

## WHAT SELF-ESTEEM IS AND IS NOT

Four decades ago, when I began lecturing on self-esteem, the challenge was to persuade people that the subject was worthy of study. Almost no one was talking or writing about self-esteem in those days. Today, almost everyone seems to be talking about self-esteem, and the danger is that the idea may become trivialized. And yet, of all the judgments we pass in life, none is more important than the judgment we pass on ourselves.

Having written on this theme in a series of books, I want, in this short article, to address the issue of what self-esteem is, what it depends on, and what are some of the most prevalent misconceptions about it.

Self-esteem is an experience. It is a particular way of experiencing the self. It is a good deal more than a mere feeling—this must be stressed. It involves emotional, evaluative, and cognitive components. It also entails certain action dispositions: to move toward life rather than away from it; to move toward consciousness rather than away from it; to treat facts with respect rather than denial; to operate self-responsibly rather than the opposite.

**A DEFINITION**

To begin with a definition: Self-esteem is the disposition to experience oneself as being competent to cope with the basic challenges of life and of being worthy of happiness. It is confidence in the efficacy of our mind, in our ability to think. By extension, it is confidence in our ability to learn, make appropriate choices and decisions, and respond effectively to change. It is also the experience that success, achievement, fulfillment—happiness—are right and natural for us. The survival-value of such confidence is obvious; so is the danger when it is missing.

Self-esteem is not the euphoria or buoyancy that may be temporarily induced by a drug, a compliment, or a love affair. It is not an illusion or hallucination. If it is not grounded in reality, if it is not built over time through the appropriate operation of mind, it is not self-esteem.

The root of our need for self-esteem is the need for a consciousness to learn to trust itself. And the root of the need to learn such trust is the fact that consciousness is volitional: we have the choice to think or not to think. We control the switch that turns consciousness brighter or dimmer. We are not rational—that is, reality-focused—automatically. This means that whether we learn to operate our mind in such a way as to make ourselves appropriate to life is ultimately a function of our choices. Do we strive for consciousness or for its opposite? For rationality or its opposite? For coherence and clarity or their opposite? For truth or its opposite?

**BUILDING SELF-ESTEEM**

In “The Six Pillars of Self Esteem,” I examine the six practices that I have found to be essential for the nurturing and sustaining of healthy self-esteem: the practice of living consciously, of self-acceptance, of self-responsibility, of self-assertiveness, of purposefulness, and of integrity. I will briefly define what each of these practices means:

The practice of living consciously: respect for facts; being present to what we are doing while are doing it; seeking and being eagerly open to any information, knowledge, or feedback that bears on our interests, values, goals, and projects; seeking to understand not only the world external to

self but also our inner world, so that we do not out of self-blindness.

The practice of self-acceptance: the willingness to own, experience, and take responsibility for our thoughts, feelings, and actions, without evasion, denial, or disowning—and also without self-repudiation; giving oneself permission to think one’s thoughts, experience one’s emotions, and look at one’s actions without necessarily liking, endorsing, or condoning them; the virtue of realism applied to the self.

The practice of self-responsibility: realizing that we are the author of our choices and actions; that each one of us is responsible for life and well-being and for the attainment of our goals; that if we need the cooperation of other people to achieve our goals, we must offer values in exchange; and that question is not “Who’s to blame?” but always “What needs to be done?” (“What do I need to do?”)

The practice of self-assertiveness: being authentic in our dealings with others; treating our values and persons with decent respect in social contexts; refusing to fake the reality of who we are or what we esteem in order to avoid disapproval; the willingness to stand up for ourselves and our ideas in appropriate ways in appropriate contexts.

The practice of living purposefully: identifying our short-term and long-term goals or purposes and the actions needed to attain them (formulating an action-plan); organizing behavior in the service of those goals; monitoring action to be sure we stay on track; and paying attention to outcome so as to recognize if and when we need to go back to the drawing-board.

