



EMOTIONAL WELL-BEING

Women's Self-Esteem

Karen DeBord, Human Development Specialist

Self-esteem is how you feel about yourself. It is an image you create. This is not just one image, but many images. How do you see yourself in your many roles?

Step back and take a look at yourself from a distance by answering the questions in the chart below.

On any given day, you experience many different roles — a manager at work, a manager at home, a plumber, a taxi driver, a caterer, a writer, an all-star athlete.

The feelings of satisfaction that you have with your performance and how you feel you are valued in these roles make up your total self-worth.

You may feel good about yourself in some areas of your life. You may not feel so good about other areas of your life. The value that you and others place on your performance affects your self-esteem.

Do you value your accomplishments and successes differently in different areas? How do others value your accomplishments and successes? Are some people's opinions of you more important to you than others'?

Our successes and the values we place on those successes form the foundation on which we build our self-esteem.

CHALLENGES & CHOICES

What are the parts of self that form the whole?

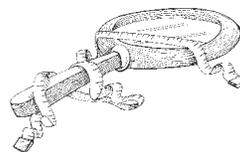
How you feel about your **physical appearance** heads the list of best predictors of self-esteem. The second highest predictor is **intimate relationships** or close and meaningful relationships with a partner. This includes communicating freely and openly in a close relationship.

The third highest predictor of self-esteem, called **sociability**, is how you interact with others.

Other areas that are strong predictors of self-worth are:

- ✓ **Intelligence:** the ability to learn and use what you know.
- ✓ **Adequacy as a provider:** supporting self and others for whom you are responsible.
- ✓ **Morality:** standards of conduct (right and wrong).
- ✓ **Job competence:** feeling productive, competent and proud of work;
- ✓ **Humor:** meaning the ability to see the amusing side of things and laugh at oneself;
- ✓ **Nurturance:** which involves caring for others, and fostering the growth of others (Messer & Harter, 1986).

What do you see?



	→		
		<i>Positively</i>	<i>Negatively</i>
How do you see yourself in social settings?	3	2	1
How do you see yourself at work?	3	2	1
How do you see your physical self?	3	2	1
How do you see yourself as a spouse or partner?	3	2	1
How do you see yourself as a parent?	3	2	1
How do you see your thinking self?	3	2	1
How do you see your moral self?	3	2	1

How do women develop a sense of self-esteem?

During childhood, children 2-3 years of age learn to label themselves correctly as either boys or girls. At first young children don't understand that their gender will be the same throughout their lives.

Learning this comes with age, but is usually evident to children between the ages of 4 and 7. By age 3, sex stereotypes are visible to young children in the form of toys, clothing, household objects, games and work.

After age 7, children's awareness of these stereotypes continues to increase — but boys show more of a preference for traditionally masculine activities than girls do for traditionally feminine activities. (Huston, 1983).

In adolescent and teen years, children are able to make some judgments about their own self-worth.

Boys tend to view their increasing body size as positive, while many girls view these growth changes negatively. In general, self-esteem among girls drops slightly in elementary school; and during adolescence, esteem for both boys and girls falls with girls dropping significantly.

What affects continued development of esteem for women?

Family values, cultural learning and support networks all play a role in how we feel about ourselves.

During teen years, females confront two tasks at once — developing both identity and intimacy. Some of the researchers think that because there is pressure to seek intimacy at this time, part of the identity development period is delayed.

Delaying this phase means that a female has not evaluated her own tal-

How strong is your safety net?

