



For better
mental health

How to... increase your self-esteem



How to... increase your self-esteem

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'It's a funny thing... when I was involved in a wider political struggle, when it was a question of standing up for human rights in general, on behalf of other people, I could keep going, I could even face prison. But when it comes to sorting out a problem like being charged too much council tax, I just go to pieces inside and have to leave it all to my wife.'

'Now that I'm all on my own, I don't bother to prepare proper meals. There doesn't seem much point when it's only me.'

'When I stop doing things and just pause, I feel quite empty.'

'None of my colleagues remembered my birthday... but then, what can you expect in a place like this?'

These are quotations from people with low self-esteem. This booklet is for anyone who wants to help themselves or others to deal with the feelings and experiences that undermine them. It explains how to recognise the problem, and what you can do to improve it.



What is self-esteem?

When your self-esteem is low, you feel depressed and hopeless. You see life negatively. Everything seems difficult, or too much trouble. It feels as if the world is a bad place, full of people who will abuse or ignore you, and you feel unable to do anything about it. You see yourself as a victim. You treat other people as potential enemies, or saviours, and sooner or later they treat you badly or let you down. This sets up a vicious circle.

When your self-esteem is high, on the other hand, the world feels like a good place, full of friends, potential pleasures and opportunities. You can assert yourself, ask for what you want and express your feelings. You feel potent, and know that you can make a difference. Other people, in general, respond to your positive attitude, so that, even when you don't get your way, you feel good about yourself and them. This reinforces your self-esteem and stimulates your inner growth.

What we've described are the two ends of a spectrum. If they were shown as two points joined by a line, few of us would say that we live at either end of it. Most of us get through life somewhere near the positive end, and we move up and down it in response to things that happen to us. Events involving loss or threat, such as losing your job, ending a relationship, being bereaved, falling ill or having your house broken into, can give your self-esteem a huge knock. On the other hand, when you are promoted, fall in love, pass an exam, face a challenge or win a prize, then you feel pleased and proud; your self-esteem is boosted. A healthy person can absorb most knocks to their self-esteem and bounce back, if their basic sense of self is positive.

Some people don't have a positive sense of self, however. It's as if their most comfortable position on this spectrum (the one that they always tend to return to) is at the negative end. When they get a knock, they can't bounce back. They are suffering from chronic low self-esteem.

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What causes low self-esteem?

If you lose your job after several years of calm and happy employment, when your family life is going well, it may be devastating, initially, but once the shock has worn off you have a good chance of finding the resources to cope. If, on the other hand, you have just been divorced and have moved house when you receive your redundancy notice, and then hear the next day that a parent has terminal cancer, then recovery is bound to be much more difficult.

Sometimes life just throws an unbearable amount of trouble at us, all at once, and we have to mobilise all the support we can from friends, family and community to help us survive it.

Physical ill-health

Our self-esteem is bound up with our physical wellbeing, and is vulnerable to illness and injury. If we get ill or have an accident, it can feel as if our body has betrayed us. Our trust in the world as a safe place may be shaken, temporarily. If the illness or accident involves us in a spell in hospital or long-term treatment, it can further damage our self-esteem.

Other people

Other people's treatment of us can also affect our self-esteem; for example, if you have a boss or work colleague who is constantly undermining your authority or questioning your work, this can lead to you becoming very unsure of achieving what you once knew you were very capable of doing. (See *How to deal with bullying at work*.) Likewise, at home; if another member of the family is constantly picking at everything you do, eventually you believe that maybe you really aren't good at anything and begin to feel worthless.

A sense of powerlessness

The more we feel potent, the better our self-esteem. Redundancy may not feel so bad if you think you can easily get another job, even a better one; if not, it can feel devastating. It can also feel devastating if you are the only one of a racial or social minority, and have reason to believe that you are the victim of prejudice.

The degree of power you have depends not just on who you are, but also on where you are; in other words, on the social context. If you are not sure of your ground in any sense (for example because you are in a foreign culture, speaking an unfamiliar language, or in an unfamiliar role) you will feel disempowered.

