



## Improving Self-Esteem

### Module I

# What Is Low Self-Esteem

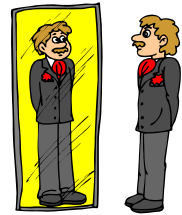
Introduction	2
What is Self-Esteem	2
What is Low Self-Esteem	2
Impact of Low Self-Esteem	3
The Problem of Low Self-Esteem	4
What You Can Expect from this Information Package	5
Module Summary	7
About This Module	8

## Introduction

Everyone, at some point or another, is uncertain about themselves, lacks self-confidence, doubts their abilities, or thinks negatively of themselves. However, if you think that you might have problems with low self-esteem, or are not sure if you have this problem but want to find out, then this information package might be helpful to you. In this module, we will discuss what low self-esteem is and what kind of impact low self-esteem might have on a person and their life.

## What is Self-Esteem

Before we talk about what *low* self-esteem is, let's start with understanding the term "self-esteem." You might have heard and seen similar words like "self-image," "self-perception," and "self-concept." All these terms refer to the way we view and think about ourselves. As human beings, we have the ability to not only be aware of ourselves but also to place a value or a measure of worth to ourselves or aspects of ourselves. So, self-esteem usually refers to how we view and think about ourselves and the value that we place on ourselves as a person. Having the human capacity to judge and place value to something is where we might run into problems with self-esteem.



Before we go further, take a few minutes to write a short description of yourself.

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How did you describe yourself? What words did you use? Is your description of yourself generally positive, balanced, or negative? What value did you place on yourself or aspects of yourself? Is that value positive, balanced, or negative?

## What is Low Self-Esteem

Have you ever been dissatisfied or unhappy with yourself on the whole? Do you ever think that you are weak, stupid, not good enough, flawed in some way, inferior to other people, useless, worthless, unattractive, ugly, unlovable, a loser, or a failure? Everyone uses these words on themselves at times, usually when they experience a challenging or stressful situation. However, if you often think about yourself in these terms, then you might have a problem with low self-esteem.

*Low self-esteem is having a generally negative overall opinion of oneself, judging or evaluating oneself negatively, and placing a general negative value on oneself as a person.*

Here are some examples of what people with low self-esteem might say about themselves:

"I get nervous talking to people I don't know at parties. I'm socially inept and I hate it!"  
"I couldn't understand a lot of what the instructor was saying today. I must be really stupid."  
"I'm overweight. I am so fat and ugly." "I'm unimportant." "I'm a loser." "I'm unlovable."  
"I'm not good enough."

In essence, people with low self-esteem usually have deep-seated, basic, negative beliefs about themselves and the kind of person they are. These beliefs are often taken as facts or truths about their identity. As a result, low self-esteem can have a negative impact on a person and their life.

Based on what has been described about low self-esteem, do you think you are experiencing this problem? Have you often had negative thoughts about yourself but had not included them in the previous description of yourself? Perhaps you might like to jot them down now.

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## Impact of Low Self-Esteem

Low self-esteem can have an effect on various aspects of a person. A person with low self-esteem probably says a lot of negative things about themselves. They might criticise themselves, their actions, and abilities or joke about themselves in a very negative way. They might put themselves down, doubt themselves, or blame themselves when things go wrong. Often, they might not recognise their positive qualities. When compliments are given to them, they might brush such comments aside or say that “it was all luck” or “it wasn’t that big a deal.” Instead, they might focus on what they didn’t do or the mistakes they made. People with low self-esteem might expect that things would not turn out well for them. They might often feel sad, depressed, anxious, guilty, ashamed, frustrated, and angry. They might have difficulty speaking up for themselves and their needs, avoid challenges and opportunities, or be overly aggressive in their interactions with others.

Low self-esteem can also have an impact on many aspects of a person’s life. It can affect a person’s performance at work or at school. They might consistently achieve less than they are able to because they believe they are less capable than others. They might avoid challenges for fear of not doing well. They might work extremely hard and push themselves to do more because they believe they need to make up for, or cover up, their lack of skill. People with low self-esteem might find it hard to believe any good results they get are due to their own abilities or positive qualities.



