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Self-Esteem: What Exactly is It?

How it affects the lives of everyone and its significance for society

I regard self-esteem as the single most powerful force in existence ... the way we feel about ourselves affects virtually every aspect of our existence ... work, love, sex, interpersonal relationships of every kind.

Nathaniel Branden, *The Psychology of Self-Esteem*

If you stopped people in the street and asked if they know what it is that everyone has to some degree, which cannot be seen, but the amount they have can be identified by the words they speak and the actions they take, there would almost certainly be difficulty in naming it. Then when they were told the answer was self-esteem and challenged to define it there would again be difficulty. The majority would invariably say it is feeling good or being self-confident, although in a survey done by the Body Shop some time ago there were some very creative definitions, such as The Pursuit of Dreams, A Twinkle in the Eye and The Living of Life.

Self-esteem is certainly more than feeling good or being self-confident and is a complicated, absorbing subject to explain as there are so many views on it. Many people are interested in it and it provokes constant debate.

There are well over 1,000 research projects on self-esteem at the present time examining how it affects different aspects of our lives. The recently published book *Self-Esteem: Issues and Answers* has 450 closely typed pages and 56 contributors and if you look on Google the number of entries under self-esteem is endless.

So here, to put you in the picture as simply as I can, my intention is to quote some of the most respected definitions of self-esteem. Reading them I am sure you will conclude that it really is an issue which is important in your life, because basically they all say if you have self-esteem life will be good and if you don't it will not be so good.

This quote expresses it much better than I can:

High self-esteem is associated with high productivity, whether it is exemplified in academic achievement, creativity or leadership: low self-esteem is characteristic of the low achiever, non creative person and the follower.

John Gilmore, *The Productive Personality*

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Nathaniel Branden, a great authority on the subject, makes the point very graphically when he writes that, just as we need oxygen for our physical survival, so we must have self-esteem for our mental well-being. Consequently it has a tremendous influence on how we lead our lives. We need to understand what it is and how to ensure that we have some of this precious commodity. Here are some definitions that I think explain it well:

Self-esteem

- is being at ease with the four aspects of the self: the physical self, the social self, the cognitive self, and the spiritual self
- is appreciating my own worth and importance, and having the character to be accountable for myself, and to act responsibly towards myself and others *Towards a State of Esteem*, the final report of the California Task Force to promote Self-Esteem and Personal and Social Responsibility, 1990.
- is the sum of feelings about yourself, including the sense of self-respect and self-worth. These findings are based on two convictions: I am lovable and capable IALAC Sidney Simon

Coopersmith was one of the first to research the meaning of self-esteem and he said it was

The evaluation a person makes, and customarily maintains, of him or her self; that is, overall, self-esteem is an expression of approval or disapproval. Indicating the person believes himself or herself competent, successful, significant and worthy.

Stanley Coopersmith, *Self-Esteem Inventories*, 1981

Branden's definition is widely regarded today as being the best. He expands on that and says

Self-Esteem is the experience of being able to cope with the basic challenges of life and of being worthy of happiness. It consists of two components: Self-efficacy-confidence in our ability to think, learn, choose and make appropriate decisions and Self-respect-confidence in our right to be happy, confidence that achievement, success, friendship, respect, love and fulfilment are appropriate for us. Nathaniel Branden, *The Six Pillars of Self-Esteem*

And Mruk agrees

The lived status of one's competence at dealing with the challenges of life in a worthy way over time.

Christopher Mruk, *Towards a Positive Psychology of Self-Esteem*

If you develop a high sense of esteem every decision you need to make and every challenge you face will be easier to deal with. A problem will be easier to solve, or if it cannot be solved then you will be able to handle it with greater poise and strength. The basic challenges of life include such fundamentals as being able to take independent care of ourselves in the world, being able to sustain relationships that more often than not are satisfying to oneself and the others involved, and

having the resilience to bounce back from diversity and to persevere in one's aspirations.

Where did we get our self-esteem? How have we decided how much self-esteem we have, that is, whether we are of low value, high value or somewhere in between?