Institutions can increase or diminish the self-esteem of the people in them by their day-to-day practices. For example, some hospitals attach a plastic bracelet with a number on it to the patient's wrist, on admission. However necessary this may be, if you are the patient, it can feel as though the hospital is claiming your body as theirs, taking away a degree of power from you just when you most need it. On the other hand, if you are greeted with courtesy, treated with respect and given choices, this will enhance your self-esteem.

How does childhood experience affect self-esteem?

Children tend not to have much power or status in our society, and therefore may still be subject to many common experiences that can undermine their self-esteem. These include, in particular, violence, loss and neglect.



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Domestic violence

A child may experience violence in many ways, all of them damaging. They may be subjected to corporal punishment, where a parent or other adult deliberately inflicts pain on them and does not allow them to fight back. Or they may witness domestic violence between their parents. Or they may be subjected to violence from a sibling or from another family member, which the parents fail to see or prevent.

The violence does not have to be dramatic to be damaging. Indeed, dramatic violence that happens over a short period may attract attention and lead to changes in the family situation that will remedy it. Undercover violence that goes on for a long time, bullying by an older brother or sister for example, can be just as harmful.

Dealing with prejudice

Another form of violence is institutional prejudice, such as racism. A child may see a much-loved parent insulted, spat at or assaulted in the street, or doing work well below his or her capacity. He or she may come to realise that 'people like us' get the worst housing, and medical care. Or he or she may hear, in the media, insulting portrayals of groups that he or she identifies with. These amount to an attack on that child's self-esteem.

Facing loss

The death of a family member, such as a grandparent, or the sickness of a mother (especially if she has to go away to hospital or a convalescent home) are obvious examples of loss that can affect a small child. But more ordinary events, such as moving house, the birth of a new sibling, or the death of a loved pet, can all be experienced as devastating losses by a child. As such, they have to be acknowledged and mourned.

Emotional neglect

When we think of a neglected child, the image that comes to mind is often of fairly dramatic physical neglect, with the child, unwashed, unfed, and left to roam the streets after dark at a young age. Yet there can be quite subtle emotional neglect, too, that can also be harmful. There are many things even loving and well-meaning parents can do that act against their children's need to feel loved and wanted:

- Leaving very small babies alone for hours at a time, to cry themselves to sleep. The more often, and the more lovingly, a baby is touched in its very early life, the more self-esteem he or she will have as an adult. The practice of baby massage would do wonders for the self-esteem of the next generation!
- Preferring one child over others (the only boy over his four sisters, or the youngest girl over the older children). This can happen without the parents realising they are doing it.
- Insisting that their child become what or who the parents want him or her to be, in spite of the child's natural talents and personality. Insisting, for instance, the child learn music when he would rather play football, or vice versa. Refusing to allow a daughter to take up engineering, or a son to study music because the parents think he should go into the family business.
- Not noticing the child's emotional needs; for instance, when he or she is mourning for a pet, reacting to the birth of a sibling, or having difficulties in settling in a new school.
- Discussing decisions that involve the child (about holidays or schooling) in front of the child, but without including him or her.
- Behaving, generally, as though the child's feelings and perceptions don't matter: 'You're too young to be thinking about that!', 'Just shut up and do what you're told!'

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- Inconsistent discipline and expectations; blowing hot and cold with affection and attention.
- Blaming them for things over which they have no control.
- Exposing them to inappropriate sexual innuendo or activity.

With all this violence, loss and neglect what matters is not so much what happens to the child, as how the child is helped to make sense of the experience. A child needs to be comforted and given the chance to talk things over and to come to terms with it. If events can't be talked about and are buried, this will do far more harm to the child's self-esteem.



What can I do to heal the past?

Even if we had to bury a childhood hurt, such as neglect or violence, at the time, we can still find healing for it in adult life. The basic process is the same: to find a way of telling the story, to make sense of it, to be comforted, and to digest it all.

