

## **Self Esteem – The Foundation of Personal Development**

If I asked you what high self esteem is, how would you answer I wonder? What does a person with high self esteem look like? Answers for the first question could range from valuing your own self worth through to arrogance. Answers to the second often include someone who achieves their goals and is confident in all situations.

What is the truth? A person with true high self esteem accepts themselves “warts and all” without needing to change. They may choose to make changes such as losing weight or setting an ambitious goal, however their self worth is not dependent on successfully making these changes. There is an important ingredient of high self esteem that is often overlooked, a person with high self esteem is accepting of others also. This does not mean they accept cruel or inappropriate behaviour; indeed a person with high self esteem has the assertiveness to challenge such behaviour. What it does mean is a basic acceptance of the right of all others to exist.

Returning to the second question, it must be clear from the above that arrogance is not a quality of a person with high self esteem. Arrogance is more likely to be a defence mechanism acquired in childhood to disguise feelings of low self esteem. There are also a great many people described by friends and colleagues as confident, who will tell you when asked that they seldom feel as confident as they appear. Achieving goals may also be a false trail because there are many who achieve goal after goal and yet describe feeling unfulfilled. So what does a person with high self esteem look like? This is hard to say for many reasons. Firstly they may look exactly as described in that they achieve ambitious goals and appear confident, they could equally be quiet and reflective. Another obstacle in identifying such a person is the apparent rarity of such people. And thirdly up until now we have been ignoring the complexity and multi-layered nature of self esteem.

On the issue of complexity, we all have more than one level of self esteem, for example we have levels for appearance, emotions, body shape, height, intelligence, relationships, leadership, success, team playing etc. Your level may be high in one area and low in another. In categories such as relationships there will be even more sub-divisions e.g. romantic, same gender friendship, opposite gender friendship, authority figures, siblings, parents, children etc.

So where does it all come from? Why is low self esteem so common?

Most people are aware that our level of self esteem is set in early childhood, however many people become defensive in discussion stating “I had wonderful parents!” This will usually be true because the bad news here is, low self esteem is not just the product of bad parenting, it may develop even where parenting is good. Self esteem does arise firstly from feed back, particularly from those nearest the child; however it also comes from the child’s own filtered sense of logic. This logic is based on limited knowledge and experience and seldom makes sense when we review it as adults. Paradoxically, even though as an adult we often intellectually review beliefs taken on as a child and understand that such beliefs are based on a misinterpretation, we may still find it hard to shake these limiting beliefs off at an emotional level.

Returning to the first element, feed back, this is often given to the child for the best of reasons. For example a parent may praise a child for doing well in a maths test and show disappointment if grades are low. Sometimes the child will translate this to mean, "I only have value as a human being when I do well at school." This is all done at a sub conscious level. Child logic can sometimes go even further, for example in my own child hood my sister was often told she was pretty, I deduced from this, using my powers of child logic, that I must be ugly! A note at this stage, parents are rarely to "blame" because most parents are doing their best based on their own experience of parenting and their own belief system and self esteem.

Self esteem is an issue for men and women alike; however there can some differences in expression. This difference is largely due to social training, in other words little girls and boys are treated differently. In the business world women are often perceived as having lower self esteem than men because masculine social training often results in men finding it easier to appear self confident, to express opinions strongly and network effectively. In simple terms, boys are praised for assertive or even aggressive behaviour; they are more likely to engage in team sports and will be taught useful behaviours such as how to shake hands! Conversely, girls are taught to "play nice", that it is unfeminine to be "pushy" and they are often discouraged from "rough sports". Girls are encouraged to develop their emotional intelligence while boys are encouraged to be task focused. Obviously these are stereo types and will not fit all men and women; however these differences and many similar ones are responsible for men and women learning different coping strategies to apply in adult life.

Unfortunately, male social training is currently the most useful in many business settings, leaving many women with the impression that the only way to get on is to become one of the boys. Many women in the past have taken on behaviour that leaves them feeling uncomfortable in order to "get on". With the rise in interest in emotional intelligence there is a gradual move to valuing behaviours that have been traditionally labelled as feminine in the business world.

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