move up and down at different times and in different situations. Some people have a generally healthy level of self-esteem where they think positively and kindly about themselves most of the time, but may struggle in certain situations.

Other people, however, may find that their self-esteem is frequently so low that it prevents them from leading the life they would like to have. For example, they may believe that *“I always say the wrong thing”* and this belief may cause them to stop speaking up in meetings at work or making social arrangements. With this way of thinking, they may gradually become more isolated, which lowers their self-esteem still further and only serves to confirm their belief that they *“always say the wrong thing”*.

### How do I know if my self-esteem is low?

If you are struggling with low self-esteem it is likely that you may be experiencing some of the following:

**Thoughts:** Self-criticism; frequently blaming yourself; repetitive memories of things you have “done wrong” or that you find embarrassing. Discounting the positive and focusing on flaws/errors

**Feelings:** Sad or depressed; worried; guilty; ashamed; frustrated; angry

**Behaviours:** Going out of your way to please others; finding it difficult to speak up for yourself; avoiding challenges or confrontation of any kind. Avoiding eye contact / keeping head down; over-compensating for perceived flaws by rigidly sticking to high standards (or striving to over-achieve)

## **What can I do to improve my self esteem?**

When thinking about making changes, see if you can approach them from the mindset of making the changes because you care about yourself, rather than because you assume you are inadequate or not good enough as you are. This simple step towards self compassion can set you on the right road.

Here are some ideas to try:

### **Challenge negative thinking**

Next time you think or say something that is self-critical, challenge yourself by asking the following questions:

*What is the evidence for this?*

*What am I responding to?*

*What would a friend say to me if they heard me talking this way?*

*What would I say to a friend who was talking this way?*

### **Notice the positive**

Get yourself a notebook and allow yourself some time at the end of each day to think back and record positive experiences from the day: For example, things you did that you feel went well; positive feedback or support you received from other people, or what you did that you enjoyed doing.

You could also try writing down a list of your positive attributes, for example personal qualities or skills. If you are not used to acknowledging your strengths this may feel uncomfortable to start with, so you may need to work on it a little at a time, noting and challenging any negative self-talk that might arise.

### **Try something new**

If you have been avoiding things or putting off something you'd really like to do because of low self-esteem, for example joining a sports class or starting a conversation with someone you wouldn't usually talk to, give it a try. Regard this as an experiment to test your assumptions about what will happen. We often have negative predictions about doing new things, and this is especially true for people with low self-esteem. These predictions may turn out to be wrong, disproving your negative thoughts, but even if things don't work out, you can learn from the experience by asking: What went well? What didn't go well? What could I do differently next time to get a better result?

### **Need more help?**

- Oasis-Talk runs a workshop regularly on improving self esteem.
- The mental health charity Mind have some good information including a pdf and video on self esteem which you can access here:

<http://www.mind.org.uk/information-support/types-of-mental-health-problems/self-esteem/#.Vs2nOOZCxCQ>