

Guide

US English

Understanding Low Self-Esteem



Introduction

Low self-esteem means not holding yourself in high regard. If you have low self-esteem, you might feel shy or anxious around other people, think of yourself as incapable or criticize yourself harshly. Some people with low self-esteem know that they judge themselves too harshly, whereas others hold onto their negative beliefs so strongly that they can feel like facts. Low self-esteem affects many people, and may make you more vulnerable to struggling with other mental health problems^[1]. Fortunately, there are helpful psychological approaches for improving your self-esteem.

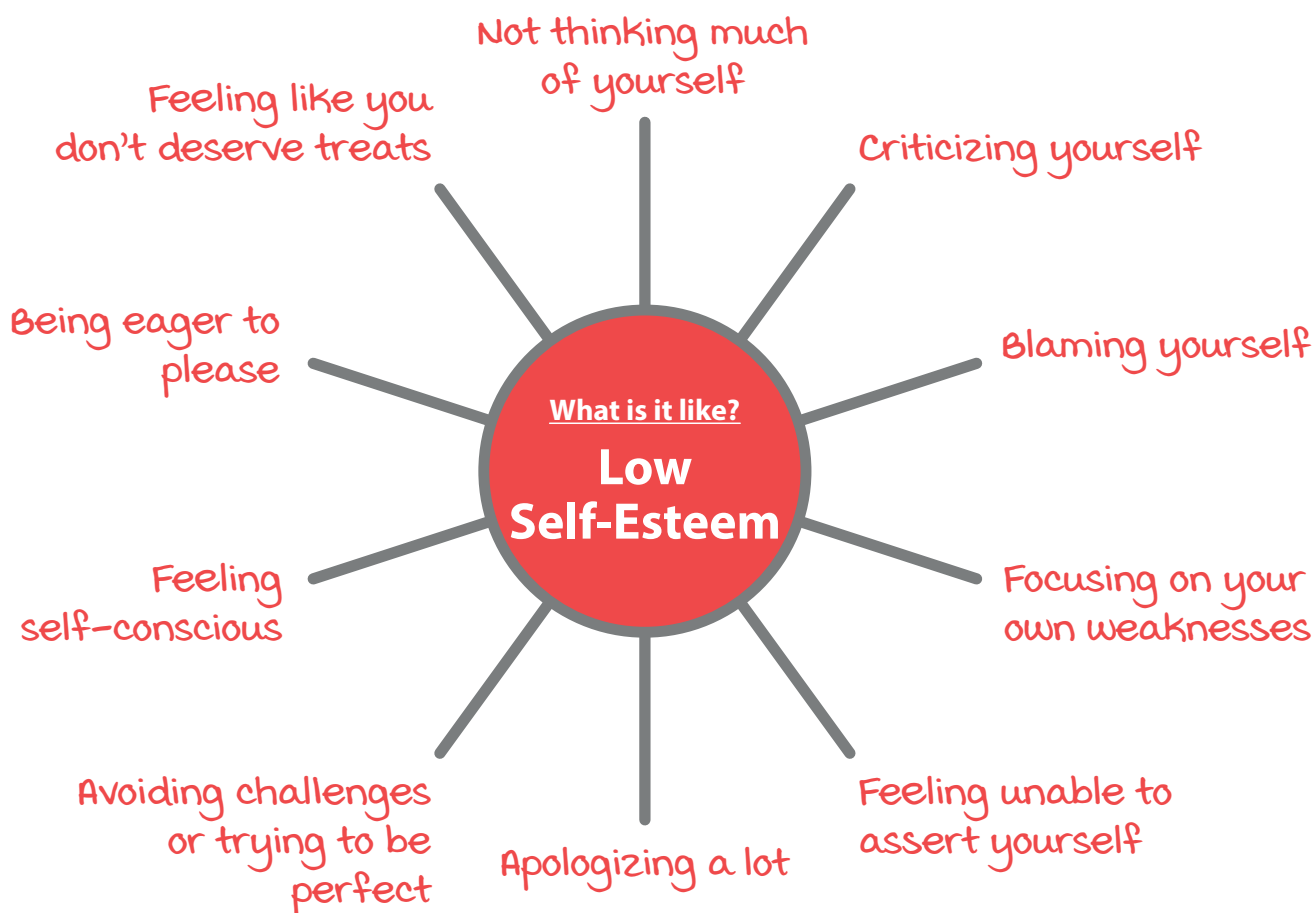
This guide will help you to understand:

- **What low self-esteem is.**
- **Why it might not get better by itself.**
- **Treatments for low self-esteem.**

What is low self-esteem?

Self-esteem is the opinion you have of yourself. When you have healthy self-esteem, you tend to think positively about yourself, and optimistically about life in general. People with healthy self-esteem know that they are valuable, and will be able to name at least some of their positive qualities, such as “I am a good friend”, “I am kind”, “I am honest”, or “I am a good father”.

