

Relationships SELF-ESTEEM

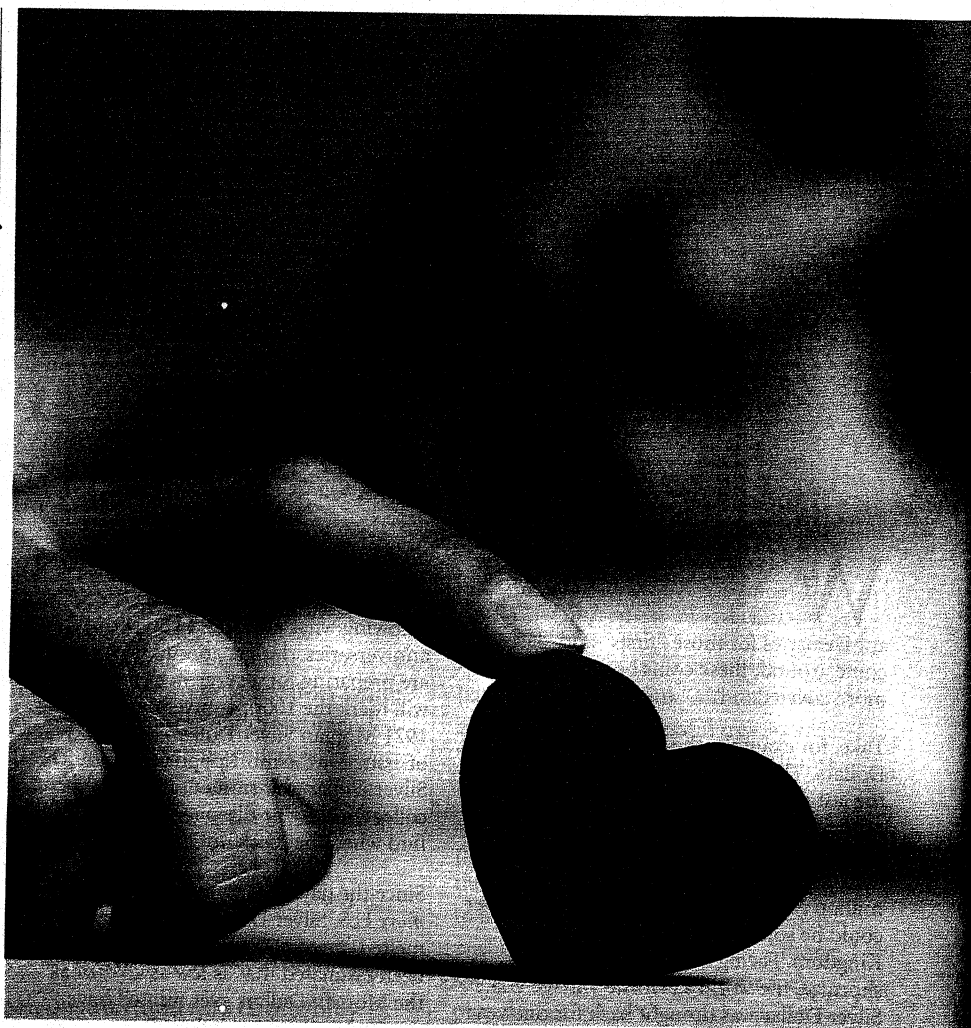
When Self-Esteem Hinges On Others

And how to cultivate confidence independently.

By Theresa E. DiDonato Ph.D.

HOW DO YOU evaluate your own self-worth? For some people, this is an easy question: They feel respect, love, and pride for themselves. For others, this is a more challenging question. Their self-esteem might be contingent upon successes in different domains. An ambitious student might tie her self-worth to her academic performance; an athlete might love or hate himself when he wins or loses a competition. When self-esteem fluctuates with the highs and lows of a romantic relationship, the outcome can be harmful for both of the individuals involved.

Humans are social creatures, so self-esteem naturally has a relational component. One perspective on self-esteem, sociometer theory, suggests that people's self-esteem serves to signal their social value. The idea is that self-esteem is a component of an internal system that vigilantly monitors



our social environment. When we encounter social acceptance, self-esteem soars; when we face social rejection, slumps in self-esteem motivate us to restore our relationships.

Responding to perceived changes in relationships, however, does not mean that healthy self-esteem is derived *solely* from one relationship or even one type of relationship. Generally, people maintain a diverse set of relationships, from family to romantic partners, friends, and professional colleagues. But this healthy balance is

derailed when people yoke their self-esteem to one specific relationship.

Relationship-Contingent Self-Esteem

Men and women with relationship-contingent self-esteem (RCSE), research shows, judge themselves as having or not having value based both on their ability to be partnered (as opposed to single) and on the ongoing quality of their relationship. Good relationship days mean you are a good person; bad days mean you are a bad

ANDREI KORZHYTS / ALAMY STOCK PHOTO

person. Such pressure makes it difficult to be authentic in relationships. Accordingly, RCSE reflects a loss of freedom of expression for one partner and a lack of feeling validated for the other.

In some ways, it might seem as if RCSE reflects strong devotion to a partner (“I love you so much! My whole self depends on you!”), but this is not how RCSE works. RCSE binds individuals to their partner, but not in the healthy ways that commitment, investment, and attachment foster closeness. Rather, RCSE reflects a dependency in which a core aspect of one person’s psychological health relies upon another person and the couple’s interpersonal dynamic. This dependency contrasts with healthy engagement in relationships, which promotes feelings of autonomy, connection, and competence.

The day-to-day experience of being in a romantic relationship is also different: Routine events (your partner pours coffee for you, your partner is late to call you) that ordinarily have no impact on well-being, have a profound effect on people with RCSE. A typical day, therefore, can be a roller coaster ride of self-love and self-hate.

Both People’s Problem

Relationship contingent self-esteem can create a daily yo-yo in an individual’s attitude, but it is also associated with challenges for a partner. A key characteristic of RCSE is inauthenticity. RCSE creates a context for dis-

ingenuous acts of seeming affirmation. Partners of people with RCSE therefore suffer from insincere validation and an absence of true support.

Because simply *being in a relationship* is of great importance, people with high RCSE tend to express greater urgency to find a partner when they’re single. Then, once in a relationship, individuals with RCSE tend to endorse a manic style of love and show more attachment insecurity. Because fluctuations in relationship satisfaction hit so hard for people with RCSE, they can drive unhealthy coping behaviors, such as drinking problems.

If the relationship ends, people with RCSE struggle to let go. They are more likely to engage in post-breakup preoccupation, or even obsession, with their ex-partner, which can lead to dangerous behaviors like stalking. If people have high levels of RCSE *and* they react poorly to a breakup—with high levels of anger, jealousy, and emotional distress—this can transform obsessive thoughts into the obsessive pursuit of former partners, research suggests. Unable to recalibrate their sense of self, stalkers’ obsessions have the potential for dangerous outcomes. RCSE is not a prerequisite for stalking, but its ties to obsession make it a vulnerability worth understanding. ■

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Is your self-esteem tied to being in a relationship? If so, ask yourself these questions.

1. What could you do to invest more in areas of your life that are rewarding, such as work and social organizations?
2. Who in your life validates you for who you are?
3. What would it feel like to be in a relationship that you didn’t need?

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