

SELF-ESTEEM

Low self-esteem is a subtle, corrosive destroyer. It is often characterised by negative statements that **you** make (or believe) about **yourself**. In your early life, usually up to about two years old at least, you had self-esteem coming out of every pore of your skin. It was 'your' world: everything in it was there for 'You'. Anyway, that is how you perceived it - then. Sometime after that you began to lose it, or this perception was taken away from you, or it slipped away as you realised that other people also existed, and that some of them even had rights. This is a necessary part of growing up – to a certain extent. There is one way, and one way only, to get your self-esteem back! It doesn't come as a gift; it isn't found somewhere; you can't earn it back; or win it. You have to start to reclaim it back - for yourself!

You need to recognise the particular negative statements that you carry about yourself. These usually have a particular flavour to them. Some of them are characterised by, "*I should ...*" or "*I ought to ...*" or "*I am always like that ...*" or "*I'm such a fool ...*" You may well have exaggerated the 'negative' and got a situation relating to yourself totally out of perspective. You may have over generalised, and consider yourself as an absolute failure, because you have made just one mistake. You may consistently ignore (or not even take in) positive statements about yourself: "*They are just saying that to be nice.*" You may "know" that people are thinking 'bad' things about you, even without checking with them (or anyone else): "*They must be because ... I am 'bad' or whatever*".

You may also see things in very 'black-and-white' terms: you are either 'good-or-bad' and since you are obviously not "good" (since you make mistakes, or have uncharitable thoughts, or have heavy thighs, or whatever); then you must – absolutely inevitably – be 'bad'. This is not good thinking.

This recognition process is not easy. These things have built up over time – or you have constructed this view about yourself over time. Originally it might have been for very good reasons. It might have helped you to survive a very difficult situation: a critical mother (perhaps). If you wanted or needed her affection (and you might have desperately), you would then have had to 'agree' with her that, "*You are the source of all her problems*". Or your father might have wanted a boy – sorry, you were a girl – "*Not good enough.*" Or your father might have wanted you, his son, to have all the advantages that he never had and to succeed where he didn't: "*Sorry, you are human. You are still his son. But maybe not the imaginary super-son that he wanted to fulfil all his ambitions. But whose problem was this?*" In these instances, s/he (your parent) could not accept you, their child, just for what you were. To survive this pain, you adopted a position of low self-esteem. There are other ways of losing your self-esteem: critical messages from the school playground; a trauma, accident or event that sets you apart somehow; some physical defect, scar, or birthmark; or a sudden weight gain or something. It is going to take some time to exorcise these early messages, whatever they were, from your psyche. You have been carrying them around and living according to these 'rules' for many years.

Please remember that these thoughts and feelings are just **your** perception of yourself. These thoughts and feelings have nothing to do with who you really are. In the same way that your parents could not see you, as you were - they only saw that you were not what they wanted you to be. You are therefore not seeing yourself as who you really are. You are only seeing one particular aspect of yourself, from one particular (and somewhat poor) perspective.

If you are going to develop positive self-esteem, you need to start to fight back. You need to start to develop a new perspective. You need to challenge this eternally negative or self-critical voice. You need to 'dump the critic' and consider some different thought forms. Please, do not discount your capabilities here. You can do this if you really want to. But you are going to have to break the mould. You are going to have to be much less modest, and talk more openly about how you feel and what you want. We know that "*You shouldn't blow your own trumpet*" but you are going to have to do

this a little bit more (or a lot more) than you ever did before, before you cross that socially unacceptable line.

Keep working steadily with this. You will need lots of practice, at first, because the negative imprinting (or conditioning) has been in use for a long time. Develop ways to check out your negative thoughts and then get some other (or more objective) feedback. Then, label these: “*John thinks I am ... Peter thinks I am ... Mary thinks I am ...*” and so on. This is a crucial part of the first step. Now you are going to have to do something a little bit more.

