

Learning to Feel Good About Yourself



A Valuable Asset

Having a good sense of one's own worth, or high self-esteem, is the most important asset a person can have. People who feel good about themselves can cope better in difficult situations than those who feel unsure of themselves. In fact, people who have low self-esteem may have problems dealing with relatively minor problems.

Most people were raised to be good children, and later, good productive adults. Some people were raised with the almost impossible expectation to be perfect. Yet, the fact is that human beings are not perfect. All people fall short of their own expectations and sometimes they disappoint others as well. However, people who have high self-esteem continue to feel good about themselves even when they make mistakes or when others criticize them. On the other hand, people who have low self-esteem are at the mercy of the opinions of those around them. When others are pleased with them they feel good, but when others are disappointed or angry with them, they feel worthless.

Where does high self-esteem come from? Throughout our lives others give us messages about our skills, lovability, and value. First, parents and other family members provide messages for self-esteem. Later, teachers, friends, and classmates communicate these messages and later still, our boss, spouse, and children help shape self-esteem. Love, acceptance, and appreciation of the person, including limitations as well as abilities, add to feelings of high

self-esteem. However, people who found little love or acceptance in their childhood can learn ways to build their own self-esteem.

What Hurts Self-esteem?

Most people discover that they have a good sense of self-worth when things are going well. During difficult times or periods of great change, the future is more uncertain and it's easy to feel less confident about oneself and abilities. This is especially true when family members and friends have difficulty supporting each other.

The events or problems that can often lower self-esteem for adults include:

- Severe financial stress;
- An unfamiliar new job;
- Loss of job;
- Working for a critical or unappreciative boss;
- Loss of a loved one;
- Children growing up and leaving home;
- A move to a new community;
- Serious behavior problems of a child or teen;
- Divorce, separation, or difficulties relating to a spouse;
- A physical disability;
- Development of serious health problems; and
- Chemical dependency or addiction.

However, steps can be taken to raise a damaged sense of self-esteem. Consider these examples of how six people handle difficult situations. Note how their self-esteem is affected in each case.

Sue and Barb

Sue enjoyed being a fulltime wife and mother. She had time to do things with and for her husband, Jim, and their two children that she couldn't have done if she'd been working outside the home. The children's school activities filled many evenings and weekends. She usually enjoyed the housekeeping tasks that some of her friends complained about—especially cooking, gardening, sewing, and decorating. She was proud of her own abilities, as well as the achievements of her husband and children.

Things changed after the children finished high school. Her oldest, Ann, went to college and got a teaching degree. Sue was proud of her daughter and pleased when Ann got a good job in another part of the state. But her new location and busy teaching responsibilities meant that sometimes there would be months between visits. Sue missed having Ann come home on weekends so they could spend time together and catch up on each other's news. Her son, Mark was newly married and busy with his own life.

Sue was proud of her children's successes, but something was missing in her own life. She hadn't realized how much of her time and energy had been devoted to the children and their activities.

Some of Sue's favorite homemaking activities were no longer as fulfilling, either.

Sue often found herself wondering what was left for her and what contribution, if any, she was making. She and Jim seemed to have less in common to talk about since the children had moved away. Many of Sue's friends were working and she was often lonely during the day. Only a few years ago, she had had plenty to do and felt good about herself. Gradually, she began to feel she wasn't worth much to herself or anyone else.

Barb was in a similar situation.

She, too, went through a major adjustment when her children left home. For many years the main activities for Barb and her husband, Tom, had revolved around their three children. But all was different now. Their two oldest were married and one lived out of state. The youngest was still in college but worked weekends and many vacations. Most of the time, it was just Barb and Tom.

There was certainly an empty spot inside Barb after the last of the children grew up. She sometimes felt quite lost without all the noise and activity, the day-to-day problems to solve, and the feeling of being needed.

Many of the friends she used to do things with were working and Barb, too, considered getting a job. But they didn't need the money and Tom often had to work at night. If Barb got a job, she would see even less of her husband. She knew that while they each needed to do their "own thing" part of the time, it was also important for them to learn to relate to each other again as husband and wife—the way they did before the kids came—and that meant spending time together.

