

## THREE STEPS TO HEALTHY SELF-ESTEEM

By Ian Barrett

I am sure that like me, most of you have worked with clients who have very low self-esteem. I believe at times it can be so paralysing for an individual that it becomes almost impossible to motivate them to take action to achieve their goals.

Low self-esteem can have devastating consequences, such as:

- ***Anxiety, stress, loneliness and depression***
- ***Difficulties with friendships and relationships***
- ***Seriously impairing academic and job performance***
- ***Underachievement and increased vulnerability to drug and alcohol abuse***

All of these negative consequences only serve to reinforce a person's negative self-image and can take them into a downward spiral, often leading to non-productive and self-destructive behaviour.

There are many different definitions of 'self-esteem', but I like to refer to it as **the extent to which we like and respect ourselves**. The word 'esteem' comes from the Latin word which means 'to estimate' – in other words, it's how you estimate yourself. A good way of assessing a person's self-esteem is by asking them these questions:

- ***Do you like yourself?***
- ***Do you think you are a good human being?***
- ***Are you deserving of love?***
- ***Do you deserve happiness?***

People with low self-esteem often find it hard to answer 'yes' to these questions.

Self-esteem develops and evolves throughout our lives as we build an image of ourselves based on experiences with different people and activities. Experiences during childhood play a very large part in the shaping of our basic self-esteem. Low self-esteem is often the result of failed experiences, such as failure in sports, being harshly criticised, being ignored, ridiculed or teased, and even being yelled at or beaten.

Later on in life, self-esteem can be an outcome of what we do, and this is usually influenced by the choices we make for ourselves. I firmly believe that **you have to do something well in order to feel good about yourself**. I have worked with clients who have tried telling themselves over and over again that they deserve to feel great, but unless they start to do something well at the same time then it's hard for self-esteem to rise.

The build up of past negative experiences in life only fuels a person's so-called inner voice – by that I mean being a harsh inner critic, constantly criticising, punishing and belittling their accomplishments or lack of them. On the other hand, people with healthy self-esteem have an inner voice that conveys positive and reassuring messages.

So how can we help our clients suffering from low self-esteem? I would like to suggest three steps, which I have used to great effect with some of my clients.

As coaches, we do a wonderful job of convincing our clients that they can change. We tell them that change doesn't always happen quickly or easily, but we work hard to empower them with the tools and strategies they need to implement change. The client with low self-esteem needs to believe that he or she can change it. Remember, **you have to do something well to feel good about yourself.**

### **STEP 1: CHALLENGE THE INNER VOICE**

The first step is to start to challenge all those negative messages of the inner voice. For example, after being turned down for a date a person often feels embarrassed or humiliated. They tell themselves they are unattractive and that nobody will ever like or care about them, and that they will always be alone. To counteract these negative inner messages, a person has to try saying for example: "Never mind. It's her loss that she doesn't want to go out with me. I know I'm an attractive and good person. I will find someone else".

With my clients, I would get them to write down their negative inner thoughts as they come to them, and then write down their rebuttals to counteract them. This can work wonders with re-programming the mind to think more positively.

### **STEP 2: PRACTISE SELF-NURTURING**

Get your client to write down 50 things they like about themselves – they may need some support with this. Then I would ask them to add one new thing they like about themselves EVERY day. Some coaches encourage their clients to keep a **Personal Success Journal** which highlights all the successes, achievements and positive things – however small. Included in this, could be reminders of accomplishments such as certificates and positive letters.

Encourage your client to plan fun and relaxing things for them self, such as going to the cinema, having a massage, or learning to meditate. I would give my client a weekly planning sheet to record these things each week and then share with me in a later session.

Perhaps the most important part of step 2 is to encourage the client to "fake it until you make it". In other words, even when they don't feel they deserve it, they must make themselves practise self-nurturing.

### STEP 3: ENLIST THE SUPPORT OF OTHERS

It would be very difficult to improve self-esteem without help from others, but this can be the most difficult step. People with low self-esteem often isolate themselves, and therefore won't ask for help because they don't think they deserve it. As low self-esteem is often the result of how people have treated you in the past, it is all the more important to get the help of people in the present to challenge the critical messages. So, for example:

- *Ask friends to tell you what you do well and write it down*
- *Ask them to tell you what they like about you and write it down*
- *Find a friend who will listen to you – to let out your feelings to, without necessarily trying to fix things for you*
- *Ask friends and family for more hugs*
- *Remind those who love you to keep telling you that they do*

Finally, I would encourage my client with low self-esteem to spend 10 minutes every day alone, sitting quietly, and trying to visualise how a life of peace, happiness and high self-esteem would look and feel for them. This can be very powerful.

During this time they should also think about all the things that really matter to them. They could write them down to help them identify the areas they could work even harder on and then plan the action they need to take. Remember, in order to raise self-esteem **you have to try hard to do well in the things that matter to you in order to feel good about yourself!**

Good luck.

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