Dear Alice,

I have a problem with self-confidence. Whenever a person compliments me about something, in my head, I disagree with them. This has also affected my love life. When I am in a relationship, I can't help but to ask myself, why is this person interested in me? Well, that's all I wanted to say. Please help me by giving me advice.

— seeking advice

Answer

Dear seeking advice,

It's not uncommon to doubt yourself when you receive compliments or appreciation, and seeking out ways to build self-confidence is a great step forward. The good news is that there are some tools based in cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT) and acceptance commitment therapy (ACT) that may help. These strategies help to either modify or accept the thoughts and beliefs you have about yourself. Since evidence shows that CBT and ACT are effective in helping people increase their self-esteem, it’s possible that using these tools may be beneficial for you. Further, if working on your own doesn't appear to be helping, you may consider working with a mental health professional who specializes in one of these treatments may help you reach your goals.

Psychologists encourage people who struggle with praise to practice tolerating the compliments that come their way. One strategy could be to try setting a goal to accept compliments, and to accept the fact that compliments make you uncomfortable. A recommended way to do this is to try to express appreciation and acknowledge the compliment by simply saying, “thank you,” or “that’s kind of you to say,” instead of dismissing praise. This may take time and feel awkward at first. However, with practice, your urge to dismiss or reject compliments may become less frequent, which may also be a sign that your self-confidence is growing!

Along with practicing accepting compliments, research shows that CBT and ACT strategies may help people build confidence and self-esteem by reframing their thoughts. CBT strategies aim to help individuals change or modify the negative or inaccurate thoughts and beliefs that contribute to low self-esteem. An ACT approach, on the other hand, recommends that people try to accept
and tolerate those thoughts and beliefs with the goal of decreasing the power and influence the thoughts have on your behavior.

CBT experts recommend taking the following four steps to reframe your thoughts:

1. **Identify the conditions or situations.** You could reflect on what situations or circumstances in your environment may be impacting your self-confidence.
2. **Recognize negative thoughts and beliefs.** You may try to identify the thoughts and beliefs you have about yourself in those circumstances. You could consider whether those beliefs or thoughts are true. A helpful way to do this is to ask yourself, “Would I express those beliefs to a friend?” If the answer is no, this may indicate that the thought is inaccurate and unhelpful.
3. **Challenge negative thinking.** You may try to challenge thoughts that are negative or inaccurate. You could ask yourself, “Are my thoughts and beliefs consistent with facts? Are other explanations possible?”
4. **Replace the negative thoughts.** You may try to modify negative or inaccurate thoughts to better reflect the facts and evidence you identified in step three. Some strategies for how to reframe thoughts to be more accurate and positive include practicing hopeful statements, forgiving yourself, focusing on the positive, re-labeling upsetting thoughts, encouraging yourself, and considering what you’ve learned. Also, if you can, try to avoid “should and “must” statements. If you notice using “should” or “must,” this may indicate you’re holding yourself to unrealistic standards.

An ACT approach to building confidence includes the following three steps:

1. **Identify the conditions or situations.** Similar to the steps based on CBT, you can start by reflecting on what situations or circumstances in your environment may be impacting your self-confidence.
2. **Take a broader look at your thoughts.** If you can, try to distance yourself from your thoughts. Consider repeating the thoughts in your mind several times, making up a song about them, or writing them down in an unconventional way (such as with your non-dominant hand). The goal is to, instead of changing the thoughts or beliefs, to realize that they’re merely words.
3. **Accept your thoughts.** To the best of your ability, try to accept and tolerate your thoughts. Note that accepting a thought doesn’t mean you have to approve of it or like it. Try to let yourself feel and acknowledge them.

*Both lists adapted from Mayo Clinic [2].*

The idea behind ACT is that once you’re able to recognize and acknowledge the thoughts and beliefs that are associated with your low self-confidence, then it’s easier to change the way you view them, which will hopefully minimize the power it has over you.

In addition to the CBT and ACT, taking care of yourself and making time for the people and activities you enjoy and find meaningful is recommended. Being physically active, eating well, partaking in hobbies, and spending time with people you care about may help boost your confidence. You can also help yourself feel more capable and worthy by helping others through volunteer work. This way, you can think about others rather than focusing on the negative
thoughts you have of yourself.

No matter what strategies you use, building your self-confidence is neither an easy process, nor one that will work itself out overnight. Enlisting the help of others, such as a mental health professional, family member, or friend — anyone you feel comfortable confiding in — can make a difference. If you’re unsure where to find a mental health professional, you can ask your health care provider for a referral, or check out How to find a therapist in the Go Ask Alice! Emotional Health archives.

Kudos to you for taking a step forward in accepting compliments — you deserve them!

Alice!

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