

Chapter 1

Explaining Self-Esteem

In This Chapter

- ▶ Understanding the components of healthy self-esteem
 - ▶ Accepting yourself and others
 - ▶ Trusting your own judgement
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Many people know that the opinion they have of themselves can be better. In our clinical practice, we see all sorts of different people from all walks of life battling with self-esteem issues. Difficulty appreciating personal worth is such a core issue that it can be said to apply legitimately to every single human being on the planet in one way or another and at one time or another. In fact, low self-esteem is such a commonly reported problem that we've written a whole book about defining healthy self-esteem and telling you how to get it.

Pause for a moment and think about your own definition of 'self-esteem'. Maybe you think that having good self-esteem means being ever confident and happy. Or perhaps you link healthy self-esteem with success, wealth, achievement, attractiveness and popularity. If so, you aren't alone. These qualities have an undeniable 'feel good' factor but they don't necessarily guarantee healthy self-esteem.

Assuming that self-esteem is determined by external factors is a very common misconception. In this chapter (and to a greater extent in Chapter 2) we help you understand that true self-esteem is based on much more than confidence or success.



Even the person who seems to have everything can be suffering with low self-esteem. Equally, a person with little wealth or obvious success can have very healthy self-esteem.

Defining Healthy Self-Esteem

Healthy self-esteem is having an enduring sense of yourself as a fundamentally valuable and worthwhile individual. This view translates into treating yourself with compassion and appreciation and not relying on outside opinions to think well of yourself.



We use the term *healthy self-esteem* instead of *high self-esteem* because we want you to think of your worth as a constant, rather than as something that goes up and down depending on circumstance.

Some examples of what we mean by *enduring healthy self-esteem*:

- ✓ Accepting yourself even when you're faced with failure.
- ✓ Liking who you are while simultaneously striving for personal development (have a gander at Chapters 8 and 14 for more details).
- ✓ Thinking that you're worthwhile and lovable even when a long-term relationship ends.

A lot of people also make the faulty assumption that having good self-esteem makes them impervious to a crisis of confidence or unpleasant feelings. Even if your self-esteem is very robust, you still experience times when your confidence wobbles in your ability to do certain things. Plus, you still experience negative emotions when bad things happen, no matter how healthy your self-esteem happens to be.

Considering common foundations for self-esteem

Very often people assume that their worth is based purely on what they can achieve or what the rest of the world approves of and is impressed by. However, important factors such as your personal values, character traits and unique personality are more accurate and healthy measures.

You may also believe that your level of self-esteem is determined entirely by the quality of your childhood relationships with your parents. Although this idea certainly contains *some* truth, it's not the whole story. Many different types of experiences contribute to your understanding of yourself. Even

individuals who have had very negative childhood experiences often manage to develop a robust sense of their own worth. So you're not strictly at the mercy of your past (Chapter 10 is all about this topic).

Rejecting futile strategies for improvement

You may have tried many different strategies to elevate your self-esteem with limited or short-lived success. Common but often problematic strategies people use to try and raise their self-esteem include:

- ✓ Driving themselves to improve their status through professional, academic or financial success.
- ✓ Judging themselves on what others seem to think of them.
- ✓ Striving for approval from other people, such as parents, peers and authority figures.
- ✓ Trying extremely hard to avoid failure and mistakes.

We're not suggesting that these kinds of endeavours are necessarily bad for you. However, linking your self-worth exclusively to such external factors leaves you vulnerable to low self-esteem whenever you're unable to meet your demands. And some strategies inadvertently keep you locked in a cycle of self-judgement and recrimination.

Knowing You're in Charge of Your Self-Esteem

You may believe that self-esteem is something you have or don't have. But in fact the way you feel about yourself is something that you can work towards improving. Good solid self-esteem requires continuous effort and nurturing. Just as responsible parents make efforts to engender a sense of significance and worth in their children, so you can do the same for yourself (investigate Chapters 9 and 15 for more on generating self-esteem through language and having values, respectively).

