



The Key to SELF-ESTEEM

It's a word that's on everybody's lips these days, and there is good reason why people should be worried about it in the kind of society we live in. But before they go looking for easy ways out of the problem, they should consider the inextricable connection between self-esteem and self-respect...

only insofar as it has taken on a certain fuzziness as to its ... like ... meaning. Dictionaries have traditionally defined it simply as "a good opinion of oneself;" now, it is being bounced around indiscriminately as a substitute for sundry similar words such as self-image, self-confidence, and self-respect.

As we shall see later on, this semantical blurring is not without importance. But first it must be said that although the concept of self-esteem is nothing new, there can be no doubt that the current preoccupation with it is a product of our particular times.

Present-day social conditions in western countries are hardly conducive to people thinking well of themselves. And these days, problematically enough, they seem to start thinking ill of themselves earlier and earlier in life.

With so many couples divorced or separated, their children may feel deserted and unwanted, or feel that it was somehow due to their own shortcomings that their parents have parted. When families do stay together, today's working mothers and fathers are

Anyone who automatically assumes that "self-esteem" is just another overworked catchphrase of our Sensitive New Age might refer to John Milton, whose deathless epic poem *Paradise Lost* was published in 1667. In it he wrote: "Of-times nothing profits more / than self-esteem, grounded on just and right..."

The term is representative of the touchy-feely psychobabble of the nineties

often short of time to spend with their children. The latter may wonder if the lack of attention they perceive is due to some flaw in themselves.

When children graduate to their teens, the prevailing social climate of permissiveness may entice them into situations which end up doing damage to their self-image. They are exposed to various addictions, which sooner or later make them despise themselves for being unable to control their own behaviour. They enter into easily disposable romantic relationships, and the inevitable disappointments involved may cause them to feel rejected again and again.

When older youths enter the employment market, many find that the only jobs they can get fail to measure up to their education or native intelligence, which may make them question their own intrinsic value. Full-fledged adults in the workplace are also prone to self-depreciation. In recent years multitudes of workers have been bumped out of jobs by corporate downsizing and the other effects of advancing technology and economic globalization. The men and women thus displaced are subject to the feeling that there must be something wrong with them if others have kept their jobs while they have failed to "make the cut."

Identification with one's occupation is an important source of self-esteem, and it is liable to sink among displaced workers or early retirees who suddenly find themselves cast in the ignominious role of has-beens. The fact that people are living longer than ever poses another self-esteem problem as an increasing number of seniors feel that they have lost their usefulness.

Overhanging all this is a cultural ethos, which implicitly equates success in all facets of life with normality. It has been said that you don't die in America, you underachieve.

Psychologists view low self-esteem as an expression of the discrepancy between people's ideal images of themselves and their actual situations and personalities. That is, they feel inferior because they have not become what they would like to be.

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As far as human feelings are concerned, it is this discrepancy that sets the present era apart from the rest of history. Up until at least the beginning of the present century, human beings in the mass were conditioned to "know their place" in society.

A firm belief in religion brought resignation to one's lot in life based on God-fearing humility. People did indeed aspire to an ideal state, but they did not expect to attain it in their mortal existence. They thought of it as something they would experience after their deaths as a reward for having lived properly, according to God's will.

It was only well into the 20th century that ordinary human beings were faced with the prospect of becoming anything they wanted, especially in North America. Today's mass media deliver proof that they can make their dreams come true in the form of success stories which glorify celebrities who have pulled themselves up by their bootstraps. If those glamorous symbolic figures can make it to the top, why not anyone? Why not you?

At the same time, the decline in religious faith has rudely thrown individuals on their own responsibility. When God's will is left out of the equation, it is clearly your own fault if you do not live up to your potential – or to what you or your parents have deemed your potential to be.

The vernacular of the times offers an illustration of how people in this achievement-oriented society see themselves and those around them. The word "loser" describes people who do not keep pace with their confreres in the acquisition of money, status, material goods, and golden personal relationships.

The expression implies that life is a contest in which a person who is not among the winners must lack character, diligence, intelligence, or attractiveness. Clearly people who see themselves as losers – or who think that other people see them as such – cannot be expected to glow with self-esteem.

Birth of a movement

Not only do we have losers in our society, we literally have born losers. Whole classes of people have been shut out of the (North) American Dream by discrimination against their race, disability, gender, social status or other accidents of birth.

It was among a section of these born losers that the present self-esteem movement started. It was conceived by sociologists who concluded that many of the problems in the distressed black communities of the United States indirectly arose from Afro-American

people depreciating themselves.

The guiding premise of the movement is that people who think badly of themselves will behave badly, or at least behave in ways that are destructive both to themselves and society.

