

We can work at replacing self-criticism with more supportive comments such as "The important thing is that I tried". We can gently confront ourselves with our self sabotage, and identify the child within us who needs to be supported as we risk learning the skills we need to behave more adaptively.

Obviously none of this is particularly easy. We developed into who we are over many years, and it will take a lot of time and effort to change. But since raising our self-esteem is so important to everything we do, the effort is well worth it. And it doesn't all have to be done alone. Professionals at the Counseling Center can help with the process of self-examination, and skill building and our support groups can provide the instruction and support necessary to change.

SELF ESTEEM

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SELF ESTEEM

Underlying a lot of the problems that bring students to the UCI Counseling Center is low self-esteem. Self-esteem refers to the way we think about ourselves, so each of us can place ourselves somewhere on the continuum from low or poor self-esteem to high or positive self-esteem. This construct is a basic underpinning of much of what we do and feel, so it follows that low self-esteem can be a major factor in many of the problems we experience. Underachievement, destructive relationships, chronic depression, and substance abuse have all been linked to a lack of positive self-esteem.

People develop self-esteem in two ways: what others do to them (or don't do to them) and what they do to themselves. As children we all need nurturing and mirroring in ways that are consistent with our level of development. The young child needs to be touched, fed and attended to. As the child grows there's a need for praise and feeling important and interesting to his or her caretakers. All of these things need to be age-specific and in all areas of development. The parent who can play peekaboo with the toddler but can't deal with messy mudpies is giving the child limited positive messages. A parent who can praise academic achievement, but can't touch or allow the child to express feelings is contributing only

selectively to positive self-esteem. Sometimes a child has very great needs, e.g. is physically handicapped or ill. Sometimes a parent does not have the resources to meet the child's needs, e.g. a single parent raising a large family, or a family where one parent is ill or substance-abusing. And sometimes parents, siblings or others are outright destructive, e.g. physical and sexual abuse. In many of these cases self-esteem suffers.

Self-esteem is also a function of what we do to ourselves. In a cyclical manner, when our self-esteem is low, we frequently act in ways that lower it further. We feel depressed, so we drink too much, then feel bad about ourselves for drinking. Feeling undeserving, we wind up in destructive relationships with partners who reinforce our low self-concept. We can't say no, so we feel exploited. Conversely, when we think highly of ourselves we're willing to risk anything for what we want, and when we get it our self worth is reinforced.

Given that self-esteem is so important to how one functions and feels, students often ask how they can work on raising their self-esteem. The answer might be best understood by looking at both parameters of self esteem - what others have done to us and what we have done and continue to do to ourselves. It can be helpful to examine the ways that others have contributed to our low self-esteem, not because we can change the past, but because we can change the way the past has affected us. It can be healing - either by self-

examination (i.e. a journal) or in the context of individual or group psychotherapy - to look at how our parents' messages to us may be more a function of their circumstances than any intrinsic shortcomings of our own. Working through our anger at those who have hurt us, and recognizing the continuing impact of such social institutions as mass media (e.g. we must all be thin beautiful, rich etc. etc.) are also helpful in developing more objectivity about ourselves.

Once we've recognized how others have affected how we feel about ourselves, we're more ready to deal with how we continue to keep ourselves down. Many of us perpetuate the effects of our critics by developing an inner critic. Since no one is perfect, our inner critic can always find something about which to harasses us: never smart enough, thin enough, popular enough, quick enough. Others of us prefer self-sabotage to open criticism: we become known for our poor relationship choices, our tendency to oversleep the morning of an exam or interview, our procrastination, or our overindulgence in recreational substances. Still others of us perpetuate our low self esteem by never having learned basic skills or self management, e.g. assertion, time management, study skills: no one taught us, and we're afraid to risk learning too "late". So to raise our self-esteem we might think in terms of re-parenting ourselves.