Throughout this book you find lots of useful information and advice to help you build reliable ways of recognising your own worth.

A note of encouragement

We understand that although you probably genuinely want to develop a more positive opinion of yourself, the whole process can be pretty daunting. Some of the subjects discussed in this chapter and in the rest of the book may be pretty unfamiliar. Many of the techniques we suggest are potentially uncomfortable and challenging.

We'd like you to know that we're really rooting for you. We believe that no matter how severe your low self-esteem issues are, you have

reason to be optimistic. The stuff this book contains represents a lot of basic common sense and we've seen it work for lots of people over the years. We don't deny that it takes some hard work and stubborn persistence but the results really will be worth it. We kindly urge you not to give up too soon and to really give it an honest shot. That's why we include plenty of information to help you supercharge your motivation.

Happy reading!

Giving up the rating game

Human beings like to assess things and give them an overall rating: 'that was a great film', 'this meal is terrible' and so on. And assigning static values to certain tangible things can be useful, even things whose values can fluctuate, such as property, products and possessions.

You may find, however, that you give your whole self a global rating (or value) based on a few aspects or even one aspect of yourself – your behaviour at work or your social performance to name but two possibilities. Although this way of assigning value seems to make sense, it's actually very problematic; the result is that your opinion of yourself goes up and down like a yo-yo depending on your most recent experience. For example, if you receive a work promotion, you may decide: 'I'm such a winner!', but then two days later you fail your driving test and conclude: 'I'm such a loser!'. Neither label is accurate or true. Actually the reality is that you're a human being capable of both success *and* failure. No one is wholly good or wholly bad. Everybody has good, bad and neutral aspects to their whole selves.

A fundamental part of developing enduring healthy self-esteem is to stop giving yourself an overall rating on the basis of one or more parts of your overall self (we talk more about this aspect in Chapter 4). Equating 'I've done something bad' with 'I'm a bad person' is inaccurate and overly simplistic: you're throwing the baby out with the bathwater.



You have many hundreds (upon thousands, upon millions!) of various features about yourself, and so trying to give yourself a single, all-encompassing rating – such as ‘good’ or ‘bad’, ‘weak’ or ‘strong’, ‘a success’ or ‘a failure’ – is wholly nonsensical.

Figure 1-1 illustrates just how many different bits and pieces comprise a whole person (and these aspects are just the ones we can fit on the page!) Take a look at the illustration and think about yourself for a minute. How many different things make you the person you are?

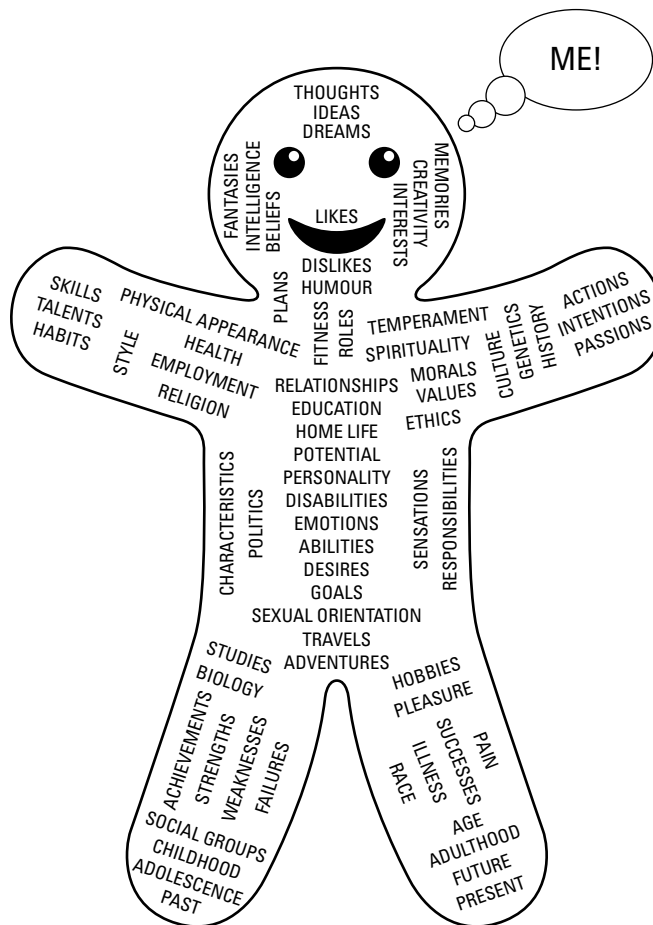


Figure 1-1:
The many
aspects of
one person.

