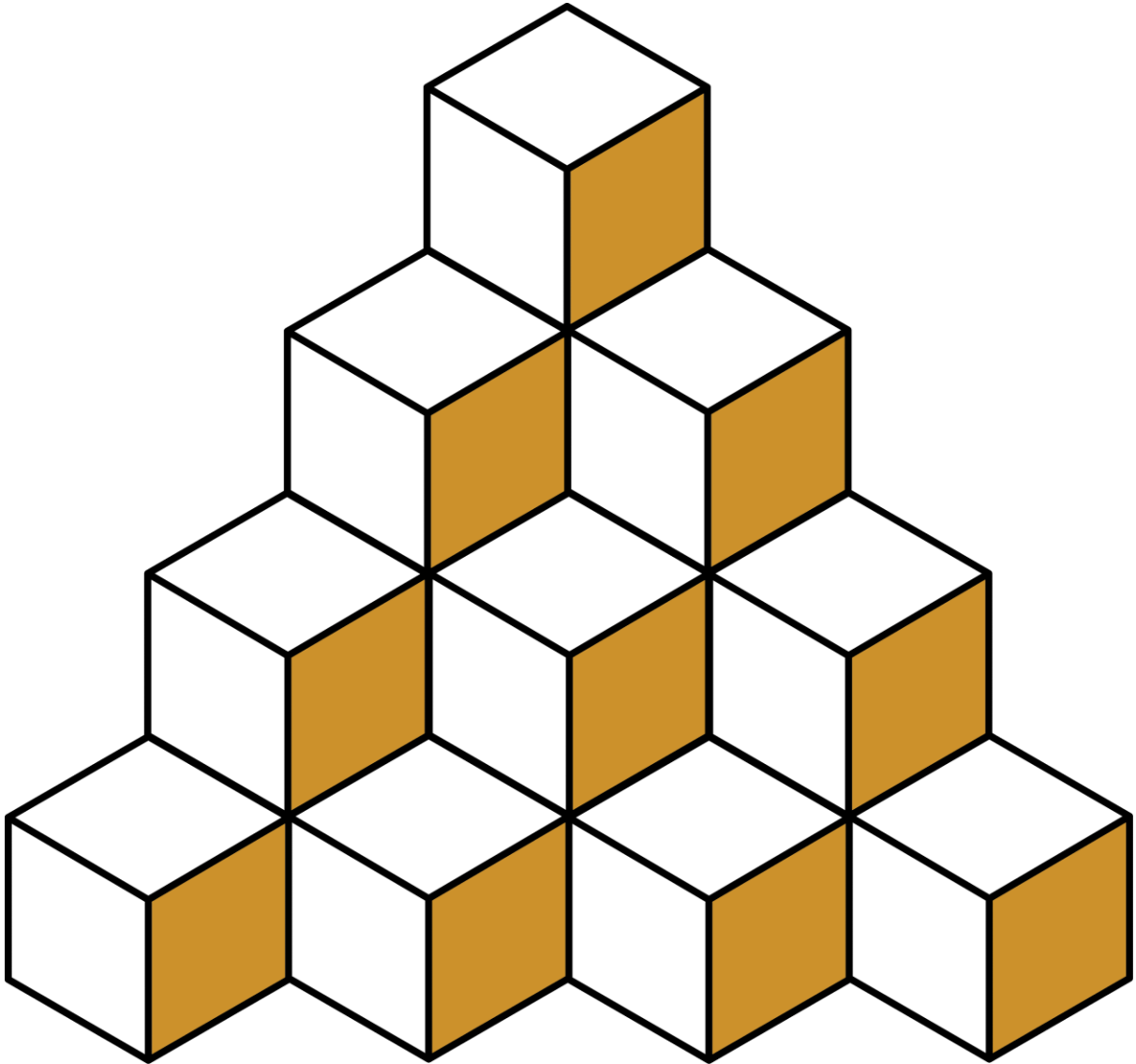


# SELF ESTEEM



# INFORMATION SHEET

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### What do we mean by 'self-esteem'?



