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How to improve your self-esteem and be kinder to yourself

We all have days when we don't feel good about ourselves, and it is rare to find someone who is confident all the time. But when we persistently have low self-esteem, it can have a harmful effect on our lives and mental wellbeing.

Self-esteem is how we value ourselves and when we have healthy self-esteem, we generally feel positive about ourselves and our lives. When our self-esteem is low, it can leave us feeling worthless, undeserving of happiness or low in confidence, which can affect our health, work and relationships.

Self-esteem vs confidence

"Low self-esteem is from the beliefs you have about who you are as a person, your opinion of yourself. It is more powerful and tends to pervade all areas of life," says Dr Sheri Jacobson, clinical director of Harley Therapy.

Low confidence, however, is about how you rate your skills and abilities, she explains. "It can affect one or several areas of life. For example, you might have low confidence with public speaking, but be very confident with stating your mind in a small group."

Low self-esteem often begins in childhood - for example, as a result of [bullying](#). But [stress](#) and difficult life events can also have a negative effect on our self-esteem, such as an illness, a bereavement or a challenging life change, like redundancy.

Anne Riley, a therapist, confidence coach and a Counselling Directory member, says you can't always spot someone who has low self-esteem, but common signs are sensitivity to criticism or avoidance of social interactions. Some people may avoid trying new things, or stay away from challenging situations.

"People with low self-esteem can be more focused on their personal problems and avoid any situation where they might be 'centre stage' and they can think negatively," she says. "It is common for them to feel nervous or anxious and they would avoid situations where they might be judged or compared to others."

Although having low self-esteem isn't a mental health condition in itself, the two are closely linked. Having low self-esteem in the long term may lead to a problem such as [depression](#) or [anxiety](#).

Naomi Barrow, 23, says low confidence and self-esteem leaves her struggling with everyday tasks.

"Getting dressed can send me into a tailspin - and has left me crying more times than I care to count - so I tend to wear the same thing pretty much every day," she says. "Showering can also be incredibly difficult if I'm having a bad body image day. Leaving the house can be a real challenge."

"It's hard to detail the things that having low self-confidence affects, because it's literally everything. It's caused me to lose friends, miss time with my family, avoid holidays or visiting places, and generally hide away from things."

Steps to boost your self-esteem

Although it's certainly not easy to silence that critical inner voice completely, there are steps you can take to improve your self-esteem and feel more positive.

Challenge negative beliefs

It helps to identify negative beliefs you have about yourself, then challenge them.

"Sit down and make a list of all the things you say against yourself, or if you are brave enough ask friends what sorts of things they notice you saying," Jacobson says.

"For each criticism you have of yourself, write down the exact opposite. Then come up with 'facts' that prove both sides. You'll likely be surprised to find you can find proof for both sides. This exercise shows how our 'beliefs' are usually not so true at all."

"Finally, come up with a statement that is balanced and in the middle – such as: "I'm not always naturally assertive, but if I need to be, I can be."

Focus on the positives

Taking time to reflect on your successes can help you have a more positive view of yourself. Writing a list of what you like about yourself may also be helpful.

Barrow says she writes down three positives at the end of every day. "It can be really difficult some days, and there have been days when they've included things like 'my dressing gown is fluffy' and 'my heat pack is warm'. But it forces me to try to find some good in every day."

Identify your triggers

Riley recommends asking yourself if there are times when you feel more confident or less confident.

"If we can identify the triggers that drain us of confidence and those factors that help us relax and be ourselves, we can identify areas for self-development and strengths we can build on," she says.

"Ask trusted friends and family members to help identify your strengths, skills and talents. Listen to what they have to say and learn to like yourself."

Try talking therapies

Talking about your feelings with a trained professional can help you work through problems and build self-esteem.

"[Cognitive behavioural therapy](#) can help you to think more positively about yourself and your abilities," Riley says. "You will learn to challenge your limiting beliefs and become less self-critical as you focus on your strengths."

Be kind to yourself

Although it can be difficult to find the motivation to take care of yourself, it's important for your mental well-being.

Geraldine Joaquim, a hypnotherapist, recommends taking time out to do things that make you happy. "Put non-negotiable dates in your diary for 'me time' such as a yoga class or joining a book club, or whatever you like doing for relaxation; prioritise your relaxation - [stress](#) makes that inner voice louder so reducing your stress through relaxation helps to dampen it," she says.

Build positive relationships

It may sound obvious, but spending time with people who appreciate you and treat you well is key to raising self-esteem.

"In terms of thinking most positively, I'm working on building up an army of cheerleaders around me," Barrow says. "These people are amazing friends, colleagues and family who build me up rather than dragging me down."

Challenge yourself

Setting yourself a goal can help you feel more positive about yourself. This could mean joining an exercise class, going to a social event or even trying out a new recipe.

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