In their personal relationships, people with low self-esteem might become upset or distressed by any criticism or disapproval, bend over backwards to please others, be extremely shy or self-consciousness or even avoid or withdraw from intimacy or social contact. They might also be less likely to stand up for themselves or protect themselves from being bullied, criticised, or abused by their partners or family members.

People with low self-esteem might not engage in many leisure or recreational activities, as they might believe that they do not deserve any pleasure or fun. They might also avoid activities where they could be judged or evaluated in some way, such as competitive sports, dancing, art/craft classes or participating in any type of competition or exhibition.

Personal self-care might also be affected. People who do not value themselves might drink excessive amounts of alcohol or abuse drugs. They might not bother to dress neatly, wear clean clothes, style their hair or buy new clothes. On the other hand, they might try to hide any inadequacies by making sure that every detail of their appearance is attended to and not allow themselves to be seen by others unless they look absolutely perfect.

If you have problems with low self-esteem, take a few minutes to write down how having low self-esteem has affected your life.

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## The Problem of Low Self-Esteem

*Low self-esteem can be part of a current problem.* If you're experiencing clinical depression, low self-esteem can be a by-product of your depressed mood. Having a negative view of oneself is a symptom of depression. So is feeling very guilty and worthless almost all the time. Here are some other symptoms of depression:

- Feeling consistently sad, down, depressed, or empty
- Reduced pleasure in activities previously enjoyed or lack of interest in most things
- Increased or reduced appetite
- Sleep difficulties (inability to sleep, sleeping more than usual, waking up in the middle of the night and unable to return to sleep)
- Feeling tired and without energy
- Being fidgeting and restless or slowed down compared to your usual speed of doing things (this is observed by others)
- Having difficulties concentrating or making decisions
- Having thoughts that you might be better off dead or thinking about hurting yourself

If you have experienced 5 of these symptoms, which include low mood or loss of pleasure or interest, and they are present on most days for the past 2 weeks or more, then it is possible that you are clinically depressed. We encourage you to seek help from your doctor or a mental health professional and get treatment. There are many effective treatments available for depression and the research has shown that when depression has been treated successfully, low self-esteem is no longer a problem.

Have you been depressed lately? Have you experienced any of those symptoms described above? If so, take note of those that have affected you most significantly.

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*Low self-esteem can be a result of other problems.* Low self-esteem can sometimes be a result of current difficult and stressful life circumstances such as prolonged financial hardship, persistent illness, an accident that has caused some kind of impairment, chronic pain, relationship difficulties, or a problem situation that is difficult to solve. Sometimes when a problem is experienced over an extended period of time, one can become discouraged and demoralised. Self-confidence can be undermined and low self-esteem can develop. Experiencing other psychological problems such as panic attacks, chronic worrying, or social phobia can also chip away at a person's self-esteem.

What are your personal circumstances like at the moment? What sorts of difficulties might you be experiencing now? How long have these been going on for? Take a few minutes to jot these down.

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*Low self-esteem can be a problem in itself and be a risk factor for other problems.* Sometimes low self-esteem can be a problem in and of itself because it puts the person at risk for experiencing other problems such as depression, having persistent suicidal thoughts, eating disorders, and social phobia. You may recognise that while things might be okay at the moment and you don't feel very depressed or anxious, or experience other difficulties, things might not have been that well in the past. If your mood often fluctuates depending on your circumstances or you have experienced depression in the past, and you recognise that you might have low self-esteem, then this could put you at risk of experiencing depression again. We call this a 'vulnerability factor.' Low self-esteem as a vulnerability factor is like something that is hiding in the background that could jump out and bite you when you least expect it.

Have you had problems with depression, anxiety, or any other mental health problems in the past? Do you think low self-esteem might put you at risk for any other problems in the future?

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## What You Can Expect From This Information Package

Whether you are experiencing low self-esteem as a result of other problems or as a problem in itself, this information package can begin to help you address this. Whether you are getting treatment for a clinical problem, learning strategies to manage your mood, or are wanting to tackle this problem of low self-esteem, this information package can be useful to you.

