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SELF-IMAGE

What is Self-Image?

Self-image is the personal view, or mental picture, that we have of ourselves. Self-image is an "internal dictionary" that describes the characteristics of the self, including such things as intelligent, beautiful, talented, selfish, and kind. These characteristics form a collective representation of our assets (strengths) and liabilities (weaknesses) as we see them.

Characteristics of a positive self-image

- Feels confident
- Compares themselves positively with peers
- Content with how they look and has belief in their own ability
- Positive feedback received from friends and family on looks and abilities

Characteristics of a negative self-image

- Doubts own ability
- Compares themselves negatively with peers and images on social media/TV/magazines
- Received negative comments from friends and family on physical appearance or mental ability

Factors affecting self-image

- Early childhood experiences and social interactions e.g. parents who pass positive comments to a child can help contribute to a positive self-image.
- Life events or roles e.g. a child who is captain of the rugby team is more likely to have a positive self-image that a child who is bullied at school

How to develop a positive self-image

- Take a self-image inventory.

- Make a list of your positive qualities.

- Ask significant others to describe your positive qualities.

- Define personal goals and objectives that are reasonable and measurable.

- Confront thinking distortions.

- Identify and explore the impact of childhood labels.

- Refrain from comparing yourself to others.

- Develop your strengths.

- Learn to love yourself.

- Give positive affirmations.

- Remember that you are unique.

- Remember how far you have come.

Self-Concept

Self-concept is how someone sees themselves and the perception that they hold about their abilities. There are various factors that can affect self-concept, these include: age, sexual orientation, gender and religion. The self-concept is also made up of a combination of self-esteem and self-image.

Self-esteem refers to a person's feelings of self-worth or the value that they place on themselves.

There are a number of characteristics of high and low self-esteem.

Characteristics of high self-esteem

- Willing to try new things in their life
- Can cope well under pressure
- Emotionally stable and confident
- Happy to share their ideas and experiences

Characteristics of low self-esteem

- Feels worthless
- Reluctant to try new things
- Struggles in new or challenging circumstances
- Do not value their own opinions and sensitive to the opinions of others

Factors affecting self esteem

- Parents/carers teaching problem solving skills from a young age (so that a child feels a sense of achievement) can lead to a positive self-esteem.
- Learning difficulties at school can lead to a child struggling to complete work or maintain friendships, which can lead to negative self-esteem.

Differences Between Self-image, The Ideal Self, And The Real Self

The ideal self is an idea deriving from Carl Roger's humanistic psychology. Rogers proposed that the personality is composed of the real and ideal self.

While the real self is the person that someone believes they actually are, the ideal self is an idealized self-image created out of what they have learned from their life experiences, the demands of society, and what they admire in their role models.

Self-image can often exist in relation to one's ideal self. Usually, there is an incongruence between one's real and ideal selves and their self image.

That is to say, how someone imagines themself to be in an ideal life may differ from how they see themselves, which, in turn, can differ from who that person actually is and is perceived by others.

