Self-Esteem

Bob (not his real name) looked around the circle. Joining a group was not really his thing, but it was recommended as a way to meet people when he started college. So here he was. But Bob had a difficult time meeting new people and starting conversations with strangers, and all these people seemed to have no problem with it, just chatting away. Maybe they all knew each other before getting here, and he's the only one who is new? And those girls across from him are laughing. Are they laughing at him? It's so hard to tell what people are thinking. Bob turns more and more inward and eventually, slips away from the group.

Over the years, a lot of people have walked into my office and shared with me thoughts and feelings that they have shared with no one else. And so often these people, no matter how different the stories and life experiences, have one thing in common – low self-esteem.

What is self-esteem? According to Linda Sanford and Mary Ellen Donovan in *Women & Self Esteem*, "Our level of self-esteem is the measure of how much we like and approve of our self-concept. The self-concept is the set the beliefs and images we all have and hold to be true of ourselves." Sanford and Donovan also go on to say that global self-esteem is the measure of how much we like and approve of our perceived self as a whole, while specific self-esteem is the measure of how much we like and approve of a certain part of ourselves.

Matthew McKay and Patrick Fanning in *Self-Esteem* define self-esteem as "more than merely recognizing one's positive qualities. It is an attitude of acceptance and nonjudgment toward self and others." "Building self-esteem more often means learning to accept who you already are rather than creating a new you." (Sanford & Donovan)

David Burns in *10 Days to Self-Esteem* contends that conditional self-esteem is based on our accomplishments or what we have decided about ourselves, and unconditional self-esteem is based on a decision to love and respect ourselves. But what does the Bible say about self-esteem? Is this something that is on God's radar? Psalm 139:14 says that we are "fearfully and wonderfully made." Jeremiah 1:5 says, "Before I formed you in the womb I knew you; before you were born I sanctified you; I ordained you a prophet to the nations." (NKJV) We are made in the image of God and every believer should have high self-esteem because of who we are in Christ. (I John 3:1)

Do you agree or disagree with these definitions? How do you make the decision about what is most important to you? Is it based on accomplishments, or your own innate value? What are you particularly good at? What aren't you particularly good at? Does this affect your self-esteem?

What is the basis of your self-esteem? Is it altruism? Religion? Looks? Intelligence? Success? Personal efficiency? Fame and power? Love? Happiness? Another way to think about this is might be, if you are lacking in any of these areas, do you think less of yourself? What areas are more significant to you, or more meaningful?

Regardless of our own personal definition of self-esteem, we all arrive at our self-esteem cognitively, which means that our self-esteem is directly related to how we think about ourselves. How we think about an upsetting event affects how we feel and our mood, therefore, you feel the way you think. Increased depression and anxiety, and decreased relationship satisfaction are closely linked to self-esteem. In fact, people with lower self-esteem tend to tolerate abusive situations and relationships.

Negative feelings like depression, anxiety, guilt, and anger result more from negative thoughts than from external events. This is not an easy concept to grasp because it is hard to separate the event from the thought and from the feeling – we've always thought this way and it's just automatic, and this automatic thought is usually negative.

It turns out there is a connection between self-esteem and stress. Nathaniel Branden, in his book *The Six Pillars of Self-Esteem*, has found that increasing someone's self-esteem will reduce the amount of stress they experience. If your self-esteem levels start out low, however, stress will often reduce them even further. But if your self-esteem is high, you are less likely to tolerate things you find stressful. Instead, chances are you will do something about it – either find out how to fix the stressor or avoid the stressor altogether – simply because you believe you deserve better than to have to suffer. In a very real way, higher self-esteem causes behaviors that reduce stress and that includes stressful relationships.

So how do we do this? Maintain, or improve, self-esteem? There are two important components to this: decreasing negative self-talk and increasing positive self-talk. One overly simple way to decrease negative self-talk is to talk to yourself the way you would talk to your best friend. Most of us would never tell our close friends that they were a loser or stupid or lazy or fat, but we don't hesitate to tell ourselves that exact thing. So when you find yourself talking rudely to yourself about yourself, change it up. Instead of being a loser, you are doing the best you can; instead of being stupid or an idiot, you are smart, but not thinking as clearly as you could; instead of lazy, you are putting something off because you tend to procrastinate; and instead of fat, you are full-figured or husky or athletically built. Be nice to yourself. And kind. And gentle.

Resources

Branden, Nathaniel. *The Six Pillars of Self-Esteem*. A Bantam Book, 1994.

Burns, David D., MD. *10 Days to Self-Esteem*. Harper, 1993 (This is a workbook that is great for use individually or in a group.)

McKay, Matthew PhD. and Fanning, Patrick. *Self-Esteem, 3rd ed*., New Harbinger Publications, Inc., 2000

Sanford, Linda and Donovan, Mary Ellen. *Women & Self-Esteem*. Penguin Books, 1984

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