

Popular psychology theories on self-esteem not backed up by serious research

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Low self-esteem is associated with a greater risk of mental health problems such as eating disorders and depression. From a public health perspective, it is important for staff in various health-related professions to know about self-esteem. However, there is a vast difference between the research-based knowledge on self-esteem and the simplified popular psychology theories that are disseminated through books and motivational talks, reveals research from the University of Gothenburg.

Current popular psychology books distinguish between self-esteem and self-confidence. It is also believed that it is possible to improve self-esteem without there being a link to how competent people perceive themselves to be in areas they consider important.

This is in stark contrast to the results of a new study carried out by researcher Magnus Lindwall from the University of Gothenburg's Department of Psychology and colleagues from the UK, Turkey and Portugal.

"I think it's important that people have a more balanced idea of what self-esteem actually is," says Lindwall. "Our results show that self-esteem is generally linked most strongly to people's perceived competence in areas that they consider to be important."

The flip side is that the researchers show that people are most vulnerable to low self-esteem when they fail or feel less competent in areas that are important to them.

"Self-esteem is also closely linked to self-confidence and perceived competence in different areas, primarily those areas that a person considers to be important," says Lindwall.

The study builds on one of the dominant theories in the field, formulated over a hundred years ago by the American philosopher William James. It states that self-esteem is actually the result of perceived success, or competence, in an area relative to how important this area is.

The current study, involving 1,831 university students from the four countries, focuses specifically on self-perception of the body – for example, how strong or fit the test subjects consider themselves to be and how attractive they believe their bodies to be.

"The results show that self-perception of the body, primarily in those areas that were considered to be important, is linked with general self-esteem," says Lindwall.

"In general, our study – along with plenty of other research in the field – paints a completely different and more complicated picture of self-esteem than that set out in best-selling popular psychology books," says Lindwall. "These books are often based on a person's own experiences and anecdotes rather than systematic research. Self-esteem is just not as simple as that, otherwise interest in the concept wouldn't be so great."

The results will be published in the *Journal of Personality*, one of the leading scientific journals in the field.

Provided by University of Gothenburg

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