



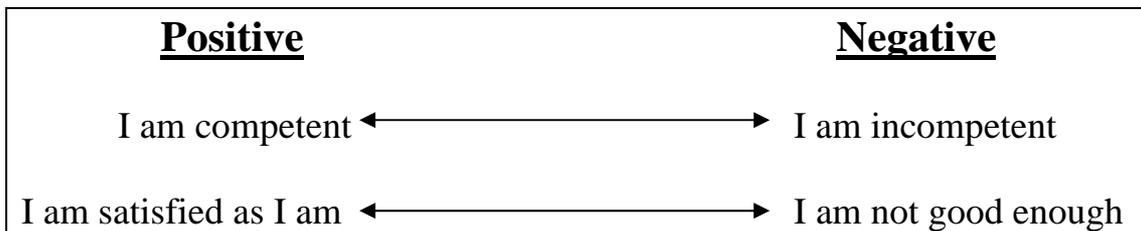
# SELF - ESTEEM

## A Self Help Guide

Dept. of Psychological Services  
& Research

## WHAT IS SELF ESTEEM?

Self-esteem is our ability to value ourselves. It is slightly different than self-confidence, which refers to our sense of being able to **do** something successfully. Self-esteem is the overall opinion we have about ourselves. We can have a tendency to trap ourselves in the way we see and think about ourselves eg. the opinion we have about ourselves can affect what we are prepared to try and not try. If it is very negative it can prevent us from reaching our potential and goals. Examples of positive and negative opinions you might have about yourself:



When our opinion of ourselves is too negative it can have a major impact on our life. This is because our thoughts and perceptions affect how we feel and behave.

For the purpose of exploring self-esteem, our focus will be on any negative statements which you make about yourself.

## UNDERSTANDING MY SELF ESTEEM

Low self-esteem can be most easily recognised by the negative statements you make about or believe about yourself. Pay attention for beliefs about yourself that you accept without question. These often begin with "I AM....." or "I SHOULD....."

Our experiences often, but not exclusively as children provide the mould for our esteem and set down the conclusions we make about ourselves. It is important to be open-minded and begin to view these negative self-statements as a matter of **opinion**, and as such, open to question and debate.

### First Step:

-To consider the 'roots' of your self esteem and accept the conclusions you have drawn about yourself as an understandable reaction to your unique life experience. We know experiences like excessive criticism, neglect, punishment, being different, being bullied or hardship can contribute to low self-esteem in some people.

Have a think about memories, specific situations or experiences that might help you build a better understanding of you. Think about the 'family sayings' as you grew up, your school experiences and important relationships.

The responsibility to change can be yours no matter how difficult your past has been. The means to begin to change what you want to change are certainly within your grasp.

## **MOTIVATION**

When you are first considering a change you might feel keen to take action, but sometimes you merely want to think about it, and at other times you just want to stay the same. These are normal experiences when you begin to think about changing.

How important is it for me to change and to develop a better view of myself?
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### Take your time and ask yourself:

- Why is it unimportant to me?
- Why is it important to me?
- What is your low self-esteem affecting and in what way?
- What do you predict will happen if you don't change?
- What do you predict will happen if you do change?
- Is there anything at risk if you do change?
- Is there anything at risk if you don't change?

## **LEARN TO CHALLENGE YOURSELF**

We know how we feel is strongly linked with how we think. Streams of thoughts are running through our minds almost constantly and often we are completely unaware of them! When the content of these thoughts

leads us to feel badly we call them 'negative automatic thoughts', because they quite simply pop into our heads without any sense of being within our control. It is the unquestioning acceptance of your thoughts as your truth that helps your critical self survive and thrive. Learning to 'tune in' to your critic and capture your thoughts is the basis for questioning their validity. This requires practice, but to begin with - simply be aware of a change in how you feel (eg. sad, angry, irritable) then ask yourself - "what was I thinking about just then?"

e.g.,

Situation	Thought
Thinking about returning a faulty toaster to an electrical shop.	The shop assistant will think I've broken it. They'll not exchange it. I'll not know what to do. I'll stutter and stammer. Everyone will think I am pathetic.

