

HEALTHY SELF-ESTEEM

As the world becomes more complex, competitive, challenging, self-esteem is more important than ever.

The shift from a manufacturing-based society to one based on information, and the emergence of a global economy characterized by rapid change have created growing demands on our psychological resources. Recently, the focus of my work has been to show how self-esteem principles and technology can be used to improve performance in the work place.

SELF-ESTEEM DEFINED

Despite the abundance of books, studies, workshops and committees devoted to the subject of self-esteem, there is little agreement about what it means. Self-esteem has two essential components:

- Self-efficacy: Confidence in the ability to cope with life's challenges. Self-efficacy leads to a sense of control over one's life.
- Self-respect: Experience oneself as deserving of happiness, achievement and love. Self-respect makes possible a sense of community with others.

Self-esteem is a self-reinforcing characteristic. When we have confidence in our ability to think and act effectively, we can persevere when faced with difficult challenges. Result: We succeed more often than we fail. We form more nourishing relationships. We expect more of life and of ourselves.

If we lack confidence, we give up easily, fail more often and aspire to less. Result: We get less of what we want.

WHAT SELF-ESTEEM IS NOT

Self-esteem is a necessary condition of well being. But it's not the only one. Its presence doesn't make life problem-free. Even people with high self-esteem may experience anxiety, depression or fear when overwhelmed by issues they don't know how to cope with.

I think of self-esteem as the immune system of consciousness. A healthy immune system doesn't guarantee you'll never become ill, but, it does reduce your susceptibility to illness and can improve your odds for a speedy recovery if you do get sick.

The same is true psychologically. Those with strong self-esteem are resilient in the face of life's difficulties.

It's impossible to have too much self-esteem. People who are arrogant or boastful actually show a lack of self-esteem. Those who are truly comfortable with themselves and their achievements take pleasure in being who they are ... they don't need to tell the world about it.

Becoming successful, powerful or well liked does not automatically confer good self-esteem. In fact, talented and powerful people who doubt their own core value are usually unable to find joy in their achievements, no matter how great their external success.

Important: Self-esteem has to do with what I think of me, not what anyone else thinks of me.

The highly touted use of affirmations is also ineffective, or at best of marginal value, in raising self-esteem. Telling yourself you're capable and lovable accomplishes little if you are operating irresponsibly in key areas

of your life.

ROOTS OF SELF-REGARD

Genetic inheritance may have a role in a person's self-esteem—it's conceivable, anyway. Parental upbringing can also play a powerful role.

Parents with strong self-esteem lay the foundation for that quality in their children. They raise them with plenty of love and acceptance, believing in their competence and setting reasonable rules and expectations.

Yet there are exceptions that we still don't understand. Some people who have these positive factors in their backgrounds become self-doubting adults, while others who survive seemingly destructive childhoods grow up with a strong sense of self-worth.

Strengthening self-esteem is not a quick or easy process. We can't do it directly. Self-esteem is a consequence of following fundamental internal practices that require an ongoing commitment to self-examination. I call these practices the "Six Pillars of Self-Esteem":

Living consciously: Paying attention to information and feedback about needs and goals ... facing facts that might be uncomfortable or threatening ... refusing to wander through life in a self-induced mental fog.

Self-acceptance: Being willing to experience whatever we truly think, feel or do, even if we don't always like it ... facing our mistakes and learning from them.

Self-responsibility. Establishing a sense of control over our lives by realizing we are responsible for our choices and actions at every level ... the achievement of our goals ... our happiness ... our values.

Self-assertiveness: The willingness to express appropriately our thoughts, values and feelings ... to stand up for ourselves ... to speak and act from our deepest convictions.

Living purposefully: Setting goals and working to achieve them, rather than living at the mercy of chance and outside forces ... developing self-discipline.

Integrity: The integration of our behavior with our ideals, convictions, standards and beliefs ... acting in congruence with what we believe is right.

Most of us are taught from an early age to pay far more attention to signals coming from other people than from within. We are encouraged to ignore our own needs and wants and to concentrate on living up to others' expectations.

Self-esteem requires us to listen to and respect our own sensations, insights, intuition and perspective. For some people, learning to do this may require the help of a competent therapist. For all of us, developing the pillars of self-esteem is a life-long—and worthy—challenge.