

Is Self-Compassion More Important Than Self-Esteem?

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Is it important to love yourself?

It seems that depends on how you do it.

Few concepts in popular psychology have gotten more attention over the last few decades than self-esteem and its importance in life success and long-term mental health. Of course, much of this discussion has focused on young people, and how families, parents, teachers, coaches, and mentors can provide the proper psychological environment to help them grow into functional, mature, mentally stable adults.

Research shows that low self-esteem correlates with poorer mental health outcomes across the board, increased likelihood of suicide attempts, and difficulty developing supportive social relationships. Research also shows that trying to raise low self-esteem artificially comes with its own set of problems, including tendencies toward narcissism, antisocial behavior, and avoiding challenging activities that may threaten one's self-concept.

This division in the research has led to a division amongst psychologists about how important self-esteem is, whether or not it's useful to help people improve their self-esteem, and what the best practices are for accomplishing that.

In one camp, you have people who believe improving self-esteem is of paramount importance. On the other side of the fence are those who feel the whole concept of self-esteem is overrated and that it's more critical to develop realistic perceptions about oneself.

But what if we've been asking the wrong questions all along? What if the self-esteem discussion is like the proverbial finger pointing at the moon?

New research is suggesting this may indeed be the case, and that a new concept -- self-compassion -- could be vastly more important than self-esteem when it comes to long-term mental health and success.

Why the Self-Esteem Model Is Flawed

The root problem with the self-esteem model comes down to some fundamental realities about language and cognition that Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT, pronounced all as one word) was designed to address.

The way psychologists classically treat issues with self-esteem is by having clients track their internal dialog -- especially their negative self talk -- and then employ a number of tactics to counter those negative statements with more positive (or at least more realistic) ones. Others attempt to stop the thoughts, distract themselves from them, or to self sooth.

Put bluntly, these techniques don't work very well. The ACT research community has shown this over and over again. There are many reasons that techniques like distraction and thought stopping tend not to work -- too many to go into all of them here. For a full discussion you can see my professional book *Acceptance and Commitment Therapy* or my trade book *Get Out of Your Mind and Into Your Life*. For the purposes of our discussion here, we will look at one aspect of this: How fighting a thought increases its believability.

Imagine a young person has the thought, "There is something wrong with me." The classic rhetoric of self-esteem forces this person to take the thought seriously. After all he or she has likely been taught that having good self-esteem is important and essential for success in life. If they fight against the thought by countering it, however, that means the thought is confirmed. The thought is itself something that is wrong with the individual and has to change. Every time they struggle against it, the noose just gets tighter as the thought is reconfirmed. The more they fight the thought, the more power they give it.

This is a classic example of why in ACT we say, "If you are not willing to have it, you do."

The simple fact is, we can't always prevent young people from experiencing insecurity and low self-esteem. Heck, we can't eliminate those feelings in ourselves. All people feel inadequate or imperfect at times. And in an ever-evolving, ever-more complex world, there is simply no way we can protect our young people from events that threaten their self-esteem -- events like social rejection, family problems, personal failures, and others.

What we can do is help young people to respond to those difficult situations and to self-doubt with self-compassion. And a couple of interesting studies that were recently published show that this may indeed offer a more useful way forward not only for young people, but for all of us.

What Is Self-Compassion?

Before we look at the studies, let's take a moment to define self-compassion.

Dr. Kirstin Neff, one of the premier researchers in this area, defines self-compassion as consisting of three key components during times of personal suffering and failure:

1. Treating oneself kindly.
2. Recognizing one's struggles as part of the shared human experience.
3. Holding one's painful thoughts and feelings in mindful awareness.

Given this context, the negativity or positivity of your thoughts isn't what's important. It's how you respond to those thoughts that matters. Going back to the example above -- "There is something wrong with me" -- instead of fighting against that thought or trying to distract yourself from it, you could notice this thought without getting attached to it (become mindful), understand that it is common to all humans and part of our shared experience as people, and then treat yourself kindly instead of beating yourself up.

Does this approach really work better than simply improving self-esteem?

It seems it does.

A just-published longitudinal study that followed 2,448 ninth graders for a year found that low self-esteem had little effect on mental health in those who had the highest levels of self-compassion. That means that even if they had negative thoughts, those thoughts had minimal impact on their sense of well-being over time as compared to peers who didn't have self-compassion skills.

This suggests that teaching kids who suffer from self-esteem issues to be more self-compassionate may have more benefit than simply trying to improve their self-esteem.

The question is: How do we do that?

As it turns out, this is exactly where ACT excels.

Using ACT to Enhance Self-Compassion

Knowing that enhancing self-compassion has been shown not only to mitigate problems with self-esteem, but also impacts other conditions including traumatic stress, a student of mine, Jamie Yadavaia, decided to see in his doctoral project if we could enhance self-compassion using ACT.

The results were promising.

We took a group of 78 students 18 years or older and randomized them into one of two groups. The first group was put in a "waitlist condition" which basically means they received no treatment. The other group was provided with six hours of ACT training.

As we anticipated, ACT intervention led to substantial increases in self-compassion over the waitlist control post-treatment and two months after the intervention. In this group self-compassion increased 106 percent -- an effect size comparable to far longer treatments previously published. Not only that, but the ACT treatment reduced general psychological distress, depression, anxiety, and stress.

At the heart of all these changes was psychological flexibility, this skill seemed to be the key mediating factor across the board, which makes sense. After all, learning how to become less attached to your thoughts, hold them in mindful awareness, and respond to them with a broader repertoire of skills -- like self-kindness, for example -- has not only been posited in the self-compassion literature as a core feature of mental health but proven time and again in the ACT research as essential for it.

Taken together these studies have an important lesson to teach all of us.

It's time for us to put down the idea that we have to think well of ourselves at all times to be mature, successful, functional, mentally healthy individuals. Indeed, this toxic idea can foster a kind of narcissistic ego-based self-story that is bound to blow up on us. Instead of increasing self-esteem *content* what we need to do is increase self-compassion as the *context* of all we do. That deflates ego-based self-stories, as we humbly accept our place as one amongst our fellow human beings, mindfully acknowledging that we all have self-doubt, we all suffer, we all fail from time to time, but none of that means we can't live a life of meaning, purpose, and compassion for ourselves and others.

Teach that to our young people, and we will have provided them a real skill they can use in the real world all their lives.

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