



BUILDING YOUR SELF ESTEEM AND ASSERTIVENESS SKILLS

Learning Outcomes

By the end of this unit the learner will be able to:

- ✓ Recognize that you have worth and are worthy of happiness
- ✓ Develop techniques for eliminating unhealthy thought patterns and replacing them with supportive patterns
- ✓ Learn how to turn negative thoughts into positive thoughts

Unit 1

Understanding of Self-esteem and assertiveness

What is Self-Esteem?

Defining Self-Esteem

While some texts and teachers will tell you that self-esteem and confidence are different, they do admit to an overlap while trying to keep them separate. We're inclined to agree with the dictionary (Oxford in this case) which defines them as practically the same. As a result, we are going to discuss self-esteem and self-confidence as largely the same thing: your perception of your abilities and your beliefs about yourself.

Characteristics of low self-esteem can include the following:

- ✓ Social withdrawal
- ✓ Bouts of sadness
- ✓ Anxiety and/or emotional turmoil
- ✓ Lack of social skills (i.e. meeting people easily, making small talk, establishing relationships quickly and easily)
- ✓ Depression
- ✓ Eating disorders
- ✓ Difficulty accepting compliments
- ✓ Focusing on negative things or ideas (in other words, pessimism)
- ✓ Self-neglect
- ✓ Excessive focus on what other people think of you
- ✓ Treating yourself poorly, but not other people
- ✓ Lack of confidence in trying new things
- ✓ Reluctance to indulge your desires
- ✓ Reluctance to trust your own opinions, or share them with others

Origins of Low Self-Esteem

In older versions of a course like this, you were likely to find a chain of activities that helped you to “think positively,” as a way to convince yourself that you could effectively talk yourself into higher esteem. Many of these courses, however, were short on **how** to shift our thinking and develop an understanding and belief that we are valuable.

If anything, some of those old courses actually irritated people with low self-esteem, who found that thinking they were “special,” “great people,” and “wonderful,” over and over again became annoying and was akin to being hit over the head repeatedly with a frying pan. You cannot use superficial means to increase your self-esteem, and people with low self-esteem sensed this.

You've probably heard statements like bullies and criminals behave the way they do because they have low self-esteem. We now know that the two are not linked and that people with very high levels of self-esteem can be bullies and criminals. The research that we have compiled actually shows that people who have genuinely low self-esteem actually tend to treat themselves badly, not other people.

What we do know is that low self-esteem is something that is conditioned in us. This past conditioning may come from parents in childhood, a teacher, a boss, or a sibling that constantly puts us down. (Sorry, parents, but that's the way it is!) This also explains why school-based efforts to improve self-esteem based on positive reinforcement are not effective, because the root of the problem has to do more with who is in our environment reinforcing these feelings. As well, you simply cannot just tell someone to feel better and have it happen!

People with low self-esteem have been conditioned (or brain-washed, if you prefer) to think of themselves as having limited value. When you begin to question that old, demeaning conditioning and replace it with conditioning that is equally strong yet values you as a person, a healthier sense of self begins to emerge. When you reinforce that valued sense of self, you develop higher self-esteem.

Contrary to what you may have heard over and over again, people with low self-esteem can actually be very sure of themselves, and that's the problem. This reinforces the conviction that they are worthless or somehow inadequate.

Strong self-esteem comes as a result of a healthy living and thinking, and creating it takes time. It's not something that you can teach to someone and then expect that the next day; they will wake up feeling completely different. Developing healthy self-esteem starts with creating a foundation that supports that way of life, and then building it.

Putting Things in Perspective

True or False: Every time we are about to grow or change, there will be some kind of difficulty or challenge that we must face.

True or False: If we are afraid to do something then we probably shouldn't do it.

True or False: Most of the reasons people come up with to avoid change are not real roadblocks, but roadblocks in their thinking.

True or False: Human beings have the power to change the way they think.

True or False: Excuses usually take the place of real fears and concerns that we must take seriously.