An obvious way to do this is through therapy or counselling, but that may not be available or appropriate for everyone. (See *Useful organisations*, on p. 12, and *Further reading*, on p. 14, for more information on this kind of help). Other ways include:

- Through the expressive arts, such as dance, music, sculpting, painting, creative writing and poetry. All of these can help you to tell your story, and can give tremendous pleasure and empowerment in themselves. Find a class through your local adult education service, local library or community centre.
- Learn to be assertive. Read up on it, and join a class. (See Mind's booklet *How to assert yourself*, details on p. 14.) It's also worth looking online for details of classes.

- Form a support group. Perhaps you can find others seeking help with their past, through a local community centre, bookshop, religious organisation or adult education class (on assertiveness or self-esteem, for example).
- Tell your friends that you are attempting to face some old childhood wounds, and enlist their help. They may have had similar experiences, and have useful advice and suggestions.
- Keep a journal. Use it to explore your memories and relate them to difficulties you are having now.

How can I build up my self-esteem?



Take care of your physical health. Make sure you have good food, relaxation and enough sleep. Try to do 10–15 minutes of moderate exercise (such as brisk walking) every day, and about 20 minutes of more vigorous exercise three times a week (something that raises your heartbeat and makes you sweat). Have a massage whenever you can. Nothing is better for increasing self-esteem and beating stress! Learn to recognise your own stress indicators, and when they occur, take time out to look after yourself.

Reduce your stress levels

Whenever possible, avoid situations where you have little power, and institutions that undermine your self-esteem. This may be difficult or appear impossible in the short run, but may be essential to your long-term mental and physical wellbeing. Keep your home as stress free as possible: make sure it is as tidy as suits you, with good lighting and supportive seating.

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Accepting a challenge

Set yourself a challenge that you can realistically achieve, and then go for it! Start with something relatively small, such as, 'Getting fit enough to walk up the steps to my flat without getting out of breath or taking the lift'. (But not 'Running the Marathon this year' unless, of course, that is a realistic goal for you!) Then, when you have achieved it, reward yourself! Tell your friends, and let them praise you for it. Then set yourself another challenge. Learn to enjoy your own achievements.

Learn something new. It doesn't really matter what it is, whether it's car maintenance, speaking Russian or flower arranging. The important thing is that it interests you and will give you a sense of achievement. The longer you have been away from learning anything new, and the more different the new subject is from your normal life, the more benefit this will give you. For example, if you are an intellectual sort of person, take up weight training or yoga. If you work in a manual trade, you might try learning a foreign language, or studying local history.

Enjoying yourself

Find out what you most enjoy, and then find a way of doing it as much as possible. If you enjoy it, you probably have some talent for it, whatever it is. Doing what we are best at is the most empowering and self-nourishing kind of activity. (If your response to this advice is, 'But I'm not good at anything!', go back to the question, *What can I do to heal the past?*, on p. 8.)

Taking action

Join in with others, if possible, to take action about the things that annoy you, whether it's the amount of dog mess in your street, government policy on asylum-seekers, the worldwide arms trade, or whatever most angers you.

Of course, the trick here is to find the right group of fellow-campaigners, a group where you feel respected and empowered. Unfortunately, political campaigning groups can be as damaging to the self-esteem of their members as any other kind of institution! This is perhaps an area where continuing struggle is not only necessary, but a sign of love for oneself, one's fellow-humans and for the world, in general.

Giving yourself a treat

Give yourself regular treats, to remind yourself that you deserve nurture and pleasure. Programme some fun into your plans for each week, to bolster your sense of humour and creativity.

Making music

Learn to sing! To free your voice is empowering to mind, soul and body. Singing strengthens the lungs and the legs, gives joy and hope, and is a powerful medium for self-expression. You can do it alone, or as part of a group. Many places now have 'Choirs for the Tone Deaf' or 'Can't Sing' groups, which take on the fact that many of us may have had painful experiences with music teachers in the past. They can teach ways of addressing this, involving breath and relaxation techniques.

