

## Chapter 3

# Self-Esteem and How It Develops

What leads to self-esteem? The research is very clear. If you want to have self-esteem, it helps to choose your parents well. Children with self-esteem tend to have parents who model self-esteem. These parents consistently are loving toward their children, expressing interest in the child's life and friends, giving time and encouragement. I am reminded of the man who said to his neighbor, "Why did you spend all day with your son fixing that bike, when the bike shop could have fixed it in an hour?" The neighbor replied, "Because I am building a son, not fixing a bike."

Parents of children with self-esteem have high standards and expectations, but the expectations are clear, reasonable, consistent, and given with support and encouragement. The disciplinary style is democratic, which is to say that the child's opinions and individuality are respected, but the parents make the final decisions on matters of importance.

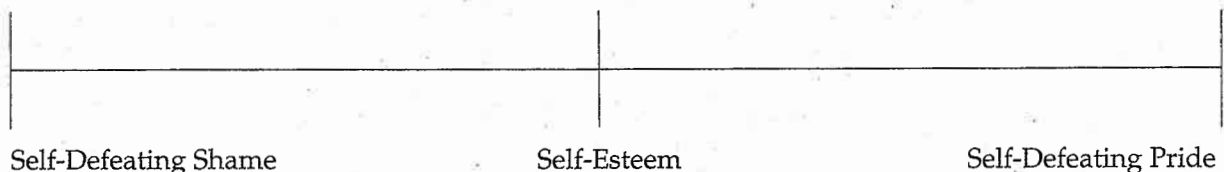
In short, the parents give messages that say, in effect, "I trust you, but I also recognize that you are not perfect. Still, I love you, and therefore will take time to guide you, set limits, discipline you, and expect the best of you because I believe in you and value you." These messages are far different from the distrust conveyed by the authoritarian parent, or the lack of caring conveyed by the permissive parent.

Some individuals have none of these parental antecedents, yet still have self-esteem. So this leads to a most important question: In the absence of these antecedents, how does one build self-esteem? Most assume we get value from what we do, from skills, character traits, talents, or acceptance of others. Again, I suggest that none of these make a good starting place for self-esteem building. Where, then, do we start? Let's begin by examining what self-esteem is.

## What Is Self-Esteem?

In principle, self-esteem is generally stable, but it can fluctuate, even from day to day, according to thought patterns, which can be influenced by, among other things: physical health, chemistry, appearance, and relationships. The fact that self-esteem can fluctuate is reason for optimism, because it suggests that self-esteem can change.

The definition of self-esteem is central to our journey. *Self-esteem* is a realistic, appreciative opinion of oneself. *Realistic* means accurate and honest. *Appreciative* implies positive feelings and liking. Some speak of high and low self-esteem, but this makes self-esteem seem like a numbers game that is competitive and comparative. It's preferable to say simply that people possess self-esteem when they have a realistic and appreciative opinion of themselves. The figure below clarifies the meaning of self-esteem. Self-esteem is squarely between *self-defeating shame* and *self-defeating pride*.



People with *self-defeating pride* are trying to be more than human. They are arrogant, and narcissistic, which means that they think they are better and more important than others as a person. Their view of others is vertical, or comparative, which is to say that to be on top means others must be below them. Self-defeating pride is often rooted in insecurity. Explore the lives of famous dictators, and you often find a complete lack of the parental antecedents that were discussed earlier.

People with *self-defeating shame*, or *self-defeating humility*, believe that they are less than human. They view people vertically, and see themselves as the dust of the earth. They hold an unrealistic and unappreciative opinion of themselves.

By contrast to the above views, people with *self-esteem* believe they are neither more or less than human. Knowing their faults and rough edges, they still are deeply and quietly glad to be who they are (Briggs 1977). They are like the good friend who knows you well and likes you anyway because they recognize the goodness, excellence, and potential that coexist alongside imperfections. People with self-esteem view others as equals, on a level or horizontal plane.

## Concepts Related to Self-Esteem

Self-esteem is often ignored because it and its related concepts can be somewhat confusing and complex. Let's disentangle some of this confusion by clarifying concepts that are related to self-esteem.

## Identity

Identity answers the questions: "Who am I? What defines me and my essential character?" Identity provides a sense of oneself and one's individuality (e.g., a woman's identity derived only from her role as a wife; a paraplegic's identity defined, not by a crippled body, but by the real or inner self).