The next step is questioning your thoughts. This does not mean thinking positively, it means finding an alternative view based on looking at both sides of the coin.

Typical mistakes in your thinking might be to:

- Exaggerate the negative (Getting a situation out of perspective)
- Over generalise (Make a mistake, and call yourself a failure)
- Ignore positive information about yourself or a situation
- See everything as black or white (View situations or people as good or bad. Not recognise the shades of grey.)
- Mind read (Thinking you know what someone thinks without checking it out by asking!)

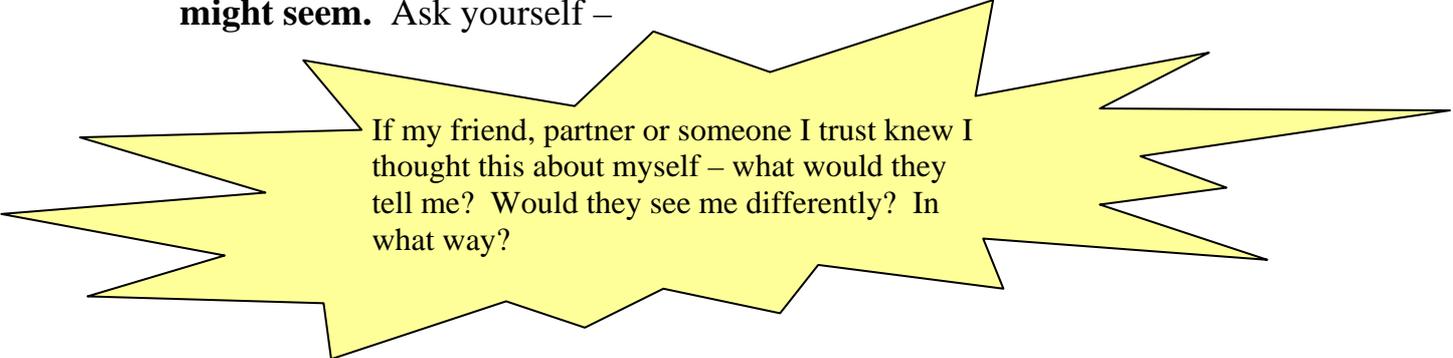
Perhaps you find yourself doing some of the things above. As you have already found out, self-esteem takes root over time and it is likely to take you months to begin to shake these roots.

To begin with, remember that these thoughts are your **perception**. In order to loosen its grip and improve your emotional well-being, regard it as an **opinion**, not a statement of fact.

## DUMP THE CRITIC

Start by thinking of some of your experiences that **don't fit** with your negative view of yourself. Our culture, and the messages we heard as we were growing up often encouraged modesty. Openly noticing your qualities and the things you like about yourself might feel like boasting or bigheadedness, but go on ... the challenge is to blow your own trumpet!

**Do not discount anything, no matter how small and insignificant it might seem.** Ask yourself –



If my friend, partner or someone I trust knew I thought this about myself – what would they tell me? Would they see me differently? In what way?

This is to introduce you to a way of questioning your self-critical voice by bringing other information about yourself into your awareness. Think of a personal quality that would 'fit' with your experience. This brings your unique qualities alive.

eg.