Your negative thoughts and feelings about yourself have created a pattern of behaviour of putting yourself down (or not putting yourself forward) and a thought form (something like, ‘*You are not good enough*’) that reinforces this, with a whole raft of secondary feelings built up to support all this. This statement is not only wrong, it is a lie – and you must really try and see this – because it is only one, usually very small and sometimes quite distorted, aspect of who you really are: the complete ‘you’. You developed this way of thinking, behaving and being – probably because you needed to survive a difficult emotional situation. That situation has now changed: and/but you haven’t. There is a different way of thinking and behaving available – at your fingertips. But you have to want to reach out for it, knowing somewhere that the old pattern (now pretty dysfunctional), is capable of being broken down and disappearing, and a new pattern establishing itself. Others have done it, now you can do it. Like the L’Oreal advert: “*You’re worth it!*”

I am deliberately making this sound quite simple, it is – but it is not easy. It is quite an entrenched pattern to break and you may need some help and support from your friends; or you may need some professional counselling or self-esteem classes for a while, in order to implement these changes fully. There are also some suggestions for running a Self-Esteem group later on, so that you can get together with some friends and run these for yourself.

The old pattern of thinking about yourself negatively has been quite embedded. You will need to fight it specifically. You may need to start to say to yourself: “*I am a worthwhile person because ...*” and then choose one, just one, particular thing that you can do well, or that is good about you. This could be something successful that you have done; or something you worked hard at; or a natural (say) quality or kindness. Work hard to get a foot in the door of better self-esteem: “*At least I can do this reasonably well. That means something.*” Then choose something else – another positive aspect of yourself. In this way, you can gradually build up a succession of reasonably accurate and more positive statements. These will slowly begin to replace the negative statements that you have developed about yourself. These positive statements are, as true, if not more so, than the negative ones. This is the first step. It has to be done. Only you know yourself well enough to be able to do it. However, you can also ask your proper friends. They might see something about you that you cannot see – yet!

To a certain extent this type of self-esteem is ‘conditional’ as it is dependent on various things that you have done, on parts of your persona, on your unique opinions, etc. And, however well this works, this is still ‘conditional’ self-esteem. Conditional self-esteem has some benefits as it affirms some of your talents and skills; it may motivate you to work hard and to do your best; or to try to be a nice person. But conditional self-esteem also has its disadvantages: it is vulnerable to circumstances. What happens if you are *not* as productive and successful as you think that you should be? What happens if the firm is taken over, or closes, and you are made redundant? Or, if someone close to you leaves? Does this mean that you are now worthless? Or inferior? Of, course not, but it certainly feels that way. Your ‘first steps’ towards better self-esteem can thus easily become corroded.

Our culture or society is based on the principle of a very few ‘winners’ getting all the glory – and there is an implication that the rest of us are thus basically ‘losers’. We admire the winners, and yet we know (somewhere inside) that we will never be one of them: so, that makes us a ‘loser’. The ‘star’ culture, or ‘hero’ culture reinforces this and is only useful for selling magazines and TV programmes. We live vicariously – in our imaginations: we are, or want to be, like them – especially

if we buy this product, or support this team, or pop group, or whatever. This is quintessentially quite depressing. We are thus continually reinforcing our lack of self-esteem. So, then we need a new washing machine, or a car, or a holiday, or a new girlfriend / boyfriend to make ourselves feel better. So, it goes on and on and on. The advertisers and the magazines love this 'negative' tendency: they use it to sell us 'stuff'.

However, we can turn this situation around. We can start to disengage our self-esteem from these superficial needs, or conditions. We can start to feel independently – “*good enough*”. We can start to see that – everyone, even the rich and famous – have their weak points (even though this also sells more magazines & TV shows). We can step out of this 'good-bad' image and say, “*Yes, I like them ... but I am not like them.*” We can start to see that we might – just possibly – not want to be in their shoes. Oh, we'd like their success, but not want their problems. Dream on! These two go hand-in-hand: you cannot have one without the other.

Stick with yourself. What are you good at? What works for you? What doesn't? What do you feel? How does this make you feel that you want or need? How can you start to get these good feelings for yourself?

