

ASK ERICA
ERICA J. BURNS, M.A.

JUST WHAT IS SELF ESTEEM?

How often do you hear yourself or someone else saying that they have low self esteem? What you usually mean by this is “I don't feel good about myself” and often you do this by comparing yourself to others. Your internal voice says some version of “I'm not as smart, funny, rich, thin, handsome... as someone else”. Sometimes this feeling is a more vague sense of just not being “good enough.”

This sense of being less than, or not enough begins to develop very early in our lives. When we are first born we have none of these feelings about ourselves. Infants are enthralled with themselves. As they discover their little toes they know how unique and special they are. Very young children are delighted by their own bodily functions and are happy to share them with you.

But very soon experiences in life begin to teach people that not everything about them is OK or acceptable. Suddenly our family, culture, school experiences begin to inform us that we must do certain things in certain ways in order to be of value.

One early way that children begin to lose that sense of OK-ness is by growing up in a family environment where one is not truly seen, heard, mirrored and validated. This can occur in a family with many children where it is simply impossible for parents to provide enough attention to each child individually. Or in families where the primary caregivers are simply distracted, overworked, overwhelmed, alcoholic, depressed or otherwise overly self involved.

Then children go to school and they may find themselves in competition with their little peers for getting the teacher's attention and then for getting good grades. The traditional grading system of A's through F's gives people a clear indication that they are doing better than or less than their peers.

The other huge influence on our self esteem that our culture provides is, of course, advertising. Every single advertisement is aimed at telling us that there is something wrong with us. If we use this product we will be prettier, healthier, smarter, be it by taking these pills, going on this diet, wearing these clothes, buying this car, getting this education, etc. etc. etc.

These lifelong influences add up and people sometimes get to the point of feeling hatred for themselves. This affects how they then perform in their work lives and in their relationships. Harville Hendricks, author of *Receiving Love*, discovered after years of working with couples that often the problems in relationship stem less from not getting what you want in a relationship than from being able to receive what is given. This phenomenon is not universal. The Dalai Lama was amazed to learn that so many Westerners feel self hatred. This was an unknown concept in his culture.

We have been taught that by doing, achieving, accomplishing, obtaining MORE we can improve our self esteem. The problem with this is that these are EXTERNAL values. These can be short-lived or can vanish suddenly if one's income, health, stock portfolio etc. suddenly changes. Pia Mellody, author of *Facing Codependence*, describes a lack of self esteem as being out of touch with one's own inherent self worth. I agree with her notion that all of our feelings of not being good enough come from either going “one up” or “one down” relative to others. We can either have self esteem or not have self esteem. It is not a matter of having more or less self esteem. The person who feels that they are better than someone else is just as lacking in true SELF esteem as the person who feels less than. It

can be more difficult for the person who feels “better than” to obtain true self esteem than the person who feels “less than” because they are not in as much pain about it and they may have less motivation to truly live from a place of healthy esteem.

In comparing ourselves to some outside standard, other people, what our culture feeds us, we deny our awesome, incredible value—our very uniqueness, our originality. There has never been and will never again be another you. You have inherent worth that can never be taken away from you. So try to begin catching yourself when you put yourself above or below anyone else. And remind yourself that you and they are special, one of a kind beings, no better and no less than anyone else.

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