References

Self-esteem: simple steps to develop self-worth and heal emotional wounds G. Lindenfield (Thorsons 2000)

Well-tuned women eds. F. Armstrong, J. Pearson (The Womens Press 2000)

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Useful organisations

Mind

Mind is the leading mental health organisation in England and Wales, providing a unique range of services through its local associations, to enable people with experience of mental distress to have a better quality of life. For more information about any mental health issues, including details of your nearest local Mind association, contact the Mind website: www.mind.org.uk or *MindinfoLine* on 0845 766 0163.

British Association for Behavioural and Cognitive Psychotherapies (BABCP)

tel. 0161 797 4484 web: www.babcp.com

Directory of registered CBT therapists available online

British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy (BACP)

tel. 0870 443 5252 minicom: 0870 443 5162

web: www.bacp.co.uk

See website for details of local practitioners

Depression Alliance

tel. 0845 123 2320 web: www.depressionalliance.org

Charity run by and for sufferers of depression. Offers self-help groups.

The Keep Fit Association

tel. 020 8692 9566 web: www.keepfit.org.uk

Website provides details of local exercise classes

Institute for Complementary Medicine (ICM)

tel. 020 7237 5165 web: www.i-c-m.org.uk

Send an SAE or visit website for a list of individual practitioners

Institute for Optimum Nutrition

tel. 020 8614 7817 web: www.ion.ac.uk

Aims to promote health through good nutrition

United Kingdom Council for Psychotherapy (UKCP)

tel. 020 7014 9955 web: www.psychotherapy.org.uk

Maintains a national register of psychotherapists of many different kinds

Websites

www.naturalvoice.net

The Natural Voice Practitioners Network

For information on singing groups

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Further reading

- The assertiveness workbook: how to express your ideas and stand up for yourself at work and in relationships* R. J. Paterson (New Harbinger Press 2000) £13.99
- Confidence works: learn to be your own life coach* G. McMahon (Sheldon Press 2001) £7.99
- How to assert yourself* (Mind 2006) £1
- How to accept yourself* Dr. W. Dryden (Sheldon Press 1999) £7.99
- How to cope with relationship problems* (Mind 2006) £1
- How to deal with bullying at work* (Mind 2004) £1
- How to improve your mental wellbeing* (Mind 2006) £1
- How to look after yourself* (Mind 2006) £1
- How to restrain your violent impulses* (Mind 2006) £1
- How to survive family life* (Mind 2004) £1
- Making sense of cognitive behaviour therapy* (Mind 2006) £3.50
- Making sense of herbal remedies* (Mind 2004) £3.50
- Making sense of homeopathy* (Mind 2004) £3.50
- Managing anger: simple steps to dealing with frustration and threat* G. Lindenfield (Thorsons 2000) £7.99
- The Mind guide to food and mood* (Mind 2006) £1
- The Mind guide to managing stress* (Mind 2006) £1
- The Mind guide to relaxation* (Mind 2006) £1
- The Mind guide to yoga* (Mind 2004) £1
- Overcoming low self-esteem: a self-help guide using cognitive behavioural techniques* M. Fennell (Robinson 1999) £9.99
- Understanding anxiety* (Mind 2006) £1
- Understanding depression* (Mind 2006) £1
- Understanding talking treatments* (Mind 2005) £1

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Mind's mission

- Our vision is of a society that promotes and protects good mental health for all, and that treats people with experience of mental distress fairly, positively, and with respect.
- The needs and experiences of people with mental distress drive our work and we make sure their voice is heard by those who influence change.
- Our independence gives us the freedom to stand up and speak out on the real issues that affect daily lives.
- We provide information and support, campaign to improve policy and attitudes and, in partnership with independent local Mind associations, develop local services.
- We do all this to make it possible for people who experience mental distress to live full lives, and play their full part in society.

For details of your nearest Mind association and of local services contact Mind's helpline, *MindinfoLine*: **0845 766 0163** Monday to Friday 9.15am to 5.15pm. Speech-impaired or Deaf enquirers can contact us on the same number (if you are using BT Textdirect, add the prefix 18001). For interpretation, *MindinfoLine* has access to 100 languages via Language Line.

Scottish Association for Mental Health tel. 0141 568 7000

Northern Ireland Association for Mental Health tel. 028 9032 8474

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