

The American Counseling Association's "Counseling Corner" Weekly Columns

Taking Action To Improve Confidence And Self-Esteem

from the American Counseling Association

Many of us would like to have higher self-esteem. We feel good when we're more confident and self-assured. Improved self-esteem enables us to be comfortable enough to relax and be ourselves with others. It enables us to quit worrying about saying the right thing or wondering what others are thinking of us.

The problem for many people is that they're waiting for some internal changes to signal that they can let the real "person" out to behave more confidently. But in reality, the path to high self-esteem is already there. Simply behaving more confidently, and trying new things, are the building blocks to improving self-esteem.

One roadblock is that there are sometimes hidden benefits to lower self-esteem. The most obvious one is that low self-esteem can let us feel safe and comfortable. If we lack the confidence to take some chances and to try new paths, we avoid risk and possible failure. We may feel safe, but will probably also feel stuck and somewhat depressed by always taking that no-risk route.

A first step in increasing self-esteem is to recognize that there's no perfect moment to begin. Waiting until we're smarter or richer or happier before we start taking action usually means that we probably never will take action. The cure is simply to try really living in the present, to go ahead and take a risk rather than always waiting.

Another roadblock to increasing self-esteem is that we often ignore our own needs. It can feel good when we please others but not if it means putting our own needs on hold. It's important to be just as able to say, "I need your help," as it is to say, "Can I help you?" When our relationships are more balanced and reciprocal, our self-esteem improves.

The temptation for many of us is to stay safely within our comfort zones. While taking chances may sometimes feel risky, playing it safe all the time can be as uncomfortable as trying something new. Even people with strong self-esteem will wonder about being judged, looking silly or making waves. The difference is that they don't worry about it as long and don't let the worry immobilize them.

Trying something new or different is usually better than staying stuck. The "trying" builds our strength, not the outcome. Whether we succeed or fail, we get to say, "I did it." And that's what builds self-esteem.

"Counseling Corner" is provided by the American Counseling Association. Comments and questions to ACAcorner@counseling.org or visit the ACA website at www.counseling.org

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