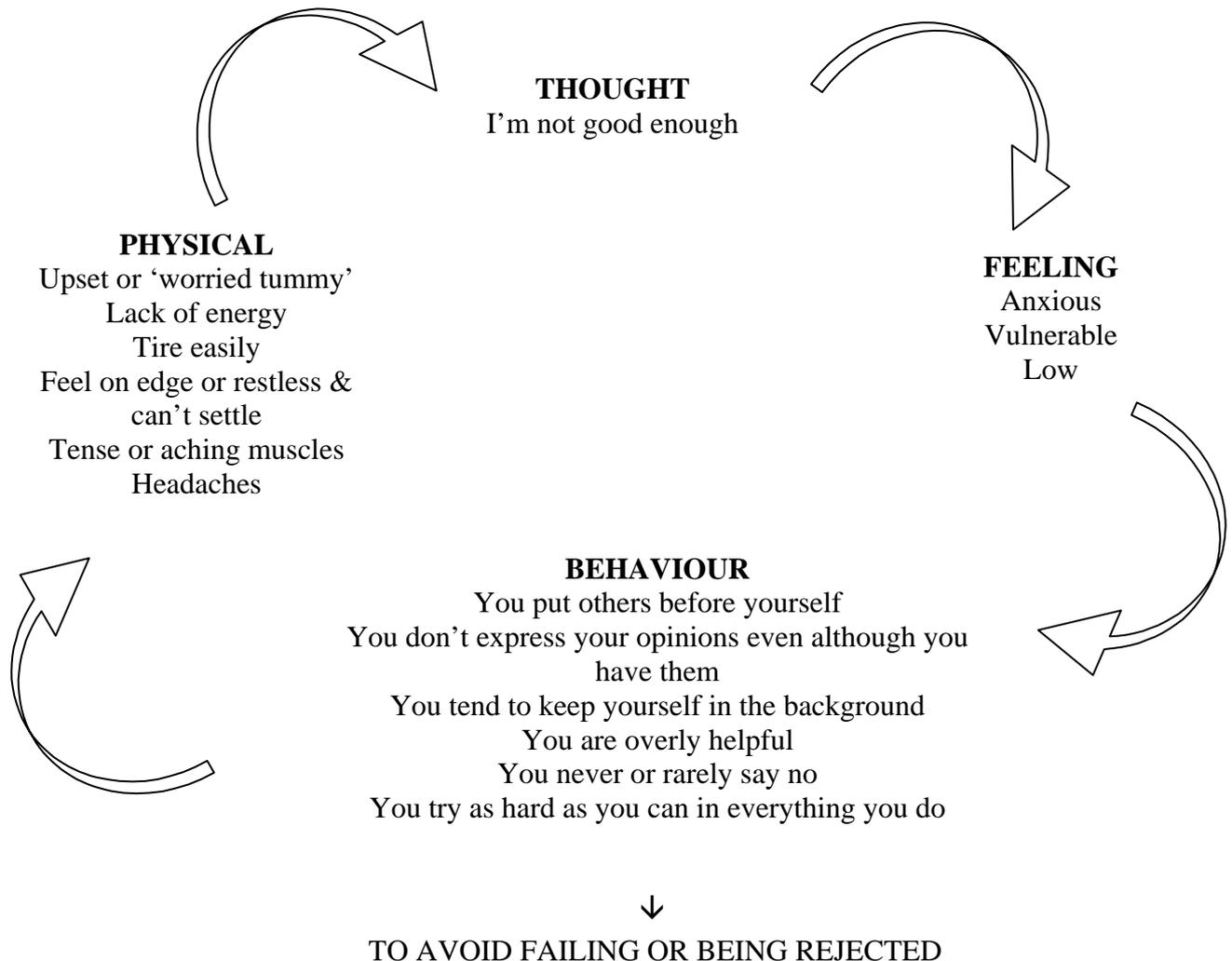
1. My friend was worried and called me for advice - I spent 30 minutes listening to her concerns and offering my help.  
**My qualities** - caring, helpful, good listener

Developing a way of checking out the accuracy of your thoughts is a crucial element of beginning to 'counter' your negative view of yourself, but it is unlikely to be helpful on its own. It requires the additional ingredient of **behaviour change**.

This is the challenge that requires commitment and determination to face a familiar situation differently.