Self-esteem relates our beliefs about our skills and abilities, and how likely we think we are to succeed. People with high self-esteem generally feel good about themselves; they tend to be happier and cope better with criticism and challenges. They believe that other people, in general, value and respect them.

People with lower self-esteem tend to see the world in a negative way, as though through a kind of distorting filter. Their dislike for themselves colours their perceptions of the world. Evidence suggests there's a link between low self-esteem and shyness, loneliness, and feeling generally unworthy.

There doesn't seem to be a clear link between self-esteem and career success or productivity, though self-esteem certainly affects our ability to enjoy life.

### Self-esteem is fairly stable

Self-esteem is the judgement we make (and tend to keep) with regard to ourselves: it's an overall attitude of approval or disapproval, a personal judgment of our own worthiness. Self-esteem tends to be fairly stable over time - unless we work to change it (by undertaking psychological therapy, for example).

### Self-esteem and self-concept

'Self-esteem' and 'self-concept' are sometimes used to mean the same thing, though they're actually different. Self-concept includes all the beliefs we have about ourselves; it's everything that we know about ourselves. It includes, for

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example, our name, race, likes, dislikes, beliefs, values, and physical characteristics.

Self-esteem is more about the way we **feel** when we **think** about and **judge** ourselves. We can believe positive things about ourselves (for example, knowing we are good at sports), but continue to not really like ourselves very much.

For people with low self-esteem, the low regard in which they hold themselves can 'spread' to other areas, making it hard to recognise or accept some compliments. Recognising a skill or ability we possess can be hard if we feel pretty worthless overall.

It's also possible to like ourselves, and so have high self-esteem, in spite of there being little evidence to support our views. Self-esteem is not about how 'good' we are – it is more about how good we think we are.

In general, people with a 'fragile' sense of self-esteem tend to seek positive feedback from others and feel more hurt when they receive negative feedback.

### How does self-esteem develop?

Like most areas of psychology, there are several different views. Some think that we 'take in' (*internalise*) the beliefs and attitudes of important people in our lives, especially when we're young. We come to treat ourselves as those around us treated us, or as they viewed us.

Others suggest how, for much of human evolution, our survival depended on belonging to a group. People who belonged to groups were safer, they were more likely to survive and to reproduce.

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Some think that the function of self-esteem is to help monitor the likelihood of us being excluded or rejected by a peer group.

When we act in ways that make it more likely we'll be rejected, our self-esteem reduces. Changes in our self-esteem help us monitor how likely we are to be accepted or rejected, and allow us to change our behaviour accordingly.

People with high self-esteem believe they're unlikely to be rejected, so don't worry too much about how others see them. People with lower self-esteem tend to be more concerned with rejection, and may be more motivated to try to manage the way others see them.

### Differences between the sexes

Research suggests that girl's self-esteem tends to be more influenced by relationships, whereas boys are more influenced by achievement and by material successes. Gender-specific generalisations are always inexact and there will be many exceptions, but overall, it seems that males may be more likely to achieve high self-esteem from 'getting ahead', whereas females may be more likely to gain self-esteem from 'getting along' with their peers.

### Aspects of self-esteem

We can think about self-esteem in three main ways:

- **Performance** self-esteem
- **Social** self-esteem
- **Physical** self-esteem

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**Performance self-esteem** refers to one's sense of competence and ability.

People who are high in performance self-esteem believe that, in the main, they are fairly smart and capable of getting things done.

**Social self-esteem** refers to how people think others perceive them. If people believe that others, especially significant others, value and respect them, they will have high social self-esteem. People who are low in social self-esteem may experience social anxiety and feel self-conscious in social situations.

**Physical self-esteem** refers to how people view their physical selves; it includes athletic ability, physical attractiveness, as well as how we have come to feel about our body shape, race and ethnicity.