Instead of trying to categorise your entire person as if you're sorting rotten fruit from unblemished, don't give yourself a rating at all. You're far too complex and multidimensional for that.

You can justifiably rate individual facets of yourself and work to improve on them if doing so is possible, but be clear and specific. Be strict about judging only the value of individual aspects of yourself or your actions – not your entire being. This discrimination allows you to be fair and realistic about what you do or fail to do. Being highly specific in your judgements means that you retain your sense of basic worth while being displeased or dissatisfied with certain parts of yourself. This book expands on this key principle and shows you how using it can promote self-development and enable you to make positive lifestyle changes (explore Chapter 15).

Recognising the vibrant ever-changing you

Some things are static, but you aren't. A chair is a chair and will always be a chair until it becomes firewood. A car is a car until it becomes an old wreck of a car and eventually a heap of car parts. But you change and grow throughout your entire life whether you plan to or not. And because you're a human being, you will at some stage die and become food for worms (sorry if that seems too direct!).

In that interim between birth and death (and we sincerely hope that the interim is long and happy) you perpetually evolve: your interests develop, you age, you acquire new skills, your priorities shift, new friendships are forged, your health changes and so on. Some changes are good and others are less desirable, some within your control and others without. Still, the upshot is that you're *not* a static creature. Nothing that lives – trees, animals or bacteria – remains exactly the same from starting point to end point.

Speaking of points, the one we're trying to make here is that no one can accurately measure or evaluate something that's in a constant state of flux. Therefore stop trying to decide whether you're thoroughly good or bad, adequate or inadequate. You're never going to be able to sustain one global view of yourself because you're always changing. Try thinking of yourself as a work in progress rather than a finished product. As you discover through reading this book, (whatever your age) you always have time for deliberate and positive action.

I'm Okay and You're Not So Bad Yourself

Accepting yourself and accepting other people go hand in hand. One reinforces the other. Everyone has room for growth and improvement. However, assuming responsibility for your own personal development is important, as is letting others take control of their own.

If you can live and work alongside others while accepting them as fallible creatures, you stand a good chance of being able to live with your own faults too. Likewise, you're more readily able to admire and appreciate things in others when you're practised at doing the same with yourself (and vice versa).

We often describe self-esteem as two sides of a coin. Truly holding a compassionate attitude towards yourself, even when things aren't going your way or when you seem to making mistake after mistake, is of enormous help in being able to do the same for others.

When you have healthy self-esteem, you probably enjoy good relationships with other people. Table 1-1 shows some of the attitudes you're likely to exemplify when you have healthy self-esteem and esteem for others.

Table 1-1 Healthy Attitudes towards Yourself and Others	
<i>Attitudes towards Yourself</i>	<i>Attitudes towards Others</i>
You give others the right to be wrong.	You give yourself the right to be wrong.
You recognise your own faults and weaknesses and still value your own humanity.	You can appreciate that others may hold different opinions, values and beliefs to your own.
You don't see yourself as intrinsically inferior or superior to others.	You observe others with a sense of appreciation or admiration without putting yourself down by comparison.
You maintain your own viewpoint even when others disagree with you.	You take into account the opinion of others and use new information to refine or modify your own opinion if appropriate.

