Self-Esteem

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　　　　To esteem someone or something is to value, respect, affirm, and give worth to that object or person. To esteem oneself is the ability to properly evaluate and accurately present oneself which involves a realistic assessment of personal strengths and weaknesses, positive and negative qualities, and true potentials and limitations.

　　　　Self-esteem is determined by the general feeling people have about themselves and by the global ideas, attitudes, or perceptions they create about themselves. It is a self-ranking activity based upon the individuals successes and failures. Self-esteem is an internal ability to assign attributes to oneself and conduct subjective appraisals and private judgments. This phenomenon may occur over a long period of time and involves complex affective and cognitive processes. The results can be positive or negative depending on the person's developmental history, childhood experiences and family background, mental reasoning and emotional stability, level of expectations and set of ideals, nature of current challenges and pressures, personal meaning and sense of direction, external appraisal and social feedback, and eventually existential outlook and spiritual faith.

Besides having a global rating about themselves, people usually develop separate ratings or levels of esteems for different domains of their lives. These include certain faculties, attributes, or traits, and several areas of functioning. As people act, react, and interact they typically create impressions about themselves, others, life, and ultimately God. Comparing oneself to others externally, and comparing real self to ideal self internally, are very common, yet subtle, daily practices. Some aspects of self-esteem appear to be fundamentally established and well set or concrete while others appear to be fluid, open, fragile, or progressive as the person's identity evolves and his or her life's journey unfolds.

Self-esteem may be thought of as the organized configurations, connotations, or impressions about the inner structure, value qualities, and relational personhood or selfhood which are accessible to the individual's awareness (cf. Rogers, 1951, p. 136). Self-esteem can be the product of several intrapsychic, interpersonal, and sociocultural phenomena and, more precisely, the product of certain cognitive assumptions on multiple levels. It can be temporal or permanent, internal or external, specific or global, and individual or communal. People may view themselves favorably in one area and unfavorably in another. Most probably, self-esteem is being always modified and adjusted, consciously or unconsciously, based upon the unmet emotional needs, surrounding events, outcomes of personal efforts, and reactions of significant others.

One of the first clear definitions of self-esteem was formulated by William James (1890) when he suggested that it equals success divided by pretensions. In other words, it results from the successes (or lack of) an individual actually achieves tempered by what he or she originally expected to achieve.

Some hold that self-esteem is composed of several elements and is an extension of at least three basic aspects of selfhood: 1) self-image, which refers to how people feel about their external shape, physical body, and public appearance; 2) self-concept, which refers to how people perceive their personality structure, skills, knowledge, and life experience; how competent and confident they generally feel; and how comfortable they are in their role, capacity, or potential for making meaningful contributions (self-definition and efficacy); 3) self-worth, which refers to whether a person feels any inherent value or internal significance and whether a person considers himself or herself as a unique and special individual.

The term self-esteem is broadly used and perhaps, like an umbrella, covers many similar yet not identical terms like: self-identity, self-perception, self-value, self-description, self-evaluation, self-acceptance, self-presentation, self-definition, self-confidence, self-affirmation, and self-efficacy. Some of these terms are more popular than others and, in many cases, are used interchangeably. Working against sound self-esteem are the feelings of inferiority, irrational self-

ideals, negative messages, distorted views, unhealthy self-talk, self-criticism, self-deception, self-defeating behaviors, and negative self-fulfilling prophecies. These can easily generate helplessness, hopelessness, worthlessness, deep inner frustration, major dissatisfaction with life, and pessimism.

An average disappointment or a minor failure can be perceived and handled differently depending on the individual's level of self-confidence and emotional stability. For some, who are secure enough, the incident may be mildly disturbing. For others, who are more vulnerable, it may be greatly devastating and could reinforce their negative views about themselves and the world. Once these negative imprints have been established, they virtually perpetuate themselves into vicious cycles leading to increased downward spiral movements.