Unconditional Self-Esteem:

Unconditional self-esteem is not so vulnerable; it is just a little harder to get your head around what it is. You can start to try to respect yourself just because you are 'you': a unique human being. On the one hand, you are ordinary: like most other people. And - there is also no one else exactly like you on this planet – and there never has been! This is a pretty amazing thing, actually. You can start to try to respect yourself – for no other reason than you have decided to change your life and to stop living with low self-esteem. You can start to try to like yourself – just because you need compassion and support, and nothing to do with whether you have (or have not) earned it. You can start to try to admire yourself, because you are the best expression of 'You' that you have managed to come up with – yet! Sure, there are some rough edges still, but hey! All these concepts are totally independent of any outside circumstances: they are therefore unconditional. They actually do boost your self-esteem. See if you can think up some others.

These sorts of thoughts help you to build a new – and better – feelings about yourself. You can start to look at different areas of your life, away from the 'comfort zone' that you might have built for yourself. You could possibly change many different aspects of yourself – just because you wanted to. It is your life: you can start to live it 'your way'. Here are some of the areas of possible growth or change: Personal, Friends; Job or Career; Family; Leisure Time; Financial; Education; Tidiness, Timeliness & Efficiency; Health; Image and Self-Image; Appearance; Living Situation; etc.

Exercise:

Imagine, for a moment, that you have a cloak: let us call it '*The Cloak of Unconditional Self-Esteem*' – a bit like the Cloak of Invisibility in the Harry Potter books & films. Now, try putting on and wearing this cloak, and try wearing it for a few minutes. How does it make you feel? What does Unconditional Self-Esteem do for you? What is different? What might you want to do differently – from now on? Explore this possibility for a moment or two.

Then choose one of the above areas – just as an exercise, still wearing this cloak – and take a few minutes and consider: if you were going to make some changes in this (particular) area: what would they be? These changes are all designed to help you to become more yourself. They are not selfish: putting you before other people. They are not self-effacing: putting other people before you. You and others (everyone else) all co-exist equally. You like some things; they like some other things. No problem. Now, consider what changes you might like – if you want to.

- √ Fed up with doing the chores? Then imagine having a cleaner coming in twice a week. Or imagine putting up a rota for other members of the household to do some of the chores. How would you feel if that happened?

- √ If you had (say) £2,000 for a total makeover (like *'Trinny and Susanna'* sometimes offered), what would you do with it? What clothes might you buy? How might you feel about yourself then? Imagine wearing some of these new clothes in various different situations. This isn't an impossible amount of money.
- √ If you could change places with someone different for a week (like one of these TV programmes) – living in a different house; doing a different job; living in a different country, etc. – what changes can you imagine? What different things would you do? Then, try and bring that experience back into your present life: what changes might you make now?
- √ If you were put in charge of the office (or place of work) for a week, what changes would you make there? Have you tried making one or two suggestions? Even anonymously?
- √ If you could be more yourself, something like that *'Unique You'*, what would you do differently; how might you feel differently?

Now choose another area (from the list higher on this page) and try imagining some changes in that area. Then try a third. OK: at the end of this exercise, just keep the cloak on for just a few minutes more. Nice, isn't it!

OK! Next stage: – what is stopping you making some of those changes right now? Who is stopping you? Please try to avoid the (almost inevitable) *"Yes, but ..."* response. Please also remember, I am trying to make this simple, but I do not presume, for a moment, that it is going to be easy. However, it is possible. You are still wearing the Cloak of Unconditional Self-Esteem. How could **You** be more like **You** – or like what or who **You Really Are**? You can take the cloak off now – if you want to. Or, you can imagine that you can carry on wearing this cloak more permanently. Or, maybe, it is now just 'yours': you decide.

