

# Positive relationships boost self-esteem, and vice versa

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Does having close friends boost your self-esteem, or does having high self-esteem influence the quality of your friendships?

Both, according to a meta-analysis of more than two decades of research, published by the American Psychological Association.

"For the first time, we have a systematic answer to a key question in the field of self-esteem research: Whether and to what extent a person's social relationships influence his or her self-esteem development, and vice versa, and at what ages," said study author Michelle A. Harris, Ph.D., of The University of Texas at Austin. "The answer to what age groups is across the [life span](#)."

The research was published in the *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*.

Harris and her co-author, Ulrich Orth, Ph.D., of the University of Bern, analyzed 52 studies involving more than 47,000 participants (54% female) looking at either the effect of self-esteem on social relationships over time or the reverse effect. The studies, all published between 1992 and 2016, included multiple countries (e.g., 30 samples from the United States, four from Switzerland, three from Germany, two each from Australia, Belgium, Canada, Finland, Greece, Russia and Sweden). Participants were 60% white, 2% Hispanic/Latino, 12% other predominantly another ethnicity and 19% mixed ethnicities. Samples ranged from [early childhood](#) to late adulthood.

The authors found that positive social relationships, [social support](#) and social acceptance help shape the development of self-esteem in people over time across ages 4 to 76. The authors also found a significant effect in the reverse direction. While earlier research had yielded inconsistent findings, the meta-analysis supports the classic and contemporary theories of the influence of self-esteem on social connections and the influence of social connections on self-esteem, according to Harris. The findings were the same after accounting for gender and ethnicity.

"The reciprocal link between self-esteem and social relationships implies that the effects of a positive feedback loop accumulate over time and could be substantial as people go through life," according to Harris.

The authors discuss the idea that positive relationships with parents may cultivate self-esteem in children, which leads to more positive relationships with peers in adolescence, which may further strengthen the self-esteem of emerging adults, and so on into late adulthood. However, the field is still in need of an integrated theory that can explain whether relationships have such a cumulative effect across life, or whether certain relationships become particularly important at certain ages.

When self-esteem or quality of [social relationships](#) is low, Harris noted, it can negatively affect the other factor, and set off a downward spiral, making clinical interventions especially important to offset this potentially adverse development.

"The fact that the effect did not differ significantly among studies with different sample characteristics strengthens confidence in the robustness of our findings," said Harris.

"We found a limited number of longitudinal studies on [self-esteem](#) and specific relationships in adulthood as well as studies using measures other than self-report, so our findings only begin to speak to these groups, and we look forward to future work oriented towards filling these gaps."

**More information:** "The Link Between Self-Esteem and Social Relationships: A Meta-Analysis of Longitudinal Studies," by Michelle A. Harris, PhD, The University of Texas at Austin and Ulrich Orth, PhD, University of Bern. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, published online Sept. 26, 2019.

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