When you have low self-esteem, you tend to see yourself, the world, and your future more negatively and critically. You might feel anxious, sad, low, or unmotivated. When you encounter challenges, you may doubt whether you will be able to rise to them. You might talk to yourself harshly in your mind, telling yourself things like “You’re stupid”, “You’ll never manage this”, or “I don’t amount to anything”.



Your self-esteem affects how you live your life, but it is fragile. If you have low self-esteem, you might be always trying to please other people, or go ‘above and beyond’ at work or with your friends and family. As long as you keep meeting these standards you may feel OK, but there will inevitably be times when it’s not possible to do so, and this can quickly leave you feeling low and anxious.

Self-esteem exists on a spectrum. Some people with low self-esteem find that it only affects them with certain people, or in certain situations. Other people find that their self-esteem colors everything they do.

Low self-esteem only in certain situations

Low self-esteem in all situations



Only certain situations trigger self-doubt.

You can enjoy or tolerate many situations.

You believe at least some positive things about yourself.

You have constant doubts and self-criticism.

They have a strong impact on day to day life.

You see your beliefs about yourself as facts.

We can separate the effects of low self-esteem into how you might think, how you might feel, and how you might act:

How you might think	How you might feel	How you might act
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Think negatively about yourself, your abilities, or your future (e.g. “I’m not good enough, I’m a failure, Nobody will ever love me”). • Worry that you won’t be able to cope or fearing the worst. • Imagine yourself as ‘worthless’ or ‘lesser’. • Blame yourself or doubt your abilities. • Talk about yourself critically, (e.g. “I am ugly”, “I am stupid”). 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Low • Sad • Deflated • Hopeless • Persecuted • Anxious • Tired • Guilty • Frustrated • Mad 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Struggle to assert yourself. • Avoid people, places, or situations that make you anxious. • Criticize yourself. • Not try in case you fail. • Overcompensate by: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Trying to please other people. • Trying to do things perfectly. • Trying too hard to prove yourself. • Overworking.

What is it like to have low self-esteem?

Rosie's belief that she was not good enough

I grew up in a family of doctors and scientists. While I was growing up, I always felt compared to my sister, 'the good one'. I was more active and energetic than her, and I loved climbing trees and running around with the dog. I often got told off for that. As I got older, people kept comparing me to my sister ("Why can't you be more like her?") and I started to wonder if there was something wrong with me. My sister was always well behaved at home and school. Even the teachers compared me to her, which left me feeling like I wasn't good enough. I didn't achieve as well as my sister academically, and I went on to work for the local council. My sister, on the other hand, became a doctor and our parents always praised her achievements. I felt like I was a failure, and the odd one out in my family.

I came to therapy when I was thirty. I was burnt out at work and my relationship had just ended after four years. I felt depressed, as if I had failed at life. I always gave 110%, I'd always tried to do everything perfectly at work and never wanted to let anyone down, even if it meant saying yes to extra work even when I was already overwhelmed. This meant that I had little time for my partner or my friends, but I worried that if I said no, my boss would think I wasn't up to the job. Once, I got a 3 out of 5 on one of my competencies in my appraisal, and I felt like I was a complete failure. As a result, I worked even harder, and I worried about making mistakes or getting things wrong: I was always putting myself down.

Luca's belief that he was not acceptable

When I was young my family lived in an area of the country that is very conservative. Anyone who was different would be talked about by the community, and most people were very religious. I knew I was gay from quite an early age, but I also knew that it wasn't OK. I grew up believing that I wasn't acceptable. I tried to keep that part of my life hidden, but I was still bullied for being different.

I eventually came out to my parents when I was 25, but it didn't go well. They didn't want anything to do with me after that. It was devastating, and they wouldn't change their minds. I worked hard to move to an area of the country where there's a bigger gay community, and more opportunities to meet people, but it felt like I had brought all my baggage with me. I

didn't want people at work to know I was gay and I never really felt comfortable with my colleagues knowing much about me. In my personal life I struggled to find a meaningful relationship, and felt useless and miserable. One of the ways that I tried to cope was that I would hide the real me, and always try to please other people. I would get into casual relationships with the attitude that if I was generous and gave them what they wanted, I would be accepted. What actually what happened was that I would be exploited for that. I wouldn't let people know the real me, and would just go along with whatever they wanted to do. I think ultimately this put people off because they never got a good sense of who I am.

In my 30's everyone back home was settling down and getting married. I felt miserable, and as if I didn't belong anywhere. I really wanted to be in a loving relationship but just couldn't seem to make it work with anyone past a few months. I went to therapy after another casual relationship ended: I was lonely and depressed, and felt like I had hit rock-bottom.

