

Week 13, Handout A: Defining and Understanding Self-Esteem

What is self-esteem? According to M. Rosenberg (1965), self-esteem is defined as "a favorable or unfavorable attitude toward the self".

Assessing your self-esteem

Your self-esteem is low if:

- **You feel depressed/hopeless.**
- **You see life negatively.**
- **Everything seems difficult or too much trouble.**
- You feel unable to do anything about how abusively people may treat you.
- You treat other people as potential enemies, or saviors, and sooner or later they treat you badly or let you down.

Your self-esteem is high if:

- The world feels like a good place--full of friends, potential pleasures and opportunities.
- You can assert yourself by asking for what you want and not being worried about expressing your feelings.
- You know that you can make a difference.
- You have a positive attitude, even when you don't get your way, leaving you feeling good about yourself and others.

These represent two ends of the spectrum.

How can domestic violence contribute to a low self-esteem?

When other people treat us in abusive ways, it affects our self-esteem.

- **Emotional Abuse-refusing to acknowledge a person's presence, value or worth; communicating to a person that she or he is useless or inferior; devaluing her/his thoughts and feelings.**
- **Verbal Abuse-when someone is criticizing who you are, what you do, and or/how you do it, it can leave you feeling worthless and undeserving**
- **Physical Abuse-if we are physically unable to defend ourselves from abuse, it can feel as if our body is inferior.**
- **Witnessing domestic violence as a child-the natural powerlessness of a child can be exacerbated when the child observes one parent hurting or demeaning and threatening the other parent.**

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 recognize your own stress indicators, and when they occur, take time out to look after yourself.

Reduce your stress levels

If at all 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 well-being.

Enjoy 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!' do some reality-checking: ask friends or family what they think you do well or think about how and when you have fun.)

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.

Week 13: Handout B– Self-Esteem

Give Yourself Positive, Nurturing Messages by Cheryl Rainfield, 2002

I don't know about you, but I find that negative or hurtful messages zing their way into me faster and easier than positive ones. If, in an hour, seven people gave me real, glowing compliments, and one person criticized me, it is the criticism that I would notice, absorb, and obsess on for weeks. It is the criticism that I would turn over and over, looking at from all angles, like a misshapen stone.

It's not hard to find criticism. It's all around us--in the way the media says our bodies should be perfect. In people judging how we live, because they feel insecure about themselves. And of course, perhaps most powerfully, are all the negative messages we were taught and given as children, critical messages that we still play through our minds.

So how do we turn the tide on this wave of negative messages? An important factor is purposely looking for and including positive messages in your life, on a regular basis. You deserve to see your own beauty--and to be as happy as you can be.

Give yourself the gift of loving, positive messages:

- **Recognize and acknowledge some good things about yourself.**

Write out a list of things that you like about yourself, or that other people have told you they like about you. Write as many as you can. Then go through each one. Think about it. Acknowledge it. Accept it and take it in. Putting your energy into this, and really opening yourself up to this, can help you heal some old hurts, and work towards opening yourself up to more positive messages.

- **Praise yourself as you would a child.**

Kids need praise and positive feedback to feel good about themselves, and we give that freely to kids. Well, adults need it, too. So whenever you do something that you would appreciate or like in a child...being kind to someone else, being tender, standing up for yourself or someone else, doing something that feels good, accomplishing something big or small...then give yourself some praise. Don't be stingy with praise. Lavish it on you the way you would a child. Acknowledge

the wonderfulness in you, and make a habit of it. It really will help you feel better.

- **Allow real compliments and praise to sink in there.**

Allowing compliments and praise to really touch you, including the ones you give yourself, is something you may have to consciously do, but it's important to do. If you have trouble keeping hold of the good things people say, write them down, then look at them often.

- **Read affirmations that appeal to you.**

Read some affirmations from a book, online, or from affirmation cards, or write your own. Just read the ones that feel like they fit you, that have messages you need to hear. Do this often, so you open up to the messages.

- **Associate an object with a positive message about you.**

Pick an object, preferably a small one, one that you like or that makes you feel good--maybe a stone, a book, a note, a little toy that you can carry around with you. Now think of a positive message about yourself--just one--and repeat it over and over while you look at the object. Tell yourself that whenever you look at that object, you'll be reminded of that positive message about yourself.

- **Put positive messages all around you.**

Write out positive, loving messages and put them in places you'll find them--inside books, on your computer screen, in your wallet, in your pockets. Put them on your refrigerator or mirror.

- **Choose the words you use for yourself purposefully.**

Words have a powerful impact on how we feel and think about ourselves and others. Words can hurt, flatten, and wound. Words can also encourage, empower, heal. Choose words, when you think about yourself, that are positive, kind, and loving.

- **Listen to alternative, healing music.**

If you only look for one song, check out [Libby Roderick's "How Could Anyone,"](#) on her cd *If You See a Dream*. The lyrics are a powerful, healing affirmation: "How could anyone ever tell you, you were anything

less than beautiful, how could anyone ever tell you, you were less than whole?"

- **Listen to children's music.**

I'm not kidding. There are some wonderful, empowering, encouraging children's songs. Check out "Proud of Me" and "Me" sung by Sesame Street's Grover on "The Best of Grover"; "Happy Place," "It's okay," "Sing a happy song," "We'll Fill the World With Love," and "What a wonderful world" by Rosenshontz, "Believe in Yourself," "But I Like You," by Sesame Street;

- **Read a book or comic strip that makes you feel good.**

Feeling good helps get you into that receptive space where you can take in good messages. A book that always makes me feel good, and gives me positive, healing messages is 39 Ways to Open Your Heart by Arlene Gay Levine and Karen Kroll. The messages are like healing affirmations, and the artwork is stunning.

Another of my favorite things to read when I want a huge splash of good feeling is any of the Rose Is Rose collected comic strips. They affirm the playful child in me, and usually reading them in large doses (such as a book) leave me feeling happy.

- **Write yourself a loving letter.**

Write yourself a letter that mentions all the things you love about yourself. Go into as much detail as you want. If you have trouble writing it, think of a friend who loves you, and try to write it from their perspective. Then mail yourself the letter.

Repeatedly telling positive messages to yourself, and taking them in, can work to build up your love for yourself, and help you to be more open to the good things within you, and around you. It can also build up your resistance to critical, hurtful messages, and help you to feel happier. So what are you waiting for? Give yourself a positive message right now. And believe it.

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