

Increasing Your Self-Esteem

Objective

To help you identify ways to improve your self-image and reduce your self-criticism.

You Should Know

There are lots of reasons why people might have low self-esteem, but most of the time the roots go back to childhood and the view that you might have internalized as a result of criticism or negative messages you heard and, perhaps, believed (and still believe). Maybe you feel that you are not attractive enough, not smart enough, or that you haven't accomplished as much as other people. Sometimes people dwell on their faults as adults or measure themselves against an unrealistic ideal of the way that think they "should be."

Does this sound familiar? Do you have a running narrative in your mind about how you are just "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?

This worksheet is designed to help you develop a better self-image through various strategies—some involve inner reflection; some involve outward action. Don't give up—keep trying and experimenting until you are able to bust through some of the old, negative messages and experience a newfound view of yourself.

What to Do

Here are 11 ways that you can learn to improve your self-image. Review the items below and commit yourself to working on at least four or five of them in the coming week or so. Keep this list handy to work on the others over the coming weeks and months.

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." Repeat as needed. Write down some positive affirmations below.

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.

6. **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.

7. **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.

8. 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.

9. 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?

10. 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!

11. 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?
