Low Self Esteem

Causes, Effects, Solutions

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LOW SELF ESTEEM

Causes, Effects, Solutions

What was going on in Jim's mind the day he tied a cement block to his foot with a short length of rope, waved goodbye to the world, and jumped into the cold, green, slimy waters of the fishing pond? Jim had lost all his reason for living. He felt like he wasn't important to anyone. There was no reason to go on when his life was all pain.

Jim was suffering from the low self-esteem syndrome. He had a good self-concept. He knew there were many good things about him. He could do many things no one else could do. But he felt like these things were not important to anyone else. No one cared what he could do.

What is low self esteem, and where do these feelings come from? Dr. Helen M. Johnson describes high self esteem as "an assured, contented, confident, relaxed feeling of knowing that you are capable, worthy, loveable, significant, respected, competent, effective, and all such adjectives which convince you that you measure up!"
On the other hand low self-esteem is exactly the opposite. It is a dreadful feeling of being inept, useless, unlovable, insignificant, inferior, unwanted, and insecure (3).

Self-esteem is the value individuals place on the selves they perceive (Rice 284). This feeling of value helps determine our success in life, our level of achievement, our relationships, and our feeling of comfort, happiness, and joy.

We are not born with a high or low self esteem. Our feelings of how we fit into the world are shaped by all our experiences from the time of birth. As an infant if we were spoken to with a harsh voice, handled roughly, neglected, or unloved, it was permanently recorded in the fantastic computer of our minds (Johnson 13).

As infants and small children we sense very soon whether we are welcome in the world. The absence of having someone respond to our cries and needs, and the absence of being held, cuddled, and spoken to with soothing, reassuring words coming from joyful happy faces denies our welcome. We have total dependence on the world and we need to feel it is dependable (Steinem 66).
"If children are treated badly enough for long enough they come to believe they are bad people" (Steinem 21).

Some children are criticized and ridiculed for things they do not know, or for not thinking of the consequences before acting. But the fact is they cannot know, or cannot think logically until their brains have achieved that point of development.

Some mothers are physically, verbally, and emotionally abused while the child watches in fear. Some children are kicked around, pushed around, knocked down, stomped on, chewed up, and spit out. There is no opportunity to know what it is like to feel good about themselves or have all of their needs met.

In addition to things that are done to us when we are children, our accomplishments or failures also help in developing a positive or negative self-esteem. We feel like we fit in and feel important if we achieve high grades in school, are physically attractive, have popularity, and are able to establish relationships.

> *The four major components of self-esteem are: emotional relationships with parents, social competence with peers, intellectual prowess at school, and attitudes of society (Rice 190).*

All of us acquire some extent of positive self-esteem during development; but in the process of living it is possible for us to become alienated from our self-esteem. We lose our best vision of ourselves because of negative messages absorbed from others. We feel defective if we are dishonest, lack integrity, or lack self-responsibility.

> *The level of our self-esteem affects every aspect of our existence (Branden 250).*

HOW DOES LOW SELF ESTEEM AFFECT OUR LIVES?

Jim's body was nearly constantly full of physical pain caused by the negative emotions he carried around with him. Every time someone criticized him, neglected him, or rejected him, the emotional hurt would become so intense that the proprioceptive factors worked together to make his life miserable. With constant pain as a part of his everyday existence, no comfortable feelings of pleasure, happiness, and joy, and the constant frustration of trying to please people to be accepted, it is not surprising that Jim decided to take his life.

> *"Individuals with low self esteem often manifest a number of symptoms of emotional ill-health. They may evidence psychosomatic symptoms of anxiety and stress" (Rice 284).*
>
> *Some emotionally disturbed people suffer from painful headaches that do not respond to doctor's prescriptions. They experience frustration, self-doubt, and generalized muscle tension. They are metaphorically beating their heads against internal barriers (Bloomfield 167-168).*

All this pain is self-inflicted by the constant bombardment of self-criticism. "The yardstick by which we measure our looks is always too narrow to account for all the differences that make us unique" (Bloomfield 58).

When we look in the mirror we see all the little flaws that other people don't even take notice of; but since we are all wrapped up in ourselves we think others are obsessed with our looks too.

We develop an inadequate view of our abilities when we compare ourselves with others; and we compete as a way of life (LaHaye 136).

We experience shame when we realize that part of us is defective, bad, incomplete, rotten, phony, inadequate, or a failure (Whitfield 44).

Shame can control us if we let it. It keeps us dejected and depressed and doesn't let us feel good about ourselves.

We also inflict pain upon ourselves by the way we perceive that people are treating us.

Some people are "killers" of self-esteem. "They are the friends or family who show their "caring" through being overly critical, overly protective, domineering, jealous, perpetually pessimistic, demandingly dogmatic, or possessive" (Johnson 69).

When we constantly, as a part of our weekly activities, hang around such people we are kept in negative emotional feelings and don't give our self esteem a chance to heal; and we continue to carry the pain, viewing ourselves as victims of the world.

In addition to a miserable life of emotional and physical pain, low self-esteem manifests itself in other ways including erratic and deviant behaviors.

"I cannot think of a single major psychological problem-from fear of intimacy or of success, to under-achievement at school or at work, to anxiety or depression, to alcohol abuse or drug addiction, to child molesting or spouse battering, to suicide or crimes of violence-that is not traceable to a poor self-concept" (Branden 249).

When we don't accept ourselves we have trouble accepting others as well. We have trouble communicating and have feelings of loneliness and isolation (Rice 284).