Self-esteem is a set of unconscious self-beliefs, formed over a lifetime, reflecting our perceptions of our abilities, our lovability, and how we attribute causality for the events in our lives.

John V. Shindler, *Creating a Psychology of Success in the Classroom*

Self-esteem is formed by the experiences we have from the beginning of our lives and our interpretation of them is reflected in all our behaviour. Do we feel in control of our lives or is it something to do with fate? Do we feel accepted or judged, criticised or empowered to attempt the actions we want to take? Do we have a sense of competence to achieve or a feeling of failure? If negativity rules, low self-esteem prevails. If the opposite is the case then we can be confident of this situation. The key question to ask is, 'Am I worthy and competent?'

Worth and competence are the twin pillars of self-esteem. For an in-depth explanation about how these translate into living your life, read Branden's books. In the next chapters you can find out how taking part in the circles will help you to discover them for yourself.

Like physical health, you can never have too much self-esteem. Where it is thought that some people do have excess of it, it is due to a complete misunderstanding and one of several myths which exist about the subject and which are constantly circulated and used by some for negative reasons. Boasting, bragging and arrogance are often thought of as associated with high self-esteem but are in fact a clear indication of the lack of it, usually brought about by a desire to overcome insecurity and a need to prove oneself to others. There is a compulsive desire to make comparisons and compete. Good self-esteem is not about feeling superior to others because you feel better than they are, or that you can do something faster or neater. Self-esteem is not conceit. Confusion about self-congratulation and narcissism is unfortunate: sound approaches to self-esteem are based on realism, not inflated self-images. If we examine the cause of the aggression of the bullies, and the problems of the other chronic misbehaviours – the fighters, the precocious and the children who are withdrawn or have adopted the life of a victim – we will realise that low self-esteem is at the root of it. These children are not being hostile to the system, which is how their actions are invariably interpreted, but behave as they do because of strong feelings of inadequacy and internal blame, a belief that they do not possess the ability or intelligence to succeed.

In fact, low self-esteem manifests itself in many harmful, unfortunate behaviours and causes untold turmoil and misery. Studies show that poor school achievement, truancy, crime, violence, alcohol and drug abuse, teenage pregnancy and suicide all have strong links to poor self-esteem. Dr Neil Smelzer, co-author of *The Social Importance of Self-Esteem* reviewed over 30,000 studies and concluded that low self-esteem contributes to a range of behaviours that lie at the root of many social problems and believes that addressing this issue is the way these problems can be overcome.

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When we talk of self-esteem we are thinking of our mental health as this quotation illustrates:

One way of describing mental health is that it is the emotional resilience which enables us to enjoy life and to survive pain, disappointment and sadness. It is a positive sense of well-being and an underlying belief in our own and others' dignity and worth.

Health Education Authority, 1996.

The problem that *The Lancet* pointed out 20 years ago still seems in evidence. It said that doctors' surgeries were full of depressed people and that the nation was suffering from an epidemic of low self-esteem. In fact it has multiplied and seems to be affecting every area of life both in the young and old.

Today's children are growing up too soon and the prospects for society and the world they will inherit look increasingly perilous.

Community Soundings, interim report of
The Primary Review, October 2007.

Here are just a few of the studies on problems which are reported there. 'The number of prescriptions given to children under the age of 16 for depression and other mental health diagnoses has quadrupled in a decade. GPs wrote more than 631,000 such prescriptions for children in the last financial year, compared to just 146,000 in the mid 1990s. Other figures suggest that the rate of anti-depressant prescriptions for the population as a whole has hit a record high.' Professor Magur Lakhami, Chair, Royal College of General Practitioners. 'GPs consider the needs for antidepressants only after a careful assessment of the patient's clinical condition.' (Openmind No.147, Sept/October 2007)

