

Stepping out with Self-Esteem

By Andrea Nierenberg

Self-esteem is the foundation on which everything else is built. When you have positive self-esteem, you can reach your highest potential, regardless of what kinds of opinions others have of you.

What, exactly, is self-esteem? It's the attitude that we each have about ourselves. Some call it pride. It has to do with what we believe is our personal worth, and the perception we think people have about us. It's a belief in our competency, and deciding how much happiness we deserve in life. Self-esteem is a choice, not a birthright. We might be born with a body that allows us to be a basketball player. However, it's self-esteem that will allow us to make the team and play for a championship title. Therefore, it's possible to take hold of the areas of our life that hold us back and develop them so we can move ahead. Take the Self-Esteem Quiz. Ask yourself the following questions and write down a brief answer:

1. What personal challenge do I need to focus on and overcome?
2. What one thing in my life needs a careful review?
3. Who am I? (This should not be your job description; it should describe your values, personal interests, etc.)
4. What do I want in life that I still need to attain?
5. What obstacles block me from what I want?
6. How do I think other people perceive me? If it's negative, why?

When you took the Self-Esteem Quiz, you may have discovered that your self-esteem forms opinions about yourself, as well as how it shapes the thoughts that others have about us. Think about an election for a political office. When you vote, does the candidate's self-esteem play a major role in your choice? We usually choose people who are self-confident and appear to have complete control of their lives. They make us sense their high level of self-esteem. So when you work on improving your self-esteem, think about how many more people will start voting for your success. And remember that you have to be motivated to improve your self-esteem.

Your self-esteem can be improved by observing others. Look for people who have a way of expressing themselves that says, "I'm glad to be alive!". These are the people who are at ease when talking about their accomplishments, as well as the areas that they would like to improve. They enjoy giving and receiving compliments. They're open to criticism and know that there's always something new to learn. Also, look for people who are flexible. They have a clear understanding that in life, ups and downs are part of the flow, and they are willing to accept that fact.

Who do you know with these personal attributes? That person is someone from whom you can observe and learn. If there isn't anyone, then take charge and start making these attitudes part of your life. In either case, how can you begin? Everything starts with a plan. Yes, a plan. We often think of self-esteem as some type of emotional attitude that cannot be controlled. Yet when we choose to view ourselves positively, instead of letting a negative self-concept control us, we can make professional decisions that will help us succeed. If we want to pursue another career, for example, we can move forward when we first have a good image of ourselves, then take the necessary steps to meet people and gain new skills. Self-confidence can't be bought. You have to develop it inside you. It takes desire, commitment, and work. When successful people work in a field that may not have been open to them before, they've studied and worked to make themselves excel. Their self-confidence increased, not because they thought they deserved more; it increased because they earned it. For example, are you on top of the latest breakthroughs in your field? Your level of knowledge will impact your self-esteem. When you're speaking to a colleague on a subject you know thoroughly, your self-esteem will be enhanced because you will possess knowledge and authority. On the other hand, when you have very little knowledge on a topic, others will sense your lack of self-confidence. That is only one example of how you can create a self-esteem plan for yourself. Take the time to review the following.

Here are some ways that you can begin to develop your own self-esteem plan starting today:

- * Accept yourself as you are.
- * Recognize, without judgment, where you need to improve.
- * Appreciate your mind.
- * Appreciate your body.
- * Be responsible for your own decisions and actions.
- * Be a person of integrity.
- * Keep a list of your accomplishments.
- * Affirm your values.
- * Become a more interesting person by exploring your world.
- * Give yourself a pep talk.
- * Count your blessings. List the people and things in your life for which you are grateful.
- * Act confident in all situations.

Lilly Tomlin once said, "I've always wanted to be somebody, but now I see I should have been more specific."

Begin to follow a specific plan, and be sure to acknowledge the pain, and, more importantly, the joy that comes from personal growth. You can even lean on those you respect or love, and ask them to give you honest feedback about the self-esteem that you are projecting.

Right now, before you read the next article, look in the mirror and compliment yourself on three things you did today that made a difference. For example, perhaps you smiled at a stranger, or you accomplished a nearly impossible task, or someone acknowledged your expertise. Remember, something you did allowed those positive things to happen. Your goal now is to plan for, and do more, of those activities. When you do, your self-esteem and life will both improve.

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