

The Trouble with Self-Esteem

High self-esteem is now viewed much as cocaine was in the 1880s—a wondrous new cure for all ills, miraculously free of dangerous side-effects. Self-esteem is both the sacred cow and the golden calf of our culture. Nothing is esteemed higher than self-esteem, and no self-esteem can be too high.

Nathaniel Branden, a leading exponent of self-esteem, raises the question: “Is it possible to have too much self-esteem?” and gives the resounding answer: “No, it is not, no more than it is possible to have too much physical health.”¹

What is Self-Esteem?

To esteem something means to have a high opinion of it. To have high self-esteem means holding a high opinion of oneself. This high opinion is usually based on a high overall rating of oneself as a person, and this high rating is in turn based on evaluating one’s actual performance. There are two popular views of self-esteem. One is the theory that it’s good for people to feel good about themselves, irrespective of how well or badly they have actually performed. If they esteem themselves highly, they will automatically do better—and even if they don’t do better, well, they’ll at least feel happier. This theory has been applied in recent years as an educational technique, the “self-esteem curriculum,” devoted to convincing students that they are wonderful and “special.” Educationally, it has yielded disappointing results.

The other approach to self-esteem seems to be popular with libertarians. This approach views self-esteem as something earned. If we perform better, we will then feel better about ourselves. We will rate ourselves more highly, and this will cause us to feel better. Feeling better is therefore our psychological reward for performing better. Usually, it’s also supposed to cause us, in turn, to perform even better.

At first glance, these two approaches seem to have little in common, but on closer examination, the first approach usually turns out to be a variant of the second. The teacher who tries to cultivate high self-esteem in her students usually does not say: “Feel good, no matter how badly you do!” Instead, the teacher deliberately lowers standards, so that the students get lots of praise for very minor achievements, while poor or mediocre work is accepted as adequate or better. And the proponents of earned self-esteem, when they confront the fact that many individuals make themselves needlessly miserable by comparing their performance to some ideal, also advise those individuals to lower their standards, so that they will feel better at a lower threshold of achievement.

In practice, therefore, both approaches to building self-esteem have a common thread: a person judges his performance to be good, then he forms a higher opinion of himself, not just his performance. Then he basks in the glow of contemplating what a terrific person he is. Then, he feels happier, and performs even better.

Doubts about High Self-Esteem

Psychiatrists, politicians, educators, and religious leaders have all been drafted into the movement to make people feel good about themselves. High self-esteem is the enchanting magic powder which will bring sobriety and civility to the teenage gangsters of the inner cities as well as bliss and fulfilment to depressed suburban housewives.

A multitude of therapists and gurus are quick to identify low self-esteem as the root cause of emotional disturbance, addiction, poor relationships, failure to learn in school, child abuse, and a host of other ills. Yet the evidence points in the other direction.

Studies on issues from smoking to violence, along with comprehensive reviews of the entire self-esteem literature, not only cast doubt on the benefits of high self-esteem but suggest that it might even be harmful.

Psychologists at Iowa State University have linked high self-esteem with the failure to quit smoking. "People with high self-esteem have difficulty admitting their behaviour has been unhealthy and/or unwise," writes researcher Frederick Gibbons.²

A study popularized by Charles Krauthammer, writing in Time magazine, investigated the self-concepts of 13-year-olds in Britain, Canada, Ireland, Korea, Spain, and the United States. Each was administered a standardized math test. In addition, they were asked to rate the statement: "I am good at mathematics." The Americans judged their abilities the most highly (68 percent agreed with the statement!). On the actual math test, the Americans came last. Krauthammer concludes: "American students may not know their math, but they have evidently absorbed the lessons of the newly fashionable self-esteem curriculum wherein kids are taught to feel good about themselves."³

Researchers at Case Western Reserve University and the University of Virginia conducted a comparison of evidence from a variety of studies concerning individuals involved with aggressive behaviour of all kinds: assault, homicide, rape, domestic violence, juvenile delinquency, political terror, prejudice, oppression, and genocide. In some studies, self-esteem was specifically measured; in others it was inferred. The authors concluded that "aggressive, violent, and hostile people consistently express favourable views of themselves." It's therefore pointless to treat rapists, murderers, and muggers by convincing them that they are superior beings, for this is precisely what such criminals typically believe already.