(continued)

Table 1-1 (continued)

<i>Attitudes towards Yourself</i>	<i>Attitudes towards Others</i>
You have a healthy desire to be liked and approved of by others but not at the cost of your own ideals, values and personality.	You enjoy the company of others and are also able to enjoy time spent on your own.
You can receive and give a compliment.	You can give and receive constructive criticism.
You rarely denigrate yourself for your mistakes or misdeeds.	You rarely denigrate others for their mistakes or misdeeds.

Clearly, many of the items in this table are ‘easier said than done’, and some are easier to act in accordance with than others. After all, no one is perfect. In fact, if you’re able to say honestly that every item applies to you, you really don’t need this book.

We revisit these concepts throughout this book and give you assistance in turning them into regular habits.

Living with Your Limitations

Everybody is dissatisfied with certain aspects of themselves. Some of these aspects you can change and others you just have to live with. For example, you can strive to become more organised, fitter, better educated or to improve your social skills. On the other hand, you’re unlikely to have much success trying to make yourself taller, super extroverted if you’re naturally shy, or a mathematical genius if maths just isn’t your best subject.



You benefit from being realistic about self-development. And your self-esteem benefits when you concentrate your energies on improving in areas where you’re most likely to reap results.

You may believe that you just can’t change certain things about yourself because doing so seems too hard. But *hard* doesn’t equal *impossible*. Feelings and thoughts arising from low self-esteem often prevent people from embarking on a journey from their problems towards recovery. Getting to grips with your individual difficulties (take a peek at Chapter 3) and setting yourself realistic goals is something that we investigate throughout this book. (You can take a look at goal-setting in Chapter 8.)

You can find out how to appreciate plenty of things about yourself (peruse Chapter 6 for more information) and work to maximise or overcome certain aspects of yourself via your own steam. However, if you have quite a severe specific problem – such as addiction, anxiety, phobias or other psychological problems – you may need some professional help, too. The Appendix at the end of this book lists sources of support and recommends additional reading.

Appraising your attributes

Several self-help books and magazines talk about boosting your self-esteem by becoming stronger, younger-looking, wealthier or more popular. The problem we have with this approach is that it conveys the message that you're not worthwhile just as you are. The implication is that the only way to be happy with yourself is to become more impressive to other people.

Although we're all for being goal-orientated, we believe that lasting self-esteem comes from *appreciating what you have*. Instead of focusing solely on what you lack or want to attain, we encourage you to take stock of your good points and maximise them. Why? Quite simply, you feel better about yourself when you concentrate your attention more on what you have going for you than on what you don't.

Again, we don't mean to suggest that anything is wrong with self-improvement – not at all. In fact we strongly recommend it throughout this book. But as a starting-off point, have a look at the positive side of things. If your self-esteem is already at a low ebb, you're at risk of putting yourself down further when you don't take time to look at your good stuff.

We continually emphasise the importance of making changes for the right reasons. Too many people believe things such as: 'If only I could get a good job then I'd have some worth' or 'If only I was more attractive with a devoted partner, I'd have some self-esteem'. These types of ideas are all kinds of wrong. First, they obliquely suggest that only certain types of people in certain situations *deserve* to have healthy self-esteem. Second, things like getting a nice job or a lovely partner can certainly enhance your enjoyment of life and boost your confidence in some areas, but your basic sense of personal worth may remain untouched. You may find that you just move the goalposts. Third, if you do get what you want and do feel better about yourself, your self-esteem is still likely to fall through the floor if you lose the job or the dashing partner.



When you choose a goal or start a plan of self-improvement, make sure that you're doing so purely because you want the benefits. Aiming for goals because you believe that reaching them makes you more worthwhile is a low self-esteem pitfall of the highest order. You're worthwhile right now. So think about things you want to do or change to improve your experience of life.

Managing making mistakes

No one likes making mistakes, certainly no one we've ever met! But everyone does it. Do you know anyone who has *never* made both serious and minor errors in his life? Didn't think so. Mistakes are normal and permissible behaviour among humans. Yet so many people refuse to accept this reality.