Improving Self-Esteem

Stop Spreading Negative Messages

If low self-esteem starts with people who make negative comments about us that we believe, then it's time we stopped listening to them and created our own internal dialogue instead of reflecting someone else's ideas.

Imagine yourself as a two year old. Most two year olds are very confident individuals and they do not suffer with negative self-talk that contributes to their self-esteem. Think of a two year old who sees something they want, and then does whatever they can think of to get it. They know what they want and how to go after it.

To realign your thoughts about yourself, and to create patterns that help to increase your self-esteem, we'll offer several tips throughout the course. They might sound childish and simplistic, but instead, think of it as re-conditioning yourself to enter that determined, confident state.

Low self-esteem can make us generalize a truth and apply it to everything. "I'm one day late on this deadline," becomes "I am always late. I can't get anything done. I am such a loser." Make sure you stop yourself from making these generalizations. You were a day late on that deadline. This means that you'll probably want to rearrange some things to make sure this doesn't impact other projects and make them late.

Do you tend to **make negative comments about yourself to other people**? We see people with low self-esteem do this frequently. When being thanked for something, they say “It’s nothing,” even though it is something remarkable. When they are given a compliment, they say “Oh, this is so old. I can’t believe you noticed it,” even when it isn’t.

When **someone thanks you or pays you a compliment**, say “You’re welcome,” or “Thank you.” No other words are needed. Remember that you are replacing old patterns that do not serve you with positive messages that do serve you. Be fair to yourself, and also respect them in their thanking your or paying you a compliment. **Consider that what they say is probably true.**

Avoid making negative or self-demeaning comments about yourself on social networks. How often have you seen status updates such as “I am so stupid,” or “I can’t believe I did that!?!” We also see photos online of people who have been drinking heavily, using drugs, or somehow portraying a negative image. Look at those images. Do they serve your positive self-esteem patterns? If not, remove them, and then stop making those comments. In addition, rise above and don’t comment or acknowledge other people’s negative messages. Remember that they do not serve you.

Throw out Perfectionism

Life is not measured by percentages or letter grades that we got in school. Stop thinking that you have to do everything perfectly, and accept “good enough” as a new pattern. When self-esteem is in low supply, we often try to compensate in other areas. Our desks and offices must be perfect. Our homes must look clean and dusted at all times. The food we prepare has to be exceptional in both preparation and presentation.

But **life is not perfect, and nor does it have to be.** Think of the value you get from taking a brisk walk and getting some fresh air instead of trying to maintain such a high level of expectation on everything, like keeping a perfect home or getting to the gym for 90 minutes five days a week. There is plenty of value to keeping order about things, but there is very little benefit that comes from having a perfect household or office or workout schedule.

Once we get out of school, **life is really measured as “pass/fail”** rather than a grade. Accepting this will help you avoid distorted thinking that requires everything to be perfect.

Do you have suggestions on creating healthy patterns instead of striving for perfection?

Building Self-Esteem

Building Confidence in Others

A great way to help ourselves is to try to help others. One part of healthy self-esteem that you can start working on is to get so comfortable with who you are that you can forget about you and concentrate on the other person. Have you ever been with somebody who was so unsure of themselves that they made you feel ill at ease?

Do you have some ideas on putting others at ease?

Although we are often taught not to, human nature is to make judgments about the people that we meet. People typically determine seven things from our appearance.

- ✓ Income
- ✓ Education Level
- ✓ Social Position
- ✓ Sophistication
- ✓ Success
- ✓ Moral Character
- ✓ Trustworthiness

Being aware of this list means that we can consider the way that we present ourselves. What kind of image are you trying to project? Does what you wear and your image influence people around you? For example, if you are heading out to get groceries but feeling down, you might be tempted to go shopping in a pair of baggy old sweatpants, torn jeans, or even pajama bottoms.