# CHANGING YOUR BEHAVIOUR

Imagine you hold the belief: I'm not good enough



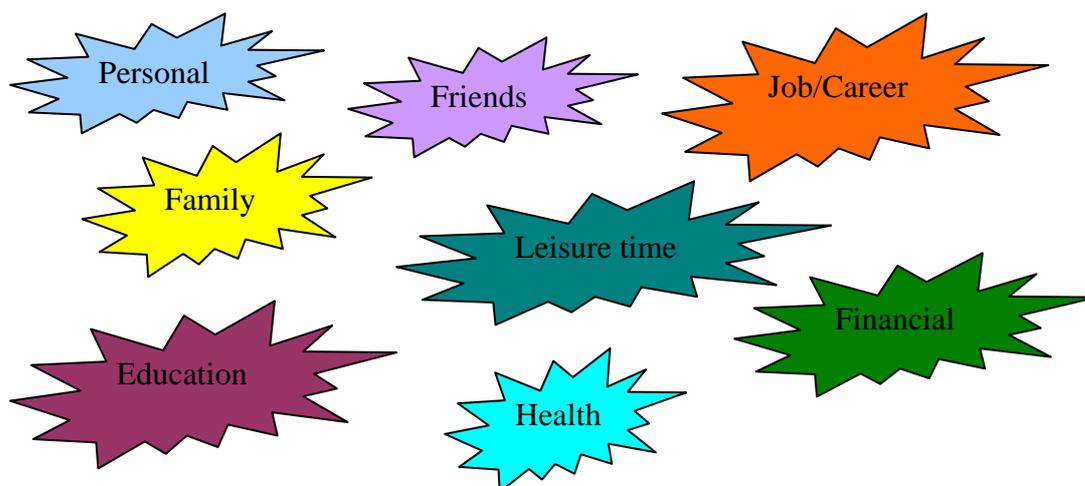
Changing what you do will help you check out whether your worst fears will come true

Can you see how this negative belief creates a vicious cycle of negativity? Look at the direct consequence of this belief on behaviour. Can you identify how your own belief affects how you behave? Consider things like your posture - Do you avoid looking at people, or do you talk quietly, mumble, talk too much or say nothing? Do you spend what others might consider an excessive amount of time on small detail?

Once you have recognised aspects of your behaviour that protect you from exposing your worst fears, select a small part that you feel able to change. Making changes requires you to be open to taking risks and facing some disappointment. Lasting change will take root with the small steps you take along the way. Learning to move out of your 'comfort zone' (the situations where you feel you belong, based on your view of yourself) in a deliberate, planned and safe way can open a door to challenges and adventure. Begin to test out approaching new situations differently. Consider what might happen, then put it to the test. Check out how accurate your prediction is. What do you notice and what can you learn about this situation and others.

## DIFFERENT AREAS OF LIFE

Sometimes when our self esteem is low it is difficult to see that change is possible. Being able to look at separate areas of your life can help you get focussed on which areas you might want to change.



Our self-esteem is not a constant state stuck in concrete. It fluctuates at different stages in our life, as well as in different situations. An example of this might be the woman who feels confident as a mother, but feels clumsy and awkward in social situations. It would be unreasonable to expect our self-esteem to be high at a time of job loss, relationship difficulties or prolonged illness - particularly depression. However it would be reasonable to expect to recover from this temporary dent. Being able to reflect back to a stage in your life when you felt better about yourself could be a rich source of ideas for improving your situation now.