Barb knew that she needed to use her energy in new ways. She needed some contact with other people to help with the loneliness. She made a list of several possible new activities for herself—volunteer work at the

hospital, taking an office in her church women's group, delivering meals-on-wheels to homebound elderly, joining an exercise class at the YMCA, and taking an evening adult class at the high school. Wisely, she decided she couldn't handle too many new things at once, so she decided to first try one thing and add new activities later.

It felt good to have a plan. She started by signing up for an aerobics class. She was a little nervous when she went the first time but she recognized a couple of women and became better acquainted with them. Soon she looked forward to going and made plans to get together with one of the women outside class. Next in her plan she agreed to take a responsible position in her church group. When the children were living at home, she didn't have the time or energy; but now she was able to do a good job. She enjoyed the responsibility and was proud to be able to help her church this way. Barb discovered that as she became more involved, her spirits lifted and she had more energy. In time, she had plenty to do and felt good about herself. She and Tom had more to talk about and they began to enjoy their time together. Barb had gone from feeling displaced and lonely to feeling good about herself again.

Jean and Marge

During the years she was home with two preschoolers, Jean had looked forward to returning to work. She and Duane needed the money and she was tired of spending all her time with little ones who were too young to carry on a real conversation. So, when Jimmie started school Jean got a job as an office assistant for a large company. She knew it would be challenging to find time for everything but she was excited about starting work. Much to her surprise she was able to master her new tasks quickly. Things were going well.

But after about six months on the job, Jean noticed she was feeling tense and irritable at home. She often had a

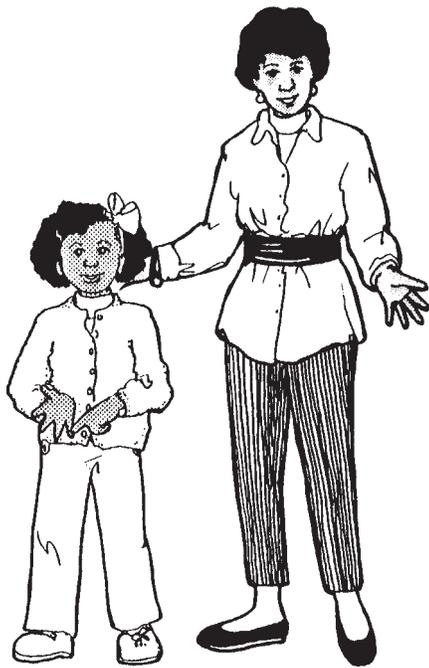
headache by the end of the day at work. She had thought Duane would do more around the house and with the kids. She felt loaded with too much to do, both at work and at home. Her boss was happy with her work but she was expected to do more and more in the office. Going back to work was supposed to make things better, but instead she was feeling more frustrated than she ever had at home with the kids. No matter how hard she worked or how late she stayed up, she never seemed to get caught up.

One day at lunch, she talked to her coworker, Marge, about how hard things were. Marge was a single parent raising three school-agers. Even with all the responsibilities she had, Marge usually seemed relaxed and good-natured. When Jean asked her how she managed everything, Marge became serious. "Well, it isn't a bed of roses for me either. When I was first divorced I just couldn't see how I could keep going—the kids, no money, the housework, and on top of it we had to find another place to live. Then I got sick. But I think it was the best thing that could have happened because I went to a doctor who really helped me see what I was doing to myself. She told me that if I was going to take care of the kids and keep everything going, I would have to learn to take care of myself and realize that the kids were more important than the housework. I took her advice. I don't worry if the house isn't just the way I'd like it. When I come home and the house is a mess, I remember the money I've made that day and I give the kids a hug. Then, together we clear the table and fix supper. Once in a while my 13-year-old has a meal ready for us. It really helps to remind myself that I can't do everything."

After their conversation, Jean had a lot to think about. If Marge had learned to make things better for herself, maybe she could too. Jean made a list of things she could do to make her situation better. First on her list, Jean decided to resign from a

volunteer committee and spend that time doing something fun just for herself. Then she thought about sitting down with Duane and the kids to list household chores that had to be done each week. Maybe it would work to plan a family outing each Saturday after everyone had helped with the chores. Next, she made up her mind to ask her parents to keep the kids for a weekend next month so she and Duane could have some time just to themselves. She knew there were other things she would have to deal with, but at least this was a start. Maybe there wouldn't be time or energy to do everything the way she used to, but she was determined to find some ways to take care of herself so she didn't feel guilty and rushed all the time.