These researchers considered the possibility that in such cases observable high self-esteem was a disguised form of low self-esteem but were unable to find any corroboration for it. The authors conclude that "the societal pursuit of high self-esteem for everyone may literally end up doing considerable harm."⁴

According to American Educator, psychologist and researcher Roy Baumeister has "probably published more studies on self-esteem in the past 20 years that anybody else in the U.S. (or elsewhere)." As Baumeister has observed, many violent crimes result when an individual defends a swollen self-image against a perceived attack. "They'll lash out to try to head off anything that might lower their self-esteem."

Baumeister concludes that “the enthusiastic claims of the self-esteem movement mostly range from fantasy to hogwash. . . Yes, a few people here and there end up worse off because their self-esteem was too low. Then, again, other people end up worse off because their self-esteem was too high. And most of the time self-esteem makes surprisingly little difference.”⁵

A comprehensive review of the self-esteem literature found that: “the associations between self-esteem, and its expected consequences are mixed, insignificant, or absent. This none relationship holds between self-esteem and teen age pregnancy, self-esteem and child abuse, self-esteem and most cases of alcohol and drug abuse.”⁶

Millions of taxpayers’ dollars have been expended by the government on professional training to boost the self-esteem of teachers and students, and even more millions have been spent by private individuals paying therapists to help them enhance their self-esteem. Yet the available evidence does not support the theory that attempts to raise people’s self-esteem necessarily produce substantial benefits, and some evidence suggests high self-esteem may have pathological consequences. We should be cautious about accepting enthusiastic claims for the unalloyed benefits of high self-esteem.

Invisible Low Self-Esteem

How do advocates of building high self-esteem respond when confronted with this kind of evidence? They have two answers.

The first is to say that when a person seems to have high self-esteem and has a screwed-up life, that person really has low self-esteem.

This reply has a certain plausibility, because we’re all familiar with the stereotype of the loud, brash, assertive person who is inwardly frightened, cringing, and self-doubting. Novelists and movie-makers love such characters, and they do occasionally exist. But mostly, in real life, if persons are outwardly loud, brash, and assertive, they are likely to be inwardly loud, brash, and assertive, or at least, more so than those who are outwardly timid or self-effacing. If someone exhibits obvious signs of thinking that he is one of the superior beings of the universe, chances are that he really believes—yes, way deep down—that he is one of the superior beings of the universe. In other words, he’s living in a fantasy world out of touch with reality.

Furthermore, if observable self-esteem is to be brushed aside as immaterial, then this has two difficulties.

Empirically, the claim that high self-esteem is good for you becomes unfalsifiable and therefore untestable. We are unable to determine whether there’s any truth in it.

Pragmatically, if we’re trying to help people to improve their lives, all we can work on is the observable. If we try to help them by building their self-esteem, this becomes futile unless we can be reasonably sure that we can tell whether their self-esteem has gone up or down. The building of a kind of self-esteem which can never be discerned in someone’s behaviour (including what that person says) is not really a practical plan.

Authentic and Inauthentic Self-Esteem

The second answer of the self-esteem promoters to the discouraging evidence on the practical results of self-esteem is to make a distinction between “authentic” and “inauthentic” self-esteem. Only authentic self-esteem brings true happiness, they claim.

As self-esteem in practice means feeling good about yourself because of how well you have done, increasing your self-esteem requires watching your behaviour to see whether you have in fact done well. Self-esteem promoters often disagree about what aspects of your behaviour you should be watching.

We can look at it this way. Advocates of high self-esteem think: I must do x. If I manage to at least do x, I can congratulate myself on being a good person. If I do less than x, then it follows that I will judge myself to be a bad person.

The advocates of high self-esteem frequently disagree on what “x” is. They each have their own favoured criterion for assessing performance, their own choice of x, or perhaps their own varying standards for measuring x. But they all agree that the name of the game is pursuit of a feeling of self-worth, to be attained by doing (at least) x.