Some of the advantages of, and the ways to attain, something more of this 'unconditional' or 'self-determined' self-esteem are:

- You will be able to enjoy life more, because you are not worrying so much about yourself. If you are OK, then you're OK. You will also be able to enjoy life more, because you are not worrying so much about other people, or things that might go wrong, or ...
- You will not have to continually defend yourself against that critical inner voice that tells you you're inadequate, or a failure, or whatever. Life thus gets easier.
- If you start to like and accept yourself more, you will have a greater capacity to like or love others. Indeed, some people would say this is a pre-requisite to liking other people.
- This is a step-by-step learning process. Keep going with it and you will achieve it. It is not a 'win-or-lose' 'pass-or-fail' situation, like an exam. It is more like learning how to ride a bike, or swim, or cook. With more practice, you will just get better at it.
- You are not trying to boost your self-esteem with any unreal statements.
- If you are not so afraid of failing, then you can become more adventurous.
- You can now begin to feel more equal to other people. As a person, you are as good as them. You can now walk around a bit taller, bolder and more confidently.
- You have your very special attributes, and so do they. This way, you step out of the 'good – bad', 'inferior – superior' polarity. You become more independent.
- You will start to see things much **less** two-dimensionally: 'good-bad', 'black-white', 'up-down', 'either-or'. Things can become: "both ...this ... and ...that ...". This gives much more possibilities and greater flexibility.
- You will expand with these possibilities. You will grow. You may start to explore things you have always wanted to do, but never had enough self-confidence to do before.

- You can face any shortcomings that you do happen to have more openly, and honestly; using these as a method of, or guide to, self-improvement. This is better than hiding them, or not wanting to look at them, because that might erode what little self-esteem you have.
- You will also be able to hear, and accept, any guidance or criticism much better, because your self-esteem will be more grounded and self-determined. You will become less defensive.
- You can begin to feel better about yourself, and you can enjoy life more, as you will not constantly be worrying whether you are 'good enough' or not. You are 'good enough'.
- Greater self-esteem will not mean that you become self-centred or insensitive to the needs of others. You may fear that, but you have a very long way to go before you cross that line. You will probably be more considerate as you know what some of the 'downside' is like.
- Life won't seem so critical or fragile. You will be able to face the rise and fall of things going well, or not so well, more philosophically and with greater equanimity. Disappointments will not destroy you, and you will be able to build on your successes.
- You may begin to realise that you were responding to the world from quite a hurt and wounded place. This process is the process that begins to heal those psychic wounds.
- In relationships, you become more of an equal, instead of being almost totally dependent on whether s/he loves you or not. This opens many new possibilities in the relationship: you might agree to disagree, instead of one person being 'right' and the other 'wrong', for example.
- You will start to feel stronger about speaking up when you think something is going wrong, or sharing your perspective, which might be equally as valuable as anyone else's.
- Practice in small, relatively safe ways at first: in the family, in the group in the office, with your friends. Then allow the positive feedback to build your self-confidence. If there is negative feedback, don't let that stop you. Try again.

(Adapted and expanded from '*Ten Days to Self-Esteem*': D. Burns, 1993)

SELF-ESTEEM STRATEGIES: 1

Basic Principle:

One of the main reasons behind a general lack of self-esteem or self-confidence is that these unnaturally occurring feelings are the result of being eroded over a long period of time. If this erosion started in early childhood, it is possible that even the very concept of self-esteem or self-confidence might seem strange or alien. There is really only way to get it back: one just needs to claim it – or re-claim it. Here are a few techniques gleaned from other (sometimes famous) people's suggestions, [adapted from a series of women's magazine articles]

