

Self-Esteem

By Troy Piwowarski

Self-esteem is a term you may have heard a lot about. If you ask ten people their definition of self-esteem, you may get ten very different answers about what it means, why it is important, and how people build self-esteem. I want to talk about a few things that may help clarify some common questions about self-esteem.

What is Self-Esteem, really? Most definitions of self-esteem involve *a person's appraisal of their overall self-worth*. Self-esteem involves beliefs about oneself that can be negative ("I can't do anything right"), positive ("I know I am a good person"), or somewhere in between. It also involves emotions, such as pride, shame, sadness, or triumph, which are largely related to beliefs about oneself.

What is my self-esteem based on? One of the most common issues is basing nearly all of one's self-esteem on *external accomplishments*, such as getting good grades, winning awards, or finishing challenging projects. External accomplishments are necessary and satisfying parts of life, and only become problematic when a person comes to rely on them exclusively to feel good about themselves.

Internal self-esteem is a much deeper and lasting source of satisfaction and security. One theory describes internal self-esteem as an internalized voice from our early childhood experiences that quietly tells us that we're good people, or on the other hand, tells us that we're worthless.

One way to sort internal self-esteem out from external self-esteem is by the example of winning a soccer game. *External self-esteem* comes from the accomplishment of kicking the winning goal. *Internal self-esteem* may come more from the knowledge that close friends and family members who believe in you are watching in the crowd, and will be proud of you even if you lose the game.

When a person experiences this "no-matter-what" kind of love from others often enough, they begin to learn how to provide themselves with the same reassurance, even without the presence of others.

Why is self-esteem so important? The beliefs we have about ourselves affect the way we act in social settings (some examples are confidence and shyness).

There is also a strong relationship between the way we treat ourselves and the way we treat others. If a person thinks poorly of who they are, it is often easier to be judgmental of others, making friendships more difficult to maintain.

People with high self-esteem are also able to "weather the storm" better when confronted with life's challenges (such as a bad grade or a break-up).

How do I increase my self-esteem? High self-esteem comes from self-reflection on what a person values in others and which of those qualities that person sees in inside themselves.

Internal self-esteem most commonly begins with close connections to friends and family members who can help build up one's internal voice, making the person less self-critical and more self-affirming.

Some people look around them and struggle to find that person who can provide a supportive voice for them. One place that people can turn to is a counselor or a therapist, who can provide a safe, supportive, and reflective environment to begin building a foundation for internal self-esteem. While many people choose to work one-on-one with a therapist or counselor, group therapy is also an excellent option for self-esteem building, because it allows the person to get supportive feedback from a whole group of peers who struggle with similar issues.

Submitted by Troy Piwowarski, M.A., Temporary Limited Licensed Psychologist, at Wentworth & Associates, a counseling center in Utica, Michigan. Troy has been practicing individual and group therapy for 2 years and works with teens and adults who struggle with self-esteem issues.