Zahara's belief that she was worthless and an idiot

When I think about growing up, I mostly remember being criticized. I could never make my Mom happy: she was quite 'cold', and I don't remember ever having a hug from her unless I was ill. Dad was quick to notice failure too – I used to swim competitively when I was in school, and he would mainly take notice if I didn't win. As an adult lots of things didn't go well for me. My first marriage was to a man who was cold and abusive. We separated years ago but I still feel that I was to blame for putting my daughters through it because I stayed for too long, not wanting the marriage to 'fail'. One of my daughters has a health problem now, for which I have always felt responsible.

I went to therapy when I couldn't take it any more. I had felt anxious every day for as long as I could remember. Every day when I woke up I would feel a knot of tension in my stomach and chest, and would automatically assume that something was going to go wrong, or that I had done something wrong. The way I spoke to myself was like an endless punishment.

I kept worrying about things going wrong, or about my family. I worried about things going wrong for my daughters, that they might need me, or that I would let them down. If they called me, I would always stop and answer, whatever I was doing. I felt like I wasn't good enough, and that I was stupid, and worthless. Whenever I had to see my husband's friends

socially, I would always stay in the background and not say anything in case they realized.

I think I was trying really hard to 'get it right' and to not be like my Mom, so I always put my daughters' needs first and worried about their wellbeing. I tried to always be loving and there for them – not something that my Mom ever did for me. I think my husband and children would say that I set too high standards for myself, never let them do anything, and am upset if things go wrong.

Do you suffer from low self-esteem?

A diagnosis of low self-esteem should only be made by a mental health professional or a doctor. However, answering the screening questions below can give you an idea of whether you might find it helpful to have a professional assessment.

I feel like I'm a person of worth, at least as much as others.

- Strongly agree Agree Disagree Strongly disagree

On the whole, I am satisfied with myself.

- Strongly agree Agree Disagree Strongly disagree

I never feel useless.

- Strongly agree Agree Disagree Strongly disagree

I encourage myself kindly when things don't go right.

- Strongly agree Agree Disagree Strongly disagree

I have a number of good qualities.

- Strongly agree Agree Disagree Strongly disagree

The questions above can't provide a definitive diagnosis, but if you ticked 'Strongly disagree' to a lot of these questions it is an indication that you might be struggling with low self-esteem. You might find it helpful to speak to your general practitioner, or a mental health professional about how you are feeling.

What causes low self-esteem?

At the centre of low self-esteem are the negative beliefs and opinions you hold about yourself. Nobody is born with beliefs like this – they develop as a result of the experiences you have throughout your life. How other people treat you, particularly when you are growing up, can greatly affect upon how you see yourself. Experiences that make you more likely to develop low self-esteem include:

- **Experiences such as punishment, abuse, or neglect.** Punishment, abuse, and neglect are very powerful experiences. Children who experience them often jump to the **mistaken** conclusion that they are bad and must have deserved what happened to them.
- **Insufficient warmth, affection, praise, love, or encouragement.** You might not remember anything overtly traumatic happening, and wonder why you feel the way you do about yourself. It is possible to develop low self-esteem without specific negative experiences, but simply through a deficit of enough positive ones. Without enough reinforcement that they are good, special, or loved, children can form the impression that they are not good enough.
- **Failure to meet other people's expectations.** You might feel that you are not good enough because you didn't meet someone else's expectations. These might have been your parent's standards, or some other authority figure. For many people with low self-esteem, it doesn't seem to matter whether the standards were fair or balanced in the first place – the part that 'sticks' is them not meeting these standards.
- **Inability to fit in with your peer group.** Belonging to a 'group' or a 'tribe' is important – it's one of our survival needs. Being different or the 'odd one out', especially during adolescence when you are forming your identity, can powerfully impact your sense of self.

What keeps low self-esteem going?

Research studies have shown that Cognitive Behavior Therapy (CBT) is one of the most effective treatments for low self-esteem [2]. CBT therapists work a bit like firefighters: while the fire is burning they're not so interested in what caused it, but are more focused on what is keeping it going, and what they can do to put it out. This is because if they can work out what keeps a problem going, they can treat the problem by interrupting this maintaining cycle. A psychologist called Melanie Fennell developed an influential cognitive behavioral model of low self-esteem [3]. Dr Fennell's model says that:

- Throughout your life you form **negative beliefs** about yourself as a result of the way you have been treated. Psychologists call this your 'bottom line' or 'core belief'. Your core belief is how you feel about yourself deep down, for example "I'm worthless" or "I'm no good".
- Confronting core beliefs feels unpleasant, so we all develop **rules for living** that protect us from our core beliefs. These rules guide how you live your life, and as long as your rules don't get broken, your core belief stays dormant. People with low self-esteem often have rules that are demanding and rigid, such as "I must always please other people", or "As long as I don't get criticized then I'm OK".
- It can feel very anxiety provoking when it seems like one of your rules might be broken. If one of your rules is "I'm OK as long as everyone is happy", it might be anxiety provoking if people around you are not happy – you might feel that you have failed.
- When there is a danger that rules might be broken, you might **make anxious predictions about what might happen** and fear the worst (e.g. "I'll be rejected if I can't do everything that is expected of me"), or you might **speak to yourself in a critical way**, or **avoid tricky situations and use strategies to cope**.

