Struggling with low self-esteem

Dear Alice,

Do you have some advice for someone suffering from low self-esteem? Some things that I struggle with: comparison of myself to others ("She is so "together!" Why am I not like that? What is lacking in me that makes her better?"), lack of faith in my abilities ("I'll never be as good as him at that? I might as well not try."), lots of self-criticizing ("Why did I sign up for this class? I should have known I couldn't handle it."), always saying yes to people or feeling like I've said the wrong thing... you get the idea. I've been feeling pretty unmotivated lately too, and I think this just adds to the problem. Can you give some advice, dear Alice?

Thanks, feeling blue

Answer

Dear feeling blue,

It seems that you've been pondering your low self-esteem for some time now, since you are familiar with many of its symptoms. You also appear to be experiencing some downtime at the moment, which can contribute to and create a cycle of feelings of low self-esteem, low self-confidence, and low self-worth. You're not alone in feeling the way you do. Many, many people have felt similarly.

Self-esteem is, simply, how good you feel about yourself. However, the impact of self-esteem, or the lack of it, is quite complicated and far-reaching. Linda Tschirhart Sanford and Mary Ellen Donovan, authors of Women & Self-Esteem (a great book, by the way) describe the impact of self-esteem in the following way: "Our level of self-esteem affects virtually everything we think, say, and do. It affects how we see the world and our place in it. It affects how others in the world see and treat us. It affects the choices we make? choices about what we will do with our lives and with whom we will be involved. It affects our ability to both give and receive love. And, it affects our ability to take action to change things that need to be changed."
As you can see, self-acceptance contributes to the development of a healthy self-esteem and can significantly affect how you live your life. When you have healthy self-esteem, you're aware of your potential, know the many facets that make you unique, and you value and respect yourself. However, you know that your imperfections or inadequacies aren't inherently bad; they don't define your value and self-worth. With a healthy self-esteem, you're aware that it's human to have limitations and make mistakes.

Regardless of the level of self-esteem that you may have, it's fairly common to doubt your self-worth at one time or another during our lives. It can become all too easy to compare yourself to others. When this self-comparison is occasional, it may be beneficial. It can help you achieve goals and ideals that you admire and respect in other people. However, when self-comparison becomes more frequent, all-consuming, and makes you feel that you don't? and cannot ? measure up to your perception of others, it can become self-destructive and affect the quality of your life. Although it may be challenging, it's not impossible to start feeling better about yourself. There are a variety of ways to help you boost your self-esteem:

- Accept who you are, as you are? this includes your strengths and your weaknesses, your feelings and emotions.
- Forgive yourself for mistakes and see them as opportunities to learn and grow.
- Take time to nurture your talents and passions, i.e., reading, gardening, painting, volunteering at community organizations.
- Take pride in your achievements, big and small.
- Set realistic goals for yourself.
- Replace negative self-talk with positive, kind, loving statements.
- Know thyself and don't depend on the acceptance of others to make you feel good.
- Maintain a healthy lifestyle by exercising, eating right, and getting enough sleep.
- Surround yourself with positive people.
- Seek counseling or self-help/support groups.
- Make conscious, healthy choices that reflect your beliefs, values, and actions.
- If you can? control comparing yourself to others, how about focusing on your similarities with others?

This self-realization process (getting to know yourself) may help you better understand the underlying issues contributing to your low self-esteem. Everyone has flaws, but these imperfections don't reflect a person's self-worth or value. It may also be helpful to ask yourself when you began to have feelings of low self-esteem. For example, has there been a particular event or person who sparked these feelings? Is this the first time that you have felt this way, or have you always felt this way? Finally, have you considered speaking to a mental health professional or with someone you trust? Remember that help is available when you feel that you need it.

Take care, and be gentle with yourself,

Alice!

Category: Emotional Health
Blues & Depression

Related questions
Fear of rejection? [4]
College student always depressed [5]
Depressed and shy: Finding the courage to get help [6]
Media and body image [7]

Resources

Counseling and Psychological Services (CPS) (Morningside) [8]
Mental Health Service (CUMC) [9]

Published date:
Jun 06, 1997
Last reviewed on:
Jun 16, 2015

Source URL: http://goaskalice.columbia.edu/answered-questions/struggling-low-self-esteem

Links