According to Nathaniel Branden, for example, x equals “the choices we make concerning awareness, the honesty of our relationship to reality, the level of our personal integrity.” Branden warns against deriving self-esteem from success in particular pursuits—in Branden’s view that would be what we are calling “inauthentic” self-esteem. Branden maintains that we’re worthwhile as humans if we make good choices, act honestly and act with integrity. We can then esteem ourselves highly because we can tell ourselves, in Branden’s words, “I coped well with the basic challenges of life.”⁷

When the self-esteem concept is criticized, its proponents can defend it by explaining that the reason self-esteem didn’t seem to work in a particular case is not that the very concept is flawed, but rather that the wrong “x” was chosen. Therefore, the self-esteem that resulted was not authentic self-esteem but “pseudo-self-esteem.”

But notice that all self-esteem theory has the same pattern, though this is not usually clearly spelled out. First, you set a goal. Second, you act in pursuit of that goal. Third, you observe your action and its consequences. Fourth, you evaluate your action. Fifth, you globalize that evaluation: you move from evaluating your action to evaluating yourself as a total person. And sixth, you (supposedly) feel and act better thereafter if you decide you’re a great person, or you (supposedly) feel and act worse if you conclude you’re a pathetic loser.

The Alternative to Self-Esteem

The desirability of raising self-esteem seems persuasive because people with serious emotional problems often have low self-esteem: they hold a low opinion of themselves and dwell on their shortcomings. So, it’s an appealing idea to improve individuals’ rating of themselves, and this seems to require getting them to hold a higher opinion of themselves—building their self-esteem.

The way of thinking I have just outlined may seem at first to be so obvious as to be unquestionable. But in fact, it commits an error. It assumes that the only alternative to giving yourself a low rating is to give yourself a high rating. This way of thinking considers only two alternatives: either you rate yourself as a bad person (a failure, a louse, a nothing) or you rate yourself as a good person (a success, a paragon, a fine human being). That ignores another option: don't rate yourself at all.

It's the essence of the gospel of self-esteem that you should rate yourself highly. Almost unnoticed is the assumption that you can't avoid rating yourself, and equally inconspicuous is the practical corollary of raising your self-esteem: if you set out to "build your self-esteem," you become preoccupied with your rating of yourself.

Not rating yourself, refraining from self-rating, means that you can evaluate what you do without drawing conclusions about yourself as a total person. For instance, if you are frequently late for appointments, you may think, "Being late for appointments has consequences I don't like. Is there some way I can stop being late?" You don't have to think, "Because I am often late for appointments, I am a loser." You don't need to draw any conclusions about your total self. That may sound unobjectionable. But suppose that you conquer your habit of being late. Now, you're always punctual. What harm can it do to pat yourself on the back? Why not think, "I'm an admirably efficacious person, because I'm always on time"?

It can indeed do harm! You are drawing comfort and sustenance from your judgment that you are a fine person, and you are requiring yourself to perform well to support that judgment. This leads to anxiety. Moreover, the next time you don't perform so well, you will then be liable to feel, not just regret and sadness that you didn't do what would have been best, but demoralization and discouragement, because you now have evidence that you are not such a good person.

We can acknowledge that low self-esteem may be a problem, without recommending high self-esteem. If someone has low self-esteem, we need not try to replace that person's low self-esteem with high self-esteem. We can instead encourage them to stop globally evaluating themselves. Instead of low self-esteem or high self-esteem, they can have no self-esteem. Or better, since "no self-esteem" sounds like low self-esteem, they can do without self-rating.

If we do not rate our total selves as good or bad, what attitude is it best for us to take towards ourselves? Instead of esteeming ourselves, we can unconditionally accept ourselves as we are. No matter how well we perform, no matter how brilliant our accomplishments, we are always imperfect, fallible human beings. Conversely, no matter how badly we screw up, we always do some things right (as demonstrated by the fact that we have survived this far).

Unconditional self-acceptance doesn't mean that we don't want to change anything. It means that we unconditionally accept the reality of who we are and what we are like. This does not involve any overall evaluation of our worth or quality as human beings. It means that nothing that we do will make us believe that we are, in toto, terrific or terrible, heroic or horrible, godlike or goblinlike.

