

# HOW TO ... increase your self-esteem



Mental Health  
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# HOW TO ... increase your self-esteem

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“It's a funny thing... when I was involved in a wider political struggle, when it was a question of standing up for human rights in general, on behalf of other people, I could keep going, I could even face prison. But when it comes to sorting out a problem like being charged too much council tax, I just go to pieces inside and have to leave it all to my wife.”

“Now that all the children have left, and I'm on my own, I don't bother to prepare proper meals. There doesn't seem much point when it's only me.”

“When I stop doing things and just pause to be alone, I feel quite empty.”

“None of my colleagues remembered my birthday... but then, what can you expect in a place like this?”

**These are quotations from people with low self-esteem. This booklet is for anyone who wants to help themselves or others to deal with the feelings and experiences that undermine them. It explains how to recognise the condition, and what you can do to improve it.**

### **What is self-esteem?**

When your self-esteem is low, you feel depressed and hopeless. You see life negatively. Everything seems difficult, or too much trouble. It feels as if the world is a bad place, full of people who will abuse or ignore you; you feel helpless to do anything about it. You see yourself as a victim. You treat other people as potential enemies, or saviours, and sooner or later they treat you badly or let you down. This further lowers your self-esteem, and so a vicious cycle is set up.



When your self-esteem is good, on the other hand, the world feels like a good place, full of friends, potential pleasures and opportunities. You can assert yourself, ask for what you want and express your feelings. You feel potent, and know that you can make a difference. Other people in general respond to your positive attitude, so that, even when you don't get your way, you feel good about yourself and them. This reinforces your self-esteem and stimulates your inner growth.

The above two paragraphs describe the two ends of a spectrum. If they were shown as two points joined by a line, few of us would say that we live at either end of it. Most of us get through life somewhere near the positive end, and we move up and down it in response to things that happen to us. Events involving loss or threat, such as losing your job, ending a relationship, being bereaved, falling ill or having your house broken into, can give your self-esteem a huge knock. On the other hand, when you are promoted, fall in love, pass an exam, face a challenge or win a prize, then you feel pleased and proud – your self-esteem is boosted. A healthy person can absorb some knocks to their self-esteem and bounce back if their basic sense of self is positive.

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Some people, however, do not have a positive sense of self. It is as if their most comfortable position on the spectrum mentioned above – the one that they always tend to return to – is at the negative end. When they get a knock, they can't bounce back. They are suffering from chronic low self-esteem.



## **What causes low self-esteem?**

When we find ourselves unable to 'bounce back' after a blow to our self-esteem, it could be for any one of a number of different reasons.

### **The latest blow is just one too many**

If you lose your job after several years of calm and happy employment, when your family life is going well, initially it may be devastating, but you have a good chance of finding the resources to cope, once the shock has worn off. If, on the other hand, you have just been divorced, have moved house and are getting over a bad case of shingles when you receive your redundancy notice, and then hear the next day that a parent has just been diagnosed with terminal cancer, then recovery will be much more difficult!

Sometimes life just throws an unbearable amount of trouble at us all at once, and we have to mobilise all the support we can from friends, family and community to help us survive it.

### **We are vulnerable because of unsorted childhood issues**

Heavy blows dealt to our self-esteem early in life can undermine our capacity to respond positively to the challenges we face later on, as adults, if we have not had the chance to address or to heal them. (See below for more information).

### **Our physical health is not good**

Our self-esteem is bound up with our physical wellbeing, and is vulnerable to illness and injury. If we get ill or have an accident, it can feel as if our body has betrayed us. Our trust in the world as a safe place may be shaken, temporarily. And of course, if the illness or accident involves us in a spell in hospital, that can further damage our self-esteem.

### **We have very little power in a situation**

The more we feel potent, the better our self-esteem. Redundancy may not feel so bad if you think you can easily get another job, even a better one; if not, it can feel devastating. It can also feel devastating if you are the only one of a racial or social minority, and have reason to believe that you are the victim of prejudice.

The degree of power you have depends not just on who you are, but also on where you are – the social context. If you are not sure of your ground in any sense – for example, because you are in a foreign culture, or speaking an unfamiliar language, or in an unfamiliar role – you will feel disempowered.

Institutions can increase or diminish the self-esteem of the people in them by their day-to-day practices. For example, some hospitals attach a plastic bracelet with a number on it to the patient's wrist, on admission. However necessary this may be, if you are the patient, it can feel as though the hospital is claiming your body as theirs, taking away a degree of power from you just when you most need it. On the other hand, institutions where you are greeted with courtesy, treated with respect and given choices, will enhance your self-esteem.

