- Self-esteem

BEAT YOUR INNER CRITIC

We all need self-esteem to have a healthy level of self-confidence to navigate life, yet how we view and value ourselves can differ greatly from person to person. Why is this the case? And how can you then boost your flagging self-esteem once it has taken a major hit?

WORDS BY JANET STONE

Most of us have felt our self-esteem ebb and flow as we face various challenges. Some may appear to have higher confidence than others, but how does this differ from self-esteem? "Self-esteem refers to whether you appreciate and value yourself, and self-confidence is your ability to believe in yourself and your abilities," says health and wellbeing coach Emma-Kate Woodham.

It's important to cultivate feelings of high self-esteem as they have been linked to greater life satisfaction, health, wellbeing and success. A recent research review study titled 'Is High Self-Esteem Beneficial? Revisiting a Classic Question' reviewed the findings of hundreds of longitudinal studies that answered questions about the long-term effects of self-esteem. The review found that self-esteem is far reaching, showing that people with high self-esteem generally had more success at school and work, as well as having better social relationships, and improved mental and physical health.

WHAT INFLUENCES SELF-ESTEEM?

Self-esteem is influenced by an individual's character traits, the environment they are raised in and their life experiences. "It's some nature, some nurture, but I think it's acknowledged more and more that a person's family background is a huge influence in the formation of personality, including what we think of ourselves, our self-esteem, and how accepting and compassionate we are to ourselves," says author and psychologist Dr Debra Campbell.

EACH PERSON IS DIFFERENT

"Self-esteem differs from person to person because we all experience the world in a different way. We go through different situations and engage with different people, which all impact our self-esteem," says Lorna Rose, founder of Courage and Confidence Coaching. A large-scale, cross-cultural study across 48 countries found age-related increases in self-esteem from late adolescence to middle adulthood and significant gender gaps, with males consistently reporting higher self-esteem than females.

Research led by the University of Bern's Ulrich Orth found that self-esteem rises consistently throughout our lives from age four until 70, when it declines slightly until age 90, and then declines more rapidly until age 94.

Yet previous research showed a decline in self-esteem at the transition from childhood to adolescence (11-13 years), which began to recover in middle adolescence (at about the age of 15 years).

"Some adolescents may experience declines in their self-esteem due to pubertal changes, conflicts with parents, and mood disruptions in this developmental period," acknowledges the research paper by Orth.

"I think at those key moments when women are really changing, such as adolescence and middle age or menopause, self-confidence can really take some hits because we're changing so much and we're getting a whole different sense of ourselves," says Dr Campbell.

The gender gap in self-esteem and self-confidence can be wide reaching, from career progression to how women feel about their appearance. A research paper by Christine L. Exley and Judd B. Kessler titled 'The Gender Pay Gap in Self Promotion' found that women subjectively describe their ability and performance to potential employers less favourably than equally performing men. The study found this underlying gender gap to arise as early as the sixth grade.

"I think females tend to be more self-reflective and I think it's a reality we're more heavily assessed on our looks.

"It's really hard to be happy and accepting of our looks in a world that is full of doctored images and filters, and photographs of genetically gifted females everywhere in a culture of assessing women on how they look," says Dr Campbell.

THE VOICE IN OUR HEAD

"Our inner critic is that little voice we hear that tells us we can't do something, or we will 'look silly' or asks 'what will people think' when we are thinking or doing something," says Rose.

"If we give our inner critic power, the impact it can have is huge. Listening to your inner critic could stop you doing so many things … joining a gym, taking up exercise, studying, wearing a certain outfit, asking someone out on a date, making friendships, applying for a job – the list goes on and on."

Having low self-esteem has been connected to mental health conditions including anxiety and depression, found a 2021 study. Having low self-esteem is associated with how someone deals with day-to-day challenges, where people with low self-esteem are often faster to disengage from a task in response to failure than those with high self-esteem.

