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Self-Esteem

Bharat R Sant

Self-esteem is a mark of a balanced personality. It distinguishes from other forms of loving oneself like egotism. The article discusses negative self-esteem and positive self-esteem and emphasizes to build a positive self-esteem, which requires one to understand his emotions and feelings. Self-esteem is not constant, it fluctuates depending on one's experiences and reactions.

“Put all excuses aside and remember this: You are capable.”

– Zig Ziglar.

1. What is Self-esteem?

In my presentations on self-esteem to high school students, I often start by asking: Do you like yourself? Do you love yourself? Do you respect yourself? There is generally an utter surprise on the faces of most of the students. Then I ask them: What is esteem? Most of them know the meaning but they find it difficult to express. When I briefly explain, they realize the significance and they become eager to know more about self-esteem and its usefulness in day-to-day life.

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There is a difference between super self-love (egotism) and plain, honest, self-love (self-esteem). The egoist is generally a cover-up for inferiority, self-dislike, and unhappiness with oneself. Self-esteem is a mark of a balanced personality. The self-image we picture is the key to the success or the failure of our most cherished dreams.¹

Not liking oneself and habitually under-rating ourselves is a widespread problem among human beings anywhere in the world. The result? We hurt ourselves and inflict hurt on others. Our self-dislike or poor self-esteem can reach a dangerous level – nervous breakdown or even mental imbalance. With poor self-esteem, we become our own worst enemy. Poor esteem often starts building up from childhood – the guilt, fear, criticism, resentment which many children experience. Parents and guardians when disciplining children have to scrupulously avoid blaming, accusing, abusing or calling names, and threatening. Even calling a child ‘stupid’ repeatedly damages his self-esteem. Gift of self-esteem is perhaps the greatest gift a parent can give to his child.

2. Why Low (or Negative) Self-Esteem?

As children, we are influenced by:

- Home environment
- School environment
- Societal environment.

Each of these environments will give shape to high self-esteem or low self-esteem depending upon the attitudes and behaviors of (i) parents, grandparents, brothers, sisters, and other close relatives living with you, (ii) teachers, non-teachers, and other students in school, and (iii) neighbours and all others who come in contact with you in your day-to-day social life. All the environments overlap each other.

Parents can be loving, caring, and encouraging. Or, they can be harsh, indifferent and fault-finding. For instance, when a child brings home his report card that says ‘A’ grade in 5 subjects and ‘C’ grade in the remaining one subject, some parents will react sternly, “Why this ‘C’ grade?” Your self-esteem comes crashing down. Some other parents will say, “Very Good. Keep it up. Maybe you have to pay a bit

more attention to one subject. If we can help you, do not hesitate to ask. Talk to your teacher also". You immediately respect your parents more. Your self-esteem rises, you feel encouraged. Similar things can happen with your school teachers. Remember Thomas Alva Edison who was reprimanded by his teacher for his slow understanding and poor performance in the school. It was Edison's mother who knew that Thomas was not stupid and she took it upon herself to teach him elementary physics.

Parents and their friends and neighbours sometimes compare their children especially when they are in the same class. The child with lower marks tends to get disheartened, discouraged and starts undervaluing himself. Parents often forget that a child has to be compared with his own previous performance and encouraged to improve. That will enhance his self-esteem and make him feel more responsible. He gets an auto-suggestion for his future: Keep improving.

As one grows, the self-esteem factor continues to play a prominent role in determining success or failure at every stage of life. College education and later professional career impart more and more experience offering thereby many opportunities to learn to develop self-esteem under different situations. People with high self-esteem tend to be optimistic, willing to accept responsibility, competent, self-disciplined, receptive to challenges. They can become leaders. Those with low self-esteem generally lack in confidence, are confused, have negative thoughts, and blame others for everything that goes wrong.

