

A BRIEF INSIGHT INTO

SELF-ESTEEM

*'Fear not, for I have redeemed you;
I have summoned you by name; you
are mine. ... you are precious and
honoured in my sight ... I love you'*

Isaiah 43:1,4



WAVERLEY ABBEY TRUST

Insight into Self-Esteem

What is self-esteem?

'Self-esteem' includes a number of terms: our self-image, self-concept, self-perception, self-confidence, self-acceptance, self-respect and self-worth. Self-esteem ebbs and flows in different situations and with different people. It reflects the overall opinion we have of ourselves, and the value we place on ourselves as individuals. Healthy self-esteem is, to a large extent, a learned behaviour. Some Christians confuse self-esteem with selfishness, and self-love with self-seeking. But a healthy self-esteem is about accepting and loving ourselves as God does. This determines the way we behave and relate to others.

Self-esteem and relationships

Self-esteem often corresponds to the views of significant people in our lives. If they treat us as valuable and worthwhile, then we believe we are. If they treat us as if we are no good, then we believe we are no good. Then, unless someone can show us a more favourable image – the true image – distortion will result in a low self-esteem. At a much deeper level, we have emotional longings for security, self-worth and significance. None of us has a perfect upbringing, so the extent to which we thirst for security, self-worth and significance will affect our self-esteem.

Goals influence our self-esteem, too. If our goals are unrealistic or inflexible and we repeatedly fail to meet them, our self-esteem falls. Pursuing goals that are in line with God's purposes for our lives is a great self-esteem booster because He knows what is best for us.

Improving self-esteem

The thinking self

Our awareness of the way we think is very important to our self-esteem. Every thought gives shape to our attitudes and decisions: 'Be careful how you think; your life is shaped by your thoughts' (Prov. 4:23, GNB).

Renewing our thinking, including transforming our faulty thoughts into godly thoughts, is something we have to constantly work on.

The behavioural self

When we have low self-esteem we can very easily slip into self-sabotage: 'I'm a failure, and so I will prove what I believe about myself.' We need to take note of when we do this and work on each example. It's helpful, too, to associate with people who are very supportive.

The physical self

Some of us with low self-esteem will develop a loathing of our bodies. But we should care for and respect our bodies, making the most of their potential by choosing a healthy diet, taking exercise, allowing space for rest and welcoming times of fun and laughter.

The emotional self

Our self-esteem will increase as we learn to manage uncomfortable and overwhelming feelings, rather than let the uncomfortable feelings manage us.

The spiritual self

Healthy self-esteem means that we don't have to hide from God, from other people, or from ourselves. We don't expect too much or too little and are thus able to form good relationships. It's important that we learn to love ourselves simply because God loves us.

How low self-esteem affects us

We have noted that at the heart of our self-esteem lies the set of essential beliefs we have about ourselves. If we have a sense of failure and unworthiness, often unseen by others, this will draw us into a downward spiral which will drain our self-esteem. When our self-esteem is low we will often ‘globalise’ a weakness or mistake – ‘Well, I’m no good at this, therefore I’m no good at anything!’ – instead of learning from the mistake and moving on.

How inappropriately high self-esteem affects us

A self-centred and inflated view of self will predictably result in a lack of concern for others, maltreatment and even cruelty.

Signs of healthy self-esteem

Healthy self-esteem reveals itself in a balanced life – we take responsibility for our lives, being appropriately assertive. We are able to negotiate with others for what we want. We are willing to meet the needs of others and can put wise boundaries in place. We do not need to be praised continually. We are at peace with today and comfortable with ourselves, accepting our weaknesses and failures. Consequently, we have good mental health.

God: the source of healthy self-esteem

God is the Creator of the universe and, as such, is the ultimate source of our worth. God has made us with an innate sense of divine mystery (Eccl. 3:11). By seeking Him first, discovering who we really are in God, and letting Him meet our needs, our self-esteem can be maintained at a healthy level.

How low self-esteem develops

The development and maintenance of a healthy self-esteem depends on our parents and families, our life experiences and our internal pressures – our personal standards and expectations of life.

Childhood factors

Our self-esteem begins at conception. Babies quickly sense whether they are wanted, loved and accepted as part of a family; however, God never calls a birth ‘an accident’. He knew us before we came to be (Psa. 139:13–16).

As we develop, we may hear words that humiliate us, hurting our spirit and wounding our soul. Emotional abuse often reinforces these words in our minds, giving them illegitimate power. The untrue and crippling words we say to ourselves may reflect those early words of torment and teasing, and reinforce the negative beliefs we have about ourselves.

If, as children, we experienced abuse, whether it was emotional, physical or sexual, the damage caused goes far beneath the surface, but it will have contributed to our adult low self-esteem.

Sometimes, as children, we grow towards adulthood deprived of adequate physical closeness or affection being shown to us. We may never have felt cherished or special. Love is meaningless unless that love is demonstrated through affection, through being listened to and understood.

We may develop anxieties which affect our self-esteem as a result of a bereavement that is handled poorly, either because significant adults were so absorbed by their own grief or simply did not know how to address our needs.

Personality factors

If our emotions and moods dip and rise, it is likely that our level of esteem will stay in step with our mood. This may have a genetic basis, yet low self-esteem is learned. Sadly, when we have low esteem we tend to create relationships that perpetuate it.

Influence of schooling

Schooldays have not been happy for all of us. It is probable that any painful experiences will be vivid memories. Also, the very experience and style of learning may have affected how we esteem ourselves.

The cycle of self-esteem

Sometimes our self-esteem is dented and we begin to believe negative messages about ourselves. We start a cycle of negative self-beliefs – a downward spiral: ‘I’m no good’; ‘Why did I think *I* could do that?’

The knocks of adult life

However positive our childhood has been, there may be experiences in adult life with family, friends, work and home that damage our self-esteem. Also there is some irony in the fact that the Church is a communion of saints, but it doesn’t always feel that way!

The disappointments of faith

Prayers that are apparently unanswered – or not answered in the way we would like them to be – will inevitably make us think God doesn’t care. We may *feel* abandoned by Him, just as if He is not there. Yet the Bible is full of accounts of people meeting God in the midst of their desert experiences.

Low self-esteem and God

For Christians, healthy self-esteem is founded on having the true image of God. We are made in His image (Gen. 1:26–27). But when we have low self-esteem we tend to view God through misshapen lenses. These warped images shape our self-esteem, hence it’s important to challenge and change them.

Distorted views of God the Father

Impossible expectations: If, as children, we don’t *feel* approval, we develop and replay negative messages, anticipating that God will act the same as our parents. Yet God accepts us totally, exactly as we are. **Abandonment:** If we have known loss or abandonment, our relationship with God may be filled with uncertainties and low expectations. ‘What about God? Will He abandon me?’ The Bible states He will not (Heb. 13:5).

Abuse: Sadly, too many of us have heard harsh words and received indiscriminate punishment instead of loving approval and affection. Yet the Bible teaches us God is a Father of love and faithfulness.

Emotionally distant: Emotionally withdrawn parents may not have validated our feelings and helped us to understand them, thus we may become ashamed of those feelings and our self-esteem will be damaged. However, God is accepting – even encouraging – of our emotions.

Unreliable: As children we need at least one significant adult in our life who is absolutely reliable and consistent. If not, we become disappointed, disillusioned and may decide we can’t trust other people or God.

Disinterested: God wants us to be part of His plan, part of His ‘big important job’. We are loved children of a Father who always has time for us.