We become perfectionists and demand too much of ourselves; and when we can't live up to our expectations that would make us feel accepted, we start blaming or criticizing others. We look at them as the cause of our feelings.

> *Because of the shame of not measuring up we begin to resent people, feeling anger, rage, or contempt for them. We sometimes retaliate by attacking them verbally, trying to control, or withdrawing from them (Whitfield 45).*

> *Shame is the emotional expression of low self-esteem (Adler 46).*

> *When we feel ashamed of who we are, we are apt to get involved in deviant behaviors since there is no feeling of personal integrity or self respect anyway. Low self-esteem has been found to be a factor in drug abuse, unwed pregnancy, and juvenile delinquency (Rice 284-285).*

If one was to ponder the causes of crime, low self esteem would be a factor in most of them. It is one of the dynamics involved but not the cause of crime.

> *A criminal has "an inflated but precarious self image" (Samenow 233).*

Other thought patterns developed over a period of many years make one inclined to criminality; but every low self-esteem person is not a criminal. Jerry Adler, in his magazine article HEY, I'M TERRIFIC, talks about low self-esteem and crime. He seems to be speaking with a cynical attitude when he says,

> *"Deviant behavior is prima facie evidence of self-image problems as in the case of a man being sought in Montgomery County, Md. for a series of rapes. Citizens have been warned by police to be on the lookout for a man in his 30s with a medium build and "low self-esteem" (46). Jesuit scholar, William O'Malley says of Pee-wee Herman, "masturbation isn't the problem, it's lack of self-esteem" (Adler 46).*

In view of all these detrimental effects on our lives, we must begin to overcome our low self-esteem immediately if not before, and get to feeling like we are worth something.

WHAT CAN BE DONE TO OVERCOME LOW SELF ESTEEM?

It is a bit late to save Jim whose body was removed from the fishing pond many long months later when the rope rotted and the corpse was discovered floating amidst the slimy sea weed, deteriorated to the point that it was unrecognizable; but we must do all we can to help others who are suffering because they know of no way out of these dangerous and destructive feelings.

Many are content to tell us that life isn't based on a "feeling," that we can change our attitudes instantly, or that these feelings (demonic influences) can be cast out in the name of Jesus; and thus in their lack of understanding, are unable to give the help that is really needed, and go about their own lives rejoicing in their popularity, comforts, and love while the one with low self-esteem continues to suffer not knowing how to change the feelings or cast out the demon.

Destructive patterns of thinking can only be changed by replacing them with new ones, over a period of time, and with rigorous persistence. No one, not even the professional psychiatrists and psychologists, have an answer that will work in every case because they may not have been through all the feelings of the low self esteem person; but many give suggestions that can be helpful.

As parents we must provide for our children an atmosphere of love and guidance within which they are allowed to grow and develop without their personalities being squelched beneath the hobnail boot of parental authority. Here are some tips by John Rosemond from his magazine article, BOOSTING SELF-ESTEEM:

> *Kids must be taught respect for others by the parents demonstrating respect for all people. Kids need to be taught that it's all right to be different, that they need not have what everyone else has. They need to be given chores to learn responsibility (not forced into slavery). They need to see the example of a good marriage, or a single parent who takes good care of herself or himself (Rosemond 40).*

Kids need lots of love and no ridicule or criticism. And as adults we must perpetually nourish our self-esteem.

> *Our basic self-concept has already formed by age 7, but continues to change and develop throughout our lives (Johnson 14).*
>
> *It is interesting and beneficial to understand where our self-esteems originated and how they developed over the years; but blaming parents does not change the situation. We must take responsibility for our own feelings and stop being a victim (Johnson 16).*

It is easy to make people feel sorry for you by disclosing the story of your abusive childhood; and they will have compassion as they shy away from you, considering you weird, crazy, and dysfunctional.

Here are some suggestions by Dr. Helen Johnson to begin to love yourself:

1. Wean yourself from depending on others for your self-esteem or it will fluctuate with positive or negative opinions (17).
2. List your successes, your strengths (count your blessings), and use positive affirmations daily 27).
3. Change your perfectionist attitude, and reward yourself for doing your best (40).
4. When you catch yourself negative mind-feeding stop, analyze the problem, and change the subject (50).
5. List your values, and reject others' values that you don't agree with (61).
6. Make yourself a support group of people who will listen, help you, and not judge or criticize. Contribute to your support group to help them also. Everyone, at times, needs someone to talk with (74).
7. Set goals, and as you achieve them revise your list (86).
8. Keep a daily journal to monitor your feelings. Learn what affects them and control them accordingly (96).

> *Low self-esteem people tend to want to please others, and are easily led (Rice 284).*

We perform because that is how we have learned to gain acceptance. Before you consider doing something for another, be sure it pleases you to do it and not only the other. It is necessary to treat others nicely; but demand fair play for yourself also.

> *We must learn to become bigger than our shortcomings and life's problems (Bloomfield 15).*

Low self-esteem people tend to wallow in self-pity. We must overcome that in order to be at peace with ourselves.

> *Whatever we put our attention on grows stronger. We must concentrate on what we want to become (Bloomfield 17).*

There are many other things that can be done to overcome low self-esteem. You must find what works for you. We have learned that self esteem is something that develops over a lifetime beginning at birth, if we choose to remain in our state of low self esteem we can expect many detrimental effects on our lives, and there are many things that can be done to overcome low self- esteem.

There is no one who cannot grow in self-esteem (Branden 250).

"The mind is its own place, and in itself can make a heaven of Hell, and a hell of Heaven (Steinem 21).

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