Thus environment and education not only influence strongly one's self-esteem, they gradually build-up an 'experience-bank' of our values, behavior and ultimately our character. We inherit values from our parents and pass it on to the next generation. That is why values-building and character-building do not begin in the nursery-class (as is often believed), not even when a child is born, but start generations ago. When parents are not honest, lack integrity, have little or no regard for values, their children will 'inherit' these traits. It doesn't stop here, these traits lower children's self-esteem, confidence, courage and commitment, the children invariably become indisciplined, arrogant, aggressive and selfish. Dishonesty, lack of integrity, and corruption can give wealth and comfort but they make us weak. It is virtues that make us mighty. Good conduct is the best of

all virtues. Righteous conduct is true nobility. And righteousness is essentially purity of mind. Saint Thiruvalluvar commences his Thirukkaval (1300 couplets) with an appeal to mankind to follow the righteous way of life. The aroma of righteousness will fill your home and workplace. It will percolate into the minds of your children keeping their heads always high with self-esteem and humility.

3. Positive Self-Esteem

A normal, healthy self-esteem, often termed as positive or high self-esteem, is your best friend. Here, you perceive yourself as someone worthwhile. You admire, respect and trust yourself and so do others about you. Self-esteem is not constant, it keeps fluctuating from time to time, even within a day. You may compare self-esteem to water in a pot. Water is essential for life, so is self-esteem. When the pot is full of water, life is smooth and everybody in the family is happy. But when the water level goes down, problems of shortages will give rise to tensions. When our pot is full of self-esteem, we like ourselves and we feel energetic and confident about accomplishing our tasks. When the self-esteem is at a low level, we become diffident or less confident, we feel sorry for ourselves, we start withdrawing from people, we feel jealous of others, we criticize and condemn others.

Take, for example, a 100 metre race in your school. You are a participant. As the time for race approaches, you start feeling nervous, you feel you are no good compared to others, you feel you will come last. All these thoughts get reflected in your running and you really fail to come first, second, or third. You now start condemning yourself, you decide never again to enter a race. Take now a second scenario: you just want to run and run as best as you can, never mind the rank. You, in fact concentrate only on running as best as you can, you are declared third rank and you win a bronze medal. You feel excited, your friends are excited. Your parents are excited, you are in the zone of high self-esteem. You even start thinking of improving and practicing regularly with the help of a coach. Your friends too encourage you and some of them feel they too can enter the race. You have not only displayed 'high self-esteem', you have infected self-esteem into others. There is a bonus: running is an exercise that helps you develop a healthy body.

Take another case. You have failed in your school examination. You come home disappointed and depressed. Your parents are upset seeing your result; they blame you for your failure, they are harsh in evaluating your future. You are

frustrated, you hate yourself. Your self-esteem has reached an all-time low. You even start thinking that living is meaningless. You pass a restless night. Next day your grandmother happens to visit your home. You were always her favourite grandchild. She hugs you, says a few loving words, and gives you the special sweet she has prepared for you. You are sad and you hardly reciprocate the affectionate feelings of your grandmother as you used to do earlier. Then your parents tell her that you have failed in the examination and that you are a stupid, good-for-nothing fellow. The grandmother scolds your parents and says encouraging words about you and your future despite failing. "Failures are pillars of success", she says. Everyone does not have to pass in one chance. Your self-esteem has already started rising. From then on you develop a different attitude towards studies and, thanks to your grandmother, the spark is ignited in your mind. Next year you come out in flying colours. You are already thinking of becoming a doctor.

If you look into a mirror, you see your face, colour of your skin, your drooping eyes. You smile and your mirror image too smiles. So you know how you look externally. Now you can groom yourself because you always want to be presentable. But what about your inner traits – honesty, sincerity, trust-worthiness, and your internal drive? There is no mirror invented as yet, which will show you your character. But the inner self speaks. If you are honest, sincere, good and likeable, your appearance, your behavior and body language will show. You will know it. As a result you feel confident, you develop positive thinking, you are enthusiastic. Your learning ability increases. You are self-propelled towards whatever you are doing, study, professional work, homework. You develop an urge to keep yourself improving. You are close to success. You recall Swami Vivekananda's advice: Arise, awake, and stop not until the goal is reached. In short, you are in the high level self-esteem zone.

They say success breeds success. Similarly high self-esteem breeds high self-esteem. Your experience trains your mind. In times of difficulty, crisis, and failure you will compose yourself and start thinking – am I at the end of the tunnel, can I not try again. Your experience will give you the answers – failure is a temporary phase. You will regain your strength, your hope, your smile, you have by now decided to correct your mistakes. In short, your self-esteem starts rising and you reach the high-esteem zone. Preventing your self-esteem going to

lower levels and constantly trying to raise your self-esteem are to be practiced everyday. Whereas external factors like advise of your teachers, parents, elders, peers, and friends do help, it is you alone who has to self-start your engine of liking yourself.