### Symptoms of low self-esteem

- **Anticipating failure** - people with low self-esteem may believe they are destined to fail or to never get what they really want.
- **Lacking assertiveness** - people with low self-esteem may not 'push' for what they want, habitually putting the needs of others before their own.
- **Remaining vigilant** - people with low self-esteem may find it hard to truly relax, tending instead to keep one eye open for signs of displeasure or rejection in others – which can be pretty tiring!
- **Pleasing others** - people with low self-esteem may spend too much energy attempting to 'keep the peace', or in helping other people. Issues that may upset or challenge others may be difficult to broach.
- **Withdrawal** - as a result of expecting to fail, some people will come to the conclusion that taking part is futile - if they're only going to fail, what's the point in trying? This way of thinking can lead to low mood and withdrawal from things that might otherwise give pleasure.

## What causes low self-esteem?

Our genes, our experiences and our outlook all play a part. Low self-esteem can be a result of current stressful life events such as prolonged money worries, illness, an accident that's resulted in some kind of impairment, chronic pain, relationship problems, or an ongoing difficult to solve situation.

Having other psychological problems, for example depression or anxiety can also reduce our self-esteem.

The roots of low self-esteem, when we began to see ourselves in a negative light, can often be found in our experiences in early in life or in adolescence.

Did you have any early experiences that might have contributed to the way you feel about yourself? Take a little time to make a note of those experiences.

People with high self-esteem can find their self-confidence knocked back if they have negative experiences later in life.

We can come to develop low self-esteem if we are bullied at work, are in an abusive relationship, experience prolonged financial hardship or continuous stressful life events, traumatic events, or life-altering illnesses or injuries.

Have you had any recent stressful life experiences that might have affected how you feel about yourself?

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### Might I have low self-esteem?

If you have read this far, you probably already have a pretty good idea! Try this quick exercise. Use the box below to write a brief description of yourself...

- Now notice how you describe yourself
- Do you think your description of yourself is generally positive, generally negative or fairly balanced?

Low self-esteem is a concept, not an illness, so can't really be diagnosed as such. It's quite possible to hide low self-esteem, so other people may never really know how a person feels about themselves, though the things we do and say can let others know about our thoughts and feelings.

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

- 'I can't talk to people. I can't think of anything to say, I'm hopeless'
- 'I'm overweight, a funny shape and ugly'



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- 'I'm not important to anyone'
- 'No-one will ever love me'
- 'I'm just not good enough'
- 'Nobody cares'
- 'I'm a loser'

If you think you might have low self-esteem, take a few minutes to write down how your life might be better if you had high self-esteem.

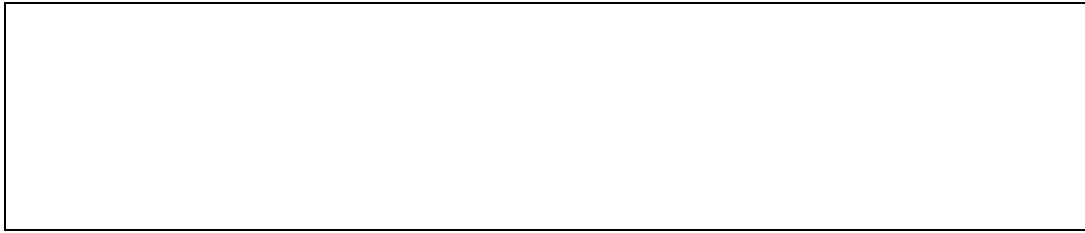
### Low self-esteem and other problems

Low self-esteem can be a problem in its own right and can lead to, or worsen, other problems. Low self-esteem can increase the risk of depression, eating disorders and social anxiety. If you think your low self-esteem is caused by, or is causing other problems such as anxiety or depression, or if it's leading you to avoid work or social commitments, it's best to seek a professional opinion.

### Recovery from low self-esteem

Write down some of your positive qualities in the space below. Use more paper if you need to.