The practice of personal integrity: living with congruence between what we know, what we profess, and what we do; telling the truth, honoring our commitments, exemplifying in action the values we profess to admire.

What all these practices have in common is respect for reality. They all entail at their core a set of mental operations (which, naturally, have consequences in the external world).

When we seek to align ourselves with reality as best we understand it, we nurture and support our self-esteem. When, either out of fear or desire, we seek escape from reality, we undermine our self-esteem. No other issue is more important or basic than our cognitive relationship to reality—meaning: to that which exists.

A consciousness cannot trust itself if, in the face of discomfiting facts, it has a policy of preferring blindness to sight. A person cannot experience self-respect who too often, in action, betrays consciousness, knowledge, and conviction—that is, who operates without integrity.

Thus, if we are mindful in this area, we see that self-esteem is not a free gift of nature. It has to be cultivated, has to be earned. It cannot be acquired by blowing oneself a kiss in the mirror and saying, “Good morning, Perfect.” It cannot be attained by being showered with praise. Nor by sexual conquests. Nor by material acquisitions. Nor by the scholastic or career achievements of one’s children. Nor by a hypnotist planting the thought that one is wonderful. Nor by allowing young people to believe they are better students than they really are and know more than they really know; faking reality is not a path to mental health

or authentic self-assurance. However, just as people dream of attaining effortless wealth, so they dream of attaining effortless self-esteem—and unfortunately the marketplace is full of panderers to this longing.

People can be inspired, stimulated, or coached to live more consciously, practice greater self-acceptance, operate more self-responsibly, function more self-assertively, live more purposefully, and bring a higher level of personal integrity into their life—but the task of generating and sustaining these practices falls on each of us alone. “If I bring a higher level of awareness to my self-esteem, I see that mine is the responsibility of nurturing it.” No one—not our parents, nor our friends, nor our lover, nor our therapist, nor our support group—can “give” us self-esteem. If and when we fully grasp this, that is an act of “waking up.”

#### MISCONCEPTIONS ABOUT SELF-ESTEEM

When we do not understand the principles suggested above, we tend to seek self-esteem where it cannot be found—and, if we are in “the self-esteem movement,” to communicate our misunderstandings to others.

Teachers who embrace the idea that self-esteem is important without adequately grasping its roots may announce (to quote one such teacher) that “self-esteem comes primarily from one’s peers.” Or (quoting many others): “Children should not be graded for mastery of a subject because it may be hurtful to their self-esteem.” Or (quoting still others): “Self-esteem is best nurtured by selfless (!) service to the community.”

In the “recovery movement” and from so-called spiritual leaders in general one may receive a different message: “Stop struggling to achieve self-esteem. Turn your problems over to God. Realize that you are a child of God—and that is all you need to have self-esteem.” Consider what this implies if taken literally. We don’t need to live consciously. We don’t need to act self-responsibly. We don’t need to have integrity. All we have to do is surrender responsibility to God and effortless self-esteem is guaranteed to us. This is not a helpful message to convey to people. Nor is it true.

Yet another misconception—very different from those I have just discussed—is the belief that the measure of our personal worth is our external achievements. This is an understandable error to make but it is an error nonetheless. We admire achievements, in ourselves and in others, and it is natural and appropriate to do so. But this is not the same thing as saying that our achievements are the measure or grounds of our self-esteem. The root of our self-esteem is not our achievements per se but those internally generated practices that make it possible for us to achieve. How much we will achieve in the world is not fully in our control. An economic depression can temporarily put us out of work. A depression cannot take away the resourcefulness that will allow us sooner or later to find another or go into business for ourselves. “Resourcefulness” is not an achievement in the world (although it may result in that); it is an action in consciousness—and it is here that self-esteem is generated.

To clarify further the importance of understanding what self-esteem is and is not, I want to comment on a recent research report that has gained a great deal of attention in the media and has been used to challenge the value of self-esteem.

