

How to break free of the low self-esteem cycle

One way to think of self-esteem is as the opinion we have of ourselves. We form that opinion early on from the messages about us that we received, first from our primary carers, then from our wider circle. For example, children might be labelled by their parents, teachers or coaches: “the clever one” or “the slow one”. We internalise the views of others as being our own, which we then evolve into our own core beliefs. As we define our own value over time, we extend those values onto others and, inevitably, we start comparing ourselves to others.

Although many of us have developed both positive and negative opinions about ourselves, a prevalent feeling of unworthiness and inferiority indicates that you are struggling with low self-esteem. That feeling of inadequacy is accompanied by a sense of deserving less than others. As a result, you might start adapting yourself to others around you in the hope of being liked and accepted by them – blending in like a chameleon. We call this coping strategy an ‘adapted self’. But its real consequence is that you ignore your own needs and cease living true to yourself.

To make matters worse, as we all unconsciously engage in confirmation bias, your mind will be quick to grasp anything that resonates with your negative core beliefs and this will naturally maintain the problem. Over and over, your mind will grasp “evidence” to confirm these beliefs about yourself and will miss any positive feedback that comes your way.

Here’s how you can break this vicious circle:

Gain awareness of your inner critic. Negative self-judgement is likely to be a result of your biased perception of events based on your core beliefs. Do you really have hard evidence for all the accusations you put on yourself?

Become your best friend. Buddha said: “Your worst enemy cannot harm you as much as your own unguarded thoughts”. Self-blaming hurts, self-compassion heals.

Next time you become aware of a negative thought about yourself, why not write it down? Then, instead of believing it, write down 3 reasons why that belief isn’t true. This new evidence can then become the basis for more positive thoughts about yourself.

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