Fennell states that all of these elements fit together. Your rules were developed to protect you, but are often rather inflexible and they can stop things from getting better. Although your safety strategies can make you feel good in the short-term, all of them can keep your core belief from changing, and your self-esteem doesn't improve.

People with low self-esteem come to believe very negative things about themselves. For example:

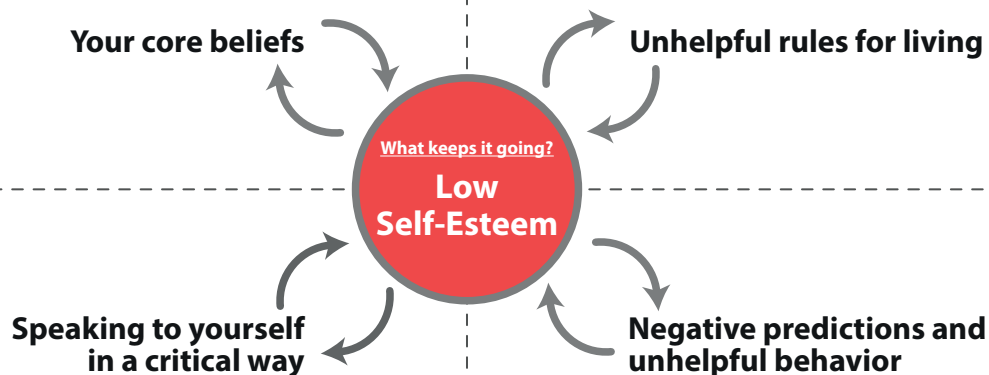
- I'm a failure
- I'm not good enough
- I'm unlovable

Beliefs aren't necessarily facts – they are more like opinions. Acting like your core belief is a fact – and never questioning it – can get you into trouble.

If you believe that your core belief is true, you might try to overcompensate with strict 'rules for living'. For example:

- If I do everything perfectly, I am OK
- I must always please people and never let anyone down

Rules are often well-intended, but when they are too strict or inflexible, they set you up to fail. When this happens you end up believing your core belief even more strongly.



You might have learned to speak to yourself in critical ways from how others have spoken to you. You might even think of it as a way to motivate yourself. Self-criticism includes saying things like:

- I'm a failure.
- I'll never get it right.

Self-criticism is rarely the best form of motivation. Emotionally, it has the same effect as being bullied or attacked by someone else, and it can leave you feeling defeated and demoralized. When you criticize yourself you may not be treating yourself fairly. Ask yourself: would you speak to a friend that way?

When you have broken (or might break) one of your rules for living, your core belief is 'activated'. This can influence what you pay attention to, and what you think. You may start making negative predictions about what might happen:

- I'll mess it up.
- What if I upset them?

Negative predictions are anxiety-provoking, and you might try to do things to stop the worst from happening:

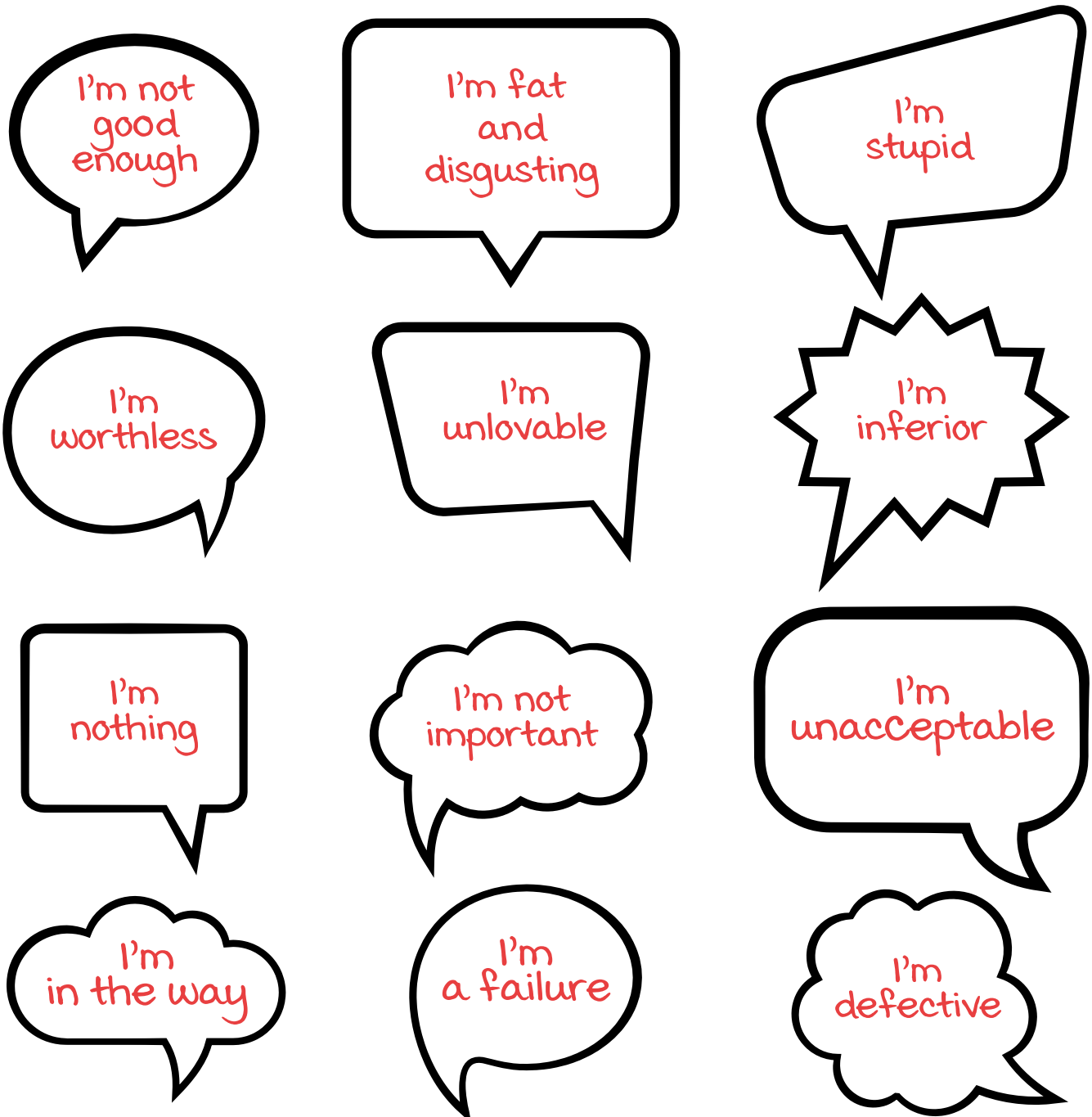
- Over-prepare so you don't mess it up.
- Appear and be extra-nice so you don't upset anyone.

There are often unintended consequences to the ways we behave. The ways you behave might strengthen your core belief.

Your core beliefs

We all form judgements or conclusions about ourselves, based on the things that have happened to us. Psychologists call them ‘core beliefs’ or ‘schemas’.

You might have memories of things that have happened in your life, or how other people have spoken to you, that really sum up how you think about yourself. They often take the form of a statement “I’m ...”.



Here are some things that you need to know about core beliefs:

- **Core beliefs aren't facts, even if they feel that way.** Core beliefs can feel so natural that you might find yourself believing that they are 'facts' or 'truths' about yourself. How can you argue with a fact? A better way to think about core beliefs is that they're *opinions* you have formed about yourself, often without knowing all the facts. To give an example: *Adana's mother was an alcoholic, and was very critical. She was often mad, so Adana came to believe that she must be bad, since her mother was so mad.* From an outsider's perspective, do you agree that Adana must be a bad person? If not, why not?
- **Core beliefs come from experiences.** Nobody is born believing that they're worthless, unacceptable, or a failure. Core beliefs are conclusions that people form based on how other people treat them. If others have treated you unfairly, how might that affect the core beliefs that you form?
- **Core beliefs are too simplistic, so they can't be true.** There might be fragments of truth in core beliefs – for example, people with the core belief “*I'm a failure*” might have had some experiences of failure – but that's rarely the whole story. Human beings are complex – we all have good parts and less good parts – but that's part of being human and it's not fair to assess a person's worth in so few words.
- **Core beliefs are biased.** Your core beliefs can affect how you see the world. Core beliefs can twist your successes so that they seem like failures, or they can make it easy for you to 'not see' evidence to the contrary ^[4]. If your core belief is that you're a failure, even when you do well at work, you might discount it as a fluke.
- **Core beliefs can be dormant.** You can think of core beliefs as being like a dormant volcano. You might not always be aware of it, but it's always there and ready to explode given the right kind of trigger.

Unhelpful rules for living

If you think about a negative core belief as a painful wound, then you can think of your rules for living as the things you do to cover up the wound so that you can get on with your life. To extend the metaphor – the problem of your rules is that although they let you carry on with your life, they don't let the wound heal properly – so you continue to suffer.



Rules for living are sometimes called **compensatory strategies**. They are used because they 'compensate' or 'balance out' the your perceived weaknesses. So if you believe that your core belief is true, you will come up with some rules that compensate for it.