## Appreciate

To think well of, to value, and to enjoy; to recognize gratefully; to *rightly* estimate the quality or worth of someone or something.

## Accept

To receive (i.e., to take in as one's own) favorably and with pleasure; approve; believe in; respond to favorably. *Self-acceptance* is believing in oneself, and receiving oneself favorably and with pleasure. One may accurately acknowledge one's weaknesses, be determined to improve, and still accept oneself. The internal dialogue might be, "I acknowledge my faults. I love myself, though not necessarily all of my behaviors. As I improve my behavior, then I can feel good about me *and* my behavior."

## Self-Confidence

Usually refers to a belief in one's abilities; related to competence and self-efficacy. As one's competence increases, one's confidence increases. In the broader and deeper sense, *self-confidence* is a belief in oneself as a person, leading to a general sense of "I can do it." Self-confident people might say to themselves: "Because anyone can do just about anything—given the time, practice, experience, resources, etc.—why can't I? I may not succeed completely or quickly, but the direction will be desirable." Demonstrating competence is satisfying, but it is an outgrowth of self-worth, not a way to establish it.

Competence and confidence correlate with self-esteem, but are not causal. If we base feelings of worth on competence and achievements, then if we fail there is no worth.

## Pride

English minister Charles Caleb Colton (1780–1832) wrote: "Pride makes some men ridiculous but prevents others from being so." There are two sides to pride as it relates to self-esteem: self-defeating and healthy.

As discussed previously, *self-defeating pride* is the attitude that one is superior, more valuable, or more important as a person than others. Such people also perceive themselves as more capable, self-sufficient, or infallible than they actually are. Synonyms for self-defeating pride include: haughtiness, arrogance, conceit, pretentiousness (i.e., trying to impress), vanity (i.e., excessive desire or need to be admired), narcissism (i.e., selfish; grandiose sense of self; exploitive). Self-defeating pride is typically rooted in fear (as in fear of being vulnerable) and/or the need to defend oneself.

*Healthy pride* is a realistic sense of one's own dignity or worth; self-respect; gratitude and delight in one's achievements, talents, service, or membership (i.e., in family, race, etc.).

## Humility

There also are two sides to humility: self-defeating humility and healthy humility. *Self-defeating humility* is an abject lack of self-respect (e.g., "dust of the earth"); spineless submissiveness; and contemptibility.

*Healthy humility*, on the other hand, involves an absence of self-defeating pride; the recognition of one's imperfections or weaknesses; consciousness of one's own shortcomings and ignorance; teachable. It is the realization that all are of equal worth. Healthy humility relates to meek behavior (in the positive sense), meaning mild, patient, and not easily stirred to anger.

Healthy humility and healthy pride coexist in the person with self-esteem. Humility because one realizes how much one still has to learn; pride in recognizing the dignity and worth one shares with all other humans.

The following amusing story (De Mello 1990) relates to one lacking in healthy humility:

A guru advised a scholar: "Go out in the rain and raise your arms upward. That'll bring you a revelation."

The next day the scholar reported back. "When I followed your advice, water flowed down my neck," he told the guru. "I felt like a complete fool."

"For the first day, that's quite a revelation," replied the guru.

## Selfishness

Some mistakenly equate selfishness with self-esteem. So let's state an important principle: The purpose of self-esteem is to transcend the self. Self-consciousness is a painful situation that keeps one's focus inward. Healing the pain with love enables one's focus to expand outward, making one freer to love others and enjoy life. The person with self-esteem loves by choice from a secure base (as opposed, say, to a codependent individual who possesses neither self-esteem nor choice). Thus, building self-esteem warrants our best efforts.

## Cost/Benefits Analysis

Some people do not build self-esteem because they don't know how. But others resist building self-esteem, as difficult as that may be to believe, because there are apparent advantages to self-dislike. Before investing the time to build self-esteem, let's do what an effective manager would do before considering a new plan: a cost/benefits analysis. First, list all of the advantages of self-dislike you can think of. When you are finished, list all of the disadvantages. Some examples follow, and then there is a space for you to fill in a list of your own.

### *Examples of Advantages for Self-Dislike*

- No risk. I have no expectations of myself, nor do others. I can be lazy and set low goals. I'll rarely disappoint myself or others.
- The world is predictable. I understand when people don't accept me because I don't accept myself. I understand not having to try.
- Sometimes I get pity and attention, at least initially.
- Self-dislike is a family norm. When I follow the pattern, I feel like I fit in.