By way of preamble let me say that one of the most depressing aspects of so many discussions of self-esteem today is the absence of any reference to the importance of thinking or respect for reality. Too often, consciousness or rationality are not judged to be relevant, since they are not raised as considerations. The notion seems to be that any positive

feeling about the self, however arrived at and regardless of its grounds, equals “self-esteem.”

We encounter this assumption in a much publicized research paper by Roy F. Baumeister, Joseph M. Boden, and Laura Smart, entitled “Relation of Threatened Egotism to Violence and Aggression: The Dark Side of High Self-Esteem,” published in the “Psychological Review” (1996, Vol. 103, 5-33). In it the authors write:

Conventional wisdom has regarded low self-esteem as an important cause of violence, but the opposite view is theoretically viable. An interdisciplinary review of evidence about aggression, crime, and violence contradicted the view that low self-esteem is an important cause. Instead, violence appears to be most commonly a result of threatened egotism—that is, highly favorable views of self that are disputed by some person or circumstance. Inflated, unstable, or tentative beliefs in the self’s superiority may be most prone to encountering threats and hence to causing violence. The mediating process may involve directing anger outward as a way of avoiding a downward revision of the self-concept.

The article contains more astonishing statements than it is possible to quote, but here are a few representative examples:

“In our view, the benefits of favorable self-opinions accrue primarily to the self, and they are if anything a burden and potential problem to everyone else.”

“By self-esteem we mean simply a favorable global evaluation of oneself. The term self-esteem has acquired highly positive connotations, but it has simple synonyms the connotations of which are more mixed, including ... egotism, arrogance ... conceitedness, narcissism, and sense of superiority, which share the fundamental meaning of favorable self-evaluation.”

“[W]e propose that the major cause of violence is high self-esteem combined with an ego threat [which is caused by someone challenging your self-evaluation].”

“Apparently, then, alcohol generally helps create a state of high self-esteem.”

Observe, first of all, that there is nothing in the authors’ idea of self-esteem that would allow one to distinguish between an individual whose self-esteem is rooted in the practices of living consciously, self-responsibility, and personal integrity—that is, one whose self-esteem is rooted in reality—and one whose “self-esteem” consists of grandiosity, fantasies of superiority, exaggerated notions of one’s accomplishments, megalomania, and “favorable global self-evaluations” induced by drugs and alcohol. No definition of self-esteem or piece of research that obliterates a distinction of this fundamentality can make any claim to scientific legitimacy. It leaves reality out of its analysis.

One does not need to be a trained psychologist to know that some people with low self-esteem strive to compensate for their deficit by boasting, arrogance, and conceited behavior. What educated person does not know about compensatory defense mechanisms? Self-esteem is not manifested in the neurosis we call narcissism—or in megalomania. One has to have a strange notion of the concept to equate in self-esteem the trail-blazing scientist or entrepreneur, moved by intellectual self-trust and a passion to discover or achieve, and the terrorist who must sustain his “high self-evaluation” with periodic fixes of torture and murder. To offer both types as instances of “high self-esteem” is to empty the term of any useable meaning.

An important purpose of fresh thinking is to provide us with new and valuable distinctions that will allow us to navigate more effectively through reality. What is the purpose of “thinking” that destroys distinctions already known to us that are of life-and-death importance?

It is tempting to comment on this report in greater detail because it contains so many instances of specious reasoning. However, such a discussion would not be relevant here, since my intention is only to show the importance of a precise understanding of self-esteem and also to show what can happen when consciousness and reality are omitted from the investigation.

So I will conclude with one last observation. In an interview given to a journalist, one of the researchers (Roy F. Baumeister), explaining his opposition to the goal of raising people’s self-esteem, is quoted as saying: “Ask yourself: If everybody were 50 percent more conceited, would the world be a better place?” [1] The implication is clearly that self-esteem and conceit are the same thing—both undesirable. Webster defines conceit as an exaggerated [therefore in defiance of facts] opinion of oneself and one’s merits. No, the world would not be a better place if everybody were 50 percent more conceited. But would the world be a better place if everybody had earned a 50 percent higher level of self-esteem, by living consciously, responsibly, and with integrity? Yes, it would—enormously.