- Look confident, even if you are quaking inside.
- Try looking after yourself; being nice to yourself; giving yourself a treat on a regular basis; being luxurious with yourself.
- Be clear and realistic about what you ask for, then stick to it.
- It's better to be honest, even outrageously so, than to lie or evade. People always know, or will find out
- A truly confident person doesn't rely on the assessment of other people.
- Doing something you *really* want to do gives you a fantastic sense of self-worth.
- Many people have "the impostor syndrome" – where you feel someone is going to expose you for who you really are. Try just to be true to yourself.
- If you haven't got a proper level of confidence yet, just learn to fake it: tell the truth later.
- As a child, you have no armour, so when bad things start to happen, you start to think something is wrong with you. It seems that there is no way out. A large part of confidence-building is banishing the feeling that it must – inevitably – be all your fault.
- Learning to develop a 'mask' or 'professional persona' is a good short-term measure. Later on, you should drop it. You will want to be accepted for who you really are.
- Learning jujitsu, or some other martial art, gives a woman a fantastic sense of self-confidence. You can think, "*I can flatten this bloke if I want to*".
- The courage to take risks comes from knowledge and experience. This means that you have to take risks carefully, and learn from your mistakes. The first time is the worst.
- Most successful people will acknowledge that they could not have done it by themselves. Confidence alone is a great start: confidence, backed up by other people, is unstoppable.
- No-one should ever tell anyone that they cannot do something. It is very provocative and they are inevitably proved wrong eventually. So, go for it!
- The more that you experiment and practice, the more you will feel sure about yourself.
- One way of dealing with anxiety-provoking situations is the "**Don't Panic**" rule. Take a deep breath; **don't** panic; and you will almost certainly 'wing it' somehow.
- Recognise when you are having an 'off-day' and don't try to change it. Go home and get cosy.
- Whatever you are up against, there is always a way to succeed – or get through.
- Never assume that you are going to be great. Don't try to be fantastic. The key to success is not to put too much pressure on yourself. Just give it your best.
- Other people may look relaxed or confident, but most of them are feeling just like you, and so they are probably faking it. You can do that too.
- Eventually, you will have to learn to stop worrying about yourself, and become more concerned with the doings of other people. This makes you very good company.
- If you find meeting new people difficult, there are ways of making it easier. When you go out, always wear something you feel good in. Don't get stuck in a corner; just circulate – you'll look confident even if you aren't feeling it. Have a couple of opening gambits.
- It is important to stretch yourself. Image your epitaph: "*She tried everything; took it all in her stride and gave it a go.*"
- Confidence comes from knowing that you will cope; that you will get over any mistakes; that you gave your best. In the end, that is all that matters.

SELF-ESTEEM STRATEGIES: 2

Basic Principle:

Remember, that there is just one way to get your self-esteem back: one just needs to claim it – or re-claim it.

Claiming Your ‘Space’:

Just as you have a right of determination over your own body, so you have the right to your own space – whether it is physical space, psychic space, head-space, or whatever. You exist, so you have the right to a proper space to exist in. You have the right to breathe, to stretch, and to take up space. Just go ahead and claim it.

Don’t apologise for existing. Don’t be sorry that you are there. The planet is a richer place with you on it. You have as much need for the rights of a space of your own as anyone else on the planet: and that means a **safe** space: somewhere where you feel safe. If you don’t have this, you should have it. You need it. Try and claim it.

You should have a room in the house, or a space, or a place in your house or garden, or even somewhere else, that you feel is rightfully **yours**. You need to feel that you can go there and not be disturbed; you can go there and feel comfortable; you can go there and do whatever you want to do, or just do nothing. We all need this sort of a space – even ‘psychic’ space. Claim yours!

Claiming Your ‘Ground’:

You also have the right to stand on firm ground. Everyone needs to be a degree of surety, of security, or of consistency. Chaos is not O.K.: domination is not O.K.; covert control is not O.K. You may need to determine what your ground is: no-one else can really do this for you. So, when you are standing on it, then just claim it.

Don’t shift about just because others seem to want to be where you are standing. It is not just to do with physical ‘ground’: it has to do with intellectual, or emotional ground. Don’t always defer to others: why are they any more important than you? If you claim an intellectual position, defend it until it is proved to be untenable: then adopt a new position. If it is a moral or ethical ‘ground’, and you think you are ‘right’; then that is what you believe. Stick to it: you are probably correct. Even if you are not, then it is just a ‘learning experience’.

You are there and I am here: we are both present. That is your position, and this is my position. We may be close to each other, and there may be subtle differences. Maybe we can agree – and maybe there are subtle differences, so we may have to agree to differ, or even disagree. We might learn something about exchanging our views and exploring our differences. You being right, does not make me wrong. Me having a valid point, does not deny the value of what you say or feel. Try to claim the validity of both.