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If it helps, ask yourself the following questions:

- What do I like about myself?
- What are my positive characteristics?
- What are some of my achievements?
- What are some challenges I have overcome?
- What are some of my skills, talents or abilities?
- What do other people say they like about me?
- What are some of the qualities I like in others that I may also have?
- If someone was like me, what would I admire about them?
- How might someone who cared about me describe me?
- What bad qualities do I not have?

How easy did you find it to remember and write down positive things about yourself?

People with low self-esteem often struggle to bring positive things to mind. This is because they tend to pay attention to negative things that confirm their negative self-view - this is called a 'confirmation bias'.

Because fewer positive things are noticed, fewer are remembered.

Some people might be able to recall positive things about themselves, but might feel uncomfortable thinking or talking about the positive qualities they have. They might think of it as arrogant to think about such things.

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Talking therapies (counselling or psychotherapy) can be very helpful for low self-esteem and are usually accessed through your GP. Mindfulness and other forms of meditation can help too.

Low self-esteem often responds very well to cognitive-behaviour therapy (CBT). CBT is an active therapy that involves changing feelings and emotions through learning to see challenges in a different way and by trying out new behaviours (*behavioural experiments*). Medication can be taken alongside therapy, though it's not recommended for everyone.

The first appointment with your GP can feel difficult, especially if you view low self-esteem as a 'weakness' (it isn't!) so it can be helpful to write down what you want to talk about before you go. Make a note of any questions or worries you might have. Some people find it helpful to take a friend or family member along.

Low self-esteem can make us feel alone and helpless, and it can be hard to summon the energy to get help. A quick 'phone call to your GP can get things moving and start you on the road to recovery.

### Things that can help you recover

#### Things to do every day

##### **1 Act opposite**

Low self-esteem can make us want to avoid people or situations. It can be very hard, but facing our fears and staying with people and situations can be very helpful. Remaining in work or returning to work might be very hard too, but can help us keep a sense of control. Keeping a normal daily routine is usually

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much better than withdrawing. We might feel like shutting ourselves away, but doing so can make things worse.

When we avoid a situation, it's harder to gain control over our fear. Ask yourself, 'if I were to act opposite to how I feel, what would I do'? Make a note of your answer below.

### **2 Deal with stuff**

Putting off problems can make them mount up. Are there things in your life you're putting off dealing with? Might an advocate or some extra support help? The Citizens Advice Bureau can help with a range of issues from housing to money worries. Doing things to address our problems helps relieve the burden and allows us to feel 'in control' again. Learning to be assertive at home and in work can help; standing up for ourselves builds positive self-esteem.

Ask yourself, 'what small thing could I do today that would help me begin to feel better about myself?' Make a note of your answer below.

### **3 Express gratitude**

Gratitude is about expressing appreciation for what one has - as opposed to focussing on what one wants. Studies show that when we deliberately attend to the things we are grateful for, we can increase our well-being and happiness. Gratitude is associated with increased energy, optimism, and empathy for others. Many people find keeping a 'gratitude journal' helpful.

At its simplest, this just means carrying around a notebook and writing down the things in life (often the simple things) that we can be grateful for. It can be hard to remember at first, but it's a good habit to get into. If you have a smartphone, free applications are available to help.

### **4 Avoid alcohol and drugs**

Alcohol is a depressant – it lowers the mood. Other non-prescribed drugs can have similar effects and are best avoided. If you live in the UK and you think alcohol or drug use might be a problem, you can contact [Alcoholics Anonymous](#) on 0800 9177 650 or [Narcotics Anonymous](#) on 0300 999 1212.

## **Things to do every week**

### **1 Activity Scheduling**

Record your activities during the week. You can use the recording form over the page.

For each activity, record the sense of achievement and pleasure you gain, from 1 ('none') to 10 ('a great deal').

After you have recorded your activities for a week, sit down and have a think about your profile - is there anything you'd like to change? When we're active and recognise our successes, we build positive self-esteem.

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### 2 Exercise



Doing something to improve our physical fitness helps, as does making sure we eat and sleep enough.

