

SOS Détresse

Self-esteem

Self-esteem is the name we give to the way in which we think of ourselves. It refers to **the way we behave towards and feel about ourselves**: if we believe ourselves to be a valued person, we feel happy with ourselves; conversely if we are too critical of ourselves we feel unworthy.

Our self-esteem is crucial for what we expect of ourselves but also plays an important role in how we deal with others. **Many personal and relationship problems are due to poor self-image and low self-esteem.** To have a sense of personal worth is a pre-condition for making contacts and establishing good relations, for having joy in life and creativity, and above all being able to overcome obstacles and take on crises.

Having poor self-esteem can manifest itself in different ways. People who undervalue themselves are often very fragile and are very sensitive to criticism and real or imaginary irritations. Some people try to hide their weakness in one way or another. They can either come across as remote or arrogant; or they are very sociable, establish contacts very easily and agree with everyone. In either case, however, they may feel empty, because they have no real contact either with themselves or with others. Others try to be understanding, to be fair to everyone and always try to be friendly and discreet. This self-sacrifice can be carried on right up to the point of total physical or mental exhaustion. The needs of others always take priority. Some people lack security, are shy and prefer to withdraw, because they think they do not deserve the interest or love of others.

How does poor self-esteem develop?

According to neuropsychological research by Klaus Grawe, **having security and good self-esteem are part of our fundamental human needs.** Yet some people always underestimate themselves and think they have no personal value. Various reasons can cause this lack of self-confidence. Normally these cases date back to negative experiences in infancy or youth with those people who were particularly important.

On a similar note, traumatic experiences can engender a sense of powerlessness or helplessness and can permanently impair self-esteem. People who have been traumatised develop negative images of themselves, voluntarily demean themselves and fall into a vicious circle of worthlessness. The fear of failure, incompetence or inability to make bonds is reinforced by the fact that any positive reactions from

people around them are ignored or minimised. These people focus primarily on what is wrong, on their faults or weaknesses. They subconsciously put themselves into situations that reinforce their idea of weakness, for example, by demanding more of themselves than they can give or by choosing partners who reinforce their sense of inferiority.

How to break free of low self-esteem?

When the primary needs of security and self-esteem are not met, negative consequences can be seen in many areas. Someone in this situation should focus totally on **one basic task: to develop a caring and accepting attitude to themselves**. If we value ourselves many things are simpler: we can accept our own mistakes and we can deal with them, because we have confidence in ourselves. Someone who due to their low self-esteem must appear to be perfect, invincible and arrogant does not accept their own weaknesses and tries to cover them up. But if we accept ourselves as we are, we can live with and accept our imperfections calmly, knowing that imperfections are part of life.

It is therefore important to develop a positive attitude towards oneself. We must apply ways of thinking that can help us break out of old, rigid clichés. We must learn to pay attention to the positive aspects of our lives.

For many people this is not simple, but it can be done in small steps.

The following questions can make you become more aware of the positive sides of life:

- In what areas / roles do I feel competent? Where do I succeed?
- What do I share with other people? To whom am I important?
- What skills have helped me so far in my life, to overcome difficult situations, to make important changes or to meet new people?
- During which period of my life could I appreciate my talents? How did I manage to have a better opinion of them then?

The following questions may help us work towards increasing positive experiences:

- When do I not take my own needs into account? What do I need to feel better about myself?
- Which people make me feel good? Where can I get to know people who share my values and interests?
- What do I like, and which activities do me good? How can I make up for dissatisfaction or worries about my work?
- In which areas would it be beneficial to start reducing my hopes and desires?

If you have found positive answers to these questions, you now have to **take up the challenge of putting the answers into practice**.

When is it necessary to seek professional help?

Sometimes self-esteem can be so damaged that it is no longer possible to see any positive features or to recognise that other people love us and need us.

When self-esteem is permanently low, people isolate themselves, become resigned to their situation or sometimes have self-harming behaviour and suicidal thoughts. Others build a wall of mistrust around themselves and completely close themselves off from anyone else. They have feelings of loneliness and emptiness, guilt, irritation or even anger. Added to that is the fear that any weaknesses and shortcomings might be noticed by others and we might be disgraced and rejected by them. If these difficulties of self-esteem are extreme, it may seem impossible for the person concerned to escape from this vicious circle. Often these problems are related to problems of depression, chronic difficulties with their partner, aggressiveness, alcohol abuse, drugs abuse or social phobia. **It is therefore advisable to seek professional help from a qualified therapist.** As part of the therapy, the person concerned can have new positive experiences, develop their self-esteem and find a better way to behave taking account of their own feelings and needs.

A first step may be to make contact with SOS Détresse and to **feel that you are valued, with all your weaknesses, worries and problems.**