



Adult Mental Health Team

# Self-esteem

A guide to help you cope

## Recovery Focus

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This booklet has been designed by clinicians who are experienced in working with people with a wide range of mental health conditions.

The North and West adult mental health teams work in a collaborative way with people to help them to cope with their symptoms. This way of working is called a recovery approach.

The workbook is arranged across four key sections:

<b>What is low self-esteem?</b>	<b>3</b>
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## 1

## What is low self-esteem?

### Why is self-esteem important?

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Your self-esteem, or how you value yourself as a person, affects your mind, body and relationships. Although you might not be aware of it your self-esteem influences your life every day; the choices you make, the way you feel in new situations and how you appear to other people.

Positive self-esteem is both a cause and a result of healthy living. Just as you can learn to change unhealthy habits, you can take steps to improve your self-esteem.

A positive or healthy self-esteem is desirable. If you generally feel good about yourself your moods will be balanced, your energy will tend to be positive, you will be open to communicating with others and empowered to take on challenges. If you have healthy self-esteem, you will be less likely to blame other people for your mistakes or misfortunes. You will be able to accept criticism and you're likely to learn new skills. Generally speaking, if your self-esteem is healthy, you will be most comfortable and secure forming honest relationships. You will be able to deal competently with stressful situations. You will tend to make healthy choices, and to appreciate the things that are good about your life.

## Characteristics of low self-esteem

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These are some of the main characteristics that you may be able to identify with:

- Social withdrawal
- Anxiety and emotional turmoil
- Lack of social skills and self-confidence
- Depression or bouts of sadness
- Eating disorders
- Inability to accept compliments
- An inability to be fair to yourself
- Accentuating the negative
- Exaggerated concern over what you imagine other people think
- Self-neglect
- Treating yourself badly (but not other people)
- Worrying whether you have treated others badly
- Reluctance to take on challenges
- Reluctance to put yourself first or anywhere
- Reluctance to trust your own opinion
- Expecting little out of life for yourself.

## The difference between self-esteem and self-confidence

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### Self-esteem is:

- A overall sense of self-worth or personal value.
- A persons image of themselves and their accomplishments.

It involves a variety of beliefs about the self, such as the appraisal of one's own appearance, beliefs, emotions and behaviours. There are a number of different factors that can influence self-esteem.

### Self-confidence is:

- Our self-assurance in trusting our abilities, capacities and judgements
- The belief that we can meet the demands of a task.

### What is the difference?

The terms self-esteem and self-confidence are often used interchangeably when referring to how you feel about yourself. Although they are very similar, they are two different concepts.

**Self-esteem:** how you feel about yourself overall; how much esteem, positive regard or self-love you have. Self-esteem develops from experiences and situations that have shaped how you view yourself today.

**Self-confidence:** how you feel about your abilities and can vary from situation to situation. I may for example have healthy self-esteem, but low confidence about situations involving maths.

## How might low self-esteem affect me?

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Low self-esteem may be an underlying cause of and can link with depression. A person may feel that there are things they can't do well, especially if it concerns social skills, being successful, initiating and maintaining relationships, or having the courage to try new things.

As a result they often feel hopeless about their situation and about the future. Because those with low self-esteem feel inadequate, they automatically think that others see them in the same way and that others may be laughing at them, will likely reject them, do not respect them, and will take advantage of them.

Consequently they tend to watch for signs this is happening and then tend to be overly sensitive and are easily offended.

Feeling inadequate, as though they don't fit in, and then constantly fearful of repercussions, low self-esteem sufferers watch others in an effort to figure out what to do and say, what to wear, what seems to work. But, as situations change, behaviours also change leaving these individuals confused about what they should do or say, adding to their anxiety and fear of rejection and so their social and relationship skills may not improve.

Assertiveness requires boldness that most low self-esteem sufferers do not have. They are often too fearful of upsetting others (and then being rejected) to tell the truth, ask for what they want, or share their feelings.

Instead, they tend to become passive until their anger builds at which point they can become aggressive- defensive, sarcastic, brusque, or rude, even violent such as is the case with domestic, gang, and teen violence.

Another response often given by those who have low self-esteem is acting in ways that are passive-aggressive. Examples are any form of manipulation, planned tardiness, throwing out cues for the other to pick up on, making insinuations to get the other person to do what you want, gossiping, etc.

