

# DEVELOPING SELF ESTEEM AND A POSITIVE ATTITUDE



SOAR Program  
2003

## WHAT IS SELF ESTEEM?

**Self esteem is a state of mind.** It is the way you think and feel about yourself. Having high self esteem means having feelings of confidence, worthiness and positive regard for yourself. People with high self esteem feel good about themselves. They feel a sense of belonging and security. They respect themselves and appreciate others. They tend to be successful in life because they feel confident in taking on challenges and risking failure to achieve what they want. They have more energy for positive pursuits because their energy is not wasted on negative emotions, feelings of inferiority or working hard to take care of or please others at the expense of their own self-care.

The amount of self esteem you have depends on many factors -- how you were raised, parental attitudes, life experiences, etc. Sometimes people lose self esteem and feel bad about themselves because of failures or disappointments in life, or because of the way others in their lives have treated them. It is important to know that self-esteem can be gained at any time in life. Ideally, it happens in childhood; realistically, most people have to cultivate it later in life.

### Why develop Self Esteem?

The rewards of developing self esteem include **being able to take risks, having positive relationships, not being held back by fears and insecurities, pursuing your dreams and desires, making good choices and reaching your goals.**

This module will give you practical methods to change the negative thoughts and behaviors that foster low self esteem and replace them with positive ones that build self esteem. **Be sure to do all the exercises and d Discuss them with your counselor.**



*Feeling good about yourself is not a luxury; it is an absolute necessity!*

## WHAT CAUSES LOW SELF ESTEEM?

It is believed that low self esteem is caused, in part, **by negative emotional responses**. Criticism, teasing, punishment and abuse, poverty, economic deprivation, failure in school and many other factors affect our feelings of self-worth. Even race, religion, the media, culture and sex have an influence on how we feel about ourselves.

When negative thoughts and feelings take root early in life, they can become powerful thought patterns that form **habits of thinking**. Before long, we begin to think in ways that limit our growth and self-development. We begin to doubt ourselves and feel dissatisfied. We become afraid to accept challenges and feel unworthy, even when we do accomplish important things. The deeper these thought patterns take root, the lower our self esteem falls, until we cannot envision what it is like to feel good about ourselves.

## YOUR SELF ESTEEM INVENTORY

Complete the following inventory, noting the areas in which your self esteem is strong and those that need strengthening.

### Words or Phrases that describe you in the following life areas:

Education	_____
Work	_____
Friends	_____
Family	_____
Physical Self	_____
Emotional Self	_____
Strengths/Talents	_____
Partner/Mate	_____
Spiritual Self	_____
Personality	_____
Major Sources of Self Esteem	_____

## Self Esteem Questionnaire

1. What type of atmosphere/environment were you raised in: positive, negative, perfect, or “contradictory?” Describe it.
2. What are some things you value about yourself?
3. Do you like yourself most of the time?
4. When do you feel best about yourself? Most fulfilled?
5. When do you feel “down” on yourself?
6. Choose an example from your life that fits a positive self esteem description. Recall in detail your thoughts, feelings and behaviors.
7. Now choose a situation from your life that fits a negative self-esteem description. Recall in detail your thoughts, feelings and behaviors.

Do you notice any change in your energy level, emotions, and bodily reactions when you think of the more positive situation? Describe this.

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**Exercise: Personal Self Esteem Evaluation**

The following exercise allows you to evaluate your self esteem using this scale:

- 5 = Always**
- 4 = Most of the time**
- 3 = Sometimes**
- 2 = Rarely**
- 1 = Never**