We have begun with discussing what low self-esteem is and what impact it can have on one's life. In the next two modules, we will explore and discuss how low self-esteem develops and what keeps it going. The modules after these will focus on addressing the problem of low self-esteem.

When using self-help materials, some people might skip sections or complete things in a different order. The modules in this information package have been designed to be completed in the order they appear. We recommend that you work through the modules in sequence, finishing each module before moving on to the next one in the series. We believe that by doing this, you will maximise the benefits you might receive from working through this information package.

The following are the modules that make up this information package:

- Module 1: What is Low Self-Esteem
- Module 2: How Low Self-Esteem Develops
- Module 3: How Low Self-Esteem is Maintained
- Module 4: Biased Expectations
- Module 5: Negative Self-Evaluations
- Module 6: Accepting Yourself
- Module 7: Adjusting Rules & Assumptions
- Module 8: Developing Balanced Core Beliefs
- Module 9: Healthy Self-Esteem

We believe that this information package will be beneficial for anyone who would like to address any difficulties they might have with low self-esteem. We encourage you to take this journey through all our modules, where our aim is that you will come away with a balanced and healthy view of yourself and take on new opportunities and challenges with an open mind. You might find that it gets a little tough at times, but we encourage you to stay with it, keep on working through these modules, and you will reap the benefit when you stay through to the end. See you at the next module!

## Module Summary

- Self-esteem refers to how we view and think about ourselves, and the value that we place on ourselves as a person
- Low self-esteem is having a generally negative overall opinion of oneself, judging or evaluating oneself negatively, and placing a general negative value on oneself as a person
- These deep-seated, basic, negative beliefs about oneself are often taken as facts or truths about who they are as a person
- Low self-esteem can have a negative impact on a person (eg., self-criticism and high distress) and a negative impact on their life (eg., work, relationships, recreation time, self-care)
- Low self-esteem can be part of a current problem, a result of other problems, or a problem in itself and risk factor for other problems
- Completing the following modules in order will help you to tackle low self-esteem:

Module 1:	What is Low Self-Esteem
Module 2:	How Low Self-Esteem Develops
Module 3:	How Low Self-Esteem is Maintained
Module 4:	Biased Expectations
Module 5:	Negative Self-Evaluations
Module 6:	Accepting Yourself
Module 7:	Adjusting Rules & Assumptions
Module 8:	Developing Balanced Core Beliefs
Module 9:	Healthy Self-Esteem



### Coming up next ...

In the next module, you will explore and learn more about how low self-esteem develops.

## **About This Module**

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### **BACKGROUND**

The concepts and strategies in the modules have been developed from evidence based psychological practice, primarily Cognitive-Behaviour Therapy (CBT). CBT is a type of psychotherapy that is based on the theory that unhelpful negative emotions and behaviours are strongly influenced by problematic cognitions (thoughts). This can be found in the following:

Beck, A.T., Rush, A. J., Shaw, B.F., & Emery, G. (1979). *Cognitive Therapy of Depression*. New York: Guildford.

Clark, D. M. (1986). A cognitive approach to panic. *Behaviour Research and Therapy*, 24, 461-470.

Clark, D. M. & Wells, A. (1995). A cognitive model of social phobia. In R. Heimberg, M. Liebowitz, D.A. Hope and F.R. Schneier (Eds), *Social Phobia: Diagnosis, Assessment and Treatment*. New York: Guildford.

### **REFERENCES**

These are some of the professional references used to create the modules in this information package.

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Fennell, M. (2001). *Overcoming Low Self-Esteem*. New York: New York University Press.

Fennell, M. & Jenkins, H. (2004). Low Self-Esteem. In J. Bennett-Levy, G. Butler, M. Fennell et al (Eds), *Oxford Guide to Behavioural Experiments in Cognitive Therapy*. Oxford: Oxford Medical Publications.

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McKay, M. & Fanning, P. (1987). *Self-Esteem*. Oakland: New Harbinger Publications.

### **“IMPROVING SELF-ESTEEM”**

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