

Self Esteem & Positive Thinking

Good self esteem and positive thinking lead to positive action (healthy, assertive, solution-focussed behaviour) including goal setting, problem solving, dealing assertively with others, taking risks for success and building a balanced lifestyle. Positive action keeps us motivated in achieving the goals we set our self which in turn lead to numerous benefits including; feeling happy; increased sense of confidence and control (self-efficacy – ‘I can’), improved health and relationships with others, managing challenges better, learning from mistakes. So self esteem is an important thing.

Self esteem is often described as the ‘feeling’ or the ‘value’ we place on ourselves as a person (and the things we do). E.g. ‘I feel good about myself’; ‘I’m okay even if I’m not perfect at sports’; etc. The ‘feeling’ or sense of self esteem we experience (high or low; good or bad) comes from the way we think about ourselves and is often buried in some sort of judgement we make about ourself and/or accept from others. The world is full of standards, expectations and judgements – but the ones we accept and hold about ourself determine our self esteem and our experience of life.

You’ve probably heard of some of the following definitions of self esteem that fit with this description. Self esteem is: The way you see yourself (not the way others see you); Accepting yourself for who you are regardless of your limits; Liking yourself and treating yourself as unique and special; Feeling ‘capable’ of getting through the normal life challenges and; Feeling good about yourself.

Because our self esteem is directly related to our thinking (our beliefs, values, judgements, standards, expectations and criticisms) learning to manage our own thinking is essential. **‘Positive Thinking’** is a habit of thinking about things and our self that is realistic/rational, balanced, solution focussed and helpful. Therefore positive thinking leads to a good self esteem and is also proven to be effective in improving our moods, health and ability to solve problems. Negative thinking on the other hand can lead to anxiety and reduced motivation to take positive action. E.G. ‘I can’t do it’; ‘it won’t work anyway’; ‘what if people don’t like what I do’.

It stops us from giving our self and ‘the situation’ a go and a chance to test out if our negative thinking is really accurate (and in most cases it’s not).

Our personal self esteem comes from a combination of our past experiences, our belief system, our standards, our connectedness with others, our successes and failures and the judgements and criticisms of others. But most importantly ourself esteem comes from how **we** ‘think’ about these things. Encouragement from others, forgiveness for mistakes, accepting each other ‘warts and all’, a kind word from a

special person, hugs and shared time are all examples of positive behaviour that help us learn to be kind to ourselves and others and provide that message – ‘you are a worthwhile and valuable person’.

Often our judgements make our self esteem ‘**conditional**’ on meeting certain standards. E.g. ‘I’m okay if I do it perfectly every time’, or ‘I should be able to keep at 100% or I’m lazy’. When we accept without question the unrealistic or **unrelenting standards** or **criticisms** of others (or our own) we may be placing our self esteem in danger. Similarly we often make **unfair comparisons** between ourselves and others, failing to take into account that each of us has a unique set of circumstances and opportunities in our lives. E.G. ‘that person (who won the lottery) has a sports car, so they’re better than me’.

Tips for improving Self Esteem & Positive Thinking

Practice doing positive things

- Make a list of things you like doing and the things you do well and do them more often.
- Take time to set personal/work/life goals and plan steps toward them.
- Learn to solve problems with a solution focus.
- Take some confidence risks out of your normal comfort zone (try something new, public speaking etc.).
- Work toward a balanced lifestyle that includes fun, rest and relaxation & a chance to express your own strengths and creativity.
- Develop your personal and interpersonal skills for reducing stress and improving communication with others (e.g. saying no; listening; problem solving; asking for things you want; relaxation etc.).

Practice being positive

- Accept yourself for who you are – ‘warts and all’ AND take steps for personal development.
- Take time for self awareness/reflection (your likes, values, goals, ideas, expectations, strengths etc.).
- Remind yourself often of your goals, strengths and accomplishments (no matter how small they seem).
- Take responsibility and action for what is in your control; your thoughts and feelings; actions; mistakes; goals; and developing strengths.
- Learn to control what is in your scope of influence and let go of what you cannot control.
- Visualise what you want! Allow some dreaming!

- Develop good relationships through quality time with others and giving appropriate compliments and help to others. See the good in others.
- Spend time with people who are positive and fun.
- Check the internet, bookstore and library for great books, quotes and stories on positive thinking and self esteem and read these often. Positive reading improves positive thinking and focus.
- Be willing to laugh at yourself and at life and with others. Stop taking yourself so seriously.
- Be assertive – speak up for yourself and share your opinion.
- Value your ideas and interests, expand on them. Interested people are interesting.
- Don't be so sensitive to other's approval or disapproval, learn to trust the worth of what you believe and do.
- Accept the variety, range and depth of feelings you experience. It's normal to feel emotions. You can't be a 'happy Larry' 100% of the time.
- Replace your 'I – shoulds' with non-judgmental words like I want, choose or prefer.

Practice positive thinking

Change negative thinking into realistic thinking

- Because our thoughts are so fast and automatic when we experience events in life, they are hard to catch, and we 'automatically' accept them. A lot of natural negative thinking gets in our flow of thoughts everyday as patterns or habits. We need to 'learn to catch the way we think' about things and ourselves in specific situations. Eg 'On no, I've got a speech at my friend's wedding next week!' (could be a fear producing thought).
- Then we can check if our thinking is realistic or helpful or not. Realistic and positive thinking will lead us toward solutions and maintain our self esteem, eg 'Well I'm not a speaker but I can use notes and everyone knows and likes me so it doesn't matter if I make a mistake'. Negative or unhelpful thinking will be critical and unfocussed, e.g. 'I'll probably forget my speech and make a fool of myself, why did he ask me!'
- We can learn to discard unhelpful thinking and replace it with a more realistic way of thinking or seeing things. You can do this by saying it to yourself. E.G. 'I don't have to be a perfect speaker, and I'm allowed to be nervous, just say some prepared kind words, my friend will really appreciate it'.
- Record and repeat positive thinking statements and mottos to yourself – these work by creating new patterns of thinking.

- We can then change the way we think with practice. Refer to books that contain chapters on ‘Cognitive Behaviour Therapy’ or ‘Rational Emotive Therapy’. These skills are proven strategies for increasing self esteem and managing moods.

Actively manage judgements, criticism & praise

- Accept compliments from others. Praise yourself for positives – it’s okay to feel good about yourself.
- Accept feedback as important for learning from mistakes & try to turn criticism into constructive feedback – if criticism has an element of value, accept it. If not, reject it. You decide.
- Remember your basic human right to be treated with respect – stop unfairly criticising yourself.
- Forgive yourself for past mistakes!
- Disarm the critic in yourself and others by asking yourself – ‘what is the reasonable message here?, is this criticism true or just trying to motivate me to change in some positive way?’
- Ask for constructive feedback about yourself and abilities from significant people in your life.
- Accept that people have differing views of the world and behaviour and success (etc) and that’s okay.
- Avoid comparing yourself with others. See yourself as a unique individual of equal worth to others.

Going further: try accessing the internet and local libraries and book stores for books on positive thinking and self esteem. If specific challenges or longer-term pressures have been affecting your self esteem and happiness seek professional counselling for effective personalised strategies.

Tips compiled by Kash Thomson for Assure Programs