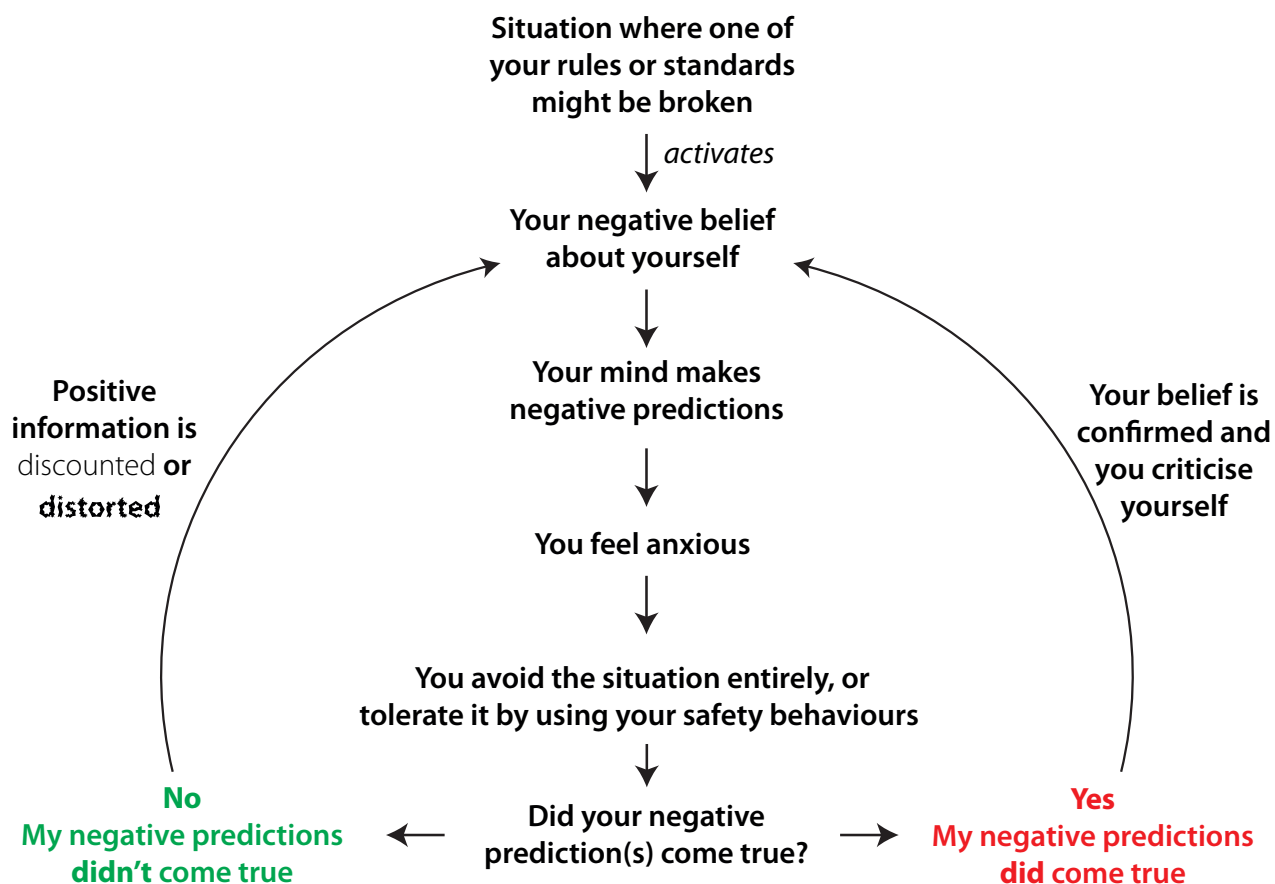
Bottom line	Rules for living
I'm a failure.	Give 110% all of the time. Always try my best. If I don't get criticized, I'm OK.
I'm unacceptable.	Don't show my true self. Go along with what other people want me to do. Don't express an opinion or I'll be rejected.
I'm not good enough.	Work hard and never make a mistake. If I don't get criticized, I'm OK. I'm alright as long as everyone else is happy.
I'm unlovable.	I must always please other people and never let them down. Suppress my own needs to make sure other people are happy. Always do what other people want me to do.

Our rules for living are often OK as long *as we're meeting them*. The intended consequence is that they protect us from feeling that the core belief is true, so if we abide by them, we can feel OK. The problem is that for people with low self-esteem the rules tend to be rigid, inflexible, and demanding. It can take a lot of time and effort to meet them, often at great expense to yourself.

Inevitably there will be times in your life where your rules will be broken, or will be at risk of being broken – for example, if you let someone down. These situations activate your core belief (“I’m not good enough”), and bring on-line difficult feelings of anxiety and low mood.

Negative predictions and unhelpful behavior

Low self-esteem is a problem of holding very negative beliefs about yourself. These beliefs can be very hard to change: even when there is evidence to the contrary, they can bias or ‘twist’ everything that you think and do so that they say the same. One way of understanding this is to draw out the sequence:



What’s happening here? Let’s break it down:

- **Situation.** Everyone’s trigger situations are different. Typically the most challenging are where one of your rules or standards *might* be broken. For this example, imagine that you have to give a presentation.
- **Negative beliefs activated.** Your negative beliefs about yourself are activated. If you have an “I’m a failure” belief, having to give a presentation would almost certainly activate it.

