

What we get wrong about self-esteem: It's built through actions, not words

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Credit: AI-generated image ([disclaimer](#))

Self-esteem is the sense of value we have for ourselves. It's how we perceive ourselves: whether we think we are worthy and competent, whether we think we belong, whether we like ourselves.

There's an entire wellness [industry dedicated to improving self-esteem](#),

but it often gets things wrong. Standing in front of a mirror and saying "I'm awesome" probably isn't going to make you feel better about yourself, because [self-esteem can be explicit or implicit](#), and how you consciously think about yourself might not align with how you unconsciously feel about yourself.

People want quick fixes, but unfortunately, building healthy, realistic and stable self-esteem isn't that simple.

More than high or low

Self-esteem is often described as high or low: either we like ourselves and are confident in our abilities (high self-esteem) or we don't ([low self-esteem](#)).

Level of self-esteem is an important measure. Low self-esteem has been linked with [depression](#) and [eating disorders](#) and high self-esteem has been linked with [defensiveness](#), [aggression](#) and [narcissism](#).

There is also a link between [happiness and self-esteem](#), but [more research is needed to determine if self-esteem causes happiness, or vice versa, or if they are just likely to co-occur](#). However, the level of your self-esteem may be less important than its stability.

Often, people have unstable self-esteem because they make their value dependent on something. This is called [contingent self-worth](#). [Basing your self-esteem on things like this is volatile](#) because mistakes or failures then become threats to your self-worth rather than opportunities to learn and grow.

People may make their self-worth contingent on things like productivity, religious approval, intelligence, relationships, or body shape or fitness. But what happens if you act immorally, fail a test or gain some weight?

Things like relationships and health require lifelong maintenance, which means self-esteem based on success in these areas will constantly be in jeopardy (and therefore unstable). Unsurprisingly, [contingent self-esteem has negative effects on mental health](#).

Self-esteem is off the scale, but is it stable?

[North Americans' self-esteem is skyrocketing](#). From 1988 to 2008, self-esteem scores in [middle school](#), [high school](#) and [college students](#) have increased significantly. Out of a possible 40 on the [Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale](#) (RSE), 11- to 13-year-olds' scores rose to 32.74 from 28.90, 14- to 17-year-olds' scores rose to 31.84 from 29.86, and college students' scores rose to 33.37 from 31.83.

By 2008, [the most common RSE score for college students was 40, with nearly one in five college students scoring perfect self-esteem. More than half of college students scored over 35](#). Most North Americans now have high, but not necessarily stable, self-esteem.

Studies show well-meaning attempts to bolster self-esteem in schools by complimenting intelligence actually impedes [academic performance](#). When students are complimented on intelligence, they tend to [focus on performance rather than learning, have extrinsic motivation for grades rather than intrinsic motivation for knowledge, and consider intelligence a fixed trait rather than something they can improve](#), all of which is detrimental to learning.

Focusing on performance increases stress, anxiety and [academic problems](#), not success. [Losing intrinsic motivation](#) makes people feel less in control and more resentful. Finally, having self-esteem contingent on intelligence, while believing intelligence is a fixed trait, morphs mistakes, failures or challenging material into threats to self-worth.

When self-esteem is threatened, those with unstable self-esteem may feel worthless and give up to protect themselves from feelings of failure, or they may blindly persist to try to reaffirm their self-worth through success (even if their approach isn't working, takes longer or takes more work).

Both strategies are unproductive. The more effective approach would be to reassess the problem and approach it from a different angle.

In short, self-esteem doesn't boost good grades, good grades boost self-esteem. Similarly, high self-esteem doesn't make someone a better leader, better romantic partner, or more liked.

People with high self-esteem may think they are more popular and well-liked, but those with contingent high self-esteem, are usually perceived as unsupportive and unlikable (which makes sense if they consider relationships a means to bolster their self-esteem). Just as with grades, social acceptance seems to boost self-esteem, not the opposite.

In other words, self-esteem isn't a cure-all. Even the most confident, attractive, intelligent people experience relationship breakups, job loss and anxiety.

So, how do we develop healthy, stable self-esteem? By focusing on effort.

Effort versus results

It's impossible for us all to be exceptional and outperform our peers. By assuming those things, we set ourselves up for constant blows to our self-esteem. Instead, we can try to base self-esteem on doing better, not being better. Behaving in ways that align with our goals, and giving ourselves something to be proud of, will develop self-esteem that isn't contingent

[on results](#) or others' opinions.

For example, if your self-esteem is currently contingent on relationships, try focusing on how kind or helpful your actions are, rather than how liked you are. If your self-esteem is contingent on productivity, try focusing less on how much you get done and more on the impact of what you get done.

When building [self-esteem](#) in others, this means complimenting their efforts, not their results. For example, telling your child "Wow, you worked so hard on this!" or "Wow, you're learning so much!" instead of "Wow, you're so smart!" Kids can't control how smart they are, and they'll never excel at every subject, so those things shouldn't define their self-worth. The same goes for adults.

Encouraging kids to work hard, be curious and appreciate the results of their efforts helps them build self-competence and belonging. This gives them a realistic sense of their abilities and an appreciation for their relationship to others.

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