

Information handout

US English

What Keeps Low Self Esteem Going?



What Keeps Low Self-Esteem Going?

Low self-esteem means not holding yourself in high regard. If you have low self-esteem you might feel shy or anxious around other people, think of yourself as incapable or criticize yourself harshly, by telling yourself things like “You’re stupid”, “You’ll never manage this”, or “You don’t amount to anything”. When you have low self-esteem, you tend to see yourself, the world, and your future more negatively and critically. You might feel anxious, sad, low, or unmotivated. When you encounter challenges, you doubt whether you will be able to rise to them.

Research studies have shown that Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT) is one of the most effective treatments for low self-esteem (Kolubinski et al, 2018). CBT therapists work a bit like firefighters: while the fire is burning they aren’t very interested in what caused it, but are more focused on what is keeping it going. This is because if they can work out what keeps a problem going, they can treat the problem by ‘removing the fuel’ and interrupting this maintaining cycle.

In 1997, psychologist Melanie Fennell identified key components that are thought to explain why some people keep suffering from low self-esteem. The *What Keeps Low Self-Esteem Going?* information handout describes some of these key factors which maintain low self-esteem. It illustrates these maintaining factors in a vicious flower format, in which each ‘petal’ representing a separate cycle. Helping clients to understand more about the cognitive model is an essential part of cognitive therapy for low self-esteem. Therapists can use this handout as a focus for discussion, or as a template from which to formulate an idiosyncratic model of a client’s experiences.

Instructions

“One interesting way of thinking about low self-esteem is to look at why, for some people, it does not get better by itself. This handout shows some of the most common reasons why some people’s self-esteem remains low. I wonder if we could look at it together and think about whether it describes what is happening for you?”

References

- Fennell, M. J. (1997). Low self-esteem: A cognitive perspective. *Behavioural and Cognitive Psychotherapy*, 25(1), 1-26.
- Kolubinski, D. C., Frings, D., Nikčević, A. V., Lawrence, J. A., & Spada, M. M. (2018). A systematic review and meta-analysis of CBT interventions based on the Fennell model of low self-esteem. *Psychiatry Research*, 267, 296-305.

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People with low self-esteem come to believe very negative things about themselves. For example:

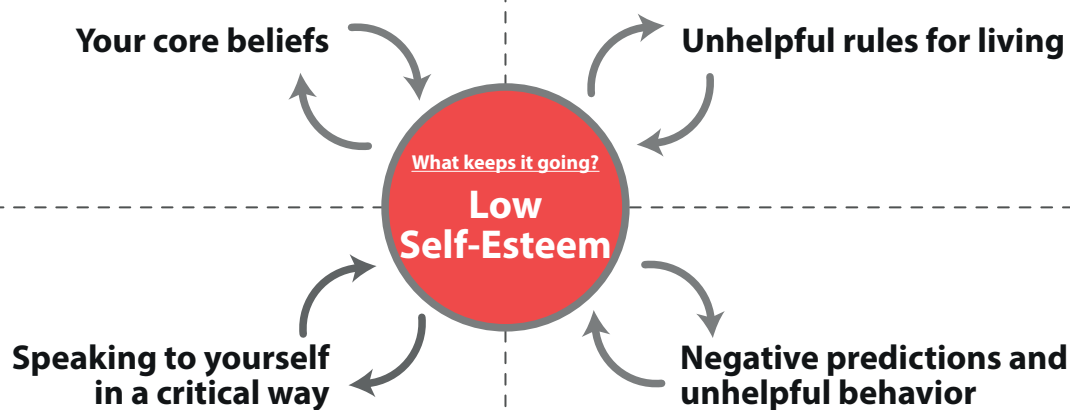
- I'm a failure.
- I'm not good enough.
- I'm unlovable.

Beliefs aren't necessarily facts – they are more like opinions. Acting like your core belief is a fact – and never questioning it – can get you into trouble.

If you believe that your core belief is true, you might try to overcompensate with strict 'rules for living'. For example:

- If I do everything perfectly, I am OK.
- I must always please people and never let anyone down.

Rules are often well-intended, but when they are too strict or inflexible, they set you up to fail. When this happens you end up believing your core belief even more strongly.



You might have learned to speak to yourself in critical ways from how others have spoken to you. You might even think of it as a way to motivate yourself. Self-criticism includes saying things like:

- I'm a failure.
- I'll never get it right.

Self-criticism is rarely the best form of motivation. Emotionally, it has the same effect as being bullied or attacked by someone else, and it can leave you feeling defeated and demoralized. When you criticize yourself you may not be treating yourself fairly. Ask yourself: would you speak to a friend that way?

When you have broken (or might break) one of your rules for living, your core belief is 'activated'. This can influence what you pay attention to, and what you think. You may start making negative predictions about what might happen:

- I'll mess it up.
- What if I upset them?

Negative predictions are anxiety-provoking, and you might try to do things to stop the worst from happening:

- Over-prepare so you don't mess it up.
- Appease and be extra-nice so you don't upset anyone.

There are often unintended consequences to the ways we behave. The ways you behave might strengthen your core belief.

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