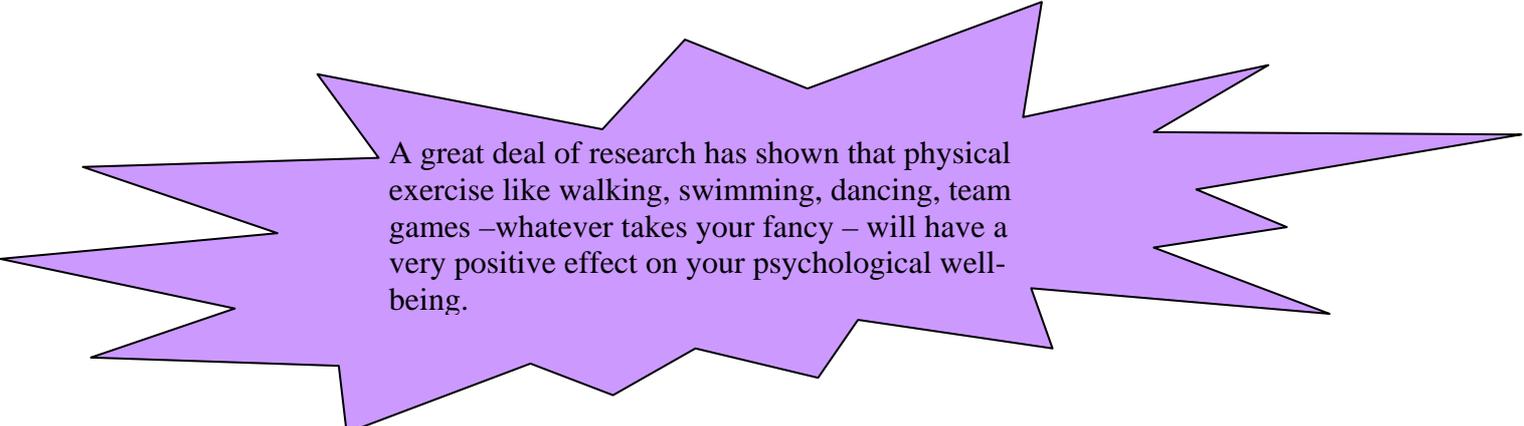
Think back to a time when you felt your self-esteem was better

- Where were you?
- What were you doing?
- In what way did you behave differently?
- In what way did you think differently?

Compare this with what your situation is now

- Where are you?
- What are you doing?
- How are you behaving?
- Are there any particular patterns or themes to your thinking?

Are there any obvious solutions that might improve your situation now - even if it would only improve it marginally?



A great deal of research has shown that physical exercise like walking, swimming, dancing, team games –whatever takes your fancy – will have a very positive effect on your psychological well-being.

## HEALTH WARNING

Learning to develop tolerance and compassion for yourself is a vital skill for your general emotional well being. People with low self-esteem are often harshly critical of themselves, placing expectations on themselves that do not match their expectations of others. Does this double standard sound familiar to you? Does it seem reasonable? Can you find a way of talking to yourself in a more compassionate, gentle and encouraging way? If you can think of someone in your life, past or present who has given you positive encouragement - consider using his or her words and phrases to 'bat off' your critical self. Many people's lives are busy with obligations to others - children, employers, partners and parents. Ignoring your obligation to take care of yourself carries a **health**

**warning.** The continual pattern of attending to others and ignoring yourself is likely to keep low self esteem going, create stress, frustration, martyrdom and low mood.

Remember your self-esteem didn't develop overnight and neither will it improve overnight. There is no such miracle treatment. Identify your dream, visualise it, bring it alive in your mind's eye (as if you'd achieved it) and begin working towards it. Remember only you have the control to be the person you are capable of being. Learn to accept yourself with no strings attached.



#### Further recommended reading

Overcoming Low Self Esteem	Melanie Fennel	£7.99
10 Steps to Positive Living	Dr Windy Dryden	£5.99
The Feeling Good Handbook	David D Burns	£9.09
Manage your Mind	Butler & Hope	£8.99
10 Days to Great Self Esteem	David D Burns	£9.99
Overcoming Social Anxiety & Shyness	Gillian Butler	£7.81
Reinventing your Life	Jeff Young	£7.99

Adapted with permission from Dumfries and Galloway Dept. of Psychological Services and Research.