

Meaning of Self-Esteem

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Self-esteem is one's overall sense of self-competence and self-worth. Self-competence is a generalized sense of one's own efficacy or ability to deal effectively with life's challenges and to attain challenging goals. Simply put, self-competence is having self-confidence or the conviction that one is generally capable of producing desired results. Cognitively, self-competence is characterized by the presence of a generalized expectancy for success (Fibell & Hale, 1978).¹

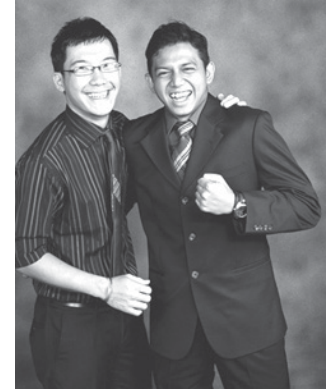
Self-worth or self-respect is essentially accepting oneself unconditionally and having the feeling that one is worthy of living and attaining happiness; you feel like you matter.

Self-competence and self-worth are the dual pillars of healthy self-esteem. As stated by Nathaniel Branden, the world's leading authority on self-esteem, if either self-competence or self-worth is absent, self-esteem is impaired.²

To facilitate a clearer understanding of self-esteem, one should examine its three major components: cognitive, affective and behavioural. The cognitive component is the opinion or belief segment of self-esteem. It is reflected in statements such as "I can score an 'A' in History" and "I am capable of becoming a High-Performance Manager". The cognitive component sets the stage for the affective component of self-esteem: the emotional or feeling segment of self-esteem. Affect is reflected in statements such as "I am worthy of happiness and success" and "I love myself". Affect can lead to certain behavioural outcomes or action dispositions. Examples of behavioural outcomes that are generally associated with high self-esteem are resilience, achievement-orientation (being ambitious and internally driven by challenging goals), assertiveness, self-reliance, being decisive and respectful of others.

Self-Esteem Versus "Feeling Good" and "Positive Thinking"

"Feeling good" is actually one of the consequences of high self-esteem. High self-esteem expresses the feeling that one is "good enough" (Morris Rosenberg, 1967).³ People with high self-esteem feel good about themselves most of the time. On the other hand, those with low self-esteem do not feel good about themselves most of the time; they feel that they don't matter and lack appreciation for who they are.



Positive thinking is most commonly defined as "focusing on the positive side of a particular situation" or "expecting the best". Self-esteem is a person's overall judgement of himself or herself pertaining to self-competence and self-worth. Self-esteem is a positive or negative attitude toward the self (Morris Rosenberg, 1965).⁴ Self-esteem refers to the evaluation that the individual makes and customarily maintains with regard to himself: it expresses an attitude of approval or disapproval (Stanley Coopersmith, 1967).⁵ In short, self-esteem involves one's thinking of the "self" while positive thinking relates to a particular situation or to a particular habit.

Self-Esteem and Reality

Authentic or healthy self-esteem is grounded in reality. It cannot be attained by merely reciting self-esteem boosters or affirmations ("feeling-good" factor). Authentic self-esteem cannot be raised by an individual reciting "I am special" every day or by joining a particular gang to have a false sense of self-worth.

Authentic self-esteem is buttressed through realistic and accurate self-appraisal, meaningful accomplishments, overcoming adversities, bouncing back from “failures” (“doing-well” factor) and adopting certain practices such as assuming self-responsibility and maintaining integrity which engender one’s sense of competence and self-worth. In short, true or authentic self-esteem is based upon a realistic view of oneself and meaningful accomplishments, not unwarranted praise or “warm fuzzies”.

Self-esteem that is not grounded in reality is termed by Nathaniel Branden as *pseudo self-esteem* – a pretence at a self-confidence and self-respect we do not actually feel.⁶ As stated by Branden, pseudo self-esteem is a nonrational, self-protective device to diminish anxiety and to provide a spurious sense of security – to assuage our need for authentic self-esteem while allowing the real causes of its lack to remain unexamined.⁷ People often seek pseudo self-esteem through popularity, prestige, material acquisitions or sexual exploits.

Self-Esteem and Narcissism

It is erroneous to equate high self-esteem with narcissism, egotism or an inflated view of oneself. High self-esteem encompasses self-satisfaction or authentic pride in oneself based upon one’s actions and achievements but never feelings of superiority or boastfulness. Individuals with high self-esteem do not characteristically view themselves as superior to others. In the words of Morris Rosenberg, “... high self-esteem people tend to be free of arrogance or contempt for others or to manifest other behaviour that we associate with the idea of superiority.”⁸

Arrogance is generally a symptom of low self-esteem and not high self-esteem, as some people imagine it to be. It is an established fact that such characteristics as boasting, arrogance and conceited behaviour are actually compensating mechanisms for low self-esteem. People with pseudo self-esteem make excessive claims about their achievements or importance to compensate for a self-esteem deficit. They often act out on others aggressively when their sense of worthiness is threatened.⁹

End Notes

1. Cited in Romin W. Tafarodi and William B. Swann, “Self-Liking and Self-Competence as Dimensions of Global Self-Esteem: Validation of a Measure”, *Journal of Personality Assessment* 65, no. 2 (June 1995): 325.
2. Nathaniel Branden, *The Six Pillars of Self-Esteem* (New York: Bantam, 1994), 27.
3. Cited in Christopher J. Mruk, *Self-Esteem: Research, Theory & Practice*, 2nd ed. (New York: Springer Publishing Company, 1999), 17.
4. Ibid.
5. See Stanley Coopersmith, *The Antecedents of Self-Esteem* (San Francisco: W. H. Freeman & Co., 1967), 4-5.
6. Nathaniel Branden, *The Art of Living Consciously* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1997), 175.
7. Nathaniel Branden, *The Six Pillars of Self-Esteem*, 51.
8. Morris Rosenberg, “Self-Concept and Psychological Well-Being” in *The Development of the Self*, ed. Robert L. Leahy (Orlando, Florida: Academic Press, Inc., 1985), 209.
9. See Mruk, *Self-Esteem*, 47, 90 & 160.