Having unconditionally accepted ourselves, we can then concentrate on what we do and how we can improve it—not because this will make us feel wonderful about ourselves—give us high self-esteem—but because we will then more effectively accomplish the goals we have set ourselves, and feel wonderful about that.

The Gap in Self-Esteem Theory

There's a strange aspect of the reasoning of many self-esteem theorists. They often seem to assume that if you perform well according to their chosen x , this will automatically cause you to esteem yourself highly. Robert Ringer, for instance, states: "It takes a good deal of practice to play the game effectively, but a good player reaps the rewards of self-esteem, the self-esteem which comes from knowing who you are, what you stand for, and where you're going in life."⁸

What is odd about this view is that Ringer appears to believe that self-esteem wells up spontaneously within you if you do something. He doesn't seem to understand that, whatever you do, this can only affect your self-esteem if you evaluate what you have done, and evaluate your total self-based on what you have done, that this requires judging your behaviour and your self-according to some standard, and that you are free to perform these mental acts of evaluation or not to perform them.

Nathaniel Branden also writes as though he believed that if you have coped well with the basic challenges of life (his nominated " x "), this must automatically cause you to possess high self-esteem.⁹ And, presumably, if the truth is that you have not coped well with the basic challenges of life, that must automatically cause you to possess low self-esteem.

You are apparently unable to react in any other way, for example by concluding: "I haven't coped well with the basic challenges of life but I'm not going to let this get me down." Or: "I haven't coped well with the basic challenges of life. Tough shit! I'll just try harder." Or: "I haven't coped well with the basic challenges of life. What a fascinating specimen I am! I'll write a novel about myself."

Self-esteem advocates often seem to assume that judging your total self is involuntary, and automatic. However, esteeming oneself involves choices among alternatives: you choose to act, you choose to evaluate your actions, you choose to extend the evaluation of your actions to an evaluation of your total self, you choose the standard by which your total self will be evaluated.

To esteem ourselves or to rate ourselves flows from choices we make in how we will think: cognitive choices. If we fail at some endeavour, or a whole series of endeavours, we are not fated to think the worse of ourselves. If we do draw the conclusion that we are worse as persons because we have failed in some specific endeavours, that conclusion arises from our philosophy of life, our beliefs, our habits of thought.

When I say that these are matters of choice, I mean this in the same way that learning a foreign language is a matter of choice. Changing our habits of rating or not rating ourselves requires repetition and reinforcement over a period of time. We may in the past have unreflectively accepted that when we screw up (or fail to "cope well with the basic challenges of life"), this diminishes our worth as persons. Now when we draw this conclusion, it may therefore indeed be "automatic."

In exactly the same way, the horror of a superstitious person when a black cat crosses his path may be automatic and may seem involuntary. But that person can question the validity of his superstitious belief and can, over time, learn to accept that a black cat is not something to be dreaded.

The conviction that our self-worth rises or falls according to our performance is indeed a kind of superstition. If we were to discuss the experience of dread which seizes a superstitious person who has seen a black cat, as though this feeling did not depend upon that person's superstitious beliefs but flowed simply from his seeing a black cat, we would be obscuring the vital part played in this

seemingly automatic process by the person's beliefs—beliefs which can be changed, though changing them may take persistent effort.

Problems with Self-Esteem

Fifty years ago, marathon runner and writer Trevor Smith, then 15, spent a hiking vacation with a group of classmates, climbing Switzerland's Stanserhorn. One thousand feet from the summit, exhausted and struggling, Smith chose to turn back.

Later that evening at dinner, reunited with all his classmates, Smith "saw the glow of satisfaction on the faces of the boys who made the summit safely . . . I regretted bitterly that I had quit when others succeeded." Smith continues to view the decision to abort his ascent as so horrible that even today he relives it "as if it happened yesterday."

As an adult, Smith climbed peaks, paddled white water, and ran hundreds of races. He concludes: "Sometimes I've paid a high price in discomfort and many injuries. But achieving goals gave a feeling of self-esteem that healed everything." Smith's lesson for his readers? Develop high self-esteem. "Tell yourself that you can do just about anything that any other human being can do . . . If you believe you can do just about anything, usually you can."¹⁰

Trevor Smith's thinking illustrates the essence of the self-esteem notion: self-rating. When you do well you rate yourself as a "good" person, you have high self-esteem; you can do anything. When you do poorly, you're a worthless failure. (Or if not worthless, you're certainly worth less.) So, your motivation to do well is that you will derive satisfaction from proving that you're a good person.