Questions to consider:

- ✓ While this might be what you want to wear, is it the image that you want to project?
- ✓ Does this behavior serve you in building your self-esteem, or does it actually negate some of the things that you are trying to do to build yourself up?
- ✓ When we present a confident image (even when we don't feel that way on the inside), it will help us to be perceived as confident, and create that kind of positive energy that helps to boost our self-esteem. (Have you ever heard the saying, "Fake it 'til you make it"?)

Creating Positive Impressions

Things We Do To Create Bad Impressions

Things We Can Do To Create Better Impressions

Increasing our Self-Esteem

A few minutes ago you did some brainstorming about how to make a positive first impression and you chose a few things you will be aware of for the next twenty-one days. However, these were for the most part external things. Now let's spend a bit of time brainstorming some internal things.

Things We Do To Tear Ourselves Down

Things We Do To Build Ourselves Up

Esteemed Confidence

Self-confidence can be discussed in terms of being successful at an activity because you have been successful at similar activities in the past. Can we project self-confidence even when we don't feel self-confident? Yes, there are several things we can do.

Pretend You Are Confident

Imagine yourself to be a confident person. Get that image in your mind and act it out. Project confidence. Stand up straight, dress better, and try to play the part. This is a concept used by peak performance coaches (as well as athletes) to help people improve. Visualize yourself as confident and successful to help you to do things confidently and to achieve success. When you feel your confidence slipping, visualize success and use positive words to build yourself up.

When Your Positive Self-Talk Doesn't Listen

Sometimes we can be so hard on ourselves that we will actually argue with that voice in our head and can't get the positive message track to enter our consciousness. One helpful way of breaking this pattern is to interfere with it. When you catch yourself listening to negative self talk, play music that inspires you. Sing or hum along. It is much more difficult for those negative messages to persist through music. The music can even be the positive message that you need at that time.

When You Meet People, Look Them in the Eye

Confident people look others in the eye. People who aren't confident don't, unless it is a cultural restriction. (In some cultures it can be considered rude to look people directly in the eye. Make sure that you know your audience.)

Dance

While this one might get you gasping (for confidence and air!), this is a great way to build yourself up. We know that the benefits of physical exercise are great, but did you ever think to let yourself go within a class of other likeminded people who are all learning at the same time? Often, you can take a class (or even two or three) before you have to pay the fee, and then you can decide whether you are more of a salsa, flamenco, or ballroom kind of person. If you don't have a partner, don't worry because lots of times there are other dancers who are on their own. Or, take a class in line dancing! Whichever you decide, dance (or yoga, or guitar lessons for that matter) will force you to focus on something that you can enjoy.

Know Your Stuff

Your confidence can't be all a front. While you are looking people directly in the eyes, standing straight, and otherwise acting as if the world were your oyster, you also have to know what you are doing. If you are prepared and sure of your facts, you've got a better chance of projecting confidence.

Rehearsal is the Best Confidence Builder

Rehearsing can be as simple as writing out a speech or your intended conversation with someone and practicing it in front of the mirror. Do a role-play with a trusted friend or colleague as the interviewer before you interview for a new position. To tackle your underlying fear of failure, include imagery with your rehearsal. Imagine yourself succeeding.

Every Day, Remind Yourself That You Have Done Some Things Well

Rather than dwell on the things that didn't work or the things that didn't go well, focus on what you did accomplish. Give yourself a mental pep talk at the beginning or the end of every day.

Read Inspiring Biographies and Autobiographies

Build a file of stories that inspire you. Remember that our capacity far exceeds our usual level of performance. Accept the fact that you will have ups and downs just like everyone else. Experiencing them through reading will help that concept to ring true in your mind.

Be Thankful

No matter how bad your circumstances, there is probably somebody worse off than you. Build excellent support around you. There are a lot of excellent people out there to spend your valuable time with. However, relationships are fragile. You must be prepared to devote some time to them.

Push Yourself to Accomplish Short-Term Goals

There is no greater way to build confidence than to get things done. Push yourself to get at least three things accomplished each week that move you closer to your goals.

