

Self-Esteem Comes from Self-Awareness

Be happy when you look in the mirror

Self-esteem: it's how we see ourselves through our own eyes. Feeling good about ourselves is pretty exciting, especially when it's down to personal achievement. Receiving a promotion at work thanks to our own diligence and efforts will probably gain admiration from others; but it is nowhere near as gratifying as the sense of personal pride we experience. Although the benefits from this rise in status are essentially materialistic, the psychological boost is far more important. There may be an extra spring in our step as we prepare to face the problems of yesterday with renewed vigour. Ideally, all of life's challenges should be regarded in this positive frame of mind, but that requires self-confidence for the duration. Unfortunately, faith in ourselves is rarely supreme or lasting, being constantly undermined by self-doubt which grows as it feeds on itself. We may eventually start to believe that we are incapable of doing anything well or good any more. We've convinced ourselves that we are losers; and a quick glance in the mirror confirms we actually look the part.

It wasn't always like this, so what's changed? The desire to improve is still there, to perform a little better than last time, to continue to look good in company; but the opinion of others doesn't count for much when we are dissatisfied with who we imagine we have become. Certainly there are differences; there must be. Years have passed, for us as they have for everyone; in our estimation, however, the passing of time has been less than kind on the home front, whereas others seem to have fared much better. This is the mistake we make: criticising ourselves based on someone we are not, perhaps can never be. The resultant lowering of self-esteem may prompt us to search for a solution. Physical appearance can be changed. The right kind of make-up, a visit to the hair salon, more fashionable clothes will make a world of difference; and compliments from people we meet following the make-over may seem to confirm it as a wise choice. The problem comes when we eventually have to admit to ourselves that nothing has really changed. Once the make-up and the clothes are off, we are no different. In fact, creating an artificial image only serves to highlight our perceived inadequacies with a before-and-after picture. The knowledge that we can't hide our true selves from ourselves causes self-esteem to drop even further and we are on a downward spiral. This has to stop. Thinking so negatively won't help. I'm hoping what I have to say next will help encourage a positive outlook.

Regard self-esteem as a barometer, a very honest one. If you don't like what you see in the mirror, ask yourself what in particular turns you off. When the read-out of the bathroom scales causes you to groan, you don't even have to ask why. Here are things you can do something to rectify. No, you can't lose the wrinkles or the grey, thinning hair except by masking them; and even if you did, you would know they were still there. Okay, they make you look older. Well, aren't you – older than yesterday, certainly much older than ten years ago? Forget yourself for a moment and consider others: George Clooney for example, until recently the film-world's most eligible bachelor. Until *recently*, remember that. Still handsome, though, more mature and, I like to think, very happy with the person he has become. Closer to home, reflect on people you have seen, maybe only in passing: the man in the business-suit, hair greying at the temples – very distinguished; or the older woman with the trim figure – no make-up that you could see, but attractive nevertheless. They caught your attention because of the way you saw them; and being unable to compare this with how they used to be, you are satisfied with their appeal. Had they glimpsed you at the time, they wouldn't have been thinking you'd changed for the worse, because they didn't know you before that moment. They would simply have accepted you for the way you are now. If you had a smile on your face at the time, they might have been thinking: "There goes someone happy to be who they are. I'd do well to follow their example."

There is, of course, more to it than just appearances. Attitude, a subject of an earlier Healthy Living article (HL11), goes hand-in-glove with self-esteem. Negatively criticising ourselves lowers self-esteem and as a consequence our attitude worsens. Problems outside of our personal bubble also bring us down and we become even more negative. Put this in perspective – look in the mirror: whatever happened at work could be making us appear and feel the way we do at that moment. The extra wrinkles are a result of the frown, plus the sneer doesn't help. Solution - forget the aggravations of the day. Think of something positive and happy as you look at your reflection; stand upright, shoulders back; imagine you are an actor rehearsing for an audition – a cheerful, devil-may-care role. Now, take a deep breath, relax and produce that endearing smile, the one you used to wear, the one you need to start wearing again. It still fits, probably better than ever now you are more mature. And remember: this doesn't come out of a bottle; it isn't an artificial make-over that takes hours to perfect: it's the real you waiting to appear the instant you let it. Always assuming that's what you want.

Surely, you do? Okay, your figure's less than perfect. If you're too skinny, you won't get fatter eating bird seed and lettuce. Get some real food into you; have a burger and fries once in a while. Those on the other side of the coin, which is most of us, need to trim down – not too quickly, though: the last thing we want is to quit two days in like we have in the past. Exercise is a must for everyone, but it has to be the right sort in consideration for current state of fitness and existing medical conditions. Above all, whatever we decide to do, it's not likely to work overnight and we definitely can't expect miracles. What should be experienced over time is an improvement in self-esteem. This will take a bit of a dive when we succumb to our former bad habits; but if the backslide is regarded as a temporary hiccup, no harm will be done. As for the measurable aspects, once again, results will probably be slow, perhaps not even noticeable at first. Just have faith, stick with the program you have set for yourself and try to be patient. Little by little you'll start feeling good about yourself.

Back to the mirror again. That's you in there, not the way you were, nor the way you will become. If you don't like what you see, be happy in the knowledge that you have something to work with; but be realistic. There is no fountain of youth, no elixir that will make you smarter, fitter, slimmer, fatter. Forget cosmetic surgery – it is potentially harmful and the image it creates won't be the real you, just an artificial reproduction of a picture you see in a catalogue. Any aspirations you may have thought lost are still achievable by the person inside you who just needs a bit of faith and encouragement. Look again: see a new you preparing to embark on a new future starting from now – no misgivings, no illusions, fully confident, ready to make it all happen. Then, before you turn away, smile at who you are, and mean it!

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