

## Unit 1: Self-Esteem: Valuing Yourself

### Introduction

Few things in life are so important to our emotional health as the way we feel about ourselves. Look around and see for yourself. Is the happiest or most satisfied person you know also the wealthiest? Is he or she the most popular or talented? Is he or she the thinnest or most muscular? For most of us, the answer to these questions is *no*.

Most of us do need a certain amount of money to make our day-to-day lives comfortable. And most of us prefer that others like us. But neither of those achievements means very much to the boy who does not like himself and walks around feeling angry at the world. Success in school or popularity means little to the girl who does not think she is worthwhile and must constantly look to others for praise and acceptance. Almost all people who feel good about themselves and others have *high self-esteem*.

### Self-Esteem: Our View of Ourselves

*Self-esteem* is pride in and acceptance of ourselves. To measure our self-esteem, we ask ourselves the following questions: Do we respect ourselves? Do we feel our lives are worthwhile and important to our families and communities? If our answers are *yes*, then we have a positive attitude about ourselves. We have *high self-esteem*.

When we have *high self-esteem*, we like ourselves for who we are. We recognize that we are not perfect. We give ourselves room to fail because



*Self-esteem is pride in and acceptance of ourselves.*

we appreciate the effort we put into living **worthy** lives. When we live a worthy life, we improve the world around us. We don't have to discover the cure for a deadly disease or be famous to live a worthy life. Treating others and ourselves with respect and being productive in our daily lives are characteristics of a worthy life. Because people with *high self-esteem* do not need to **criticize** or find fault with others to build themselves up, they tend to respect other people. Their confidence in their efforts and abilities makes them less dependent on the praise of others for **self-satisfaction**.

When we see ourselves as having little value, we are experiencing *low* self-esteem. We have trouble liking ourselves. We may demand perfection from ourselves, and we constantly criticize ourselves. We see our own **imperfections** as flags waving in the wind, announcing our lack of value to others and ourselves. We may try to explain away our faults because we cannot accept ourselves as imperfect.

Low self-esteem makes us **vulnerable** to the judgments of others. We are unprotected and open to attack or hurt. We may do things to gain praise from others. No matter how much effort or thought we put into our education, our jobs, a project, or a relationship, our satisfaction will depend on the judgment of others. If we have low self-esteem, we may criticize someone to make ourselves look better in the eyes of other people. We may spend a lifetime seeing ourselves as we believe others see us instead of looking inward and facing and appreciating who we are.

Even some of the healthiest people will have moments of low self-esteem. All of us have to do some work in order to build and maintain high self-esteem.



*Healthy people will also have moments of low self-esteem.*

## Where Does Self-Esteem Come From?

Self-esteem begins to develop at birth. When we are newborns, our needs are very basic. We feel hunger and cry for food. We need our soiled diapers changed. We find warmth in our parents' arms and comfort in their loving voices. In time, we develop more than physical needs. We begin to have emotional needs. We want love and a sense of security from our parents and caretakers. All of our happiness and **contentment** comes from our surroundings—the world *out there*.

## The Family: Where It All Begins



We do not understand all of the factors that create our self-esteem. We do know that much of our



feelings about ourselves first developed from how our world responded to us. Our families or our caretakers were the earliest people to influence our self-esteem. If they made us feel good about ourselves, we had a good chance of developing high esteem. If they let us make mistakes without **condemning** or harshly judging us, we could learn to accept ourselves—and others.



*Our families or our caretakers were the earliest people to influence our self-esteem.*

If, however, they belittled us or continually criticized our efforts, we tended to develop low self-esteem. Low self-esteem can make any mirror reflect a **distorted** image. Every

time we look in a mirror, we see someone who is less than we really are. We see the person others have described to us: someone who is not lovable or capable. We see a lie; we see a false image.

## The Self: Where the Development of Self-Esteem Continues

Once we grew old enough to make choices and do things for ourselves, much of the responsibility for our self-esteem became our own. Both the way we approached our daily responsibilities and our willingness to examine ourselves honestly greatly influenced our self-esteem.