There are two common temptations that often lead to extreme positions: (a) overestimating oneself (grandiosity, self-preoccupation, pride, egocentricism) which can lead to narcissism and result in controlling and abusing others, or (b) underestimating oneself (self-doubt, self-depreciation, self-hatred) which can lead to pleasing others, addictive behaviors, perfectionism, anxieties, and depression. In addition, "giving" to the point of becoming depleted or "taking" to the point of being overly saturated are both signs of major insecurities and dysfunction. Invariably, the way we act upon the world shapes the way we perceive ourselves and, vice versa, the way we perceive ourselves shapes the way we act upon the world.

Numerous research studies have explored the subjective well-being (SWB) of people. For example, Myers and Diener (1995) found four inner traits which appear to mark happy people: self-esteem, sense of personal control, extraversion, and optimism. Better indications about well-being stem from knowing about one's personal traits, close relationships, work experience, spirituality, and culture.

A Theological Perspective. There has been much controversy around the notion of self-esteem in Christian circles. The attitudes range from totally rejecting, to moderately integrating, to completely embracing the concept. From a biblical point of view, believers are called to respect, nurture, give worth to, pray for, set value on, and have charity and care for others as well as themselves. The presence of God's image within us, along with the sinful nature, is a vivid example of the constant tension we feel. Like so many other apparent contradictions in the Christian faith, we are called to observe and integrate "both-and" instead of "either-or." This principle applies to other domains of life as well. Christian believers are called to carefully reconcile and accommodate many polarities, like truth and grace, acceptance and rejection, dignity and deprivation, love and hate, joy and sorrow, glory and shame. Since we live in a broken and fallen world, groaning for full redemption, we shall continue to attend to and

experience such inevitable tensions. These forces are always at work within and without and truly are integral parts of our humanness.

Each individual believer is called to be a healthy self and become a well rounded and complete person. Self-esteem has been often mistaken for self-worship, misunderstood as arrogance or pride, and confused with self-centeredness. We clearly are not called to be "selfish beings" (with inflated ego), yet at the same time, we are not called to be "selfless beings" either (without sense of self). Both are unhealthy and could lead to serious disturbances and psychopathology.

The Christian faith fundamentally promotes both self-affirmation and self-denial, self-care and self-sacrifice, self-love and self-hate, self-presentation and self-preservation, and a natural balance between genuine receiving and authentic giving. This is not a mysterious paradox to resolve or an impossible task to accomplish. Rather, it is a positive tension needed for our mental creativity and emotional stability. It is essential for character development, integrative living, and relational maturity. The Scriptures challenge us to be secure, humble, self-aware, and yet, at the same time remain open, well equipped, and highly motivated as we strive toward meaningful identity, personal growth, communal harmony, and productive service. Virtually, the resolution of paradoxes begins to emerge when the person accepts both realities and reconciles both polarities rather than splitting them or dwelling on one extreme. Individuals with a healthy sense of self have been and will continue to be more effective ministers of Christ and better disciples in God's kingdom.

Evidently, there is an element of fulfillment in self-sacrifice (Mark 8:35; John 12:25). According to Hardy (1986), Christian love is not totally free from self-regarding aspects, for "we are not indeed called on to renounce desire for our true welfare, but to find it in self-sacrificing love" (p. 571). After all, the New Testament does accept the Old Testament precept of loving our neighbor as ourselves as a natural fact (Lev. 19:18; Mark 12:31; Rom. 13:9).

Stott (1984) eloquently addressed this issue by emphasizing that we must "affirm" our true self, that is, who we are by creation, and we must contain, temper, and even "disown" our false self, that is, who we are by the fall. He added that true self-denial (denying the desires and wishes of our false and fallen self) is not the road to self-destruction but the road to self-discovery. We are to affirm and value everything within us that is compatible with Jesus Christ (p. 28). According to Ellison (1983), constructive humility (not pride) and true meekness (not weakness) are the biblical counterpart of positive self-esteem. True humility is based on God's approval and acceptance rather than on self-negation. Johnson (1989) also tried to outline a Christian understanding of proper self-esteem and suggested that it is an accurate response to knowing ourselves which evidently results from knowing God.

A Cultural Perspective. Certain cultures display a strong social cohesiveness to the degree that individuals are lost in the group. They place greater value on the communal harmony rather than on the individual uniqueness and therefore discourage a completely private or separate identity. Other cultures overemphasize the "individual" more than the "social" aspect of being to the degree that they glorify personal autonomy, total privacy, and a constant need for individual recognition.