Ideas for improving Self-Image

A good self-image can be built by routinely converting setbacks into accomplishments. People would typically call this "turning a lemon into lemonade."
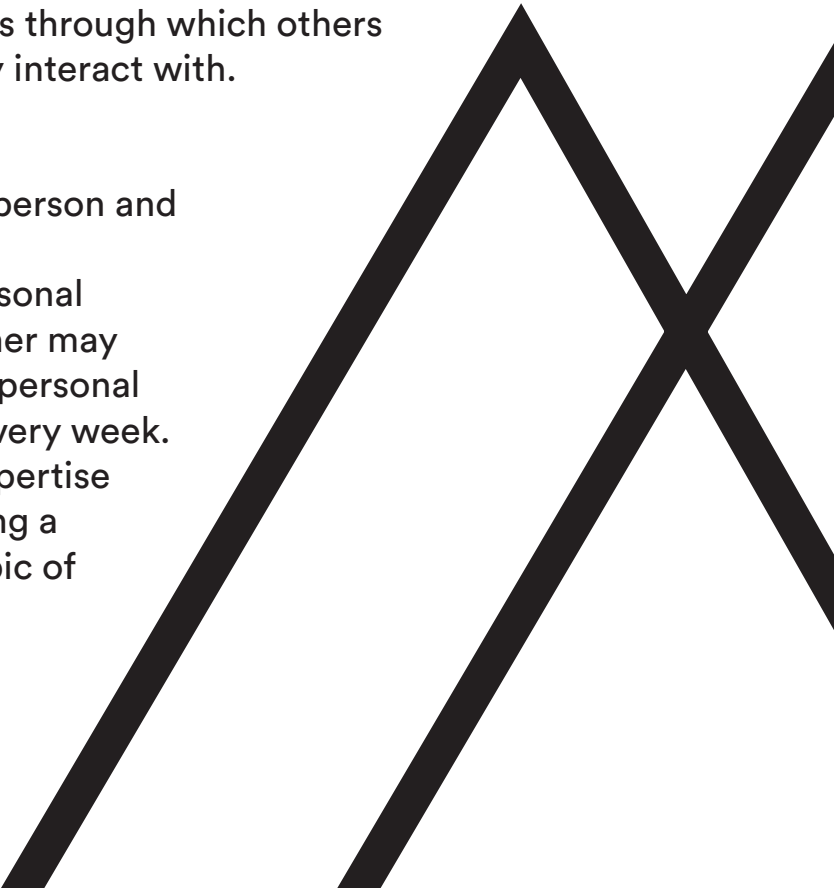
In doing this, the person doing the conversion can build self-confidence in one area that is important to them.

Self-image is changeable and can be built up. Numerous researchers have conducted studies on how groups of people such as students, musicians, and people with disabilities can improve their self-image. These studies have used methods such as:

- Improving some aspect of one's appearance, either through taking on healthy habits (such as exercise and adequate nutrition) or surgery (such as through dentistry).
- Non-judgemental reflection, such as loving-kindness meditation. This can help someone reframe self-critical and judgemental thoughts into thoughts that are constructive and more reflective of reality. By using non-judgemental reflection to become more aware of harmful thinking patterns, people can develop a greater capacity to provide themselves with unconditional positive regard. In addition, meditation has been shown to increase one's sense of social connectedness (Hutcherson, Seppala, & Gross; 2008).
- Calling out negative thought patterns, commonly referred to as the "inner critic."

Researchers have also proposed methods through which others can improve the self-image of those they interact with. These include (Campbell, 1981):

- Accentuating positive aspects of a person and vocalizing one's strengths
- Publically displaying someone's personal achievements. For example, a teacher may put a picture of a student and their personal achievements on a bulletin board every week.
- Allowing someone to share their expertise with a group, such as through solving a problem or giving a lecture on a topic of interest.

Emotional development through life stages

Infancy

During this stage, infants develop a sense of self and positive self-esteem through secure attachments with their caregivers. This starts with their basic needs being met as a baby.

Early childhood

By the age of four, the child's self-esteem develops further through the support they receive outside of the family. Being able to solve problems through puzzles will enhance self-esteem, as will involving the children in scenarios where their opinion is sought. Children who do not receive these experiences may develop low self-esteem.

Adolescence

Several factors affect self-esteem during adolescence. These can include stress within the home, or at school, or a combination of the two. Coupled with the changes that occur during puberty, these can all have an impact on self-image too.

Being bullied or not being accepted by your peers can have detrimental effects on a young person's self-esteem and can feed into way they feel about themselves. This can lead to anxiety and depression and a sense of not belonging, all characteristics of having low self-worth. This can be intensified by peer pressure, the use of images in the media, social media and the increase in cyberbullying.

Adulthood

Self-esteem continues to develop through adulthood and an individual's self-esteem may increase through the achievements they have made which, in turn, increases self-worth. During adulthood a person develops a real understanding of who they are and how to deal with situations more effectively and with more confidence.

