

How to Improve Your Self-Esteem

- Self-esteem = self-confidence (personal competence) + self-respect (personal worth, right to be happy).
- It is what *you* think & feel about yourself, not what someone else thinks about you. Therefore, we need to search for it within ourselves (not externally).
- It affects virtually every aspect of our life including how we function at work, in relationships, as parents etc. and is the key to success or failure.
- The goal is to have high self-esteem *regardless* of our strengths/weaknesses, successes/failures and the approval/disapproval of others.
- Self-esteem/love is not selfish or self-indulgent, it's essential. We have to live with ourselves everyday, so it's important to love & respect ourselves as we are. Our relationship with ourselves is the foundation & mirror of our relationship with others. "You cannot serve others from an empty vessel." (E Brown)
- We can improve it by changing our attitudes, beliefs and most importantly our behaviours.
- Below are some actions you can take to help you do this. Commit to taking small steps everyday.



Much of the content of this document is condensed from Nathaniel Branden's book 'How to Raise Your Self-Esteem'.

Living Consciously

- *Choosing* to be *aware of* and face facts and truth; seeing reality as it really *is*, not how we *want* it to be.
- In contrast to a self-deluding attitude of “If I choose not to see it or acknowledge it, it doesn’t exist.” (‘Head in sand syndrome’).
- “It doesn’t mean we have to like what we see, but it does mean we recognize that what is & that what is not & that wishes or denials do not alter facts.”
- Feel more powerful, competent and in control if we acknowledge/face reality (even if it is painful) and take appropriate action to respond to it.

ACTION

1. In what areas of your life do you operate with the most and least level of consciousness?
2. If I were to become more conscious in the areas I am less conscious
3. In the next week, what two or three things might you do differently to live more consciously in the area(s) you are less conscious?

Practicing Self-Acceptance

- Involves observing, *experiencing* and *accepting* all aspects (particularly unwanted ones) of ourselves (our thoughts, feelings, beliefs, urges, memories, appearance, personality, actions etc.), without trying to deny them, reject them or identify with them.
- We cannot make unwanted feelings/aspects of ourselves go away by shouting at them or rebuking ourselves.
- Instead, we can open up to them, allow them to be there; we are larger than any one emotion/aspect. Befriend them to help us understand & face them.
- Accepting/changing our reaction to unwanted feelings can help diminish them; we stop feeding/making a catastrophe of them & they stop controlling us.
- We are stronger when we accept the facts/truth about ourselves; to stand by ourselves (‘warts & all’) as we would a friend. Self-esteem= self-acceptance.
- Doesn’t necessarily mean you ‘like’ or don’t want to improve aspects of yourself. Pre-condition of change; we can’t overcome an issue if we deny it exists.
- Improve what you can change and learn to accept what you can’t.

ACTION

1. Practice self-acceptance using F.E.E.L:

Focus – Bring your attention to a difficult feeling / situation you are experiencing.

Explore – What is the feeling? Describe it, examine it. Where is it in your body? What is it about? Where does it come from? How old is it?

Embrace – Accept, allow and embrace the feeling. Breathe into it. Don’t judge it, embrace as you would a baby if it is crying, giggling, screeching etc.

Let Go – Allow yourself to express and release the feeling. If struggling to let go, ask yourself what it feels like to hold on to it.

2. - Some of the aspects of myself I dislike (and like) and have trouble accepting are

- It’s not easy for me to be self-accepting because

- If I were more accepting of these aspects of myself

Liberation from Guilt

- Guilt can diminish self-esteem. If we feel guilt, we need to check that we are judging our behaviour by our *own* standards ('appropriate guilt'), not others.
- If we feel appropriately guilty, we need to take steps to resolve our guilt (see below). If we understand, learn from and forgive ourselves for our mistakes, our behaviour tends to improve; if we remain self-condemning and passive, we continue to suffer and our behaviour and self-esteem tend to worsen.

ACTION

Think of an action/behaviour you have taken / not taken for which you dislike / reproach yourself. Then ask yourself:

- Am I judging myself by: a) my *own* standards / values / morals or, b) someone else's (i.e. parents, partner etc.)?
- If b), What do *you* really think about your action? It is rational, appropriate, fitting for you? If yes, examine what the guilt is about & where it comes from? What is underneath the guilt? Are you scared of being judged/criticised for not meeting someone else's standards? Then, ask yourself if you are willing to take the courage to listen to my own inner voice, to respect, stand by and act on my own beliefs/values (about those of others that you do not share)?

Are you willing to live your life for you or others? 'Honouring the self.'