The organized drive to boost self-esteem originally took the form of trying to improve the self-image of black children by letting them know that they are fundamentally as good as anybody. Teachers in inner city schools were urged to reinforce the strengths of each individual pupil. They made fusses over the children: Michael draws beautifully, Jennifer can sing like an angel, Sarah has marvellous interpersonal skills.

The movement then spread to children with no particular social disadvantages who were thought to lack self-esteem for any number of reasons: they might be shy or homely or what-have-you. Schools began to specialize in instilling self-esteem in the offspring of the American upper middle class.

A product to be sold

Life for these children became a succession of awards. There were cake-and-ice cream celebrations for "kids of the week," and "extraordinary kids." Congratulatory scrolls and printed T-shirts ("Superkid!") were presented to pupils who actually had done nothing special. Critics wrote that this hype was not building self-esteem so much as it was puffing up egos. It might even prove psychologically dangerous to the "superkids" later in life when the realities of the world cut them down to size.

A few lonely voices pointed out that self-esteem begins at home, and that there would be little need for special self-esteem classes or camps if parents would only pay more attention to the childhood need for approval.

Children whose parents always tell them about what they do wrong, and never about what they do right, are unlikely to respond effectively to the transparent flattery employed in some self-esteem courses. In fact, youngsters usually have keen noses for the contradictions between rhetoric and reality – in this case, between what they hear in school and what they experience in their homes.

When the self-esteem movement reached the adult level, promoters naturally began cashing in on it. Self-esteem became a product to be sold.

Much of the so-called literature on the subject is composed of buzz-words, platitudes, and contrived advice to do



things like carrying around little file cards which you can take out of your pocket in gloomy moments to remind you of how much you have to be proud of. Heaps of verbiage exhort you to "find the genius within you," etc. The self-help market is replete with self-esteem centres, self-esteem videos, self-esteem board games, self-esteem greeting cards.

The mini-industry that has grown up around self-esteem tends to offer people a high opinion of themselves without requiring them to earn it. It purveys a kind of doctrine of original sin in reverse: no matter how bad an actor you are, you deserve your own approval by virtue of being alive.

This pseudo-doctrine is consistent with the trendy social attitude which holds that just about the worst thing a person can be is "judgmental." In good biblical fashion, the modern man and woman judges not, that he or she not be judged.

Towards the "bad me"

The trouble with some people is they have included themselves as well as others in this sensible bargain. If everybody else can get away with anything free of censure, then surely they are entitled to the same treatment by their own consciences. Pop psychologists add to this impression. Wrote one, who shall be nameless: "You don't have to try, you just have to be."

The core of their message as regards self-esteem is that people should not attempt to draw it from others. They are unique individuals, warts and all, and that is sufficient unto itself.

A "Self-Esteem Declaration" published on the Internet tells its readers to proclaim: "I AM ME IN ALL THE WORLD, THERE IS NO ONE ELSE EXACTLY LIKE ME, EVERYTHING THAT COMES OUT OF ME IS AUTHENTICALLY MINE BECAUSE I ALONE CHOOSE IT." Presumably this is to be repeated like a mantra until it becomes an organic part of one's being.

The theory of going it alone in the world makes a certain amount of sense in light of the fact that the really grave problems of low self-esteem are the result of people becoming overly dependent on what others think about them or feel towards them. To translate the findings of psychological researchers into simple terms, individual self-esteem is supported by the love and appreciation of others: take that support away, and the ego goes into free fall.



Often people with severe self-esteem problems tie their whole self-image to the approval of a single "dominant other." When they feel rejected by that figure, they become angry with themselves and conceive an image of themselves as "the bad me," and often behave accordingly. Their self-esteem spirals down to the point of chronic depression or even suicide. Victims of low self-esteem kill themselves when they are convinced that nobody (primarily the dominant other) cares whether they live or die.

Others may believe that people think ill of them because of something in their past which has made them adopt a "bad me" self-image. These include the victims of household abuse or sexual crimes, and marital cast-offs. Victims of debilitating and disfiguring illnesses and accidents are similarly subject to seeing themselves in an unfavourable light through no fault of their own.

People like this need help, but they will not be helped by panaceas that trivialize a truly serious emotional condition. If the quick and easy solutions being offered do not work, those in serious psychological distress are left feeling more downhearted than ever. They are far more likely to find succour in support groups of their fellow-sufferers, who know just how they feel.

The idea of worthiness

The operative word here is "support," because without it, sufferers are likely to drift into continual misery. Emotional self-sufficiency is necessary up to a point, but to promote it as the sole antidote to low self-esteem is to defy human nature.

For unless they are psychopaths, people do care about what others think about them and feel towards them. It is bred in the bone: small schoolchildren, for example, will agonize over whether the classmates they like really like them in return. People of all ages will take great pains over their appearance to win the approval of their peers.

