

Low self-esteem –how you can improve and change it

Do you have low self-esteem? It's an increasingly common problem, and one blamed for all kinds of serious consequences. Yet the way most people think about the problem makes it worse rather than better. In this article, I'll explain why and what you can do about it.

It is interesting to note that nowadays we very much approach mental health in the same way that we approach physical health. For thousands of years, western allopathic medicine has operated on a basic model of diagnosis and cure. If you go to see your doctor, his first job is to diagnose you, meaning that he must work out what disease you have. Once he knows that, he can think of the cures that are known to work on that disease and give one of them to you, usually either drugs, surgery or radiation.

This way of doing things has worked extremely well for improving physical health. The average human life span is almost twice what it was one hundred years ago, due in no small part to western medicine's ability to treat and tackle disease. Indeed, some diseases like smallpox have effectively been eradicated completely and while some areas of the planet still suffer major disease outbreaks, the majority of us will never experience anything like the plagues that ravaged Western Europe during the Middle Ages.

In the early twentieth century when medicine began to take a serious interest in mental health, it seemed sensible enough to keep to the same model. It was more or less assumed that there would be 'mental diseases' too which could be diagnosed and then cured. However, detecting mental disease is a much murkier and more challenging business than detecting physical disease.

For example, if you have a physical disease like syphilis, there will be tell-tale changes in the antibodies in your blood as your body releases them to fight off the infection. The presence of those antibodies can be tested, giving us a clear indication of whether you have the disease. If you do, the antibodies are there, and if you don't, they aren't. The results are unarguable.

However, with a 'mental disease' like depression, it's rather more difficult. Supposedly we can test for depression by looking at your brain chemistry, but actually no-one knows if people are depressed because their brain chemistry is unbalanced, or their brain chemistry is unbalanced by being depressed. Likewise, we can't just take your self-esteem out and examine it to see whether it's high or low. Instead, we have to look at your behaviour. If you generally talk, think and act as though you think well of yourself, we say it's high, and if you generally talk, think and act as though you're not worth much, we say it's low.

And there's the key. It's not that you have low self-esteem, it's that you esteem yourself lowly. In other words, it's not a fixed disease, but an ongoing process, a habitual way of thinking and behaving. The good news is that like any other way of thinking and behaving, it can be changed, and often more quickly and easily than you might think.

For example, you could take a piece of paper and on it make two lists. Down the left hand side, list those things you think you are, such as 'I am kind, I am patient, I am boring' and so on. Down the right hand side, like those things you think you should be, such as 'I should be good, I should be popular, I should be perfect'. If the lists are very similar, you are likely to experience high self-esteem because you believe that you are the way you should be. On the other hand, if the lists don't match, you'll probably feel much less good, because you'll believe that you should be different than you are.

Thankfully, these thoughts and opinions about yourself are changeable. For example, all of us do some kind things and some cruel ones. If you say that a person 'is' kind, you simply put down some kind of arbitrary rule. Is a person kind if they do two kind things for every cruel one, or must they do at least three? Learning to change and dispute the way you think about yourself can make it much easier to experience feeling better. That's not to say you should ignore problems or the things about yourself you don't like, just that you can come to see them as projects to work on rather than reasons to punish yourself.

If you experience a lot of negative thoughts and feelings about yourself, it's a lot easier to deal with them by changing what you think and do rather than labelling them 'low self-esteem' and then looking for a cure. Not only that, but the whole process of taking responsibility for and control of how you think about yourself will inevitably get you thinking and feeling better about yourself just by itself.

Phil Mattingly is a hypnotherapist and trainer. For more visit - <http://www.philmattingly.com/>

©2009 Phil Mattingly. All rights reserved.