Each week do something physical, ideally a little outside of your comfort zone - something that you can remember and feel proud of.

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	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday	Sunday
7 – 8am							
8 - 9am							
9 - 10am							
10 - 11am							
11 – 12am							
12 – 1pm							
1 - 2pm							
2 - 3pm							
3 - 4pm							
4 - 5pm							
5 – 6pm							
6 – 7pm							
7 – 8pm							
8 – 9pm							
9 – 10pm							
10 – 11pm							
11 – 12pm							

### Longer term things to consider

#### Repairing relationships or moving on

If you're struggling with a difficult relationship, or low self-esteem is causing problems in your relationship you can contact [Relate](#), or speak to your GP about other types of relationship counselling. If there's someone whose behaviour frightens you, read our 'anger' information sheet.

### **Talking therapies**

There are many different types of talking therapy; the most effective for low self-esteem is probably cognitive-behaviour therapy (CBT). In CBT, we learn to face our fears and the ways in which our thoughts can make us more anxious and less able to cope. Your CBT therapist will help you learn new skills to deal with low self-esteem and help support you face up to things you may have avoided.

Other treatments are available for low self-esteem, such as mindfulness, analytic therapies or counselling, which some people find helpful. Ask your health professional for advice, or choose a therapy that feels right and that works for you.

### **Self-help resources**

There are many good books and websites that can help. Your GP, practice nurse or mental health practitioner will be able to recommend from a range of excellent and helpful material. Voluntary services such as Mind have a number of valuable resources, look up your local Mind service on the Internet and give them a ring.

### **Act now!**

The sooner treatment starts, the sooner you'll feel better. If you've been affected by anything you've read here, contact your GP now. Don't delay in seeking help.

Speak with your GP or a health professional for extra information or to get on the road to recovery today.



## Diagnosing low self-esteem



The following questions won't give you a diagnosis, though it can give you a better idea about your level of self-esteem.

Don't worry about the privacy of your results; we don't store them anywhere so they are confidential to you.

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### Rosenberg self-esteem scale

Please read each statement and record a number 0, 1, 2 or 3 which indicates how much the statement applied to you over the past two weeks. There are no right or wrong answers. Do not spend too much time on any one statement. This assessment is not intended to be a diagnosis. If you are concerned about your results in any way, please speak with a qualified health professional.

0=Strongly disagree 1=Disagree 2=Agree 3=Strongly agree

1	I feel that I am a person of worth, at least on an equal plane with others	<input type="text"/>
2	I feel that I have a number of good qualities	<input type="text"/>
3	All in all, I am inclined to feel that I am a failure (R)	<input type="text"/>
4	I am able to do things as well as most people	<input type="text"/>
5	I feel I do not have much to be proud of (R)	<input type="text"/>
6	I take a positive attitude toward myself	<input type="text"/>
7	On the whole, I am satisfied with myself	<input type="text"/>
8	I wish I could have more respect for myself (R)	<input type="text"/>
9	I certainly feel useless at times (R)	<input type="text"/>
10	At times I think that I am no good at all (R)	<input type="text"/>
Total score =		<input type="text"/>

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For items marked with an (R), reverse the scoring (for example, 0 = 3, 1 = 2, 2 = 1, 3 = 0). For those items without an (R) next to them, simply add the score. Typical scores on the Rosenberg scale are around 22, with most people scoring between 15 and 25. A score of less than 15 suggests low self-esteem may be an issue. Remember that this assessment is just for information, it is not a diagnosis.

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Wood, A. M., et al. (2010). Gratitude and well-being: A review and theoretical integration, *Clinical Psychology Review* (2010), doi:10.1016/j.cpr.2010.03.005

### Disclaimer

Disclaimer: This material is for information only and should not be used for the diagnosis or treatment of medical conditions. We have used all reasonable care in compiling the information but make no warranty as to its accuracy. We recommend you consult a doctor or other health care professional for the diagnosis and treatment of medical conditions, or if you are at all concerned about your health.

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