**Our Daily Life.** Those of us who make a sincere and worthy effort in our daily lives are most likely to develop high self-esteem. Do we study for exams? Do we sit down and focus on our notes and class materials? Do

we pay attention to our duties at our jobs? Do we try to be understanding and respectful towards our parents and siblings? If we can answer *yes*, then we are making a worthy effort. This effort will be reflected in our self-esteem.

If, on the other hand, we do not make an effort to do things well, we will see ourselves as having little value. If we behave selfishly towards our families and friends, we will not feel our role in our family and community is important.

### Seeing Ourselves Clearly.

The famous Greek philosopher Socrates claimed self-knowledge is the starting point: *know thyself*. The *maxim* (general rule expressed in a few words) *know thyself* is attributed to a number of ancient Greek philosophers. “Know thyself” means learning the good, the bad, and the ugly of who you are as an individual. The first rule to good health is to know thyself. Knowing ourselves, knowing our positive qualities and our imperfections, and accepting ourselves are important in building high self-esteem.



*Sarah has received a positive message while growing up which has helped her develop a good self-concept.*

Your **self-ideal** is your mental image of what you would like to be, while your **self-concept** is the current mental image you have of yourself. The truth about ourselves is easier to live with than the **fictions**, false images, and lies we sometimes develop about ourselves. Living with an honest image of ourselves makes life satisfying. Living with a fiction is tiring—we have to constantly remember the lies we’ve told ourselves and others.

### The Inner Voice: Talking to Ourselves

Our ability to think about ourselves develops as we grow. We might say that we develop a point of view about ourselves. Whereas the newborn sees only the surrounding world, the older child sees both the surrounding world and himself or herself. We find ourselves actually



thinking about ourselves. We begin to develop attitudes about ourselves. A voice within ourselves begins to speak. All of us have heard this voice inside. It is hard to ignore and can carry great authority.



*Our ability to think about ourselves develops as we grow.*

Our minds often comment on how we feel and see ourselves. Our inner voice very likely will comment on whether we are worthy or unworthy people. “Yes,” it may say, “you deserve to be well liked and appreciated. You are not perfect, but you are still lovable and full of good qualities.”

In some of us, the inner voice is not so kind. “No,” it may say, “no matter how hard you try or what you do, you’re just not as worthwhile as others. And look at all your imperfections. Why aren’t you perfect?”

Fortunately, we can always improve our self-esteem.

## Enemies of High Self-Esteem

### The Unsupportive Family

Our families were the first to influence our self-esteem. For some of us, they are the most important influence in raising or lowering our self-esteem. Unfortunately, some of us grow up in unsupportive families. Our families may be verbally **abusive**. Their **criticism** and hurtful words can stunt or wear away our positive sense of who we are.

In time, we may begin to believe what they say about us. We may **internalize** or take these hurtful words *inside* ourselves and think they are true. We may *internalize* statements such as “You can’t do anything right!” or “Why are you so stupid?” or “Why can’t you be like your sister or brother?” Later in life, we may very likely accept the same abuse from our girlfriend or boyfriend or spouse. As our self-esteem lessens, we begin to expect the abuse and believe we deserve it. Our inner voice begins to repeat these abusive statements, like a tape recorder that can’t be turned off. We will begin to hear these comments running through our heads.

### The Undemanding Self

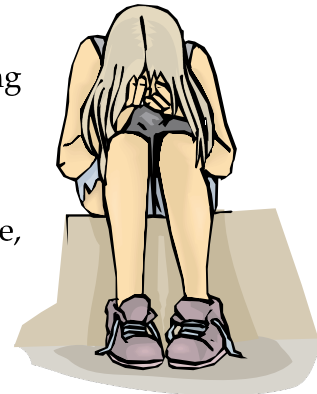
Building high self-esteem is not easy. However, some of us have fallen into the habit of taking the easy road. We don’t study for a test. When we do poorly or flunk the test, we then feel bad about ourselves and consider ourselves “not too smart in algebra” or a “loser at school.” If we don’t make a good effort in our daily lives, is it fair for us to feel bad or pity ourselves for our failures? Obviously not. And if we do make a good effort, then whatever the outcome, we should not criticize our effort.