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## **How does childhood experience affect self-esteem?**

Children in our culture do not enjoy power or high status, and therefore may still be subject to many common experiences that can undermine their self-esteem. These include, in particular, violence, loss and neglect.

### **Violence**

A child may experience violence in many ways, all of them damaging. They may be subjected to corporal punishment, where a parent or other adult deliberately inflicts pain on them and does not allow them to fight back. Or they may witness domestic violence from one parent to another. Or they may be subjected to violence from a sibling or from another family member, which the parents, for one reason or another, do not see or which they fail to prevent.

The violence does not have to be dramatic to be damaging. Indeed, dramatic violence that happens over a short period may attract attention and lead to changes in the family situation that will remedy it. Undercover violence that goes on for a long time – for example, bullying by an older brother or sister – can be just as harmful.

Another form of violence is institutional prejudice, such as racism. A child may see a much-loved parent insulted, spat at or assaulted in the street, or doing work well below his or her capacity. He or she may come to realise that 'people like us' get the worst housing, and medical care. Or he or she may hear, in the media, insulting portrayals of groups that he or she identifies with. These experiences amount to an attack on that child's self-esteem.

## Loss

The death of a family member – of a grandparent, for example – or the sickness of a mother, especially if she has to go away to hospital or a convalescent home – are obvious examples of loss that can affect a small child. But more ordinary events – such as moving house (especially to another city), the birth of a new sibling, the death of a loved pet – can all be experienced as devastating losses by a child. As such, they have to be acknowledged and mourned.

## Neglect

When we think of a neglected child, the image that comes to mind is usually of fairly dramatic physical neglect – a child that is unwashed, unfed, left to roam the streets after dark at a young age, and so on. Yet there can be quite subtle emotional neglect, too, that can also be harmful. There are many things even loving and well-meaning parents often do that can act against their children's need to feel loved and wanted.

- Leaving very small babies alone for hours at a time, to cry themselves to sleep. The more often, and the more lovingly, a baby is touched in its very early life, the more self-esteem he or she will have as an adult. The practice of baby massage would do wonders for the self-esteem of the next generation!
- Preferring one child over others (the only boy over his four sisters, or the youngest girl over the older children). This can happen without the parents realising they are doing it.
- Insisting that their child become what or who the parents want him or her to be, in spite of the child's natural talents and personality. Insisting, for instance, the child learn music when he would rather play football, or vice versa. Refusing to allow a daughter to take up engineering; or a son to study music, when the parents think he should go into the family business.

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- Not noticing the child's emotional needs. For instance, when he or she is mourning for a pet, reacting to the birth of a sibling, or having difficulties in settling in a new school.
- Discussing decisions that involve the child (e.g. about holidays or schooling) in front of the child, but without including him or her.
- Behaving, generally, as though the child's feelings and perceptions don't matter: 'You're too young to be thinking about that', 'Just shut up and do what you're told!'
- Not answering, or refusing to discuss with the child important questions such as, 'Now Daddy's got this new job, are we going to move to Manchester?'
- Inconsistent discipline and expectations; blowing hot and cold with affection and attention.
- Blaming them for things over which they have no control.
- Exposing them to inappropriate sexual innuendo or activity.

With all this violence, loss and neglect what matters is not so much what happens to the child, as how the child is helped to make sense of the experience. An event which has been talked over, and where the child has been comforted, and enabled to take it on board, to make sense of it and come to terms with it, will do less harm to the child's self-esteem than one which has had to be buried and cannot be talked about.

### What can I do to heal the past?

Even if we had to bury a childhood hurt, such as neglect or violence, at the time, we can still find healing for it in adult life. The basic process is the same: to find a way of telling the story, to make sense of it, to be comforted, and to digest it all.



An obvious way to do this is through therapy or counselling but that may not be available or appropriate for everyone. (See *Useful Organisations* on p. 12 and *Further Reading* on p. 14 for more information on this kind of help). Other ways include:

- Through the expressive arts, such as dance, music, sculpting, painting, creative writing, poetry. All of these can help you to tell your story, and can give tremendous pleasure and empowerment in themselves. Find a class through your local adult education service or community centre.
- Learn to be assertive. Read up on it, and join a class, as above.
- Form a support group. Perhaps you can find others seeking help with their past through a local community centre, bookshop, religious organisation, or adult education class (on assertiveness, self-esteem or 'Freeing your Inner Child', for example).
- Tell your friends that you are attempting to face some old childhood wounds, and enlist their help. They may have had similar experiences, and have useful advice and suggestions.
- Keep a journal. Use it to explore your memories and relate them to difficulties you are having now.