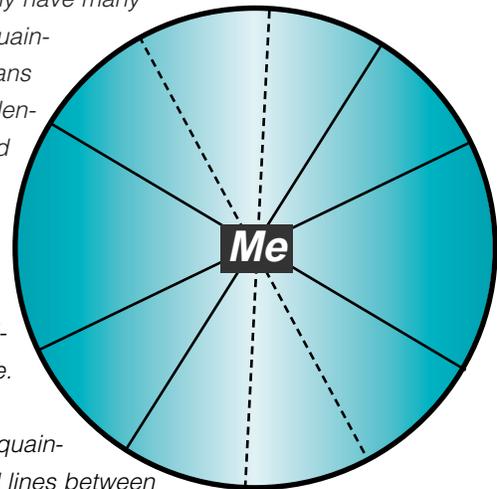
Healthy individuals generally have many people in their network of acquaintances. A healthy network means you have more sources of replenishment when you are stressed and more people to turn to when you need support.

1. Take a clean sheet of paper.

2. Draw a circle in the middle and label it with your name.

3. Start naming as many friends, family members or acquaintances as you can. Draw solid lines between your name and other names to show which ones you can most always count on for support and dotted lines to indicate persons you can sometimes count on for support.

How have you received support. Are there ways the linkages can be strengthened? Is there room to develop new friendships and acquaintances?



ents, skills and values and often has to deal with these questions later in life.

For adult women, competence has become the new standard. Competence is about the unlimited capacity to do everything well without any help and without ever showing weaknesses. Trying to live by this competence code can itself be overwhelming.

Couple this with a society that frowns on any show of emotion, that expects women to succeed without being competitive and that also expects women to forgo the pursuit of any personal needs, and you have a formula for burnout.

For some women, doing much for others may be a major source of esteem. It may give some power in the family and power in primary relationships.

The strain of overfunctioning at work, taking on too much responsibility, and not letting anything go while

keeping all of the balls in the air may help many women feel like they are meeting the standards set by others.

This helps avoid feelings of shame if a task is left incomplete and can help gain approval thus boosting esteem temporarily. But by meeting all of the needs of others, we neglect our own needs, which in the end can deflate self-esteem.

One way to avoid overwork at home and in the paying workforce is to surround yourself with a support system, or network, made up of friends and family. These are people you can call upon for help.

Complete the activity above to show your support network. If there are too few linkages, broadening this support system through your faith or religious organization, through work associations, and through the community may be one way to build in a safety net.

Esteem has an impact on all areas of a woman's life

WORK

Behaviors learned during the school years are likely to carry over into the work world. Average girls in school are often ignored — neither reprimanded or praised. They learn that if they do well in school, it is due to luck or hard work, not because they are capable or smart.

When girls perceive that they are not good at science and math (in particular), their sense of self-esteem and aspirations for a career decline. A school culture that values the abilities and skills of individuals over competitiveness between genders is more encouraging for girls.

Psychological well-being is positively related to the kind of roles and number of roles a person occupies. In the business world, a common method for raising personal value is in diversification — or having many skills and many acquaintances.

A woman whose entire life has revolved around one person or one job may find herself and her esteem tied to this role without other outlets or options. Some researchers have found that a woman's salary is directly affected by her self-esteem (Frey & Carbock, 1989).

No matter how much women love work, most women feel that good personal relationships such as friendships, marriages or children are critical to having a balanced life.

The struggle for balance between work and relationships can sometimes leave a woman feeling like a failure at both.

Advancing a career usually does mean working long hours, bringing work home, and giving work the emotional energy that a woman could otherwise focus on relationships with family and friends.

RELATIONSHIPS

Women often are nurturing, all-giving persons, often sacrificing self over others. These actions tie women's self-worth intricately to how successful they are in relationships. Women often confuse being needed with being loved. This kind of socialization creates beliefs that the more you give, the more you get and finds women putting others' needs above their own.

This viewpoint results in many women draining all of their personal energy and resources on others. Without replenishment, reciprocation, or appreciation for constant giving, the positive internal sense of fulfillment that was achieved through giving breaks down, and thoughts such as, "I must be doing something wrong" or "What is wrong with me?" take over.

HEALTH

A number of health problems can be traced to low self-esteem including eating disorders, substance abuse, depression and suicide. Some researchers (Sanford & Donovan, 1985 in Frey and Carbock) have found that women have socially learned to listen to their physicians as opposed to listening to their own body signals. This may erode a woman's belief in their own bodies and their own knowledge about themselves.