Many women find themselves trying to do the impossible—being excellent at work, being loving and available wives and mothers, and keeping house the way they could if they were not working outside the home. When there isn't enough time for everything, they often feel worried and guilty.



Concentrating on what is possible can go a long way toward a more balanced life.

The Difference Is in Self-esteem

The “empty nest,” a divorce, trouble at work, or not having enough time to do a good job at any one thing—all can trigger feelings of worthlessness. It's not the situation itself that's important, but rather how people choose to deal with it. At first, Sue and Jean apparently didn't think they could do anything about their problems. Instead, they seemed to simply accept their fate of being unhappy. On the other hand, Barb and Marge faced similar feelings and decided they could do something about the situation. As they worked on a plan, one step at a time, things got better. It was Barb's and Marge's attitude, their good feelings of self-worth, and their plan that made the difference.

Bill and John

Bill was excited when he got the job he'd been hoping for—designing software for the computer system at a good-sized business downtown. He was glad he had taken the extra courses that helped him get the job. His new boss seemed pleased to have him on board, and soon Bill fell into the swing of things in the office.

At first, Bill was confident that he could handle the job and he finished his first assignments without much trouble and on time. But after a few months, he began to sense a lot of tension among co-workers. The boss, Mr. Peterson, seemed to play favorites. Bill started to worry about whether he had made a wise decision in accepting the job. He found himself waking up at night worrying about the situation.

Bill had been working on a tough project for more than a month when Mr. Peterson began to hover around him, checking on his progress. Constant hovering by his boss made Bill nervous, and soon he was making foolish mistakes and getting further and further behind. One day,

Mr. Peterson was in a particularly bad mood and caught Bill in an error. It was all Bill could do to keep from cringing when his boss said, “I've sure been wondering lately if I made a mistake hiring you. You can't seem to do anything right!”

If Bill had been unsure of his abilities before, he was even more unsure now. He was afraid to talk about his problems with co-workers for fear they would think less of him. He had trouble at home sharing what was going on with his wife. Sometimes Bill could hear his dad's voice as he had when he was a boy, “If there's any way to mess a thing up, you'll do it.” Bill didn't want to quit his job, but he didn't know where to turn for help, either. His self-worth suffered and the knot in his stomach reminded him of his work problems even when he was at home trying to relax.

John had a similar job situation.

John was pleased when his boss, Mr. Miller, asked him to be parts manager at the automobile dealership where he had worked as a floor salesperson for two years. He would have more responsibilities in the new position as well as a good pay increase. He knew it would be hard to fill the shoes of Frank, who had retired after 18 years as parts manager for the business. Frank knew the stock backwards and forwards and he knew his customers and what they needed. But John had learned new things before and he was confident he could do a good job.

The first few weeks at the new job went pretty well, even though John knew he wasn't as efficient as Frank had been. But after several months, John felt his boss was getting impatient with him. Mr. Miller didn't like it when customers had to wait while John searched through the stock and the books to see if he had a part.

One day, when a customer made a special trip to the store from a neighboring town for a carburetor, John

knew he was in trouble. Mr. Miller overheard the customer yelling at John, "Boy, I don't know what's going on around here. Frank always had what I wanted in stock. This is the second time in two months I've made a trip over here for nothing." The customer was really angry and John knew he'd hear more about it later from his boss.

After the customer left, Mr. Miller said to John, "I just don't know what we're going to do here, John. I've tried to be patient with you, but I just can't afford to get the customers so upset." John could feel his face getting hot and his heart thumping as his boss spoke. He knew there was a problem and he was starting to feel discouraged and incompetent. How could he ever catch up with the skills and knowledge that Frank had?

That night when John went home, his family could tell something was wrong. John hated to tell them about the problems with his job. But he knew he was going to need some support to handle this job problem. After the children went to bed, John told his wife, Betty, about what was going on at work. John discovered that it really helped to share his feelings and he felt encouraged to face the situation. Betty suggested John go out for coffee with another employee and get ideas on how to approach Mr. Miller about the problem.

