

The Consequences of Low Self Esteem

By Ron Petit

We hear a lot these days about self-esteem, what it is, how to get it and very importantly, what the consequences are of having low self esteem. But let's back up a little. What is self-esteem to begin with? Is it just more psychobabble or simply attempts by some to sell us more self-help books with agendas that don't match our values.

Clearly, trite phrases such as learning to "take care of ourselves" or "defining ourselves" or "taking responsibility for ourselves" have some limited usefulness when referring to that elusive "self", but they seem to often be used in ways that are too abstract and that don't pass the smell test down at the truck stop. So bottom line then, what do we mean when we use the term "self" and how does having one help our "self esteem"? Oh yea, and what happens if our self-esteem gets damaged or takes the next flight south.

The Dictionary and the encyclopedias have their definitions of self and self-esteem but I wish to offer my own version for brevities sake. Having a self or a stable sense of self-means knowing what our values are and conducting our lives in alignment with those values. It also means knowing what we stand for and what we stand against. It means that when things we don't stand for appear in our world, that we can set limits, say no and/or enforce limits we have already set. When we know our verbal, touch and space boundaries (to name a few) and we set or assert them, we end up feeling true to ourselves and in alignment with our values. The end result is that we end up feeling good about ourselves. Our self-respect grows. This in turn gives us courage to tackle life and its challenges and to literally be able to take on more responsibilities and to move in the direction of our genuine goals and aspirations.

On the other hand, when we don't honor our values and limits or if we've actually never internalized workable authentic limits and values, we often are tossed about by life's turmoil and changes with little influence in the matter. As a result, we end up not being able to take feedback real well as we see it as a criticism of ourselves and a putdown, rather than a chance to learn. In addition, because we end up feeling inadequate and not very potent, we also then tend to not want to try new things, as they are too threatening and too easily take us out of our safe comfort zone. We all need comfort and a semblance of security in our lives, but when we are so fearful as to not be able to take reasonable risks in our own behalf, then we end up often living lives of wasted potential and inner frustration.

In this scenario, we often judge ourselves harshly as we condemn ourselves for lacking courage, for not having taken the risk and followed our dreams or even something as simple as not having spoke up when we wanted to in a situation where it mattered to us.

On the other hand, if we make it a practice of first listening to our gut and our inner aspirations, speaking up when so inspired, setting limits and saying no when we need to

and taking wise risks in order to help ourselves, we end up feeling better and can then live with ourselves and our choices, even if things don't seemingly "work out". We then tend to get off our own cases, as our inner person is satisfied. We have honored those deeply held commitments that tend to haunt us until they are heard and acted upon. We feel good about ourselves or at least better. We are on the road to building self-esteem.

Getting included and feeling like a valued part of something bigger than ourselves helps also. I believe it is wired in for us to want to contribute on some level and to make a difference in this world to others, even if it is simple or modest endeavor. Taking part in our church, an outdoor club, The Lions, a business club, or being a part of a circle of friends can do wonders for our self-esteem. When we feel we have helped or contributed in some small way, I believe we then value ourselves more. As a result, we then have even more to give to others and worthwhile causes in the future.

When I can make a difference, when I listen to and honor my inner values, when I define myself and what I stand for and when I get myself included, my self esteem soars.

Sometimes there are those clever ones who try to fool us with counterfeit self-esteem. It goes by the name of arrogance. It is qualitatively and spiritually different on a very basic level. The arrogant person is not in an equal relationship with others nor do they even see others as equal. Their goal is to have the spotlight on themselves and they are indeed very self-centered. It's not about "us" but instead it's all about them or "me". They tend to be consumed by the outer image, the outer man, if you will. They do not respect, accept or value their inner selves and as a result, they do not have the capacity to value the inner being of others. They tend to put others down and then derive a certain amount of glee from the process. Such a person at a deeper level has very low self-esteem and they choose to cover this up by compensating and trying to persuade us otherwise. Most of us are not fooled.

In community life, the person with high self-esteem always looks for the common ground where all are equal. They do not try to lord it over others or to put others down. Because they accept and value themselves, they extend the same to others. Such people are more apt to try to understand others rather than to level accusations. They tend to also get along with others better as they relate in a way where others feel valued in their presence.

Growing up in Winter, I was blessed by having known many people who were kind and had high self-esteem. People like Carolyn Melchert, Bob Ruegger, May Mackalonis, Mr. Sullivan the coach at Winter School, Mr. Stevens the band instructor, Mrs. Gouge the choral instructor and the list goes on. I am thankful for their contribution to my life. As I return to this area, I again see that there are similar people in our midst. I'm hoping to meet more of you every day.

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