- \_\_\_ 1. I feel successful in my present work/school activities.
- \_\_\_ 2. I feel satisfied with my present work/school path.
- \_\_\_ 3. I consider myself to be a risk taker.
- \_\_\_ 4. I feel that continuing my education is important.
- \_\_\_ 5. I consciously look for the good in others.
- \_\_\_ 6. I can do most everything I put my mind to.
- \_\_\_ 7. I am comfortable in new social situations.
- \_\_\_ 8. I appreciate compliments from others.
- \_\_\_ 9. I feel comfortable speaking in front of others.
- \_\_\_ 10. I enjoy telling others of my success.
- \_\_\_ 11. I am an optimistic person.
- \_\_\_ 12. I am goal-oriented.
- \_\_\_ 13. I am comfortable making decisions.
- \_\_\_ 14. I am in good physical condition.
- \_\_\_ 15. I am respected by others for who I am.
- \_\_\_ 16. I project a positive self-image.
- \_\_\_ 17. I am an active listener.
- \_\_\_ 18. I like being responsible for projects.
- \_\_\_ 19. I enjoy controversial discussions.
- \_\_\_ 20. I find obstacles challenging.
- \_\_\_ 21. I am able to ask for help without feeling guilty.
- \_\_\_ 22. I can laugh at my own mistakes.
- \_\_\_ 23. I am responsible for my thoughts and actions.
- \_\_\_ 24. I am direct when I voice my feelings.
- \_\_\_ 25. I am leading a balanced life.
- \_\_\_ 26. I am an enthusiastic person.
- \_\_\_ 27. I use eye contact when talking to others.
- \_\_\_ 28. I genuinely like myself for who I am.
- \_\_\_ 29. I take criticism well and learn from it.
- \_\_\_ 30. I exercise regularly and eat a balanced diet.

**Add up your points and put the total here: \_\_\_\_\_**

You score indicates:

- 120 - 150 = Very high self esteem
- 90 - 119 = Moderately high self esteem
- 60 - 89 = Average self esteem
- 31 - 59 = Moderately low self esteem
- 0 - 30 = Low self esteem

## DISGUISED LOW SELF ESTEEM

Self esteem is sometimes hidden by other behaviors used to **compensate** for the deeper-rooted, more painful feelings we wish to avoid. Psychologists tell us that low self esteem often masks itself under a **false front of superiority, perfectionism, over-confidence, “niceness” or “humbleness,” boastful or attention-seeking behavior, hyper-critical behavior or religious fanaticism.**

All of these behavior patterns are meant to shield us from the **underlying feelings of sadness, inferiority, self-hatred, fear or insecurity.** They allow us to "compensate" for these unacceptable or painful feelings by giving us a false sense of being "okay" or "right" or "better" than those around us.

Do you find yourself masking low self esteem with any of the behaviors mentioned above? \_\_\_\_\_  
Describe certain behaviors you display that mask low self esteem:

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## PATTERNS OF LOW SELF ESTEEM

As you have learned so far, self esteem develops in childhood and forms patterns of thinking and behaving. These patterns tend to reinforce self esteem, whether low or high, and become habits. In some cases, these habits can be very destructive, causing us to feed and nurture feelings of low self esteem even when there are no reasons for it. In other words, things in our lives may have changed significantly since childhood, we may no longer be subject to the influences that contributed to our low self esteem, **yet we perpetuate it by our beliefs and behaviors.** We keep our self esteem low when we should be striving to raise it. How does this happen?

**Low self esteem is perpetuated by our behaviors, thoughts and actions. Read the following list and check those items that you think contribute to your low self esteem:**

- A lack of faith, both in myself, other people and the world around me.
- A lack of purpose or meaning in my life.
- A lack of goals to motivate and guide me.
- Dependence on others for a sense of importance or meaning in my life.
- Failing to accept responsibility for my life and well-being.
- Failing to recognize, appreciate and reward myself.
- Adhering to false concepts and assumptions about myself.
- Feelings of negativity toward myself and others.
- Failing to develop my abilities and talents.
- Comparing myself to others.
- Feeling I have to prove myself to others.
- Feeling a need to give in, please or agree with others to be accepted.
- Feeling I have to prove myself to others.
- Resisting, fretting or worrying about things I can do nothing about.
- Not allowing myself the freedom to make mistakes and fail.
- Not allowing myself freedom of self expression.
- Being impatient, harsh or demanding of myself.