#### **AWARENESS OF WHAT AFFECTS OUR SELF-ESTEEM**

Self-esteem reflects our deepest vision of our competence and worth. Sometimes this vision is our most closely guarded secret, even from ourselves, as when we try to compensate for our deficiencies with what I call pseudo-self-esteem—a pretense at a self-confidence and self-respect we do not actually feel. Nothing is more common than the effort to protect self-esteem not with consciousness but with unconsciousness—with denial and evasion—which only results in a further deterioration of self-esteem. Indeed a good deal of the behavior we call “neurotic” can be best understood as a misguided effort to protect self-esteem by means which in fact are undermining.

Whether or not we admit it, there is a level at which all of us know that the issue of our self-esteem is of the most burning importance. Evidence for this observation is the defensiveness with which insecure people may respond when their errors are pointed out. Or the extraordinary feats of avoidance and self-deception people can exhibit with regard to gross acts of unconsciousness and irresponsibility. Or the foolish and pathetic ways people sometimes try to prop up their egos by the wealth or prestige of their spouse, the make of their automobile, or the fame of their dress designer, or by the exclusiveness of their golf club. In more recent times, as the subject of self-esteem has gained increasing attention, one way of masking one’s problems in this area is with the angry denial that self-esteem is significant (or desirable).

Not all the values with which people may attempt to support a pseudo-self-esteem are foolish or irrational. Productive work, for instance, is certainly a value to be admired, but if one tries to compensate for a deficient self-esteem by becoming a workaholic one is in a battle one can never win—nothing will ever feel like “enough.” Kindness and compassion are undeniably virtues, and they are part of what it means to lead a moral life, but they are no substitutes for consciousness, independence, self-responsibility, and integrity—and when this is not understood they are often used as disguised means to buy “love” and perhaps even a sense of

moral superiority: “I’m more kind and compassionate than you’ll ever be and if I weren’t so humble I’d tell you so.”

One of the great challenges to our practice of living consciously is to pay attention to what in fact nurtures our self-esteem or deteriorates it. The reality may be very different from our beliefs. We may, for example, get a very pleasant “hit” from someone’s compliment, and we may tell ourselves that when we win people’s approval we have self-esteem, but then, if we are adequately conscious, we may notice that the pleasant feeling fades rather quickly and that we seem to be insatiable and never fully satisfied—and this may direct us to wonder if we have thought deeply enough about the sources of genuine self-approval. Or we may notice that when we give our conscientious best to a task, or face a difficult truth with courage, or take responsibility for our actions, or speak up when we know that that is what the situation warrants, or refuse to betray our convictions, or persevere even when persevering is not easy—our self-esteem rises. We may also notice that if and when we do the opposite, self-esteem falls. But of course all such observations imply that we have chosen to be conscious.

In the world of the future, children will be taught the basic dynamics of self-esteem and the power of living consciously and self-responsibly. They will be taught what self-esteem is, why it is important, and what it depends on. They will learn to distinguish between authentic self-esteem and pseudo-self-esteem. They will be guided to acquire this knowledge because it will have become apparent to virtually everyone that the ability to think (and to learn and to respond confidently to change) is our basic means of survival—and that it cannot be faked. The purpose of school is to prepare young people for the challenges of adult life. They will need this understanding to be adaptive to an information age in which self-esteem has acquired such urgency. In a fiercely competitive global economy—with every kind of change happening faster and faster—there is little market for unconsciousness, passivity, or self-doubt. In the language of business, low self-esteem and underdeveloped mindfulness puts one at a competitive disadvantage. However, neither teachers in general nor teachers of self-esteem in particular can do their jobs properly—or communicate the importance of their work—until they themselves understand the intimate linkage that exists between the six practices described above, self-esteem, and appropriate adaptation to reality. “The world of the future” begins with this understanding.