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## **How can I build up my self-esteem?**

**Take care of your physical health.** Make sure you have good food, relaxation and enough sleep. Try to make sure that you have 10–15 minutes of moderate exercise (e.g. brisk walking) every day, and about 20 minutes of more vigorous exercise three times a week (something that raises your heartbeat and makes you sweat). Have a massage whenever you can. Nothing is better for increasing self-esteem and beating stress! Learn to recognise your own stress indicators, and when they occur, take time out to look after yourself.

**Avoid, whenever possible, situations where you have little power, and institutions that undermine your self-esteem.**

This may be difficult or appear impossible in the short run, but may be essential to your long-term mental and physical wellbeing. De-stress your home as much as possible: make sure it is as tidy as suits you, with good lighting and supportive seating.

**Set yourself a challenge that you can realistically achieve, and then go for it!** Start with something relatively small, such as, 'Getting fit enough to walk up the steps to my flat without getting out of breath or taking the lift'. (But not 'Running the Marathon this year' unless, of course, that is a realistic goal for you!) Then, when you have achieved it, reward yourself! Tell your friends, and let them praise you for it. Then set yourself another challenge. Learn to enjoy your own achievements.

**Learn something new.** It doesn't really matter what it is, whether it's car maintenance, or speaking Russian or flower arranging. The important thing is that it interests you and will give you a sense of achievement. The longer you have been away from learning anything new, and the more different the new subject is from your normal life, the more benefit this will give you! For example, if you are an intellectual sort of person,

take up weight training or yoga. If you are a handy, craftsmanlike person, try and learn a foreign language, or teach yourself a new style of dance...

**Find out what you most enjoy, and then find ways of doing it as much as possible.** If you enjoy it, you probably have some talent for it, whatever it is. Doing what we are best at is the most empowering and self-nourishing kind of activity. (And if your response to this advice is, 'But I'm not good at anything!', go back to the question, *What can I do to heal the past?*)

**Join in with others, if possible, to take action about the things that annoy you** – whether it's the amount of dog mess in your street, government policy on asylum-seekers, the world-wide arms trade, or whatever most angers you. Of course, the trick here is to find the right group of fellow-campaigners, a group where you feel respected and empowered. Unfortunately, political campaigning groups can be as damaging to the self-esteem of their members as other kinds of institutions! This is perhaps an area where continuing struggle is not only necessary, but a sign of love for oneself, one's fellow-humans and for the world.

**Give yourself regular treats, to remind yourself that you deserve nurture and pleasure.** Programme some fun into your plans for each week, to nurture your sense of humour and creativity.

**Learn to sing!** To free your voice is empowering to mind, soul and body. Singing strengthens the lungs and the legs, gives joy and hope, and is a powerful medium for self-expression. You can do it alone, or as part of a group. Many places now have 'Choirs for the Tone Deaf' or 'Can't Sing' groups, which take on the fact that many of us may have had painful experiences with music teachers in the past. They can teach ways of addressing this, involving breath and relaxation techniques.

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## Useful organisations

### British Association for Behavioural and Cognitive Psychotherapies

PO Box 9, Accrington BB5 2GD

tel./fax: 01254 875277

e-mail: [info@babcp.com](mailto:info@babcp.com)

web: [www.babcp.com](http://www.babcp.com)

### British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy (BACP)

1 Regent Place, Rugby, Warwickshire CV21 2PJ

tel. 0870 443 5252

fax: 0870 443 5160

minicom: 0870 443 5162

e-mail: [bacp@bacp.co.uk](mailto:bacp@bacp.co.uk)

web: [www.counselling.org.uk](http://www.counselling.org.uk)

Send an A5 SAE for a list of accredited local counsellors

### The Courage to Sing

Lorryn de Peyer

5 Bloomsbury House, Clarence Avenue, London SW4 8HZ

tel: 0208 671 1286

e-mail: [thecouragetosing@hotmail.com](mailto:thecouragetosing@hotmail.com)

web: [members.xoom.calm/thecouragetosing](http://members.xoom.calm/thecouragetosing)

London-based workshops and courses dedicated to helping people find their voices and express themselves