Some social scientists argue that our national **culture** encourages us *not* to take responsibility for ourselves. We permit ourselves to feel like victims who cannot change our lives. The news often carries stories of people who commit crimes and then blame some problem in their life. “I took to crime because my parents didn’t love me,” or “I abused my spouse (or children) because my parents abused me.” Nobody doubts the difficulty of growing up abused. The **undemanding** self, however, lets this abuse become the reason for living an unworthy life. It can be hard, but each of us needs to learn that feeling bad about ourselves is a good reason to build a better life. It is not a good reason to hurt others.

## The “Any Failure Makes Me a Total Failure” Trap

The *undemanding* self can create another enemy of high self-esteem: the “this failure means I’m a total failure” trap. Suppose you take a dance class. You notice others in the class who have more talent in dancing than you do. Almost all of us will at one time or another find ourselves in this situation. It may not be in a dance class; instead, it may be in an English or biology class. Perhaps it is on a baseball field, in an art class, or in a group learning how to juggle. **Remember:** No one is instantly good at everything!

The problem is never that we are not good at dancing or baseball or art. The problem begins when we believe that our lack of talent or accomplishment in one area or skill represents who we are in total. Sometimes this will happen when a peer, a classmate, or even a person in authority, for example a teacher, tells us we are not a good person because of a single failure or lack of skill. The truth may be that we are not a good dancer. But lacking talent in dancing means that we lack talent in dancing. It means nothing more.



*Don’t fall into the “I’m a total failure” trap.*

The person with high self-esteem knows she has other talents and skills. She knows she is not perfect and never will be. She knows that no person or no single experience can turn one failure into a full description of who she is. In addition, the person with high self-esteem has the will and confidence to make herself into a better dancer. She knows she can improve on just about any skill.

## The Pressure from Peer Groups and Cliques

As we grow older, our circle grows to include more than just our families and caretakers. It begins to include other children, or peers. Children tend to form **cliques** or groups with other children. A clique is a peer group that demands devotion from its members. Boys and girls in cliques demand **conformity**. They expect members to dress and act in certain ways. They judge harshly those who do not conform.



*Cliques judge harshly those who do not conform.*

Most of us have belonged or will belong to a clique at some time in our life. Cliques provide us with support. In a clique, we find a ready-made set of guidelines for our behavior. And we find others who praise us for following those *rules* and guidelines. We have a need to belong to peer groups, and joining a clique is one way to **satisfy** that need.

Cliques, however, can lessen our self-esteem. At first we may feel good about our acceptance in a group. But in exchange for acceptance, we are asked to give up our independence. If our values and beliefs do not fit those of the clique, then we will feel pressure to become someone we are not—and to give up values that are part of who we are. In time we will feel that the real *us* is beginning to disappear.

Cliques push us further away from knowing ourselves. The more we let others decide what we should believe and how we should act, the less self-respect we will have.

### **The Confusing Messages We Hear from the Media**

Not only can family and peers give us harmful messages, we may also be subjected to harmful messages from the media. The media includes songs we hear; movies and television programs we see; and books, magazines, and newspapers we read. These messages are often contradictory. One movie will tell us that real men use violence to settle disagreements. Another movie will tell us that real men don't need to use violence; instead, they use their brains to solve conflicts. One book tells us that a girl's value is not in her looks. And then a television show will tell us that only beautiful girls are happy with their lives. Many times we will even find *mixed messages* in the same television show or movie.