A few days later, John met with Jerry who had worked at the store for more than 10 years. Jerry knew the boss well and he had worked with Frank, John's predecessor, for years. Together, John and Jerry came up with a plan to present to the boss. Jerry pointed out to John that no one could learn in a couple months what had taken Frank years to learn. The plan included getting Frank to come back half-days for a few weeks to help John learn the system. Jerry suggested that John record specific tasks he completes each day and how he spends his time. They decided to meet again

in a week to go over how best to approach Mr. Miller.

John felt relieved to be working on a plan and to have support from his wife and Jerry. Instead of being depressed and overly anxious, he was able to use his energy to find a solution. He no longer felt that the situation was impossible or that he was to blame for the problem; rather, he simply needed some help in learning how to handle the job. He knew it would be difficult, but his wife and Jerry had convinced him that he needed to discuss a solution with his boss.

There are important differences in the way Bill and John handled their work situations. Both men faced the possibility of lowered self-esteem because of criticisms by their bosses. Bill felt less sure of his abilities and even about who he was as a person. He was afraid to talk to his family or co-workers about his problem, so he didn't receive their encouragement or suggestions. He felt helpless to do anything to improve the situation.



In contrast, John decided to share his problem and get support. He discovered that he could take initiative in approaching his boss to come up with a plan. Bill remained stuck while John moved ahead toward the possibility of a better job situation. Perhaps neither Bill nor John could work out a peaceful solution with the boss, but they could choose alternative ways to deal with the problem, or, as the last resort, to leave the impossible situation.

A Conscious Effort

In these examples, four individuals took steps to deal with their problems and began to feel better about themselves.

You, too, can learn to face problems and new situations in ways that build your self-esteem. Being with other people who see you as a valuable person can give you a real boost. You can also learn to give yourself the compliments you would like to hear from others. You can put the day's tasks on a list, enjoy checking off one after another, and learn to feel good about small things. Most of all, **you can learn to separate your own value from negative things in work or family.**

The following techniques can build self-esteem.

- Share problems with a friend or relative by using the telephone or inviting them over. Say something like, "I've been kind of worried lately and I thought it would help to talk. Do you have a few minutes?"
- Think of an inexpensive activity for you and your spouse or another adult to enjoy. Have friends over. Go for a picnic or go fishing. Try walking or go jogging together.
- Take time for yourself each week to do something fun, perhaps a hobby. Everyone will benefit when you're more relaxed.
- Allow time for physical exercise several days a week to "work off your worries."

- Find a friend to exchange babysitting with if you have young children. This can give you time for yourself or your marriage.

- If your spiritual life has been a source of strength in the past, remind yourself to read, study, pray, or meditate to strengthen your spiritual self.

- Learn to compliment yourself for small tasks accomplished. “What a nice looking stack of clean clothes.” “I’m good at keeping our cars in tip-top shape.” “How nice it is for the family to sit down together for a meal.”

- Start planning how to improve your situation. Get help from a friend or

family member to break the problem into smaller parts; then look at small steps you can take one at a time to improve your situation.

If these suggestions seem impossible to try, it may be that you could benefit from seeing a counselor—a minister trained in counseling, a psychologist, or a social worker. These professionals are trained to help people deal with problems in low self-esteem. Sometimes only a few sessions can help someone deal with a difficult situation and feel better about himself or herself.

It’s easy to come up with the “yes-but’s.” “Yes, but I really don’t have a close friend. And I don’t have time to

get together with other people. I could never share my troubles with another person.” Instead, try to see the positive possibilities.

Of course, you have to create a plan that fits both you and your family. If you don’t already have a close friend, it may be that finding a neighbor to share some of your problems with may help you turn an acquaintance into a good friend.

If you wait for the outside world to provide you with healthy self-esteem, you can be easily disappointed. Real self-esteem comes from inside yourself and from friends who care. Nothing and no one can take away your worth as a person.

. . . and justice for all

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Issued in furtherance of Cooperative Extension work, Acts of May 8 and June 30, 1914, in cooperation with the U.S. Department of Agriculture. Stanley R. Johnson, director, Cooperative Extension Service, Iowa State University of Science and Technology, Ames, Iowa.

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