**Exercise: Who Am I?**

**This exercise will help you explore yourself. Think about each question before you write an answer, then write down whatever comes to mind.**

1. Write three words that describe you:

\_\_\_\_\_

2. How would you describe your self esteem at this time in your life?

\_\_\_\_\_

3. What factors in your life have contributed to your self esteem?

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

4. What do you consider to be your greatest accomplishments in life?

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

5. How would your friends describe you?

\_\_\_\_\_

6. What was the most positive message about yourself your parents gave you?

\_\_\_\_\_

....the most negative message?

\_\_\_\_\_

7. What do you like best about yourself?

\_\_\_\_\_

8. Rate your level of self esteem by putting an "X" above your chosen response:

\_\_\_\_\_

very low      low      average      above average      high



## WHAT CAN YOU DO ABOUT YOUR SELF ESTEEM?

There are many ways you can begin to raise your self esteem by changing your thought patterns and behaviors. First it is important to identify one or two main areas you would like to work on. Don't be overzealous at the start, wanting to change everything at once. Remember, it took a life-time to become the person you are today. The following exercise will help you in setting goals for yourself and developing a plan of action.

**Exercise: Put an "X" next to each item you would like to work on. In the column to the right, write down a goal you would like to reach pertaining to that item. Make sure the goal is realistic and attainable. It can be short-term (over the next few weeks) or long term (over the next few years).**

### What I want to work on:

### My goal (what I want to achieve):

\_\_\_ overall level of self esteem

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_ positive mental attitude

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_ physical exercise program

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_ personal appearance

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_ career focus/direction

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_ social/interpersonal skills

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_ assertiveness

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_ decision-making

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_ risk taking/overcoming fear

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_ public speaking ability

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_ professional skills

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_ balanced school/personal life

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_ listening skills

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_ negotiation skills

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_ other: \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_ other: \_\_\_\_\_

After you have completed the above, if your list includes more than three things to work on, prioritize it. **Put a check mark beside the top THREE things you plan to start working on.** For each goal you checked, write an idea below for how you plan to reach it. If needed, ask your counselor to assist you.

Goal 1: \_\_\_\_\_  
Your Plan: \_\_\_\_\_

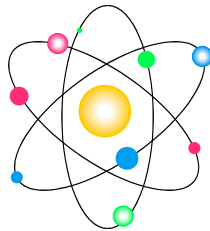
\_\_\_\_\_

Goal 2: \_\_\_\_\_  
Your Plan: \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

Goal 3: \_\_\_\_\_  
Your Plan: \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_



## LETTING GO OF NEGATIVE ATTITUDES

We all experience negative attitudes and feelings at different times. It is when those feelings persist and affect your way of thinking and reacting that problems arise. Low self esteem is accompanied by negative attitudes. Do any of the following "symptoms" apply to you?

- finding something wrong in every situation
- being pessimistic about outcomes
- being unhappy because your expectations were not met
- believing that things will go wrong
- being easily distracted by irritations
- being unpleasant to be around
- complaining and finding fault
- believing your attitude is a legitimate consequence of a negative situation
- believing that positive people are dreamers, Pollyanna's, or fools

**Exercise: Now you will gain the experience of changing your negative attitudes and responses to positive ones. Following the example below, change these negative statements to positive ones.**

**Example:**

<u>Negative</u>	<u>Positive</u>
<i>Nothing ever goes my way!</i>	<i>Sometimes things go my way; sometimes they don't.</i>

1. People aren't trustworthy. \_\_\_\_\_
2. You can't get good service these days. \_\_\_\_\_
3. I can't ever get ahead. \_\_\_\_\_
4. There's no justice in this world. \_\_\_\_\_

**Add some of your own statements below:**

5. \_\_\_\_\_
6. \_\_\_\_\_
7. \_\_\_\_\_

**Exercise: CHANGING YOUR ATTITUDE**

First, take inventory of what your attitudes are. You must be aware of them before you can take steps to change them. Briefly describe your attitude for each of the items below.