Smith's widely accepted but dangerous view of self-esteem illustrates its inherent traps. If you subscribe to his self-esteem notion, when you do well, you'll tend to take an overblown, grandiose view of yourself. And when you do poorly, you're likely to feel depressed and hopeless. Many people who pursue this approach live their lives either anxiously and compulsively striving to prove themselves (instead of enjoying themselves by striving to attain their goals) or phobically avoiding challenging and competitive situations.

In the 1960s, Joe Pine, an acerbic conservative TV talk show host, had as his guest the long-haired rock musician Frank Zappa. Pine was prone to surliness, which a leg amputation—he wore a wooden prosthetic—may have exacerbated. As soon as Zappa had been introduced and seated, the following exchange occurred:

PINE: I guess your long hair makes you a girl.

ZAPPA: I guess your wooden leg makes you a table.¹¹

This brings out another of the attendant difficulties with the pursuit of self-esteem. If I am to decide whether I am doing well or badly as a total person, I have to somehow reduce to a common measure all the varied aspects of my performance in different fields, to come up with a single score or rating of myself.

Individuals are unique and many-faceted. "Weighting" all the different aspects of one's behaviour is unavoidably subjective. Suppose that your daughter is an excellent swimmer but a poor runner or is well above average in math but well below average in languages, or is often unusually considerate of

her little brother but sometimes mercilessly teases him to the point of tears. There is no objective method for making these different behaviours commensurable.

In practice, people who pursue self-esteem usually don't get very far in trying to formulate a weighted evaluation of all their performances. Instead, they tend to fall back on some formula which grossly oversimplifies the picture. For example, a child may become convinced that he is no good because he has done poorly at spelling. He may then give up trying, using as an excuse the "fact" that he is a no-good failure.

Furthermore, people often change—not all at once, overnight, but in particular ways continually. As Albert Ellis puts it, "People's intrinsic value or worth cannot really be measured accurately because their being includes their becoming."¹²

Another problem is that once we get into the habit of thinking that we are good because we have performed well or bad because we have performed poorly, we generally find that this is not symmetrical. There is something innate in human beings—perhaps it has survival value—to pay attention to what is creating discomfort and to pay no attention to what is going OK.

Self-raters therefore tend to drift downward in their self-rating, drawing gloomy conclusions when they fall short, and not fully balancing these with optimistic conclusions when they do well. This tendency is all the more powerful because of a fact I have omitted to mention so far, for the sake of simplicity. People who rate themselves always find in practice that "feeling good" or "feeling bad" about themselves is not stable. So, when we say that someone has high or low self-esteem, we're referring to an average: how good they feel about themselves always fluctuates.

Our moods fluctuate naturally and hanging our sense of well-being on the peg of our self-rating tends to magnify the mood swings.

Just Say No to High Self-Esteem

It is rational to be concerned about your effectiveness in pursuing your goals, and therefore in dealing with problems that arise. It is not rational to be concerned about your overall rating as a person.

The pursuit of high self-esteem, even where it seems to be working for a while, can be hazardous. And at best, self-esteem accomplishes nothing important that can't be accomplished by self-acceptance.

References & Notes:

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7. *The Power of Self-Esteem*, pp. 59, vii.
8. Robert J. Ringer, *Looking out for #1* <http://www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/ASIN/0449210103/> (New York: Fawcett Crest, 1977), p. 87; and see pp. 11-12.
9. Branden advises that we judge ourselves by what is within our volitional control, not by what is under the control of other people (*The Power of Self-Esteem* <http://laissezfairebooks.com/product.cfm?op=view&pid=NB5600&aid=GC>, p. 52). He does not address the issue of our being free to abstain from any self-judgment at all. We can speculate that he might think this is impossible, or he might think it would have harmful consequences for our personal efficacy. In either case, he would be mistaken.
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