

How Do You View Yourself?

Objective

To help you develop a positive but realistic self-image.

You Should Know

Sometimes people have a poor self-image and dwell on their faults rather than their strengths. They measure themselves against an unrealistic ideal of the way that think they “should be.” Where does that unrealistic ideal come from? People who grew up in families where there was a high demand for perfection or achievement sometimes struggle as adults to fulfill those expectations in their work or home lives. Others who were subject to criticism for the least little flaw grew to focus on those flaws as core parts of their self-image, not learning that, in essence, nobody’s perfect. If they do 99 out of 100 things right, they’ll dwell on the one “wrong” thing.

Does this sound familiar? Do you have a running narrative in your mind about how you are not living up to your own self-imposed standards? Do you criticize yourself or feel you are not “good enough”? What would it be like to embrace yourself fully, “warts and all”? Wouldn’t your day be a little easier, a little more pleasant?

What to Do

Here are some ways that you can learn to improve your self-image. After each item, write down one or two *specific things* you will do in relation to that item and when and how you would like to build that particular skill. For instance, for “Exercise,” you might say, “I will take a 20-minute walk at least four times a week, starting next Monday.” Or for “Step Out of Your Bubble,” you might say, “I will go to a museum with a friend sometime in the next month.”

1. Challenge your negative thoughts. Listen closely to what your inner critic says. Ask yourself, is that actually true? Challenge those ingrained beliefs that bring down your self-esteem. Write some statements to counter them here. Example: Instead of “I am not good enough,” try, “I am a worthy and capable human being with strengths and weaknesses.”

Does this happen to you?

5. Notice what's in your control and what isn't. If your poor self-image is related to things you can't control ("If only I were taller, I'd be happier," "If only I looked like Beyoncé, I'd be sexy," etc.), then you are setting yourself up for continued misery. Focus your energy on identifying things in your life that you can do something about and begin to act on those. Write them here.

7. Do something you love to do! Are you passionate about cooking? Reading? Singing? Sports? Computers? Animals? What are you currently doing or not doing to invest time and energy into your passions? What would you like to do more of? Note any excuses or rationalizations you might think of that keep you from pursuing these activities.

8. Be grateful. Current research shows the establishing a "gratitude practice" every day can help boost your mood and your self-esteem. List here some things you are grateful for—it can be small, like the pleasure of chewing a tasty piece of cheese, or big, like your health or your family or having a warm bed at night.

9. Give Back/Pay It Forward. If you suffer from low self-esteem, it's often hard to think about anything but your flaws and limitations. You might have trouble seeing other people's needs sometimes. Consider volunteering some time or money to a cause that has meaning for you, such as the Food Bank or an animal shelter. You might also consider what skills and talents you have that you could pass along to someone else—look into being a mentor or volunteer who helps others to discover their own strengths. What goes around comes around, as they say. Studies show that the happiest people are the ones who are involved in serving others.

10. Find Positive People in Your Life. Maybe you feel down a lot and avoid hanging out with others whose lives might seem “better” than yours. Identify the people in your life whom you feel comfortable with, who bolster your self-esteem, who see your wonderful qualities and accept your flaws and mistakes. Make an effort to spend more time with them and less time with people who bring you down. What would you like to do toward meeting that goal?

11. Exercise! Sure, you've probably heard this a million times but it's true. Exercise has been proven to be a true, natural anti-depressant and can help people with a poor self-image to feel better about themselves. Set small, realistic goals (e.g., walking for a few minutes a day) and build up to more if you wish. Releasing positive hormones such as endorphins can be a great side effect of increased movement. As they say, just do it!

12. Step Out of Your Bubble. Are you stuck in a routine? Do you feel like a stick-in-the-mud as a result? Make a plan to do something different—whether it's driving a different route to work or visiting a place you've never been or reconnecting with an old friend or going to an event where you are likely to meet new people. It can feel challenging at first, but moving out of your comfort zone can give you a boost of energy and a new perspective on the possibilities for your life.

More to Think About

1. How was it to reflect on the above suggestions? Which ones do you feel excited about? Which ones do you feel some resistance to?

2. For those you feel some resistance to, what encouraging words would you like to offer that part of yourself in order to boost your motivation?

3. Who can you identify in your life who loves you unconditionally? Try to connect with that person regularly to remind yourself of your worth and your positive qualities. Then remember to tell yourself the things they tell you.

How helpful was this exercise? _____
(1 = not very helpful, 5 = moderately helpful, 10 = extremely helpful)

What could you do differently to make progress in this area?