**My attitude toward...**

life: \_\_\_\_\_

job: \_\_\_\_\_

school: \_\_\_\_\_

friends: \_\_\_\_\_

the opposite sex: \_\_\_\_\_

family: \_\_\_\_\_

schoolmates/coworkers: \_\_\_\_\_

myself: \_\_\_\_\_

society: \_\_\_\_\_

**Next, put a "\*" beside the attitudes you would like to change. You may choose as many or as few as you would like, paying particular attention to those that are holding you back and preventing you from feeling good about any aspect of your life.**

**For each item you selected, write it below. Next to it, write what you would like your attitude to be.**

I WOULD LIKE TO CHANGE MY ATTITUDE ABOUT:

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## ARE YOU A PERFECTIONIST?

**If you *are* a perfectionist, you probably aren't ready to admit it! Ask yourself if you have any of the following tendencies:**

- Do you set high standards for yourself and get angry if you don't achieve them?
- Are you harder on yourself than on anyone else?
- Do you accept other people's flaws but none of your own?
- Do you feel disappointed in yourself if you get a grade less than an A?
- Are you frustrated or upset if you receive an evaluation that includes constructive criticism or a suggestion on how to improve?
- Are your positive feelings about yourself dependent on performing perfectly?
- Are you frustrated if you do not perform perfectly?
- Do you reject the praise of others even when you have done something well?
- Is it hard for you to receive compliments?
- Are you afraid of failure or criticism?
- Do you feel your way is the best way?

If you answered yes to one or more of the above, there is a good chance that you are a perfectionist. Most perfectionists will argue that there is nothing wrong with perfectionism – after all, isn't it motivating and doesn't it push you to do you very best?

The answer to both questions is “yes” and “no.” Striving to do well is certainly a desirable quality, but perfectionism can be a real problem. It makes you vulnerable to stress at work, school and home, and subjects you to mood swings, depression and anxiety.

Perfectionists often have difficulties in relationships; they are lonely, frustrated and unhappy. They have trouble learning from criticism, failures or mistakes. They are often held back from doing important things by a fear of making a mistake or failing. When they make a mistake or fail to be perfect they verbally abuse themselves, sulk, pout, or make others around them miserable. Perfectionists are self-centered. They tend to obsess over what they are trying to accomplish, waste time over minor details, worry and repeat steps over and over in order to get it right...perfect. In the long run, they take longer and are less productive.

Perfectionists are unfair to themselves. They do not allow themselves the reward of enjoying their successes or the fun of celebrating their improvements. It is important to allow ourselves moments in which we feel proud and satisfied with our accomplishments before we take the next steps toward higher achievement. These positive experiences serve as reservoirs of positive energy that help us through difficult times. Perfectionists don't have these reservoirs from which to draw.

Don't live under the pressure of perfectionism and deprive yourself of the happiness and self esteem derived from accepting yourself and feeling good about your accomplishments. You can still strive for the best, learn from your mistakes and enjoy the process more than the outcome.

Lord, grant me the serenity to do what I can do, to give it my best shot and to be reasonably satisfied if it doesn't come out perfect.

Recovering Perfectionist's Prayer

## PERFECTIONIST'S EXERCISE

**Change the following perfectionist attitudes to more positive and supportive attitudes:**

If I make a mistake, people will think I'm stupid.

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I'm a slacker if I don't always strive for perfection.

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If I don't do well at something, I should be angry with myself.

---

If I make a mistake, I can't be satisfied with myself.

---

It's wrong for me to feel pride and satisfaction with my performance.

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**EXCELLENCE VS PERFECTIONISM**

If you are a perfectionist, you are probably finding it very difficult to relinquish some of the attitudes that you feel are necessary and beneficial to your success in life. The following comparison between excellence and perfectionism may clarify the difference between striving for the best and being a perfectionist.

**EXCELLENCE**

**PERFECTIONISM**

**OUTLOOK**

Realistic: It is...