Those with lack of confidence and low self-esteem generally become either overachievers or underachievers. Some may feel angry and are driven to prove their adequacy, often becoming very successful as the result of their low self-esteem. Other low self-esteem sufferers remain in unsatisfying and or abusive relationships, remain in jobs where the pay is poor and the benefits non-existent, give up on their dreams, and float through life because they are convinced that trying to change these factors will result in failure, humiliation, or being alone. People who lack self-confidence are very needy. These are self-defeating behaviours that low self-esteem sufferers repeat over and over.

Write down below examples of how you think low self-esteem may have affected you:

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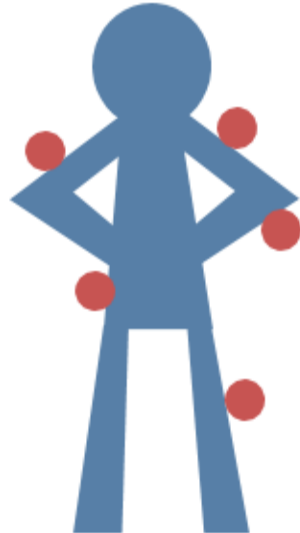
## How external factors impact on our self-worth

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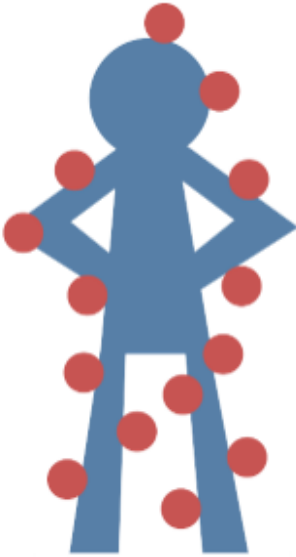
**If you were presented with several different babies and you were asked to rate their worth what would you think?**

**No one is worth more or less than the other; we are all born into this world of equal worth.**



**As we go through life we find that things 'stick' to us; materialistic features such as cars, jobs, money, social relationships and circumstances. For instance marriage, life events, perhaps travelling or becoming successful in our occupational lives.**





**After a period of time so much tends to 'stick' to us that we lose our sense of 'core worth' or we compare our exterior worth to the exterior worth of others: "They have a better... than me, so they are worth more than I am"**

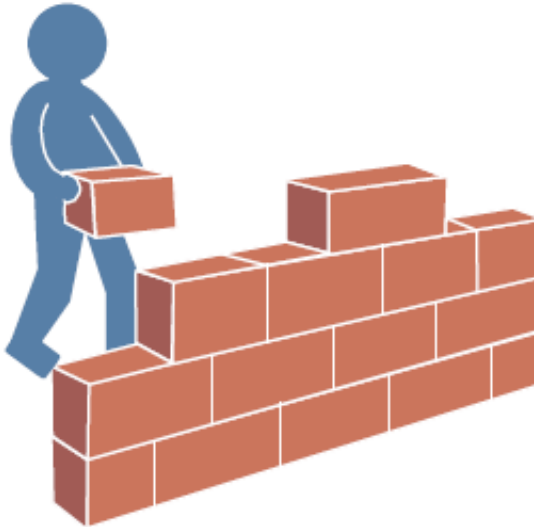


**When we begin to compare ourselves to exterior components of others we need to take a step back and reflect; remind ourselves in comparison to others, we are still worth exactly the same as other individuals around us.**

## The Wall

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Try thinking of self-esteem as a wall, life events can knock it down but we can build it up again and it can then protect us in future. It is not a fixed thing we can take steps to build it up.



That's why we talk of 'building self esteem'. Breaking it down into small 'brick sized' pieces can be a helpful way of working on our self-esteem bit by bit.

## The three components of self-esteem

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A useful way of looking at self-esteem, particularly when thinking about breaking self-esteem into smaller pieces, is the idea of self-esteem having three different components:

- A sense of **value** (e.g. I am liked)
- A sense of **competency** (e.g. I can)
- A sense of **control** (e.g. I will)

Think about what aspects are affecting your self-esteem. What affects our self-esteem may be different for everybody.

Your confidence may have been lowered after a difficult experience or series of negative life events such as:

- Being bullied or abused
- Losing your job or difficulty finding employment
- On-going stress
- Physical illness
- Mental health problems
- A difficult relationship, separation or divorce

Try to focus on your positives. Write a list about all of the things you like about yourself, you could include ways in which you feel valued, things that you are good at and can do, and things that you want to achieve. If you find this difficult, ask a friend or a loved one to help you. Highlighting the positive can help you to begin building up your self-esteem.