Body Dysmorphic Disorder

When self-image is greatly detached from reality, serious emotional and psychological problems can result. One such example of this is Body Dysmorphic Disorder.

Body Dysmorphic Disorder is a body-image disorder characterized by persistent and intrusive preoccupation with an imagined or slight defect in one's appearance.

As a result, those with Body Dysmorphic Disorder may engage in:

- Camouflaging their perceived defect, such as with clothing or makeup;
- Comparing their "flawed" body part to others';
- Seeking surgery;
- Checking or avoiding mirrors;
- Skin picking;
- Excessive grooming and exercise;
- and, changing clothes excessively.

Body Dysmorphic Disorder is a result of an incongruency between one's self image — how they believe they look — and their real self.

Healthy vs Unhealthy Self-Image

So what does a healthy self-image look like? What about an unhealthy self-image? What's the difference? And what impact do both have on your life? Let's answer these questions by breaking down what it means to live with a healthy and an unhealthy self-image.

An Unhealthy Self-Image

A person with an unhealthy self-image tends to consistently focus on their flaws and limitations. In fact, they persistently criticize themselves and tend to judge most of their decisions and actions:

- What was I thinking?
- That was such a stupid decision.
- I can't believe I just did that.

This constant critical judgment tends to distort their imperfections — making them larger than life. In fact, everything on the negative side tends to be exaggerated and blown out of proportion. This often happens because they are heavily influenced by other people's opinions of them to their own detriment. In fact, these peoples' lives are very much defined by societal standards, norms, and expectations. As a result, they are consistently comparing themselves to others and trying to live up to other people's expectations. And when they notice that they just don't measure up, this sends their emotions into a tailspin which triggers doubt, pessimism, insecurity and eventually leads to discouragement and potentially depression.

Whenever a person builds their self-image upon external factors, there will always be drawbacks. People's opinions change and societal expectations constantly shift. When these opinions and expectations are weighed in our favor this leads to a positive outlook and more fulfillment. However, when they flip and become unfavourable or unhelpful in respect to the outcomes we would like to achieve, this then causes upheaval by sending our emotions into a tailspin because suddenly the perfect mental picture/idea we had of ourselves has been thrown out the door. It's certainly not a healthy way to live.

A **Healthy** Self-Image

A healthy self-image is primarily based on an individual's personal feelings and perspectives. Here individuals are no longer influenced by other people's opinions of them or by societal expectations. They instead make up their own minds about the internalized mental picture/idea they have of themselves. As a result, these people often have a more optimistic outlook on life and thereby more confidence in themselves and in their own ability. Why? Because they feel a greater sense of control over themselves and over their life.

A person with a healthy self-image doesn't deny that they have flaws. In fact, they are realistic and clearly understand and accept the fact that they have their personal shortcomings. However, there is no critical judgment here. They acknowledge who they are and how they are at this very moment and do the best they can with what they have.

A healthy self-image is of course built upon a high level of self-worth. Both work together to help shape a healthy personality, which effectively builds the foundations of an empowered life.

It's estimated that roughly **85% of people worldwide** (adults and adolescents) **have low self-esteem.**

More help

If you need support, you can seek help and advice from the below sources:

Childline (under 19s): 0800 11 11

Sign up for a free Childline locker (real name or email address not needed) to use their free 1-2-1 counsellor chat and email support service. Visit their online message boards where you can share your experiences, have fun and get support from other young people in similar situations.

The Mix (Under 25s): 0808 808 4994

Email support is available via their online contact form.
Free 1-2-1 webchat service and telephone helpline available.

Mind: 0300 123 3393

If you need non-urgent information about mental health support and services that may be available to you.

Find more information on the helplines page.

LSP's Safeguarding & Mental Health First Aider Teams

If you have any concerns at all, please don't hesitate to contact a member of our Safeguarding or Mental Health teams:

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