Do Something for Yourself Every Week

You deserve it. Find a way to celebrate what you have accomplished or overcome, and give yourself some kind of tangible reward for your efforts.

The Power of Thought

Negative Thoughts

What are some of the situations that make you feel inferior or low on self-esteem?

Is it when you feel criticized? Unloved? Rejected? Unsuccessful?

What are you thinking in these situations?

What are you telling yourself?

Do you think that you can't control your thoughts?

Flip it Around

Think of a situation and your negative thoughts that are associated with it. Then think of a more positive message you can give yourself.

Situation	Negative Thoughts	Positive Thoughts

Tyrone’s Thinking

Tyrone was laid off from work, along with several other employees, because of a business slowdown. He felt bummed out, worried, angry, and guilty, and he became quite depressed. He kept thinking, “I’m a born loser. I’m letting my family down.”

How do you think these thoughts made him feel?

Can you see where his thinking is distorted or inaccurate?

What thoughts would you suggest he think instead?

Debrief

Here are some ways Tyrone's thinking was distorted.

- ✓ **All or nothing thinking:** He's looking at himself in black and white categories, because he sees himself as a total loser.
- ✓ **Overgeneralization:** He's lost his job but he's generalizing to his entire self.
- ✓ **Mental filter:** He's dwelling on this bad event and letting it discolor his entire view of life, much like a drop of ink can discolor a whole glass of water.
- ✓ **Discounting the positives:** He's overlooking his many good qualities.
- ✓ **Magnification or minimization:** He's blowing this negative event out of proportion.
- ✓ **Emotional reasoning:** Tyrone reasons from how he feels. He feels like a born loser so he believes he really is one.
- ✓ **"Should" statements:** He may have the belief that he should always be successful at things and never fail. He may also believe that if he is a good person and tries hard, life should always go smoothly.
- ✓ **Labeling:** He's labeling himself as a born loser instead of trying to learn from the situation or thinking about the best way to find a new job.
- ✓ **Blame:** He's automatically blaming himself for getting laid off. In point of fact, lots of people at his plant were laid off due to that slowdown. Tyrone's employment record has been excellent.

Ask for What You Want

What Do You Want?

Our biggest hurdle is figuring out what we really want. Often, we just take the easy route and ask for money, in the belief that surely if we have all the money we could possibly want, everything else would be ours for the taking. However, we all know that isn't exactly how it works. Money doesn't buy happiness, although it does make the search a little easier.

One of life's fundamental truths is, "Ask and you shall receive." Kids can ask for what they want, whether it's an ice cream cone or a new toy. As adults, we seem to lose our ability to ask for what we want, and we really struggle when it comes to asking for or accepting help. This is strange if you think about it, because the world responds to those who ask.

There are many different asking strategies. We can create future abundance in our lives just by mastering the art of asking assertively.

There are three reasons why we don't ask for what we want.

- ✓ We believe that it's not right to ask.
- ✓ We lack confidence.
- ✓ We fear rejection.

Some people don't enjoy the rewards of asking because they don't ask effectively. Here are some ways to ensure that you get results when you ask.

Ask Clearly

Be precise. Think about your request. Take time to prepare; maybe even write out what you want and practice. Words are powerful so choose them carefully.

Ask with Confidence

You are more apt to get what you want if you speak up and sound confident, rather than hesitate and sound unsure of yourself. The worst that can happen is that you will be denied, but it probably won't put you in a worse situation than before. Or, if this route is closed, look for another.

Ask Creatively

What can you do to make sure you make an impact, and to make certain your request doesn't get lost in the crowd? How could you make your request stand out? How can you make your request fun? Schedule some time every month to dream up new and different ways to ask for what you want.

Ask Sincerely

When you really want help, people will respond. Be willing to be vulnerable, and tell it the way it is, lumps and all. Don't worry if your presentation isn't perfect; ask from your heart.