Idealistic: It should be

**STRIVES FOR**

The Possible: accepts the possible

The Impossible: desires the perfect

**SELF TALK**

I want...  
I wish...  
I would like...

I must...  
I should...  
Others should....

**STATED AS**

A request or desire

Always a demand

**MOTIVATION**

Striving for positive  
Desire for success

Avoidance of negative  
Fear of failure

	<b>FOCUSES ON</b>	
Process		Product
	<b>POSITION IS</b>	
Free...in pursuit of excellence		Slave...in prison of perfection
	<b>EXPECTS</b>	
Best of self		Best in comparison to others
	<b>LIVE VIEWED AS</b>	
Challenge that is welcome		Trial that is endured
	<b>RESULTS</b>	
Accomplishment		Disappointment
Acceptance		Condemnation
Fulfillment		Frustration
Success		Failure
	<b>LIVES IN</b>	
Reality, present moment		Fantasy, the future
	<b>TRUTH VS. LIE</b>	
The Truth: People and things do not have the ability to be perfect		The Lie: People and things have the ability to be perfect

*“Man is the only animal endowed with  
the capacity to make himself miserable.”*

## **INCREASING YOUR SELF ESTEEM**

### **I. LIKING YOURSELF**

Developing self esteem is about liking yourself and appreciating your talents, abilities and attributes. This does not mean becoming egotistical or vain. It merely means acknowledging your good traits and qualities.

Your self concept has a great deal to do with your self esteem. If you continually tell yourself you are a failure, a loser, a poor student or whatever terms you use to put yourself down, you are feeding your low self esteem and creating a negative attitude. You are reinforcing what others wrongly caused you to feel about yourself. If you accept that they were wrong, or perhaps ignorant in doing this to you, why would you chose to do the same thing to yourself?

## II. TAKING ACTION TO IMPROVE YOURSELF

Building self esteem requires action; it is not something you can wish for, purchase or borrow. There are things you can do everyday to help build your self esteem. Here are just a few:

- ⇒ practice positive thinking
- ⇒ visualize success everyday
- ⇒ accept compliments and believe them
- ⇒ seek counseling through difficult times
- ⇒ identify your values
- ⇒ identify your goals
- ⇒ be honest in expressing your strengths, talents, and skills
- ⇒ learn from constructive criticism
- ⇒ write down your accomplishments everyday
- ⇒ give yourself credit every day
- ⇒ take action on ideas you believe in
- ⇒ nourish your physical, mental and spiritual self
- ⇒ forgive those who have hurt you
- ⇒ make time for self development every day

*"It is only by taking risks everyday that we live at all."*

### CREATING A NEW YOU

The following exercise helps you to explore your inner strengths. This provides a framework from which to build your new self image. By starting **now** to change the way you look at and feel about yourself, you will change your life. **You have the power to change and become the person you want to be.**

#### Exercise:

#### 1. List all your positive qualities relating to....

work:

school:

other people (friends, family, etc.):

#### 2. List all your accomplishments up until now:

#### 3. List all the things you are good at:

**4. Now list some things you would like to change about yourself personally.** (A good example would be: *"I would like to change the way I put myself down all the time" as opposed to "I wish I had a better house to live in."*)

## **SELF ESTEEM IS NOT ABOUT CHANGING OTHERS**

The truth is, you cannot change or control anyone but yourself. When you learn not to spend time worrying about changing others and work on changing yourself, you are on your way to higher self esteem.

Changing yourself can be as simple as wearing a different color that cheers you up or as difficult as getting rid of a habit, such as smoking. Change may mean learning new behaviors or letting go of negative or destructive relationships.

Decide what you want and how you would like to change. Write your ideas below, then do the following visualization and affirmation exercise.

**I would like to change...**

**I would prefer....**

### **Exercise: Visualization and Affirmation**

Find a quiet, comfortable place free from distractions. Close your eyes. Let your mind relax and drift for a while. Think about what you've learned so far about self esteem and what it would mean for you to have higher self esteem.