- Self-dislike keeps me from developing self-defeating pride.
- It justifies my poor dressing/grooming habits.

### *Examples of Disadvantages of Self-Dislike*

- It is very painful.
- Life is no fun.
- It leads to psychosomatic symptoms and disease.
- It creates a vicious cycle: Because I have a low opinion of myself, I don't try. Then others treat me poorly. They interpret my pessimism and apathy as indicators of incompetence. Their poor treatment of me confirms my low opinion of myself.

### *Your Personal Advantages and Disadvantages*

#### **Pros/Advantages**

(The good thing about self-dislike is ...)

#### **Cons/Disadvantages**

(The bad thing about self-dislike is ...)

### *Benefits of Emotional Change*

This analysis raises some very important questions. The ultimate question, of course, is: Is self-dislike a problem for me in terms of emotional, physical, or social costs? Others are: Are there ways to build self-esteem and still get my desires for attention, help, security, etc., met? Am I willing to risk losing some of the payoffs of self-dislike in order to get the gains of self-esteem? Progress is likely to begin as soon as one decides to count the cost of growth and pay its price.

Some find it helpful to test the waters before beginning to change. Try answering the question: What would be the positive consequences of my having a realistic and appreciative opinion of myself?

Some sample responses include:

- I'd be less susceptible to persuasion.
- I'd be less driven by fear.
- I'd be more motivated by enjoyment and personal satisfaction.
- I'd be happier.

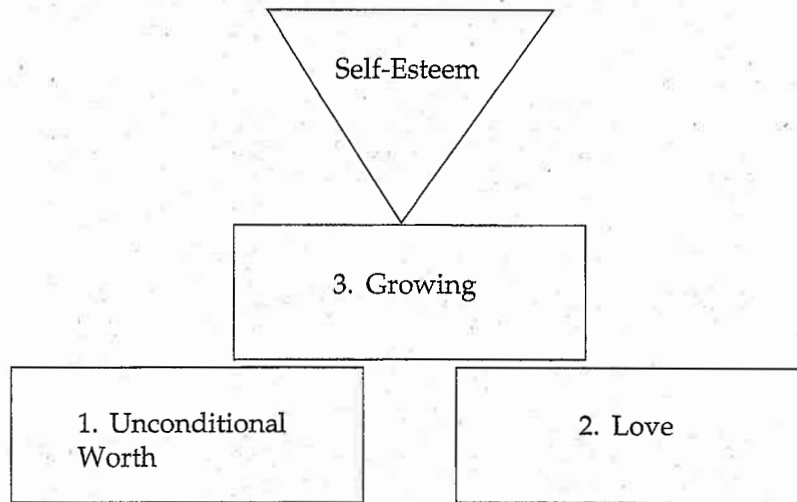
- I'd try/risk more.
- I'd be more at ease with my **rough edges** and more willing to work on them.
- I'd be happier with my **relationships** and less likely to stick with partners who aren't worth it.
- I'd be more comfortable **with** expressing my feelings.
- I'd be less **selfish and self-protecting**.
- I'd be less **questioning** of myself and my actions when things go wrong.
- I'd worry **less**.
- I'd be more likely to be respected and treated well.
- I'd be considered more attractive.
- I'd enjoy life more.
- I'd make better, more objective decisions.
- I'd feel liked for who I am, and not for some phony person I wish I were.

Write your answers below:

## How to Build Self-Esteem

To change self-esteem is to first understand the factors on which it is built. Self-esteem is based on three sequential factors: (1) unconditional human worth, (2) love, and (3) growing.

### The Foundations of Self-Esteem



While all three factors are essential in building self-esteem, the *sequence* is crucial. Self-esteem is based first on unconditional worth, then love, and then growing. "Growing" (or "coming to flower") refers to moving in the desired direction. Too many people become frustrated because they try to start with growth, and neglect the first two important factors: unconditional worth and love. Without a secure base, self-esteem topples. The process cannot be short-circuited.

The remainder of this book deals sequentially with building the skills necessary to master each of the essential factors of building healthy self-esteem: the section called Factor I in Part II focuses on unconditional human worth, Factor II addresses love, and Factor III focuses on growing.