- **Negative predictions.** Your negative beliefs make it hard for you to see accurately and as a result your predictions about what will happen are **biased**. Instead of seeing things realistically, you worry about how badly it could go. You might predict “I’m going to mess it up” or see an image of how badly you could fail.
- **Feeling anxious.** Thoughts lead to feelings, and your negative predictions make you feel anxious and threatened.
- **Avoidance or safety behaviors.** Feeling anxious might make you want to avoid the situation entirely. If that’s not possible, you might use ‘safety behaviors’ to prevent the worst from happening. If the presentation is not something you can avoid, you might spend hours over-preparing.

One of two things might happen next:

- **If it goes badly, and your negative prediction comes true,** your core belief is confirmed. You might say “I knew it, I am a failure”.
- **If it goes well and your negative predictions don’t come true,** you might discount or distort the evidence so that it ‘fits’ with your negative belief^[11]. People with low self-esteem often say things like “Well, I got lucky that time but I won’t pass next time”, or “I only scraped through because I prepared so much, I’m still a failure really”.

Low self-esteem is like being stuck in a ‘no win’ situation. Even when things go well, the negative belief doesn’t easily change: the ‘proof’ that it’s not accurate never really ‘sticks’. The positive news is that with a little persistence these beliefs can be changed. You can develop more helpful ways of responding to your fears that can get you unstuck, and help you to see yourself in a kinder light.

Speaking to yourself in a critical way.

Everybody has an inner monologue – that little voice in our head that comments on what we're doing, and on the world around us. People with low self-esteem often speak to themselves in very harsh or critical ways. You might blame yourself, put yourself down, or call yourself names.



One difficulty with talking to yourself in critical ways is that our brains aren't very good at distinguishing between real threats 'out there' in the world, and threats that we are just imagining. Our brains often respond to self-criticism as if we were being attacked by someone else. This can trigger your fight-or-flight system and increase how anxious you feel.

Ultimately, the problem of self-criticism in low self-esteem is that it strengthens your negative core beliefs about yourself, whether it is fair or not.

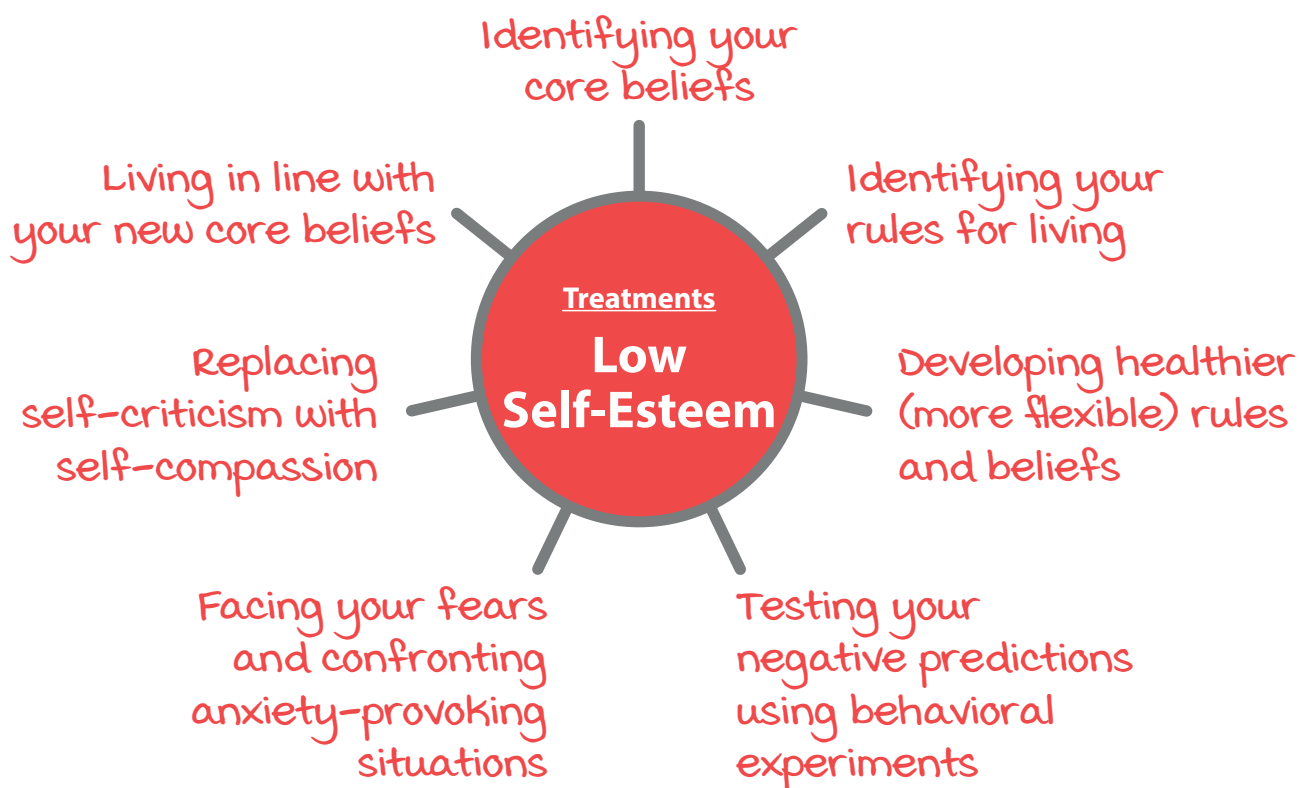
It can take time to stop criticizing yourself, but one question to consider is: would you ever talk to a friend the same way you talk to yourself? If not, why not?