*The messages from television are often contradictory.*

## Getting Caught in a Vicious Cycle: Food, Drugs, and Unhealthy Relationships

When we feel something essential is missing from our lives, we may use something else to fill the void, or hole. If, for example, we feel unloved or unpopular, we may use food, drugs, or unhealthy sexual contact to make ourselves feel better. After a parent yells at us, a boyfriend or girlfriend hurts our feelings, or we do poorly on an exam, we may stuff ourselves with food. Even more potentially dangerous, we may use drugs to ease the hurt or engage in unprotected sexual activity.

And then the vicious cycle begins. We feel bad about ourselves because we've overeaten and put on weight. We feel guilt because we have put drugs in our bodies. We feel guilt over the sexual activity. Then, because we feel bad about ourselves, we indulge again in food or drugs or alcohol or whatever habit we use to block out pain. In an attempt to make ourselves feel better, we only feel worse. On and on it goes, wearing away our self-esteem.

## Building Self-Esteem

Sometimes it can seem impossible to develop high self-esteem, especially for teenagers. During our teen years, most of us are insecure. The cliques around us put pressure on us to conform and be a certain way. We are trying to figure out who we are and what we want to be. We're exploring our independence as we begin to try out new roles and take responsibility for ourselves. In the midst of all this confusion, we still need to develop a positive attitude towards ourselves.

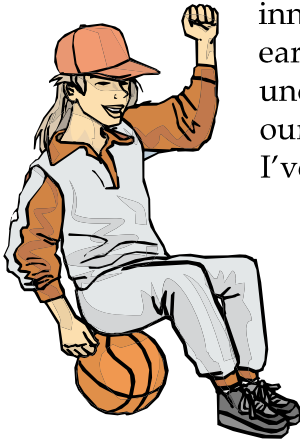


*During our teen years, most of us are insecure.*

## Turn Off the Negative Inner Voice

First, learn to turn off the negative inner voice. The inner voice can haunt us. It seems to come out of nowhere, to stand behind us like a dark shadow. The inner voice often speaks to us when we're most vulnerable. We've just experienced a setback or failure. We weren't invited to a party. We flunked an algebra exam. Our girlfriend or boyfriend just broke up with us. Something hurtful happens, and the inner voice starts to tell us that we're not worthy or we're a failure.





*Learn to turn off the negative inner voice.*

Each of us can develop ways to silence the negative inner voice. Some of us may find we can just turn a deaf ear to it. Some of us can silence the voice by understanding where it comes from. We can tell ourselves: “Those are other people’s voices and words I’ve let become my own. But no more—I won’t listen!”

Still others of us will be helped by humor. That’s right, just laugh at the voice when it creeps into your mind and starts spilling negatives.

Learn to use **positive self-talk**, which is talking to yourself in a positive way about your characteristics and abilities. Focus on the good aspects in your life while working on your weaknesses.

### **Accept the Warts ... and All**

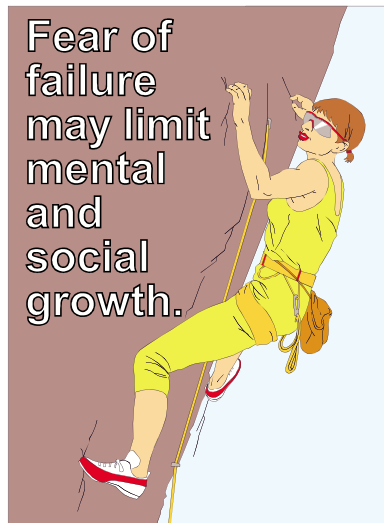
All of us have imperfections. Imperfections make the world a more interesting place. Imagine if everyone were perfect—what a bore that would be! Accepting our imperfections will help put us in touch with who we are. To help you see yourself in a true light, take a sheet of paper and begin making a list. On the left side of the page, list all the activities and skills you’re good at. Put down everything you can think of—from babysitting to listening to a friend. Keep the list with you for a day or two. You’ll be amazed at the length of the list. When you’re done, absorb the list. In other words, study it and note just how many skills you have.

