

Module 13: Self Esteem and Assertiveness

Objectives

This module aims to help you explore and gain an understanding of the following:

- What self-esteem is and how to increase it
 - How to become more assertive
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Self-Esteem

Self-esteem is how we value ourselves; it is how we perceive our value to the world and how valuable we think we are to other people.

Self-esteem affects our trust in others, our relationships, our work – nearly every part of our lives. If you have low self-esteem, your beliefs about yourself will often be negative. You are likely to focus on your weaknesses and on mistakes that you have made, and may find it hard to recognise the positive parts of your personality.

Positive thinking and behaviour can contribute to higher levels of self-esteem.

Exercise 1: What can I do to build my self-esteem?

To increase your self-esteem, you need to challenge and change the negative beliefs you have about yourself. This might feel like a difficult task, but there are a lot of different techniques you can try to help you. Below are some of the things that might help and some questions to get you started:

1. Do something you enjoy

Doing something that you enjoy and are good at, can help build your confidence and increase your self-esteem. This could be anything from paid work, volunteering, caring for someone or something or a hobby.

Identify three things you currently do that you enjoy.

Now think of three things you would like to do.

2. Build positive relationships

Try to associate with people who will not put you down and whom you feel able to talk to about your feelings. If you spend time around positive and supportive people, you are more likely to have a better self-image and feel more confident.

Name three positive people in your life.

If you have low self-esteem, there might be people close to you who encourage the negative beliefs and opinions that you have about yourself. It is important to identify these people and take action to stop them from doing this, perhaps by becoming more assertive (see above) or by limiting how much time you spend with them.

Identify anyone who may be negative in your life.

List three things you can do to reduce the effect they have on you.

3. Set yourself a challenge

If you set yourself goals and work towards achieving them, you will feel satisfied and proud of yourself when you achieve your goal, and feel more positive about yourself as a consequence.

However, it is important to make sure the challenge you set yourself is one that you can realistically achieve. It doesn't have to be anything particularly large but should have meaning for you. For example, you might decide to start going to a regular exercise class or give up smoking.

Think of three challenges:

1. *In the next week*
2. *In the next month*
3. *In the next 3 months*

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It is also important to feel positive and healthy. The following will help you achieve this:

Look after your physical health

Looking after your physical health can help you feel happier and healthier, and improve your self-image.

Physical activity

Physical activity helps improve people's sense of wellbeing and image of themselves. Exercise releases endorphins – 'feel-good' hormones that can help improve your mood, particularly if you do it outside.

Sleep

Lack of sleep can cause negative feelings to be exaggerated and means you can feel less confident, so it's important to make sure you get enough sleep.

Diet

Eating a well-balanced diet at regular meal-times with plenty of water and vegetables will help you to feel healthier and happier. Stopping or reducing your alcohol intake, and avoiding tobacco and recreational drugs can also help improve your general wellbeing.

As we have identified earlier how you think is very important in how you see yourself.

Learn to identify and challenge negative beliefs

If you are going to improve your self-esteem, it will help to understand more about your negative beliefs about yourself and where they came from. (See section on self-talk)

Focus on positive things

If you have low self-esteem, it can take practice to get used to thinking more positively about yourself.

Exercise 2 – How I see myself

One way you can do this is by making a list of things that you like about yourself.

You might include:

- things about your personality
- things about the way that you look
- things that you do
- things you are good at- your skills.

Keep this list and look at a different part of it every day. If you are feeling anxious or worried about an event, such as a job interview, you can use it to remind yourself of the good things about yourself.

If you struggle to come up with a list of good things, you could ask your partner or a trusted friend to help you begin. This may also help you to see how others may have a higher opinion of you than you do.

Another technique is to write down at least three things that went well or that you have achieved that day before you go to sleep. Some people also find it helpful to keep objects that make them feel good about themselves e.g. cards and letters which they can keep in a 'feel good box.'

Try mindfulness techniques

Mindfulness is a way of paying attention to the present moment, using techniques like meditation, breathing and yoga. It has been shown to help people become more aware of their thoughts and feelings, so that instead of being overwhelmed by them, it is easier to manage them.

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People with low self-esteem often struggle to be assertive; this can be because they don't feel they deserve to be listened to. However, learning to be assertive and being able to share your views with others can help improve your self-esteem. Once you can see other people value your views then you can see it yourself.

Learn to be assertive

Being assertive means being able to stand up for your own or other people's rights in a calm and positive way, without being either aggressive or passive.

Assertive individuals are able to get their point of view across without upsetting others, or becoming upset themselves. Someone who is assertive states their needs and opinions clearly, so that people take notice. Being assertive is a skill which can be developed. It requires patience and practice and can result in positive communication, better decision making and less of the negative feelings which contribute to anger, worry and anxiety.

To be assertive you need to speak up for yourself in a way that does not disrespect the other person. It can involve saying no, which can be difficult, especially if it is a family member or friend who is asking us to do something.

Here is a list of things that might help:

- Ask the person if you can talk to them on their own- don't include other people
- Remember that you want to maintain the relationship and that most people do not intend to deliberately hurt your feelings
- Remember if something upsets you, you have the right to speak up about it
- Pay attention to your body language as well as to the words you say – try to be open and confident. Keep your voice calm and low, look the other person in the eye, stand up straight so that you look confident (even if you don't feel it)
- Try to express your feelings if you have been upset – wait until you feel calm and explain clearly how you feel. Stick to the point
- Give the other person the benefit of the doubt. They may not even realise they have upset you or done anything wrong, so what you say may come as a surprise
- Allow people a chance to respond-sometimes people need a chance to reflect on things before they can understand your point.
- Tell people if you need more time or support with tasks that you find challenging.
- Say 'no' to unreasonable requests.

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Reflection

Look at the list below. Congratulate yourself for all of the things that you have done in the last week. For the ones you haven't tried yet think about how they may help you and how you can include them in your day to day life.

- Do activities that you enjoy.
- Spend time with positive, supportive people.
- Set yourself an achievable challenge.
- Be helpful and considerate to others.
- Try not to compare yourself to other people.
- Try to do regular exercise, eat healthily and get enough sleep.
- Be assertive – don't let people treat you with a lack of respect.
- Use self-help books and websites to develop helpful skills, like assertiveness or mindfulness.
- Learn to challenge your negative beliefs.
- Acknowledge your positive qualities and things you are good at.
- Get into the habit of thinking and saying positive things about yourself.

Self-praise is an important part of improving your self-esteem, while it may feel uncomfortable at first, it gets easier and really helps to build towards a better more positive future. Don't forget to give yourself praise every time you achieve one of the above.