

What Is Low Self-Esteem, Anyway?

Understanding Yourself with More Kindness and Less Criticism

Welcome

If you've ever found yourself thinking:

"I'm not good enough."

"Everyone else seems to have it together except me."

"Why am I so hard on myself?"

"I wish I could be more confident."

You're not alone.

Many people struggle with low self-esteem at some point in their lives. It can affect how you think, feel, and relate to others, often without you even realizing it. The good news is that self-esteem isn't something you're simply born with. It can grow, change, and become healthier over time.

This guide will help you understand what low self-esteem is, where it comes from, and practical, evidence-based ways to begin building a kinder relationship with yourself.

What Is Low Self-Esteem?

Self-esteem is the way we think and feel about ourselves overall.

It includes the beliefs we have about our value, our abilities, and whether we see ourselves as worthy of kindness, respect, and belonging.

Someone with healthy self-esteem doesn't think they're perfect. They simply recognize that everyone has strengths, everyone has struggles, and making mistakes doesn't make someone less worthy.

Low self-esteem, on the other hand, often involves viewing yourself through a much harsher lens.

Instead of seeing one mistake, you might see yourself as a failure.

Instead of noticing your strengths, you might focus almost entirely on your weaknesses.

Instead of accepting compliments, you may dismiss them or assume people are “just being nice.”

Over time, these patterns can become so familiar that they begin to feel like facts, even though they are often distorted by years of experiences, beliefs, and self-criticism.

Low Self-Esteem Isn't a Personality Trait

One of the biggest misconceptions is that people either have self-esteem or they don't.

Research tells us something different.

Self-esteem develops over time through our experiences.

It is shaped by relationships, family messages, school experiences, successes, disappointments, culture, social media, trauma, bullying, and many other factors.

Because it develops over time, it can also change over time.

Your current self-esteem is not your permanent identity.

Where Does Low Self-Esteem Come From?

There is rarely one single reason.

Instead, self-esteem is usually influenced by many experiences over the course of life.

Some common influences include:

Growing up with frequent criticism.

Feeling different from others.

Being bullied or excluded.

Living through trauma.

Experiencing difficult family relationships.

Comparing yourself to others.

Receiving the message that your worth depends on achievements.

Trying to meet impossible standards.

Feeling like you have to be perfect.

None of these experiences guarantee low self-esteem, but they can contribute to the way we learn to think about ourselves.

Your Brain Isn't Trying to Be Mean

Here's something many people find reassuring.

Our brains naturally pay more attention to negative experiences than positive ones.

Psychologists call this the negativity bias.

Imagine receiving ten compliments and one criticism.

Many people can easily remember the criticism but struggle to recall the compliments.

Your brain isn't broken.

It's doing what human brains evolved to do: notice possible threats.

The challenge is that when this happens repeatedly, your mind can begin collecting evidence that supports self-criticism while overlooking evidence that tells a more balanced story.

Fortunately, our brains remain capable of learning throughout life.

Each time you notice a strength, practice self-compassion, or challenge an unfair belief about yourself, you're helping your brain develop new patterns.

What Can Low Self-Esteem Look Like?

Low self-esteem doesn't always look like someone lacking confidence.

Sometimes it looks surprisingly successful on the outside.

You might notice yourself:

- Apologizing even when you've done nothing wrong.
- Feeling guilty for saying no.
- Believing everyone else is doing better than you.
- Comparing yourself constantly.
- Assuming people secretly dislike you.
- Feeling uncomfortable when someone compliments you.
- Working extremely hard because you never feel "good enough."
- Avoiding new opportunities because you're afraid you'll fail.
- Thinking one mistake means you've failed completely.
- Being much kinder to other people than you are to yourself.

If some of these sound familiar, it doesn't mean something is wrong with you.

It simply means you've likely developed habits of thinking that deserve compassion rather than criticism.

What Low Self-Esteem Is Not

Low self-esteem does not mean you are:

Lazy.

Weak.

Broken.

Attention-seeking.

Difficult.

Hopeless.

It means you're human.

Many people who struggle with low self-esteem have spent years holding themselves to impossible standards. Maybe you can relate?

Can Self-Esteem Be Improved?

Yes! I'll say it again...yes!