In most Western societies, identity is individually achieved, while in most Eastern and non-Western cultures, it is communally ascribed. Western cultures greatly emphasize independence, autonomy, and achievement. They are characterized by "doing" and the "me" generation, that is, personal value is based upon "what you do or accomplish" more than on "who you are." Unfortunately, the industrial and technological revolutions have resulted in a glorification of individualism, competition, isolation, and self-gratification. At times, many who live in the current "post-Christian" era place the self in the same position that earlier traditional subcultures reserved for their gods (Johnson, 1989). There certainly is a danger in over-emphasizing the theoretical notion of "separation-individuation" (cf. psychodynamic literature) in cultures where personal space, rigid boundaries, strict privacy, self-sufficiency, and self-reliance are already highly praised. In addition, the present mass media and social climate keep reinforcing these values.

Both "I, me" and "us, we" are essential for survival and must be actively present in any balanced and functional human existence. When studying the biblical model of the community of faith, individual value, and spiritual culture we find a remarkable interplay and beautiful harmony between the "I" and "we," self and others. Accordingly, sound personal identity reflects solid connectedness, deep rootedness, rich belongingness, and prolonged heritage. It derives from and feeds into the communal identity which marvelously results in an interdependent, intimate, and meaningful existence.

Few recent studies have tried to explore the cross-cultural factors and dynamics of self-esteem and the effect of ethnic identity, age, and gender on self-rating (cf. Brooke, 1995; Karim, 1990; Martinez & Dukes, 1991; Phinney, 1991; Watkins & Cheung, 1995). New writings, observations, and research studies, which take into consideration the socio-cultural and religious aspects of self-esteem, are much needed.

Finally, the role of an experienced Christian therapist is to enhance the value of clients, especially the young and adolescents, and help them make realistic attributions of themselves, others, and the world. To break the deep-rooted and negative self-view cycles is perhaps one of the greatest challenges facing any counselor. For people to feel good about themselves, to know

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where they are coming from, what they represent, and where they are going, is essential for leading healthy, productive, and satisfied lives.

Practical Suggestions. The following suggestions can help those who struggle with low self-esteem, poor self-image, or some degree of worthlessness:

1. Watch any negative thoughts, disruptive ideas, unhealthy messages, self-defeating talks or habits, unrealistic inner dialogue, destructive mental scripts, or irrational expectations.

2. Learn good self-awareness skills and exercise self-monitoring, thought-stopping, and self-instruction techniques. Begin to unlearn the unhealthy patterns of behavior and consistently replace them by new, productive, and healthy ones.

3. Memorize and deeply meditate upon certain Scriptures and refined positive statements. They will help repair distorted concepts about self and others. Bible verses like "I thank thee because I am fearfully and wonderfully made" (Ps. 139:14), and also like Joshua 1:9, Exodus 33:14, Psalms 8:4-6, 90:17, 100:3, 138:3, Isaiah 40:28-31, Zephaniah 3:17, and 1 Timothy 1:12 are examples of the vast available resources and excellent therapeutic tools.

4. Practice self-affirmation by countering old negative thoughts and messages. Gradually reverse them with positive and constructive ones. For example, an extreme negative thought would be: "I am a failure! I can't do anything right." Changing it to a realistic positive, would become: "Although I make some mistakes at times, I know I can do so many things right, and I have proven that before." Furthermore, it is highly recommended to compliment or fortify the new statement by adding an appropriate and powerful Scripture verse like "... and I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me" (Phil. 4:13). Hopefully, this begins to repair the pathological cycles and allows the positive input to penetrate into deeper layers of the soul until it reaches the core of the person's being.

5. Seek affirmation from caring others and surround yourself with positive and mature people. That is extremely essential for any emotional healing, mental recovery, and spiritual stability. Receiving nurture can be difficult for some who are more comfortable giving and showing care. However, receiving openly as a skill needs to be learned and constantly practiced by reaching out to others and taking interpersonal risks. It requires courage, honesty, and humility. The results can be marvelously refreshing to the mind and deeply therapeutic to the soul.

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See Also: Self; Self-Concept.

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