Pick one quality you would like to develop or improve in your life. It can be anything you want to achieve: more confidence, better study habits, popularity, strength to overcome life problems, better health, a more positive outlook, better relations with others, etc.

Next, think what it would be like if you already had this quality. Picture how it would feel, what you would be doing, what special things would happen in your life as a result of this quality? Create a motion picture in your mind of how you would go about your daily life fully enjoying this quality. Include others in your motion picture. Picture how they would be relating to you, and how you would be relating to them.

Allow yourself to become fully immersed in this motion picture for about 5 -10 minutes. If anything enters the picture that you don't like, let it go.

**Now, affirm (state in positive terms) how this quality makes you feel about yourself. Here is an example of a positive affirmation:**

*"I am completely confident in all that I do. I do my best in everything I undertake. I feel good about myself, knowing that I am becoming more and more confident every day."*

**Write your affirmation on a piece of paper and read it over and over until you memorize it. The more you practice it, the more your mind will accept it, and the more it will become part of your life. Let your counselor help you to create affirmations.**



*"Whatever the mind can conceive and believe, it can achieve."*

### **LETTING GO OF THE PAST**

We have trouble developing self esteem and confidence when we cannot let go of the past. We remember and relive in our minds things that happened that tore our self esteem down, thereby reinforcing low self esteem. We make excuses for ourselves or feel justified for feeling bad because of what others did or said to us. We allow past wrong actions of others to define who we are and how we feel.

You may object and say, "But I had no CHOICE in the matter when I was a child!" or "I didn't ask for this to happen!" This may be true but, as an adult, **you DO have a CHOICE**. You can decide whether to let these memories of the past shape who you are today or what you **WANT TO BE**.

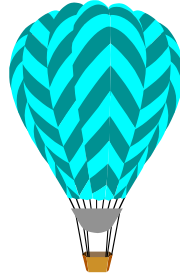
Letting go of the past is not about burying it or trying to forget it. Many people block out bad memories from the past only to find them surfacing in later years in the form of fears, illnesses and phobias. Letting go is not pretending something didn't happen. That is only self-deception.

**Letting go means acknowledging where our feelings and emotional reactions came from, accepting them and then taking action to changing ourselves, our responses and our attitudes in order to feel better about ourselves today.**

**Exercise: This final step is a lesson in letting go. List below all the past (and present) feelings of resentment, fear, anger, disappointment, etc. you would like to let go of in order to feel better about yourself.**

**I want to let go of...**

Now, close your eyes and imagine each of these statements written on different colored balloons. When you are ready, release the balloons into the air and watch them drift away, never to return to you. Say to yourself, *"I now release the past that has been holding me back. These past events, and the feelings they caused, are now gone forever. They have no influence on me anymore. They can't hurt me anymore."*



### **BUILDING AND MAINTAINING A STRONG SUPPORT SYSTEM**

- *Ask for direct help, and be receptive when it is offered*
- *Develop empathy for others*
- *Make an honest assessment of your needs for support and your satisfaction with the support you presently receive*
- *Think of five people with whom you would like to improve your relationship; in each case, identify one action step you will take toward such improvement:*

1. \_\_\_\_\_
2. \_\_\_\_\_
3. \_\_\_\_\_
4. \_\_\_\_\_
5. \_\_\_\_\_

- *Rid yourself of damaging relationships.*
- *Maintain high-quality relationships both on and off the job.*
- *Tell the members of your support network that you value the relationship you have with them.*

### **IN CONCLUSION...**

*You have begun to make positive changes in your life. The process of raising your self esteem and creating a more positive attitude does not stop here. In fact, this is only the beginning. Work with your counselor to gain assistance in changing some of the thought patterns and behaviors that have held you back. Read books that teach you ways to improve yourself and your outlook on life. Be kind to yourself. Appreciate yourself for the good things you do everyday. Above all, give yourself credit for the positive steps you are taking to enrich your life.*

***"The secret of gaining self-esteem is to make the decision to talk to yourself the same way you would talk to a beloved friend who was upset."***