

The Talking Room – Low Self Esteem - 1

Low self – esteem is having a generally negative overall opinion of oneself, judging or evaluating oneself negatively and placing a general negative value on oneself as a person.

This sheet explores what maintains low self-esteem, what keeps it going.



At-Risk Situations

At points in our lives we will encounter situations where it is extremely difficult to live up to or follow our rules and assumptions. For example, someone who has the rule “I must do things perfectly” will find starting a new job very difficult, as it is almost impossible to live up to this rule given the circumstances. These are called “at-risk situations” because they are situations where the rules and standards set for ourselves are at risk of being broken or have been broken. When these situations occur, the negative core beliefs we are trying so hard to protect ourselves from become activated, and our low self-esteem goes from being dormant to very active.

Unhelpful thinking

The activation of our negative core beliefs means we start to engage in a lot of negative thinking about the situation we are in and more generally. We tend to either expect that things won’t work out (biased expectations) or criticise and blame ourselves (negative self-evaluations). A lot of this negative thinking arises because generally humans tend to process information in our environment in ways which confirm and maintain our beliefs. We tend to only pay attention to

information which confirms our beliefs, ignoring or minimising other information, and we also tend to interpret information in a way that supports our beliefs. For example, if you have a negative core belief “I am a failure” then you will tend to only notice events which support this, minimising your successes, and you might also interpret things in an all-or-nothing way which supports the idea that you are a failure (‘I only got a B - I failed’).



Unhelpful Behaviours

Unhelpful thinking and unhelpful behaviours tend to go hand in hand. For example, if we have biased expectations that things won’t go well, we will tend to avoid or escape the situation. If we have negative self-evaluations such that we are harsh and critical towards ourselves, we will tend to isolate ourselves from others, be passive and neglect or abuse ourselves in some way.

The End Result

The outcome of all this unhelpful thinking and behaviour, is that we experience unhelpful emotions, such as depression and anxiety. Our unhelpful thinking, behaviours, and feelings lead just confirm our negative core beliefs and lead us to restrict our lives. We never approach life with an open mind and so miss opportunities which over time can change how we see ourselves.

The Good News

While we cannot change the past, we can do something about the things we do on a day-to-day basis in the ‘here and-now’ that maintain the negative core beliefs we have about ourselves. This means that things can be different, and you can overcome low self-esteem. What is important now is that you commit to making the effort to address your unhelpful thinking and unhelpful behaviours from day to day.