Treatments for low self-esteem

Psychological treatments for low self-esteem

A number of psychological treatments have been developed which directly target low self-esteem or self-criticism. These include **cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT)**, **competitive memory training (COMET)**, and **compassion focused therapy (CFT)**. There is evidence that they are effective forms of treatment ^[5,6,7,8,9,10,11]. There is also some overlap with psychological treatments for depression.

Ingredients of effective CBT for low self-esteem include:



Do you remember Rosie from earlier? Here's how therapy helped her:

It was a relief to find out I wasn't really a failure, I'd only started to think so because of the experiences I had been through growing up. My therapist and I looked at the strategies I had developed to compensate for feeling like a failure. For example, needing to do everything perfectly was driven by my fear of failure. After I looked at how well this

strategy was working, and reviewed all the pros and cons with my therapist, I realized that it was leaving me feeling exhausted and with little time to do things that really mattered to me. There was an experiment I found helpful where I did a task at work perfectly, and compared it to doing another task 'well enough'. The extra effort didn't actually lead to a better outcome and so was not necessary! I was able to start leaving work on time and making time to do things in the evenings that I really wanted to do, like seeing my friends or going to a yoga class. It had been so long since I prioritized my own needs that at first I wasn't sure how I wanted to spend time when I wasn't working. I used this as an opportunity to try new pursuits and see what I liked, such as joining a football team, going to a choir, and meeting up with a group who played guitar like me. Whenever I tried something new, my self-critical thoughts would be very intense: "I'm going to be useless at this....there's no point in trying....I'm never good at anything, I will just fail". My therapist and I looked at how I could challenge my self-critical thoughts, and I found it helpful to ask myself 'what would I say to a friend?'. Learning to be more compassionate with myself helped me be more willing to try new things, even when I was completely outside of my comfort zone.

Luca found experimenting with his 'rules for living' useful:

It was helpful to understand how I developed low self-esteem, and the impact of my earlier experiences with my family. I found I had developed certain rules to compensate for feeling unacceptable, and was trying very hard to please other people, hiding the truth about myself at work. My therapist and I spent time examining my 'rules for living', specifically looking at the pros and cons of my rule about pleasing other people at a cost to my own needs. We spoke about the time when I agreed to help a flatmate with moving apartment, but also had a deadline at work and felt taken advantage of. I developed a healthier perspective: "It's OK to help other people, but also to take care of myself". I experimented with this new rule by sometimes saying no when my friend requested more help than I could provide. My friend was completely fine with it, and nothing bad happened when I said no, so I experimented with trying the new rule in different situations. I started expressing my preferences more to test whether they would be rejected or criticized. Once, I suggested a going to Mongolian restaurant and found that my friends were happy to try something new. In the past, I would always have gone along with my friends wanted to do and kept quiet about what I wanted. I felt more confident and worked on being more authentic and open. I came out to a colleague at work, and was surprised at how accepting she was. I learned to set healthy boundaries in my relationships, which meant I could be

| myself.

Zahara found these aspects of treatment most helpful:

I'm really glad I got therapy when I did. My therapist spent time finding out about my day to day life, and encouraged me to keep records of how I was feeling, and what I was thinking. We spoke about my childhood, and where some of my thoughts and feelings had come from. My mother had been really cold and quite critical, and never showed me any affection. She explained that my 'core belief' is "I'm stupid, I'm not good enough".

Keeping a record of all the self-critical things that I said to myself was really helpful. I knew I criticized myself a lot, but seeing it written down was so powerful. My therapist asked if I would ever speak to my children that way, and I never would! She had me practice different ways of talking to myself whenever I had these thoughts. My self-criticism didn't disappear right away, but I am more aware of it now.

We also worked on being more compassionate to myself. I was always there for my kids if they were upset, but I was terrible at soothing myself, and it meant that I was always in 'threat mode' and feeling anxious. I'm getting better at noticing when I'm upset, and asking myself "What would I do for my daughters if they felt like this?" helps me to do what's right for me. I still worry about things, but it doesn't control me like it used to, and I don't wake up with a knot in my stomach any more.

Medical treatments for low self-esteem

There are no recommended medical treatments for low self-esteem by itself. Where low self-esteem accompanies other problems, such as anxiety or depression, medical treatment may be recommended.

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