> ## "THERE CAN BE VERY DAMAGING EFFECTS OF HAVING LOW SELF-ESTEEM."
> DR DEBRA CAMPBELL
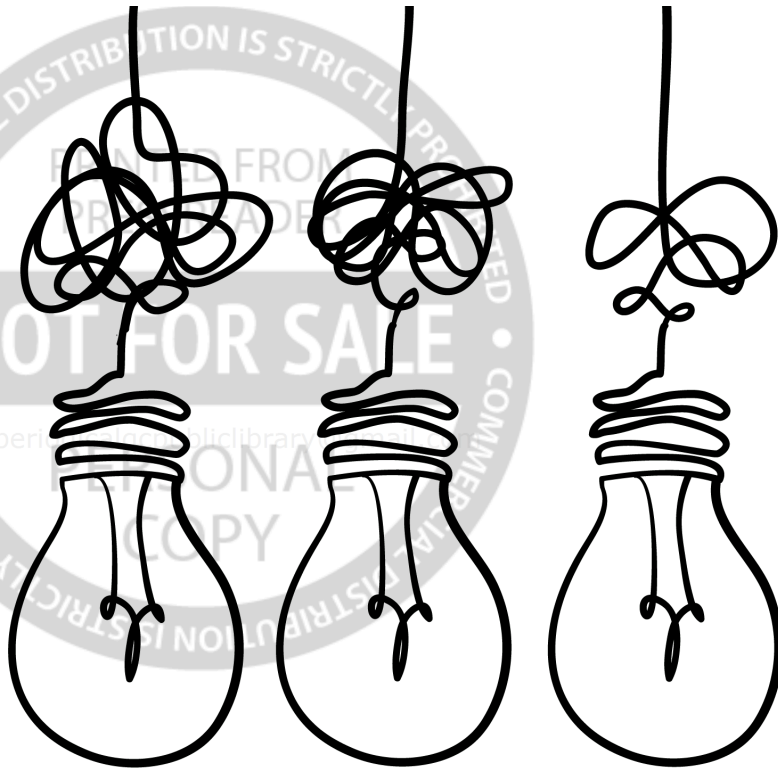
"There can be very far-reaching, very deep and very damaging effects of having low self-esteem," says Dr Campbell. "If your level of self-acceptance, your level of kindness and compassion to yourself is not very high, then it can be demotivating across all areas of life."

"In general, people who suffer with low self-esteem can be very good at things, at particular skills or have great competencies or be very intelligent, but the problem is they're not giving themselves internal loving credit for that. They're not able to enjoy it."

Meanwhile, Woodham says, "If you have high self-esteem, you are really in tune with your values and your purpose.

"You're more engaged and able to do things that you enjoy and your relationships are better both at work and at home. You are more likely to thrive and be resilient, and you're more likely to do all the good things like eat well, sleep well and exercise, which affect your health."

KEEPING POSITIVE

We all try to support our friends in a positive and kind way when they are doubting themselves, but many of us don't respond to our own negative self-talk the same way, letting our inner critic be in control.

"Self-esteem is constantly evolving, and we can develop and enhance both self-esteem and self-confidence," says Rose.

"I believe that the difference between someone with high self-confidence and low self-confidence is the power they give to their inner critic. We need to learn tools to turn the volume down on the inner critic and stop paying so much attention to it," says Rose.

Dr Campbell says, "It really comes down to getting extremely familiar with how you speak to yourself in your own mind. It really starts there and that's really the first stage and also the ongoing work of lifting self-esteem to a higher place."

Practising mindfulness – gently paying attention to the present moment – is a good way to create awareness of your negative thoughts towards yourself, says Woodham.

She suggests reframing a negative thought, such as, 'I am so stupid', to 'I am having a thought that I am so stupid' to soften the thinking around negative self-talk.

"And another great way is writing a negative thought down, then screwing up the paper and throwing it away," says Woodham.

"Writing journals is also fantastic for trying to tease out those nuances and to try and start putting more of a positive lens on them," she adds.

Try boosting your self-esteem by gaining insights into why you may talk to yourself in a negative way, and whether the critical voice you hear is someone who may have knocked your self-esteem in the past, such as a sibling or partner, says Dr Campbell.

"Understanding where being hard on yourself might come from is important because if you have those insights, it helps you to be more compassionate and makes it easier to work on changing the inner voice or at least not accepting it," she says.

"Try developing a kinder voice. Some people think of that as some affirming statements that they can make to themselves, but for others if that is too hard, try starting with making a negative statement more neutral and build on it from there." Ⓜ

BOOST YOUR SELF-ESTEEM

There are so many ways to increase self-esteem, says Lorna Rose of Courage and Confidence Coaching, Auckland. These include:

Challenge your negative thoughts, and reframe them to be more helpful and positive thoughts. This takes a bit of practice as we are so accustomed to listening to those unhelpful thoughts, but writing them down and challenging whether they are true or not can really help to improve our self-esteem.

Setting goals and creating a plan to achieve them (smaller, realistic goals are very helpful here). This can create a sense of value and worth in ourselves.

Ensuring some kind of movement or exercise is part of our routine to support healthy mental health and physical health. This can have a positive impact on how we feel about ourselves.

Getting to know ourselves, identifying our 'non-negotiables' that we must do to feel good about ourselves. By identifying these and prioritising these things, we are building up our respect for ourselves, which will lead to increased self-respect and self-worth.

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