Do you think these children feel lovable and capable or worthy and competent? There is now thought to be a causal association between early anxiety and future negative outcomes including depression and substance abuse. The organisation beat reports that eating disorders affect 1.1 million people in the UK, the majority being adolescent girls and young women. Obesity in the young is a national concern. We have the second-highest level of obesity in the developed world. At the launch of Improving Lives, Saving Lives, Dr Paul Cosford, director of public health for the east of England, said in september 2007, that obesity needed to be a priority and that early intervention was needed, including as early as breastfeeding and weaning (September 2007). Ofsted says that a quarter of 10-15-year-olds regularly get drunk and 5 per cent of 10-11-year-olds had been drunk at least once in the four weeks prior to being questioned. The Howard League for Penal Reform believes that 95 per cent of boys aged 10-14 get involved in some kind of crime. In 2007, 24,000 were admitted to hospital for self-harm using razors and glass burns, the youngest of whom was 9 years old. A national enquiry, 'Truth Hurts', claims that one in five girls between 15 and 17 have self-harmed. According to a survey of 1,078 children aged between 7 and 18 by the Anti-Bullying Alliance, one in three children are being bullied on the way to and from school.

Put these and the results of many other reports and surveys together and you can begin to see the extent of the problem. Callers to ChildLine have presented many different problems and have prompted the charity to warn of an 'alarming decline' in the mental health of children.

Fifty one per cent of the timetable and enormous sums of money are spent on initiatives to improve literacy and numeracy, yet the results are inconclusive. With children and young people displaying behaviour like this, maybe there is a missing X factor. Could that be self-esteem?

A small-scale investigation by members of the School of Education, University of Manchester, which reported some time ago, found that levels of self-esteem had decreased in the time children moved from Year 2 to Year 6 and that the scores of the 11-year-olds were considerably lower than those of the same age tested 13 years previously.

And for them to have a sufficient level of self-esteem, so they can move forward well in their lives, the grown-ups must take responsibility. But if the grown-ups do not have sufficient self-esteem themselves, they are not in a position to help. This sounds like a downward spiral and is what prompted David Law MP to ask in the Commons if 'society is on the brink'. It is said that one in four of the adult population suffers from some kind of mental distress.

Mental health problems are now the biggest cause of absence from work, costing businesses millions of pounds a year in sick pay.

Claire Harris, Cambridgeshire Primary
Care Trust, October 2007.

Other problems of behaviour that people are presenting are mentioned elsewhere.

Apart from problems which are biological in origin, I cannot think of a single psychological difficulty, from anxiety to depression, to fear of intimacy or of success, to alcohol or drug abuse, to underachievement at school or at work, to spouse battering or child molestation, to severe sexual dysfunction or emotional immaturity, to suicide or crimes of violence – that is not traceable to poor self-esteem. Nathaniel Branden, *The Psychology of Self-Esteem*

I am sure that Branden is right. My 30 years as a head teacher and the experience of being with countless children in Circle Time and presenting self-esteem workshops for many adults convinced me that when low self-esteem is tackled and changes made, dramatic differences can happen. The facts given here illustrate what an enormous impact self-esteem has on the lives of individuals and the repercussions that has for society. The Self-Esteem Tree is here to show where the people contained in these figures are. Through the situations and conditions they have found themselves in they are not even beginning to climb the trunk. Yet it is possible for them to get all of life's assets on the branches and to reach the top of the tree. Healthy self-esteem is always available to obtain. It simply needs a signpost there to show them which way to go. For this to happen a concerted national campaign is needed at all levels including the government, the media, employers, unions, voluntary agencies, schools and universities to concentrate on this one issue using all the many options available. If done well, people would soon appreciate the changes, welcome the differences, a positive lifestyle would be the norm and society would be transformed in a generation.

If you wish to address your self-esteem, either for personal interest or because you are responsible for the self-esteem of others, then you can begin to test your awareness of it by looking at the activities listed in the next chapter. Later you can read how self-esteem is composed of several different components and when they

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are put together in a structured way by using various strategies and activities, will build a high authentic level of self-esteem.

A healthy level of self-esteem enhances your performance, increases your likelihood of success – is the rocket fuel of motivation and the bedrock of well-being and contentment.