## 2

## How to combat negative thinking patterns

Over the years we can develop negative thinking patterns which can contribute to feelings of low self-esteem.

Learning how to recognise these unhelpful thinking patterns is important. They often occur just before or during distressing situations. Once you are able to notice them you can begin challenging the thoughts.

Over time this will help you to distance yourself from your unhelpful thinking patterns and see the situation in a different, more helpful way.

### Examples of unhelpful thinking patterns

#### Negative mental filter

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People with a negative mental filter notice only what the negative filter wants or allows them to notice, and we dismiss anything that doesn't fit. This can be like looking through 'gloomy specs'. We might for example only notice when somebody criticises us as opposed to noticing the occasions where we receive praise.

#### Negative judgements

Making evaluations or judgements about ourselves rather than describing what we actually see or have evidence for.

For example making a judgment that others think negatively of us.

### **Making assumptions**

Assuming we know what others are thinking (usually about us) when in reality we cannot possibly know what others are thinking.

### **Compare and despair**

Seeing only the good and positive aspects in others and comparing ourselves negatively against them.

### **Critical self**

Putting ourselves down, self-criticism and blaming ourselves for events or situations that are not (or not totally) our fault or responsibility.

### **Black and white thinking**

Believing that we can only be good or bad and right or wrong rather than anything in between.

### **Should and must statements**

Thinking or saying statements like '*I should*' or '*I shouldn't*' and '*I must*' puts increased pressure on ourselves and sets unrealistic expectations.

Can you relate to any of the negative thinking patterns described? Try to write down some examples of when you may have thought in these ways.

Negative thinking pattern	Example
Negative mental filter	
Negative judgements	
Mind reading	
Compare and despair	
Critical self	
Black and white thinking	
Should and must statements	

Now that you can identify your negative thinking patterns, the next step is to try to challenge these thoughts. You can practise this using the prompts in the table below.

Negative thinking pattern	How to challenge the thoughts
<b>Negative mental filter</b>	Am I only noticing the bad stuff? Am I filtering out the positives? Am I wearing those 'gloomy specs'? What would be more realistic?
<b>Negative judgements</b>	I'm making an evaluation about the situation or person. It's how I make sense of the world, but that doesn't mean my judgements are always right or helpful. Is there another perspective?
<b>Mind reading</b>	Am I assuming I know what others are thinking? What's the evidence? Those are my own thoughts, not theirs. Is there another, more balanced way of looking at it?
<b>Compare and despair</b>	Am I doing that 'compare and despair' thing? What would be a more balanced and helpful way of looking at it?
<b>Critical self</b>	There I go, that internal bully's at it again. Would most people who really know me say that about me? Is this something that I am totally responsible for?
<b>Black and white thinking</b>	Things aren't either totally white or totally black – there are shades of grey. Where is this on the spectrum?
<b>Should and must statements</b>	Am I putting more pressure on myself, setting up expectations of myself that are almost impossible? What would be more realistic?

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## Building self-esteem

### Affirmations

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Positive affirmations can increase your self-esteem. An affirmation can help to replace a negative thought with a more helpful positive thought. The way this works is by repeating a positive statement that includes some kind of belief or intentions. If you repeat the affirmation enough you will start to believe it and this can change the way you think about yourself.

Positive affirmations can help you to focus on the positive rather than negative aspects on any situation. Try repeating some of the following affirmations to yourself on a daily basis:

- I deserve to be happy and successful
- I have the power to change myself
- I can forgive and understand others
- I can make my own choices and decisions
- It is enough to have done my best
- I deserve to be loved

In the space below think of some positive affirmations of your own that you can use:

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## Goal Setting

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Your level of self-esteem reflects the relationship you have with yourself. The more your relationship with you is based on trust, respect, interest and affection the better your self-esteem. Having this kind of relationship doesn't mean looking the other way when you screw up or pretending it didn't happen. It means holding yourself accountable in a respectful and constructive way.

One of the easiest ways to practice holding yourself accountable is by setting goals. Self-esteem is enhanced when you set a goal that is meaningful and important to you, and you follow through to make it happen. So if you want to improve your reputation with yourself, go ahead and set some heartfelt goals.

Try to think of a goal that is important and meaningful to you, the completion of which will provide you with a boost. What is something you're either doing, or not doing, that's affecting your relationship with yourself?