Terror about making errors is largely due to what you decide your blunders *mean*. The following examples show some of the unhelpful ways people think about making mistakes, even small ones:

- ✓ I can't stand other people knowing that I messed up.
- ✓ If I make a big mistake, the result will be total disaster.
- ✓ If I'm in a responsible role, mistakes are unacceptable.
- ✓ If I were a worthwhile person, I'd get things right.
- ✓ I'll never be forgiven for making a mistake.
- ✓ Intelligent people don't make mistakes.
- ✓ Making mistakes means I'm useless.
- ✓ Making silly little mistakes proves I'm an idiot, because they can be avoided.
- ✓ Mistakes are a sign of laziness.
- ✓ My mistakes are more serious than other people's.
- ✓ Other people will think I'm stupid, incompetent or inadequate.

Looking at these common ways of thinking, it's hardly surprising that so many people live in fear of making mistakes. Happily, none of these attitudes is true. Refuse to indoctrinate yourself with such low self-esteem-generating twaddle.

You can't avoid errors altogether (unless you stop living) but you can take the fear out of making them. Bear in mind that if you try overly hard to avoid making mistakes, you may end up also avoiding taking any risks and holding yourself back from doing things that you want to do.

Here's a list of healthy attitudes towards human error – we recap on this a lot throughout this book:

- ✓ Big mistakes are as easy to make as little ones.
- ✓ I prefer to avoid mistakes but I'm a human being and therefore I shouldn't expect to never make any.
- ✓ Many mistakes are repairable in some way.
- ✓ Many mistakes turn out to have hidden benefits.
- ✓ Mistakes are an integral part of discovering a new skill.
- ✓ Mistakes can have very serious consequences but are never the end of the world.
- ✓ No one, no matter how intelligent, is immune to human error.
- ✓ Owning up to my mistakes is likely to prevent me from feeling ashamed of them.

Respecting Your Own Judgement

When your self-esteem isn't great, assuming that other people know better than you is all too easy. The opinions they hold must be more valid than your own, you think. But beware: that's your self-doubt speaking. It tells you: 'Listen to other people! Who the hell do you think you are making your own mind up about stuff!? You're not capable!' If you want to have healthy self-esteem, the time has come to talk back.

Getting vocal

If your internal voice of self-doubt tells you to keep quiet, defy it! Stifling your opinions in social situations for fear of being disagreed with is common among people with poor self-esteem. Such self-censorship may seem like the safest strategy, but the result is that you feel even worse about yourself because you're not getting involved in conversations. You end up feeling left out and isolated. Plus, you're depriving others of the chance to get to know you.

Worse things exist than having your opinion disagreed with. Do you agree with everything you hear your friends discuss? Probably not, whether you speak up or keep your view to yourself. So if you don't expect to agree with everything you hear other people say, why should you think that someone disagreeing with you is so terrible?

Instead of censoring everything you utter, speak your mind. Overcoming the fear of being disagreed with or causing offence is covered throughout this book. In particular we look at ways to challenge negative thoughts associated with low self-esteem in Chapters 5 and 11.

Putting your peers' opinions into perspective

Getting an objective opinion about decisions, plans and so on is often very helpful. Friends can be really useful sources of advice and guidance. However, if you're full of self-doubt, you may well rely too heavily on what other people say and dismiss your own ideas.

The more you turn to others before deciding a course of action, the more you undermine your faith in your own decision-making capabilities. You *can* make up your own mind about important stuff if you give yourself the chance. Your peers are unlikely to have extra information or special powers that render their views superior to your own.

Give yourself a chance to see how your own choices work out. Part of developing healthy self-esteem is realising that you can cope with any negative consequences arising from decisions you've made.

Spending (or dare we say wasting) a lot of time worrying about and second-guessing how others view you is part and parcel of low self-esteem. A term often used to describe excessive worry about being thought of badly by others is *fear of negative evaluation* or FNE for short (turn to Chapter 6 for more on this). In this book we discuss how you can care about other people's opinions (sometimes very much), and yet cease worrying and allowing FNE to interrupt your life.