And what about warts? On the right side of the page, list those skills you’ve tried but haven’t had much success with. When you’re done, put a check next to those skills you haven’t given much effort to. After all, why should you be good at those things you’ve had little or no training in?

And remember this: Most successful people never let their failures stop them. In fact, most successful people say that failure was an important part of their success. They learned from their failures. They knew that success would not come easily.

## Failure and Risk-taking

When we're willing to fail, our world expands. We become willing to try new activities, because we know that all we have to risk is failure—which really isn't much. Yet what we have to gain is a sense of accomplishment and satisfaction. The more times we risk failure, the more times we will experience success. And success will help us build self-esteem.



## Improve Our Body Language

Although we should accept who we are, improving our body language can help improve our self-image. When we see someone shuffling down the hall with his shoulders slumped, his eyes pinned to the ground, we think he has low self-esteem. His body *reflects* the way he feels about himself. He needs to reverse this reflection. By developing good posture—straightening his shoulders, walking smoothly, and looking straight ahead—he can begin to feel better about his body and himself.

Changing our body language will also change the way others respond to us. They will have more respect for us—because they will see we have respect for ourselves. It's a cliché, but it's true: It's hard for others to like us if we don't like ourselves.

## Respect in Action: Battling Peer Pressure

Cliques and peer groups often pressure us into certain behaviors. We begin to drink or do drugs to be accepted. We decide to dislike and shun certain classmates because the group does. The group labels these behaviors *cool*. But what could be less cool than letting others make our decisions? Have we forgotten that our heroes are those who remain committed to their beliefs instead of conforming to the beliefs of those around them?

## The Best Kind of Revenge

Few of us are so lucky as to be surrounded by people who are always supportive. Sometimes parents or siblings take out their frustrations on us. Or maybe it's a teacher. Almost certainly some of our peers will be cruel at times. And no one can escape the media and its sometimes twisted messages that confuse us and make us believe that we're missing something—beauty, talent, likability. All of these influences can wear on our self-esteem and make us feel bad about ourselves. What should we do?



*Work hard at your interests and be as successful as you can be.*

To get even with someone who has done you harm, do not attempt to harm them or yourself. Do not get even with an unsupportive or unloving parent by committing crimes or doing drugs. Do not get even with cruel classmates by fighting or starting rumors. The best kind of *revenge* against people who have harmed us is to live a *worthy* life. A life *you* know is deserving of respect and valuable or honorable.

Work hard at your interests and be as successful as you can be. If you let others influence you to live an unworthy life, then you are letting them hurt you forever. If, instead, you succeed and raise your self-esteem, then you end the hurt others have done and you take control of your own life.

## Summary

*Self-esteem* is pride in and acceptance of ourselves. If we have high self-esteem, we see our life as *worthy* and productive. We like ourselves for who we are, and we do not *condemn* ourselves for our *imperfections*. If we have low self-esteem, we do not appreciate our efforts and work. We have trouble liking ourselves and may not be able to tolerate our imperfections. Almost all people who feel good about themselves have high self-esteem.

Our self-esteem often is influenced first by our families. Supportive families make us feel good about ourselves. Unsupportive families may condemn our imperfections and mock our efforts. This can lead to a *distorted* image of ourselves. As we grow older, we become able to shape and raise our self-esteem.

Enemies of high self-esteem include an unsupportive family, an *undemanding* self, pressure from peer groups and *cliques*, and confusing messages conveyed by the media. If our self-esteem is low, we may use food or drugs as a way to make ourselves feel better. Unfortunately, these addictions will, in the long run, only make us feel worse.



*Our self-esteem often is influenced first by our families.*

We can build self-esteem by examining ourselves and noting just how many skills and talents we have. We can accept ourselves for who we are—imperfections and all. We can learn to fail without condemning ourselves. And we can risk failure so we can succeed and feel good about ourselves. When those around us hurt us, we can answer with the best kind of revenge: living a worthy life and taking control of our future.