

# High self-esteem is not always what it's cracked up to be, says UGA psychologist

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Oscar Levant, a mid-century pianist, film star and wit, once watched noted keyboardist and composer George Gershwin spend an evening playing his own music at a party and clearly having a great time. "Tell me, George," Levant said, somewhat jealously, "if you have it to do all over again would you still fall in love with yourself?"

Increasingly, psychologists are looking at such behavior and saying out loud what may go against the grain of how many people act: high self-esteem is not the same thing as healthy self-esteem. And new research by a psychology professor from the University of Georgia is adding another twist: those with "secure" high self-esteem are less likely to be verbally defensive than those who have "fragile" high self-esteem.

"There are many kinds of high self-esteem, and in this study we found that for those in which it is fragile and shallow it's no better than having low self-esteem," said Michael Kernis. "People with fragile high self-esteem compensate for their self-doubts by engaging in exaggerated tendencies to defend, protect and enhance their feelings of self-worth."

The research was published today in the *Journal of Personality*. Kernis's co-authors are Chad Lakey and Whitney Heppner, both doctoral students in the UGA social psychology program.

Amid the complexity of perspectives on the human psyche, a slow but relentless change is occurring in how psychologists view self-esteem, said Kernis. It was once thought that more self-esteem necessarily is better self-esteem. In recent years, however, high self-esteem per se has come under attack on several fronts, especially in areas such as aggressive behavior. Also, individuals with high self-esteem sometimes become very unlikable when others or events threaten their egos.

While high self-esteem is still generally valued as a

good quality that is important to a happy and productive life, more researchers are breaking it down into finer gradations and starting to understand when high self-esteem turns from good to bad. In fact, it is now thought that there are multiple forms of high self-esteem, only some of which consistently relate to positive psychological functioning.

One of the ways in which high self-esteem can turn bad is when it is accompanied by verbal defensiveness—lashing out at others when a person's opinions, beliefs, statements or values are threatened. So Kernis and his colleagues designed a study, reported in the current article, to see if respondents whose self-esteem is "fragile" were more verbally defensive than those whose self-esteem was "secure."

Using 100 undergraduates, they set up a study in three phases. In the first part, students completed a basic demographic questionnaire and other measures to evaluate their levels and other aspects of self-esteem. In phase 2, the team assessed the students' stability of self-esteem because the more unstable or variable one's self-esteem, the more fragile it is. And finally, in the last phase, the researchers conducted a structured "life experiences interview" to measure what they call "defensive verbalization."

"Our findings offer strong support for a multi-component model of self-esteem that highlights the distinction between its fragile and secure forms," said Kernis. "Individuals with low self-esteem or fragile high self-esteem were more verbally defensive than individuals with secure high self-esteem. One reason for this is that potential threats are in fact more threatening to people with low or fragile high self-esteem than those with secure high self-esteem, and so they work harder to counteract them."

On the other hand, individuals with secure high self-

esteem appear to accept themselves “warts and all,” and, feeling less threatened, they are less likely to be defensive by blaming others or providing excuses when they speak about past transgressions or threatening experiences.

One reason the study’s findings are important, Kernis said, is that it shows that greater verbal defensiveness relates to lower psychological well-being and life satisfaction.

“These findings support the view that heightened defensiveness reflects insecurity, fragility and less-than-optimal functioning rather than a healthy psychological outlook,” said Kernis. “We aren’t suggesting there’s something wrong with people when they want to feel good about themselves. What we are saying is that when feeling good about themselves becomes a prime directive, for these people excessive defensiveness and self-promotion are likely to follow, the self-esteem is likely to be fragile rather than secure and any psychological benefits will be very limited.”

And what of Oscar Levant and George Gershwin" While Levant may now be largely remembered for his acid opinions, Gershwin left us Rhapsody in Blue, An American in Paris, and Porgy and Bess, three of the most memorable compositions of the 20th century.

So the score for that fabled encounter on the secure self-esteem scale could be Gershwin 1, Levant, 0. Maybe it’s a reminder of how complicated self-esteem really is.

Source: University of Georgia

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