The following task may help you to identify some goals that are important to you:

1. Make a list of five to ten things that you do not like about your life, or that you would like to change
2. Next, write down what the opposite of each of these items would be.

Fill in your answers to these questions in the table provided on the next page.







## 4

**Dealing with setbacks  
and moving forward**

Setbacks are a part of life and the impact they have depends on how you handle them. You may experience setbacks when building your self-esteem or when recovering from mental illness. Something might happen, or you may find yourself slipping back into old habits. A self-esteem setback can be damaging and can cause you to spiral downwards if you let it.

It's important to recognise any warning signs of a self-esteem set-back and act as soon as possible. The quicker you act, the better. Look back through work you have done and skills you have learned to refresh yourself. Get the support you need and don't be afraid to seek professional help if you feel you need it.

## Things to remember

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**Self-esteem setbacks are expected:** everyone experiences setbacks at some point. Life has both ups and downs and stumbling blocks are a part of your journey.

**You're moving forwards:** while a self-esteem setback might throw you slightly off track, the general direction is forward. Acknowledge the progress you've made and give yourself permission to keep on going. It's helpful to remind yourself that you're doing well.

**You haven't failed:** a setback is not a failure. It's not an easy road and you've done well to get this far. That's a huge success. You've made good progress regardless of the setback.

**Don't be hard on yourself:** nobody's perfect and we all stumble. Self-care is particularly crucial at this time.

**You will get through this:** a self-esteem setback is temporary and it will pass.

**Learn from the experience:** think of a setback as a growth opportunity. Ask yourself what the setback is telling you and what you can learn from it. The wisdom you gain will make you even stronger and more prepared for future challenges.

**Most importantly, realise that a self-esteem setback is not the end of the world:** be kind to yourself, learn from the experience and get back on track as soon as possible.

## References and useful contacts/information

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[www.goodtherapy.org/blog/self-esteem-goals/](http://www.goodtherapy.org/blog/self-esteem-goals/)

[www.self-esteem-experts.com/support-files/goal-setting-worksheet.pdf](http://www.self-esteem-experts.com/support-files/goal-setting-worksheet.pdf)

[www.mind.org.uk/information-support/types-of-mental-health-problems/self-esteem/#.V6spztJ4QdU](http://www.mind.org.uk/information-support/types-of-mental-health-problems/self-esteem/#.V6spztJ4QdU)

Overcoming low self-esteem by Melanie Fennell.

[www.nhs.uk/livewell/mentalhealth/pages/dealingwithlowself-esteem.aspx](http://www.nhs.uk/livewell/mentalhealth/pages/dealingwithlowself-esteem.aspx)

### **Developed by**

Julie Bull RMN

Janet Winter O.T.

Leah Marriner Research Assistant

These booklets were created specifically to assist our set 4 follow up sessions identified for clients following assessment, to assist with understanding of symptoms, learning strategies to promote coping, facilitate recovery and promote well-being. We have received some wonderful feedback from clients and clinicians during the developmental stages which has been incorporated into the booklets.

If you would like to have information translated into a different language, please contact the Equality and Diversity Team at: [EqualityandInclusion@oxfordhealth.nhs.uk](mailto:EqualityandInclusion@oxfordhealth.nhs.uk)

**Arabic** يُرجى الاتصال بنا إذا كنتم ترغبون في الحصول على المعلومات بلغة أخرى أو بتسبيق مختلف.

**Bengali** আপনি এই তথ্য অন্য ভাষায় বা আলাদা আকারে পেতে চাইলে অনুগ্রহ করে আমাদের সাথে যোগাযোগ করুন।  
**Urdu** اگر آپ یہ معلومات دیگر زبان یا مختلف فارمیٹ میں چاہتے ہیں تو برائے مہربانی ہم سے رابطہ کریں۔

**Chinese** 若要以其他語言或格式提供這些資訊，請與我們聯繫

**Polish** Aby uzyskać informacje w innym języku lub w innym formacie, skontaktuj się z nami.

**Portuguese** Queira contactar-nos se pretender as informações noutro idioma ou num formato diferente.

Oxford Health NHS Foundation Trust  
Trust Headquarters  
Littlemore Mental Health Centre  
Sandford Road  
Oxford  
OX4 4XN

Switchboard 01865 901 000  
Email [enquiries@oxfordhealth.nhs.uk](mailto:enquiries@oxfordhealth.nhs.uk)  
Website [www.oxfordhealth.nhs.uk](http://www.oxfordhealth.nhs.uk)

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