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“Learning to Love the Girl God Made Me to Be”

Self-Love: Why Loving Myself Is Part of Teen Dating Violence Prevention

Self-love is something I used to think was just taking cute pictures, painting my nails, or doing something fun when I was stressed. But as I have grown up, I have realized self-love is much deeper than that. It is not just about appearances or small pleasures, it is about how I speak to myself when I am alone, what I allow and do not allow, and how I protect my own peace. It is choosing to see myself the way God sees me: loved, worthy, and made on purpose, even on days when I do not feel that way. Self-love is not a trend or a mood; it is a daily choice to honor my feelings, my body, and my heart.

A moment that shaped my understanding of self-love and safety was when Caleb James, a student from my school community, died. He was only 18 when he was shot in 2021. At first, people were told it was accidental, but later it was ruled a homicide. His mom fought tirelessly for justice, insisting that the truth about what happened mattered. Watching a mother fight for her son's life broke my heart and made his death feel even heavier. Caleb was someone I knew through my school, and his loss shook our entire community.

His story changed many of us. It reminded me how fragile life is, how fast it can change, and how important it is to take our safety seriously, physically, mentally, and emotionally. It made me more determined to love myself enough to protect myself, to never ignore red flags or unhealthy relationships. Caleb did not deserve what happened to him. None of us deserve harm, abuse, or silence around the truth. His story taught me that self-love is not selfish, it is a necessity for survival and a foundation for living a life God intends.

Self-love directly shapes the relationships and friendships we choose. When I take care of myself and stay close to God, I naturally choose people who treat me with respect and kindness. I am more confident, I set healthy boundaries, and I do not let anyone walk over me. But when I struggle, comparing myself to people online, feeling overwhelmed with school, or battling insecurity, I am more likely to accept less than I deserve. This is why self-love is a real part of preventing teen dating violence. Knowing your worth is like holding a shield: it protects you from anyone who tries to control, scare, or diminish you.

I have also seen this play out in one of my closest friendships. One of my best friends was in a relationship where she experienced verbal and mental abuse from her boyfriend. For a long time, she stayed, unsure of her worth and afraid to speak up. It was heartbreaking to watch her heart and confidence slowly shrink. But recently, she has been turning to God, seeking His guidance and comfort, and slowly learning to love herself again. Seeing her rediscover her self-worth

through faith has shown me how powerful self-love and God's love are in breaking cycles of abuse. It reminds me that no one should ever settle for being treated poorly, and that choosing God and choosing yourself can be life changing.

Many things influence my self-love. My faith is one of the strongest. Reading my Bible, watching church online, and hearing verses about identity remind me that my worth comes from God, not from anyone else. My teacher's cadet class also shaped my perspective. Working with first graders every week reminds me that every child deserves safety, gentleness, and love. If I believe that for them, I must believe it for myself too. These experiences teach me that my heart, like theirs, deserves protection, kindness, and care.

I am learning to treat myself with kindness through small but powerful habits. I use positive affirmations like "I am enough," "I am loved," and "I deserve peace." I journal about what I am thankful for, how I am feeling, and what I want to work on. I prioritize sleep, eat better, and give myself quiet time. Loving myself is not about perfection, it is about consistency. It is about choosing myself, even when life feels overwhelming.

But self-love is not without challenges. Social media makes it easy to compare my life, my body, my relationships, and my future to people who appear perfect online. Negative self-talk can make one mistake feel like a total failure. Unhealthy friendships and relationships drain confidence, leaving hearts tired and worn down. Sometimes, learning to step away from people or situations that hurt is the hardest, but most necessary, act of self-love.

Ignoring red flags is one of the fastest ways to lose self-love. We sometimes excuse harmful behavior because we do not want to lose someone, but if something feels controlling, painful, or disrespectful, it is not love, it is fear. Caleb's story and my friend's experience remind me how important it is to trust my instincts, speak up, and never let anyone dim my worth. Loving myself means choosing a better one for myself, even when it is difficult.

Moving forward, I am building habits that protect my heart and mind. I am honest with myself, even about the parts I struggle with. I set boundaries with people who drain me. I am learning patience with who I am becoming and stopping comparisons to others. I choose people who bring peace, not chaos. I spend more time with God because that is where I feel grounded. And I am learning to stop apologizing for being sensitive or emotional, because those qualities make me strong and caring.

Two resources that help me strengthen my self-love are:

The You Version Bible App – It offers devotionals about healing, confidence, and identity. On difficult days, the verses remind me that I am never alone and that God's love never wavers.

The “I Am” Daily Affirmation App – It sends simple, positive reminders throughout the day. Messages like “I deserve love” appear at exactly the right moments, helping me shift my mindset and reinforce my worth.

Self-love is not something I have mastered, it is a daily choice, often challenging, but always worth it. Loving myself does not mean thinking I am perfect; it means valuing myself enough to expect real love, honesty, and safety. It means letting God heal the parts of me I once tried to hide. It means protecting my heart and insisting on healthy, peaceful relationships.

In the end, self-love is how I break cycles, protect my future, and honor people like Caleb by living with purpose, truth, and courage. It ensures that I do not just survive life, I grow into the girl God always planned for me to be. Loving myself is an act of courage, faith, and hope. It is the foundation for the life I am meant to live, and the most powerful way to step fully into the person God made me to be.