Help Others

We live in a world of reciprocal relationships and energy. When you give, you get. When you are ready to lend someone a hand, do so. The more you can help others, the more likely that someone will be available to help you when you need it. Be giving of your time and accepting of theirs.

Think of something that you truly want from others, or something that you could use help with. Write it down and start the ball rolling by asking today!

Case Study

Marlene's Story

Marlene, an office manager in a busy organization, managed a staff of twelve people. Over and over as a child she had heard her parents say, "Don't ask such dumb questions," and, "What makes you think you know anything about that?" She was made office manager because for years she was a first class worker who never raised her voice and got along well with everybody in the department. She didn't feel she had management ability but didn't know how to turn down the promotion.

After being promoted, Marlene found her world falling apart. She disliked giving orders and couldn't face on-the-job conflicts. She couldn't bring herself to tell her employees what she thought when they voiced an opinion different from hers, even though she felt she was right. She also found it impossible to criticize their below-standard work, even though it was getting worse under her management.

Her self-talk included, "I'm stupid," and "I can't make decisions." Thus she did stupid things that resulted in her staff thinking less of her. Because she took a long time to make decisions, she was seen as wishy-washy.

Marlene uncovered her childhood messages and her negative self-talk while she was doing exercises similar to the ones you have just done. She decided to do something about her perception of herself, and to gain control over her internal and external image.

What steps would you suggest that Marlene take to begin changing her negative self-image?

Create What You Want

Identifying Dreams and Setting Goals

Identifying Your Dreams

One of the things that we can easily overlook when our self-esteem is low is to give some thought to what we want and how we are going to get there. Right now we're going to take some time to think about our own hopes and dreams, and from that, set some concrete goals that will help us to make these pattern changes that help us to change our thinking.

SPIRIT

If the goal is quite large, it needs to be broken down into several small, achievable goals that will help you get where you want to go. Good goals should have SPIRIT!

Specific

Be specific about what you want or don't want to achieve. The result should be tangible and measurable. "Talk to people" is pretty ambiguous; "Talk with two of my co-workers each day" is specific.

Prizes

Reward yourself at different points in the goal, particularly if it's long-term. If your goal is to set up a meeting with a new colleague, for example, you might purchase a special treat for yourself afterward.

Individual

The goal must be something that you want to do. If your spouse wants you to lose 20 pounds but you think you look fine, you're not going to want to work towards the goal.

Review

Review your progress periodically. Does the goal still make sense to you? Is it still giving you energy and something you find motivating? Are you stuck? Do you need to adjust certain parts of it?

Inspiring

Frame the goal positively. Make it fun to accomplish. You could make a poster of the end result, frame it, and post it on the wall.

Time-Bound

Give yourself a deadline for achieving the goal. Even better, split the goal into small parts and give yourself a deadline for each item.

My Own Goal Setting

Ideas to get you started:

- ✓ Career (responsibilities or a specific position, or maybe even your own business)
- ✓ Income
- ✓ Relationships (marriage, children, family, friends, colleagues, customers)
- ✓ Things to learn
- ✓ Hobbies to take up
- ✓ Volunteer activities or charities to support
- ✓ Recreational activities
- ✓ Home, vehicles, or other possessions to purchase
- ✓ Places to travel to
- ✓ Spiritual
- ✓ Health (examples: lose 20 pounds, exercise more frequently)

- ✓ Educational
- ✓ Behaviors and habits to develop or change

My Goal

Further Reading:

- ✓ *Book, Howard, and Stephen Stein. The EQ Edge. Wiley, 2006.*
- ✓ *Carnegie, Dale. How to Win Friends and Influence People. Pocket Books, 1998 (Reprint).*
- ✓ *Dyer, Wayne. Everyday Wisdom. Hay House, 2005.*
- ✓ *Fanning, Patrickl, and Matthew McKay. Self-Esteem. St. Martin's Paperbacks, 2010.*
- ✓ *Hamilton, Cheryl, and Cordell Parker. Communicating for Results. Wadsworth Publishing, 2007.*