Research consistently shows that self-esteem can improve.

Not by repeating positive affirmations you don't believe.

But through small, repeated experiences that help your brain build a more realistic and compassionate understanding of who you are.

Building self-esteem is less about convincing yourself you're amazing and more about learning to stop believing you're inadequate.

Eight Evidence-Based Ways to Build Self-Esteem

1. Notice Your Inner Critic

Pay attention to how you speak to yourself.

Would you use those words with someone you care about?

If not, your inner critic may need some gentle challenging.

2. Practice Self-Compassion

Treat yourself with the same understanding you would offer a close friend.

Self-compassion is associated with lower anxiety, greater resilience, and healthier self-esteem.

3. Stop Waiting to Feel Confident

Confidence usually follows action.

Take small steps before you feel ready.

Confidence grows from experience, not from waiting.

4. Focus on Progress Instead of Perfection

Perfection is impossible.

Progress is achievable.

Ask yourself:

“What is one small improvement I can make today?”

5. Reduce Comparisons

Social media often shows carefully selected highlights.

Comparing your everyday life to someone else’s highlight reel is rarely fair or accurate.

6. Spend Time With People Who Help You Grow

Healthy relationships don’t require you to earn your worth.

Choose people who encourage growth while accepting you as you are.

7. Remember Your Strengths

Your brain naturally notices weaknesses.

Make a habit of intentionally noticing what you’re doing well.

This isn't arrogance.

It's balance.

8. Live According to Your Values

The more your choices reflect the kind of person you want to be, the stronger your sense of self becomes.

Self-esteem grows when your behaviour matches your values.

Reflection Worksheet

Getting Curious

Complete these questions honestly.

There are no right or wrong answers.

When do I feel most confident?

When do I notice self-doubt becoming stronger?

What situations tend to activate thoughts like "I'm not good enough"?

What messages have I learned about myself over the years?

Are these messages facts or opinions?

Meeting Your Inner Critic

Write one self-critical thought you hear often.

Now ask yourself:

What evidence supports this?

What evidence does not support it?

What would I tell a friend who believed this about themselves?

How could I say that to myself instead?

Seeing the Whole Picture

List ten things that make you who you are.

These don't have to be achievements.

Maybe you're funny.

Maybe you're curious.

Maybe you're dependable.

Maybe you're trying even when things are hard.

Small Steps This Week

Choose three actions that support healthier self-esteem.

- ☐ Accept a compliment by simply saying "Thank you."
- ☐ Try something new.
- ☐ Speak kindly to myself once each day.
- ☐ Take a break from comparing myself online.
- ☐ Spend time with someone supportive.
- ☐ Celebrate one thing I did well today.
- ☐ Practice saying no respectfully.
- ☐ Ask for help if I need it.
- ☐ Remember that mistakes are part of learning.

My three goals:

Looking Back

At the end of the week, reflect.

What am I proud of?

What challenged me?

What did I learn about myself?

What is one thing I want to continue practicing?

Final Thoughts

Your self-esteem is not determined by your grades, your appearance, your productivity, your social media followers, your mistakes, or what other people think of you.

You are much more than your hardest day or your loudest self-critical thought.

Building healthier self-esteem is a gradual process of learning to see yourself more clearly, more compassionately, and more realistically. Every small step you take toward treating yourself with kindness matters. Growth doesn't require perfection. It simply requires practice.

KALM Psychology

This resource is intended for educational purposes and is not a substitute for psychological assessment or treatment. If low self-esteem is significantly affecting your mental health, relationships, school, work, or daily functioning, consider reaching out to a qualified mental health professional.

Looking for additional support? If low self-esteem is affecting your daily life, you don't have to work through it alone. Individual therapy can help you better understand the experiences that have shaped how you see yourself, while learning practical, evidence-based skills to build confidence, self-compassion, and emotional resilience. KALM Psychology also offers a [Teen Emotional Regulation Skills Group](#), where teens learn DBT skills in a supportive environment to help manage intense emotions, strengthen relationships, and develop a healthier sense of self. Reach out today to learn more about individual therapy or upcoming group programs.

These complimentary resources may be shared in their original form with attribution to KALM Psychology and Zahra Domingo, Registered Psychologist.