### Depression Alliance

35 Westminster Bridge Road, London SE1 7JB

tel. 020 7633 0557

fax: 020 7633 0559

e-mail: [information@depressionalliance.org](mailto:information@depressionalliance.org)

web: [www.depressionalliance.org](http://www.depressionalliance.org)

Charity offering help to people with depression, run by sufferers



**Institute for Complementary Medicine**

PO Box 194, London SE16 7QZ

tel. 020 7237 5165

fax: 020 7237 5175

e-mail: [icm@icmedicine.co.uk](mailto:icm@icmedicine.co.uk)

web: [www.icmedicine.co.uk](http://www.icmedicine.co.uk)

Send an SAE for a list of individual practitioners in various complementary therapies

**The Natural Voice Practitioners Network**

e-mail: [network@singout.in2home.co.uk](mailto:network@singout.in2home.co.uk)

web: [www.singout.ukgateway.net](http://www.singout.ukgateway.net)

Offers an informal directory of teachers, performers and workshop leaders among its activities

**The Voices Foundation**

38 Ebury Street, London SW1W OLU

tel: 0207 730 6677

fax: 0207 259 0598

e-mail: [vf@voices.org.uk](mailto:vf@voices.org.uk)

web: [www.voices.org](http://www.voices.org)

Runs one-day singing workshops around the country, among its other activities

**References**



*Self-Esteem: Simple Steps to Develop Self-Worth and Heal Emotional Wounds*, G. Lindenfield, (Thorsons 2000)

*Well-Tuned Women* eds F. Armstrong, J. Pearson (The Womens Press 2000)

# HOW TO ... increase your self-esteem

## Further reading and order form

- A-Z of Complementary and Alternative Therapies* (Mind 2000) £3
- Asserting Your Self: How to feel confident about getting more from life* C. Birch (How to books 1999) £9.99
- Getting the Best from your Counsellor or Psychotherapist* (Mind 1995) £1
- How to Assert Yourself* (Mind 2000) £1
- How to Look After Yourself* (Mind 2000) £1
- How to Accept Yourself* W. Dryden (Sheldon Press 1999) £6.99
- How to Deal with Anger* (Mind 2000) £1
- How to Accept Yourself* Dr W. Dryden (Sheldon Press 1999) £6.99
- How We Feel: An insight into the emotional world of teenagers* J. Gorgon, G. Grant (JKP 1997) £12.95
- Learn to Relax* M. George (Duncan Baird 2000) £10.99
- Manage your Mind – The mental health fitness guide* G. Butler, T. Hope (Oxford University Press 1995) £8.99
- Massage: An introductory guide to the healing power of touch* S. Mitchell (Element 1999) £5.99
- Meditation: An introductory guide to relaxation for mind and body* D. Fontana (Element 1999) £5.99
- Mind Guide to Food and Mood* (Mind 2000) £1
- Mind Guide to Managing Stress* (Mind 2000) £1
- Overcoming Low Self-esteem* M. Fennell (Robinson 1999) £7.99
- Self-esteem – Research, theory and practice* C. J. Mruk (Free Association Books 1999) £16.95
- Self-help Groups – Getting started, keeping going* J. Wilson, J. Myers (R. A. Wilson 1998) £7.99
- Success from Setbacks* G. Lindenfield (Thorsons 1999) £6.99
- Understanding Depression* (Mind 2000) £1
- Understanding Talking Treatments* (Mind 2000) £1
- Women and Mental Health* ed. D. Kohen (Routledge 2000) £16.99

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# Mind works for a better life for everyone with experience of mental distress

Mind does this by:

- advancing the views, needs and ambitions of people with experience of mental distress
- promoting inclusion through challenging discrimination
- influencing policy through campaigning and education
- inspiring the development of quality services which reflect expressed need and diversity
- achieving equal civil and legal rights through campaigning and education

The values and principles which underpin Mind's work are:

**autonomy, equality, knowledge, participation and respect**

For details of your nearest Mind association and of local services contact Mind's helpline, *MindinfoLine*: 020 8522 1728 (within London) or 0845 7660 163 (outside London) Mon-Fri 9.15am – 4.45pm. For interpretation, *MindinfoLine* has access to 100 languages via Language Line. Typetalk is available for people with hearing or speech problems who have access to a minicom. To make a call via Typetalk dial 0800 959598, fax. 0151 709 8119.

Scottish Association for Mental Health tel. 0141 568 7000

Northern Ireland Association for Mental Health tel. 02890 328474



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