

BUILDING SELF-ESTEEM
by Rebecca A. Stanwyck, LCSW
August 2006

Beginning with Nathaniel Branden's "*The Psychology of Self-Esteem*" in 1969, the idea that self-esteem is essential for happiness and success in life has grown to be commonly accepted. Intuitively, it makes sense: people who feel good about themselves will be happier and more likely to succeed—in school, at work, and in their relationships. It also seems reasonable that people with a low opinion of themselves are more likely to fail and/or lead unhappy lives. So if self-esteem is such a valuable commodity, you may ask, where does it come from and how can I get some (or more)? And is it true that high self-esteem leads to success and happiness?

What exactly is self-esteem? The definitions are various and often vague. I view it as a combination of *self-confidence* (trusting your own intuition and judgement) and *self-respect* (believing that you are a worthwhile human being, worthy of love and respect from others).

Where does it come from? Most psychologists believe that we aren't born with self-esteem, but must develop it. Our sense of self begins to develop in infancy, and is largely influenced by our relationship with parents or other primary caregivers. Ideally, we grow up believing we are lovable, worthy beings whose basic needs for sustenance and comfort can and will be met, which engenders self-respect. Also ideally, as children we are given opportunities to think for ourselves, make mistakes and learn from them, as well as receive acknowledgement for our accomplishments, which instills self-confidence.

Of course, many children simply don't get that kind of unconditional love and support, or don't learn those lessons. As a psychotherapist, I often work with adults who lack basic self-respect and confidence, and one of the tasks of therapy is to build their self-esteem.

How does one build self-esteem? The short answer is, by learning how to give yourself the acceptance and encouragement, the nurturing and support, which you may have lacked as a child – some people call it "re-parenting your inner child". Of course, this can be challenging, and take a long time. Getting support and encouragement from others really helps, too.

Will building self-esteem improve my life? A recent article in *Scientific American* reviewed a number of studies on self-esteem, and concluded it's not evident that having high self-esteem will lessen a tendency toward violence, or deter teenagers from alcohol, tobacco, drugs & sex, or improve academic or job performance. The only positive correlation was with "happiness".

One of the problems with these studies is that "happiness" is a subjective state of mind. And, there are no objective measures of self-esteem. We can't do a blood or urine test for it. So you probably ought to take all of these studies with a grain of salt, and decide for yourself: do you feel worthy of love and respect? Do you have confidence? Are you generally happy?

If not, you might benefit from some self-esteem enrichment. A couple of excellent books on the subject are "*Self-Esteem*" by Matthew McKay and Patrick Fanning, and "*The Self-Esteem Workbook*" by Glenn Schiraldi, both of which are available through New Harbinger Publications (www.newharbinger.com). You can also contact me to find out how working with a therapist or coach can help to build self-esteem.