Claiming the Right to ‘Speak’:

You also have the (‘inalienable’) right to hold any political, social or other opinions – as long as you allow others the same right; and you also have the right to ‘freedom of speech’ – as long as you do not cause offence or incite a riot.¹¹ You certainly have your own unique perspective on things, on anything – as no-one can see things exactly your way, because they are not you. Your views and perspectives may have never been fully or clearly formulated, expressed or heard. That does not

¹ Boundaries to freedom of speech relate to: libel, slander, obscenity, pornography, sedition, incitement, fighting words, classified information, copyright violation, trade secrets, food labelling, non-disclosure agreements, the right to privacy, dignity, the right to be forgotten, public security, and perjury.

make them any less important: it actually makes them more important. Try to find your voice and speak them out.

Your views are important – they matter. If they are not heard, you may feel ignored and so others may miss out on something different, something valuable. So just speak out what your views are – clearly and simply. Choose a moment when no-one else is speaking and just speak them out. You can claim this right as well.

Claiming the Right to be ‘Heard’:

Are you *really* less important than anyone else? They seem to be able ‘to claim the right’ to be heard: they speak up. Why not you? Why is your voice any less significant? Or, do you not happen claim this right for yourself?

Part of re-claiming one’s self-esteem is also re-claiming, not only the right to speak, but also this right to be heard. You may have been shouted down in the past. You may not have dared to speak out – in the past. But this is ‘now’, the present, times are different and things are changing. You are now claiming your right to be heard.

Rights ‘With’ not Rights ‘Over’:

All of these rights that you are claiming, or re-claiming, are not ‘rights over’ someone else, but ‘rights with’ someone else. In the past, someone else’s rights might have superseded yours, or you might have felt that someone else was more important or needy than you, and so you gave over your rights in favour of theirs. Now you are re-claiming your rights. These are not rights that are more important than anyone else’s – except to you. They are rights that you are claiming – equal to anyone else’s rights. The only difference is that that you have not been claiming them for a while.

Other people may have to adapt to this new situation. They may have to make a little room for you – because you are now more ‘present’. This should not diminish them in any way – it just levels the playing field. It may mean some changes – it does mean disastrous changes. These are not bad changes: they are changes that make things more equal – ultimately better for everyone. Other people may not want you to change: they may not like the ‘new you’ – Tough! You like the ‘New You’. You are now claiming your space, your ground, your right to speak, your right to be heard, and all your other rights. This is who you are NOW.

Now, you are really starting to re-claim all these rights and with them, your self-esteem. One of the simplest ways of expressing your preferences or rights, is simply to say: “*That Doesn’t Work For Me!*”. I call these the ‘Four Magic Words’ – as they really do seem to work.

This Just Takes Practice:

Like everything, it will take quite a while to do some of this and get this right in a way that works for you. It sounds all very simple, it is: but it is not easy. There are a thousand scripts telling you that: “*You shouldn’t do this*”; “*Other people won’t like you*”; “*You are selfish*”; “*You should think of others*”; etc. etc. etc. It is time to ignore these a bit more. Don’t listen to these scripts any more. You have listened to them for years, and you have ended up where you are now. They do not work for you any more, now-a-days. You do NOT need to listen to these scripts ever again. This is a habit that needs to be broken. Tell yourself that you are stopping doing this now. Re-claim your self-esteem: Now!

Set up an alarm bell, or a warning light, or imagine a self-esteem meter. Whenever you recognise – or become aware of – one of these scripts that lower your self-esteem: just “Stop!” You have – just now – already stopped (unconsciously) carrying these scripts. You have become more aware of your (unconscious) patterns and done something different. You saying “Stop” is what is different: this is a necessary and essential first step. You might not know what to do next: that’s OK. The “I don’t know” moment is a very important moment.

From now on, you are doing something different. Try using a different script: a more positive one; one that makes you feel a bit better. It doesn't matter – you are in an 'Exploration' mode. You need to find out what works – for you – and what doesn't.

The “rest of your life” starts now. Yes, you will listen to those old scripts again, at times, but their power over you is becoming broken. You have now re-claimed your right to choose. Sometimes, you may forget and choose the old way – the one that doesn't totally serve you (you are human and fallible): and sometimes you will choose the new way, and this serves you, and ultimately everyone else. You will increasingly decide for yourself: you choose.