- If a), You feel 'appropriate guilt' because you have not met your own standards, instead of self-chastising, consider the following steps to resolve guilt:
 1. What were the circumstances, context and options available to you at the time? What were you trying to achieve, avoid, nurture etc? Remember, even if the path we choose is a mistake or destructive, at some level we are trying to survive, protect ourselves, avoid fear or pain, meet our needs or grow.
 2. Are you willing to own, accept and take responsibility for the action?
 3. If your action has hurt someone, what action can you take to make amends and minimize the hurt/harm caused (i.e. apologise, repay money etc.)?
 4. What can you learn from the experience? What action can you take now or would you do differently next time so you do not repeat the mistake?
 5. What actions can you take to allow self-forgiveness? If difficult, ask yourself if/how you would forgive a loved one who made a similar mistake?

Integrating the Younger Self (Inner Child)

- As children/teenagers our self-confidence/respect can be nurtured or undermined depending on whether we were loved, respected, valued and encouraged by the adults (or significant others) in our lives.
- As adults, we have three ego states (sub-personalities): child (adaptive/rebellious child & free child), adult and parent (nurturing parent & critical parent).
- If we did not feel not loved, valued etc. we can develop limiting self beliefs and, certain situations in our adult lives can consciously or unconsciously trigger/reactivate our 'wounded inner child's' insecurities, fears, dependency etc. as if we were still that child. This can be evident in and have an impact on our relationships, work & the ways in which we think, feel and behave.
- We can use our adult/nurturing parent to acknowledge, befriend, embrace and reassure our child to help us feel whole, integrated and loved.

ACTION

1. Explore how you felt as a child/teenager and how you feel about these aspects of yourself now. Consider what influence/impact these feelings/aspects might have on you and your life today. How have they shaped you? What limiting beliefs or self-destructive behaviours have grown from childhood?
2. Explore your strong emotional reactions. Where do they come from (child or adult)? Do they remind you of similar feelings/experiences from the past?
3. When your inner child feels threatened, have a compassionate & reassuring dialogue with him/her using your adult/nurturing parent (as per a friend).
4. If the child within you could speak, he/she would say....
5. One of the things my child self needs from me now is

Living Responsibly

- Living *actively & productively* rather than passively.
- Taking full responsibility for your choices, feelings, actions, achieving your desires/goals etc. rather than blaming others or waiting to be 'rescued'.
- If we avoid taking responsibility for things that we have control over we can feel helpless. We can also jeopardise our self-esteem if we try to take responsibility for things that are beyond our control. However, we are responsible for our attitude, response and behaviour regarding the latter.
- Living responsibility (i.e. taking positive action) helps us feel more empowered, competent and confident in ourselves and less reliant on others.

ACTION

1. If I take full responsibility for my actions, behaviour, feelings, happiness etc
2. If I blame other people or see myself as a victim
3. If there is a problem, ask yourself questions like: 'What is within my control/power to change?', 'What actions can I take to improve the situation?', 'Why and how does X, Y or Z keep happening to me etc?' 'One of the ways I can take more responsibility with regard to X,Y & Z is to ...'
4. When making a decision or taking action, ask yourself:
 - 'Is it kind?, Is it necessary? Is it helpful?' to yourself and/or others
 - Is it a 'Towards move' (moving you towards the person you want to be) or 'Away move' (moving you away from the you want to be).

Living Authentically

- The courage to be who you are and to honour yourself. To be real, genuine & congruent; your inner self is aligned to the person you present to the world.
- We live authentically when assert our wants & needs, tell the truth about what we think & feel and allow others to see who we are even when difficult.
- When fake the reality of who we are (inauthenticity) we devalue and disrespect ourselves. We betray ourselves and others.

ACTION

1. In what areas of your life and with whom are you more and less honest with yourself and others about your thoughts, feelings desires etc.?
2. Consider if you are currently living any lies in your life? What would happen if you gave up living this lie?
3. If I were willing to show people who I really am ...
4. If I were more honest about what I think, feel, want, need ...
5. If I am not here to live up to someone else's expectations ...
6. In what small ways can you be more authentic in the next week?

Other Strategies/Actions

- "Don't believe everything you think. Thoughts are just that - thoughts." (A Lokos). We can't stop our unhelpful negative self talk (or that of others), however, we can change how we respond to it. We can learn to observe and detach from it, to challenge it, to not take it seriously or give it meaning, to not let it control us.
- Maintain perspective and helpful thinking patterns. Notice the meaning/explanation you give to challenges or setbacks: *Internal* ('It's me') vs *External* ('It's not me'), *Global* (everything, over-generalise/catastrophise) vs *Specific* (just this), *Stable* ('forever') vs *Unstable* ('just for now').
- Live purposefully. Have meaning and purpose in your life; contribute to society, have a sense of belonging, engage in purposeful activities and life long learning.
- Do compassionate deeds for and nurture the self-esteem of others. "The best way to find yourself is to lose yourself in the service of others." (M Gandhi)