Women communicate differently

Communication styles can affect and be affected by self-esteem. Females learn to be caring and connected, to give to others instead of learning to give to themselves. There are specific ways women are expected to interact with others. Much of this pattern is overcome when women begin to understand their own communication patterns. For example, how would you respond to the following situation?

Your supervisor has noticed some hostility among several of the people in the work unit. She wants to clear the air immediately because people are disgruntled and losing valuable work time over a situation that has been handled by the corporate office. You have only been on the job for six months, but feel as if you have some information and insight into the problems. Would you —

1. Say nothing.
2. Turn to someone whom you think is wiser than yourself for the answers.
3. Respond based on your personal experiences.
4. Attempt to collect more information and then decide.
5. Hear the opinions of others and combine that with personal experiences to construct a solution.

There are five levels of women's communication patterns. Each response above represents one of those levels. Each level reflects higher confidence in what you think.

1. Silence

A woman who chooses silence fears the consequences of her words. This woman sees herself as powerless, depends on others to do the talking, may lack self-confidence, and is unaware of the power of her own words.

2. Received knowledge

This woman prefers to turn to another authority (a teacher or a book for example) to seek answers. She assumes that there is one right answer for each question and feels she has trouble picking her own words. Her answers are not her own, but that of another expert.

3. Subjective knowledge

This woman will either reject or support 'expert' opinion based on her own experiences. This woman has learned to go with a "gut feeling." She may distrust scientific knowledge and realizes that she can depend on nobody but herself.

4. Procedural knowledge

This woman recognizes the need to learn new methods of understanding various points of view and uses new strategies of understanding to analyze situations. She has learned to listen to her inner voice and hear herself think but is alert to others around her.

5. Constructed knowledge

At this level, the woman uses critical reasoning and weighs options. She constructs new knowledge by going beyond information to weave knowledge, experiences and appropriate strategies together to form new meanings. (Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, & Tarule, 1986)

Summary

The first step in raising your self-esteem is to develop confidence in what you already know about who you are. Hear the opinions of others, learn from their experiences and ideas, but trust in yourself.

References

- Belenky, M.F., Clinchy, B.M., Goldberger, N.R. and Tarule, J.M. (1986). *Women's ways of knowing*. New York: Basic Books.
- Frey, D. and Carbock, J. (1989). *Enhancing self-esteem*. 2nd edition. Muncie, IN: Accelerated Development, Inc.
- Huston, A.C. (1983). Sex-typing. In Paul H. Mussen (Ed.) Series Volume IV, *Handbook of Child Psychology*. New York: John Wiley and Sons, Inc.

Your communication history

The following exercise will help you begin to restructure your communication style. Think about your upbringing, your own needs and your own desires. Think back to the family in which you grew up. What parts of your family or culture contributed to who you are and how you feel about yourself?

- What does it mean to be a woman?
- How should a woman be treated?
- How should a woman treat herself?
- What are some ways you have been taught to be?
 - Never be...
 - Don't be...
 - You should always be...
- What messages did your parents give you about your mistakes?
- How have you learned to highlight your successes and achievements?

How do you meet your needs?

Find a balance between your personal needs and meeting others' needs.

Some of these questions may be helpful:

- What do I want?
- What is my next step?
- How can I do this?
- How does this feel to me?
- What do I think is important?
- What can I live with?
- What are my choices?
- Do I agree with what is happening?

Your reflection

By yourself or in a group think of, or share, the following:

- Something you do very well.
- Some way in which you are creative.
- Name someone who totally accepts you.
- Describe how you respond to criticism.
- Name a place where you feel relaxed.
- What do you think others appreciate about you?
- Name the times you have felt good.
- Was there a time when you felt bad about yourself?
- What is a risk you took recently?
- Name a high point in your life.
- Name a favorite activity.
- Who have you had an impact on?