4. Building a Positive Self-Esteem

To build your self-esteem you have to understand your emotions and feelings. There has to be a question-answer session. You have to drive yourself towards positive thinking and positive self-imaging.² This positivity is the key to high self-esteem. The first lesson is learning to like yourself. To like yourself you have to know what you are, what are your strengths, what are your weaknesses. You have to literally discover yourself. Start listing out your good points. For example, your self-analysis says you are kind and compassionate. Visualise where and when you have been kind and compassionate. These traits may be towards human beings, birds, or animals. May be you have helped a poor, blind man crossing the street. Or you have nursed a badly hurt pup. Visualisation merges into your personality build-up. At this point you find that others too like you for your kindness and compassion, they respect you, they appreciate your nature. You now start liking yourself even better.

Kindness and compassion is only one illustration. Think of integrity, honesty, sincerity. Think of your goals. Think of success. You need to visualise, even say affirmatively in words not once but many times, orally and in writing. Keep saying, "I like my friends". "My friends like me". "I shall succeed". Such affirmations and visualizations keep you on a positive (thinking) track. They do not allow negative thoughts to enter your mind. Affirmations can be written down prominently in your workplace or home.

To enhance your self-esteem, you need to develop humility and be humble. It is difficult. Our false pride pushes up our already large ego. As you go up the ladder, as your status increases, as you get richer and more powerful, your humility ought to increase. And it should be genuine and not hypocritical. In fact, humility increases your greatness. Our Indian system of greeting 'Namaskar' is not just folding hands, you have to bow, you have to be respectful, you have to smile, you have to be willingly humble.

Once I went to see my Director-General in his office. The first thing I noticed written in bold letters:

“Great minds discuss ideas

Average minds discuss events

Small minds discuss people”

I memorised the statement and on return to my own office, wrote it in bold letters on the small black-board in my chamber. Repeatedly reading the statement changed gradually the entire atmosphere in my department. I found everyone trying his best to reach the “great mind” stage.

5. Conclusion

Self-esteem is liking yourself, therefore you have to create an atmosphere of pleasantness around you, amongst others, and within yourself. This means nurturing pleasant thoughts, pure thoughts and good thoughts. Thus,

Self-esteem:

- is the healthy appreciation of yourself
- is the healthy self-image that comes from within
- is the power to be your best.

Self-esteem means:

- loving and valuing yourself
- you have accepted yourself as you are but continue to improve yourself.

In high self-esteem:

- we like ourselves
- we feel energetic and capable of accomplishing tasks
- we feel confident.

In low self-esteem:

- we feel sorry for ourselves
- we withdraw ourselves from people
- we lack confidence
- we blame others.

Possible reasons for low self-esteem:

- guilt, fear, anger, failures, criticism, resentment
- home environment, parents' attitude
- school environment, teachers' attitude
- general environment, societal attitude.

It is not only your self-esteem that has to be kept at a high level, you have to help others in doing the same. One has, therefore, to learn to change or adjust one's attitude so as to:

- appreciate others' accomplishments
- be simple and humble but still interesting and likeable
- act with honesty, integrity, and sincerity
- share your personal experiences that will give strength, courage, and confidence to others
- share others' sorrow and happiness.

We are all a part of society – the parents, elders, teachers. We have a responsibility to create and maintain a high self-esteem environment wherever we are, guide youngsters who are in a low self-esteem zone to come up in a high self-esteem zone, not do anything that will damage the self-esteem of others. Religions and moral teachings are a time-tested method of inculcating self-esteem and character. Storytelling too has a profound effect on building self-esteem in both young and old.

(Bharat R Sant has vast experience in teaching, research and management. He is a Faculty Member of the Vivekananda Institute of Human Excellence, Hyderabad. He can be reached at brsant@rediffmail.com).

Endnotes

1. Shiv Khara: "You can Win", Macmillan India Ltd., New Delhi, Revised Edition, 2002.
2. Norman Vincent Peale: "The Tough-Minded Optimist", Prentice-Hall Inc., Englewood Cliffs, NJ., USA, 1961.