

Self esteem

Self-esteem is your opinion of yourself. People with healthy self-esteem like themselves and value their achievements. While everyone lacks confidence occasionally, people with low self-esteem feel unhappy or unsatisfied with themselves most of the time. This can be remedied but it takes attention and daily practise to boost self-esteem.

See your doctor for information, advice and referral if you're having trouble improving your self-esteem or if low self-esteem is causing problems such as depression.

Characteristics of low self-esteem

Typically, a person with low self-esteem:

- Is extremely critical of themselves
- Downplays or ignores their positive qualities
- Judges themselves to be inferior to their peers
- Uses negative words to describe themselves such as stupid, fat, ugly or unlovable
- Has discussions with themselves (this is called 'self talk') that are always negative, critical and self blaming
- Assumes that luck plays a large role in all their achievements and doesn't take the credit for them
- Blames themselves when things go wrong instead of taking into account other things over which they have no control such as the actions of other people or economic forces
- Doesn't believe a person who compliments them.

Low self-esteem and quality of life

A low self-esteem can reduce the quality of a person's life in many different ways, including:

- **Negative feelings** – the constant self-criticism can lead to persistent feelings of sadness, depression, anxiety, anger, shame or guilt.
- **Relationship problems** – for example they may tolerate all sorts of unreasonable behaviour from partners because they believe they must earn love and friendship, cannot be loved or are not loveable. Alternatively, a person with low self-esteem may feel angry and bully other people.
- **Fear of trying** – the person may doubt their abilities or worth and avoid challenges.
- **Perfectionism** – a person may push themselves and become an over-achiever to 'atone' for what they see as their inferiority.
- **Fear of judgement** – they may avoid activities that involve other people, like sports or social events, because they are afraid they will be negatively judged. The person feels self-conscious and stressed around others and constantly looks for 'signs' that people don't like them.
- **Low resilience** – a person with low self-esteem finds it hard to cope with a challenging life event because they already believe themselves to be 'hopeless'.
- **Lack of self-care** – the person may care so little that they neglect or abuse themselves, for example, drink too much alcohol.
- **Self-harming behaviours** – low self-esteem puts the person at increased risk of self-harm, for example, eating disorder, drug abuse or suicide.

If at any time you are worried about your mental health or the mental health of a loved one, call Lifeline 13 11 14.

Causes of low self-esteem

Some of the many causes of low self-esteem may include:

- Unhappy childhood where parents (or other significant people such as teachers) were extremely critical
- Poor academic performance in school resulting in a lack of confidence
- Ongoing stressful life event such as relationship breakdown or financial trouble
- Poor treatment from a partner, parent or carer, for example, being in an abusive relationship
- Ongoing medical problem such as chronic pain, serious illness or physical disability
- Mental illness such as an anxiety disorder or depression.

Seek help for underlying self-esteem problems

Chronic problems can be demoralising and lead to self-esteem issues. Seek professional advice for problems such as relationship breakdown, anxiety disorder or financial worries.

Self-esteem building

Self-esteem is strongly related to how you view and react to the things that happen in your life. Suggestions for building self-esteem include:

- **Talk to yourself positively** – treat yourself as you would your best friend. Be supportive, kind and understanding. Don't be hard on yourself when you make a mistake.
- **Challenge negative 'self-talk'** – every time you criticise yourself, stop and look for objective evidence that the criticism is true. (If you feel you can't be objective, then ask a trusted friend for their opinion.) You'll realise that most of your negative self-talk is unfounded.
- **Don't compare yourself to others** – recognise that everyone is different and that every human life has value in its own right. Make an effort to accept yourself, warts and all.
- **Acknowledge the positive** – for example, don't brush off compliments, dismiss your achievements as 'dumb luck' or ignore your positive traits.
- **Appreciate your special qualities** – remind yourself of your good points every day. Write a list and refer to it often. (If you feel you can't think of anything good about yourself, ask a trusted friend to help you write the list.)
- **Forget the past** – concentrate on living in the here-and-now rather than reliving old hurts and disappointments.
- **Tell yourself a positive message everyday** – buy a set of 'inspirational cards' and start each day reading out a new card and carrying the card's message with you all day.
- **Stop worrying** – 'worry' is simply fretting about the future. Accept that you can't see or change the future and try to keep your thoughts in the here-and-now.
- **Have fun** – schedule enjoyable events and activities into every week.
- **Exercise** – it is such a good boost to the brain for all kinds of things but especially in combatting depression and helping you to feel good. Targets need to be step by step, such as starting with a walk round the block once a day, enrolling at a local gym class or going for a swim.
- **Be assertive** – communicate your needs, wants, feelings, beliefs and opinions to others in a direct and honest manner.
- **Practise the above suggestions every day** – it takes effort and vigilance to replace unhelpful thoughts and behaviours with healthier versions. Give yourself time to establish the new habits. Keep a diary or journal to chart your progress.

Seek out support to build self-esteem

Further ways to build self-esteem include:

- Talk to a trusted friend or loved one about your self-esteem issues.
- Browse the Better Health Channel for further information.
- See your doctor for information, advice and possible referral.
- Read books on self-development.
- Take a course in personal development.
- Discuss your issues and get advice from a trained therapist.

Where to get help

- Your doctor
- Your local community health centre
- Find a GP near you who specialises in mental health issues through the [beyondblue](#) website
- [beyondblue](#) Info Line Tel. 1300 22 4636
- Lifeline Tel. 13 11 14
- Kids Helpline Tel. 1800 55 1800
- Suicide Helpline Victoria Tel. 1300 651 251
- Mental Health Foundation Tel. (03) 9427 0407, Monday to Friday, 9am to 5pm
- Relationships Australia (Victoria) Tel. 1300 364 277

Things to remember

- Self-esteem is your opinion of yourself.
- Everyone lacks confidence occasionally but people with low self-esteem are unhappy or unsatisfied with themselves most of the time.
- It takes attention and daily practice to boost a low self-esteem.

This page has been produced in consultation with, and approved by:

NAPCAN

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