Here we come back to the semantical blurring of self-esteem and self-respect, in which the two terms are used interchangeably. They are not the same: self-esteem is interior, self-respect is exterior, like the ceiling and roof of a house.

A man can have the highest opinion of himself in the world for no reason that is at all discernible to his neighbour. If his neighbour thinks the world of him for good reason, then he is entitled not only to the respect of the neighbour, but of himself.

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It is instructive that a feeling of worthlessness is usually cited as a symptom of dangerously low self-esteem. And that comes around to the old-fashioned idea of worthiness. Are you worthy of the good opinion of those around you? What have you done to deserve their good opinion or otherwise? Only when you have earned respect by objective standards can you honestly respect yourself.

A normal hazard of life

Note that in the quotation at the outset of this essay, John Milton makes the qualification that, to profit somebody, self-esteem must be grounded on just and right. Anyone who thinks that a good opinion of oneself can stand without the support of outside approval is either an egotist or a reckless rebel intent on defying the world.

Indeed, defiance is a characteristic of those who seriously lack self-respect. When disapproval of their actions is expressed, they are likely to say, in effect: "If you think that was bad, watch this!" The easiest thing to do when you have done something to lower your self-respect is to lower your standards. Before long, you may find yourself keeping company with others who have also let their standards slip, and habitually doing things that are unworthy of your better self, much to the eventual detriment of your self-esteem.

The only case in which self-esteem can be considered in isolation from self-respect is among children. They have done nothing to rate a low opinion from those around them, and therefore have nothing which should make them feel bad about themselves – unless their parents put them down. Perhaps the worst thing parents can do to their children's self-esteem is to act so badly themselves that their children become objects of ridicule. It is the way of the world to identify children with their parents. Children can have little self-respect if their parents manifestly have none.

As for the rest of us, we should not be so quick to believe that we suffer from low self-esteem just because we sometimes feel inadequate. We certainly should not be misled by popular attitudes to allow our self-esteem to suffer because we have not met with demonstrable success in our careers. The law of averages says that the great majority of players in the game of life will not be winners. In any case, most of us are not willing to make the arduous personal sacrifices required to come out on top.

We should make a clear distinction

between what we are responsible for and what we are not. We cannot be individually responsible for conditions in the society or the economy. And we are surely not responsible for the conditions of our birth. If we meet with misfortune, it should be taken as a challenge to our self-esteem rather than a blow to it. Nothing makes a person feel better about him or herself than to overcome adversity with head held high.

Another point to keep in mind is that practically everyone experiences disappointment at frequent intervals. It should not be seen as a sign of failure due to a personality flaw, but as a normal hazard of life. Disappointment may even turn out to form the groundwork for lasting contentment. It is by being disappointed in the lesser and the passing things in life that we learn the value of the greater things that really matter in the long run.

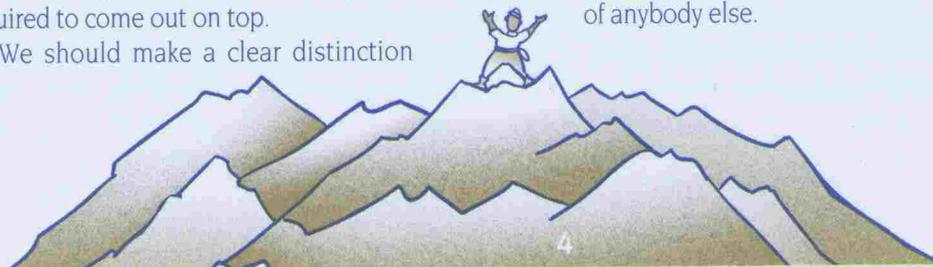
We should further realize that there is nothing abnormal about comparing ourselves unfavourably with others. "To be human means to feel inferior," as the pioneer psychologist Alfred Adler wrote. In fact, it is undoubtedly better for most individuals to feel a little inferior than to feel superior. People with an overdose of self-esteem are likely to conclude that they are so above it all that they need not care about normal standards. In their arrant egotism, they do not feel the need of the approval of those around them; but they hurt those around them nevertheless.

Among reasonably well-balanced people, self-esteem goes up and down according to circumstances. It serves as a gauge to behaviour: you feel good about yourself when you have done good, and bad about yourself when you have done bad. A fall in self-esteem is usually the result of self-reproach for having done things a person is ashamed of. In the longer term, when people raise their standards of conduct, they accordingly raise their self-esteem.

To say that all the current to-do about it should not be taken too seriously is not to say that poor self-esteem is not, for some, a genuine affliction. We have all met people who think too little of themselves for no good reason, and if we on the other hand think a lot of them, we should let it show.

At the same time, self-esteem does not come free. It must be earned in the coin of self-respect, which arises from the respect of others. That is true of everybody, which means that it is as true of ourselves as it is of anybody else.

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