We Embody What We Think:

Are you still carrying the cares of others? Do you still feel at the bottom of the heap? Are you putting yourself last – again? Do you look depressed, ground down, forlorn? Now, do something different? What changes would you like to make? What would you look like, feel like, if you stopped feeling that way, or doing all these things? How would you like to stand, or move, or look – if you felt much better about yourself? This is now a part of your (new) potential.

Just check out how you feel about yourself, now. Are you standing up straighter? Do you look a little less depressed, or anxious? Do you begin to like being who you really are; try doing this just a little bit more? What would a calmer, stronger, more confident 'you' look like? Think your body into this sort of state of being: just for a few moments. Now, do it for a little bit longer. Walk about like this for a little while longer. This can be the new 'You'!

Take a deep breath – in your upper chest area. Allow your back to straighten, and your shoulders to drop, and gently reset the upper part of your body. Take in a couple of deep breaths. Hold your head up. Turn your head from side to side, to straighten out your neck. Then look straight ahead. Stretch your chin up, then allow it to reset. Take another deep breath, and breathe out. Relax into this new position.

Now choose – choose between how you would like to stand, to move, to appear to others. Try it out for a few moments. Think how you would like to be: then become it. Do what is right for YOU! How does it feel? Would you like to go on: feeling this way; being this way; doing things this way? You can! But you have to choose for yourself. You can – you may have to – embody this new Self. And you may have to keep on doing it.

Re-Building Self Esteem:

Now, write down a list of positive statements about yourself – from other people's perspectives, for example: “*My mother likes this about me.*” “*My workmates say this about me.*” “*My partner tells me this about me.*” “*My boss thinks this about me.*” Post these: by the bathroom mirror, on the fridge, on your computer monitor, etc. See what difference this makes. These can act as a constant reminder – an *aide-memoire*. You are re-programming some of these historic (negative) scripts. You are now well on the way to re-building (re-claiming) your self-esteem: – cognitively, emotionally and somatically.

SELF-ESTEEM STRATEGIES: 3

Basic Principle:

If you are not very sure of yourself, this strategy is for you. So, the basic principle here is to ensure that: The “You” that you are, and the “You” that you feel, and the “You” that you are working from, are all one-and-the-same “You”. They are all different aspects of “You”: and that this “You” is working together in an integrated way and is becoming the “you” that you ‘know’ or remember; is becoming the “you” that you like (or, at least, feel O.K. with); and so you are becoming the “you” that you really want to be. This sentence is not really that confusing: try reading it again.

Exercise:

Ask yourself these three main questions:

“What am I feeling right now?”

“What would I like - or need - right now?”

“What works for me & what doesn’t work for me in my immediate surroundings?”

Try not to judge your answers. Sometimes they might seem trivial, or ridiculous, or impossible, or just plain selfish; but, hey! – That **is** what you are feeling, or this **is** what you want, not ‘that’ – at this moment in time. So just accept your answers. These are what you feel. They might change later; feelings often do. If they don’t change, then you probably really do feel this, or really do want this, or really don’t like that. And all **that** is really important information.

As you learn to accept these different aspects of yourself more, however quirky they are, you will learn to accept yourself more. As you learn to accept yourself more; so, your self-esteem will start to grow. As your self-esteem grows, then you will begin to be able to start to communicate these thoughts, feelings, wishes, or injunctions to other people around you. But don’t worry about that now – that comes later. Stick to the exercise! Keep on doing this exercise. As you do this exercise, and as you keep on doing this exercise, you will start to build up a much clearer idea of: who you really are; what you really feel; what you really want; and what you really don’t want. This is essentially a process of clarifying, and of strengthening, and of “centring” – you are consolidating who you really are - now. This is a really good first step. It is important that you practice this sort of exercise; and just keep on practicing it. ‘Practice makes Perfect!’ Repetition makes it better, clearer and stronger. And the reason that this is important is that somewhere along the line, your natural (original) self-esteem and self-confidence got eroded, or became suppressed. This is just part of the process of getting it back – re-claiming it back. It is an essential step. It is grounded in reality. It is who you really are – for the moment anyway. You can always get to change things later.

Asking For What You Really Want:

Whether you realise it or not, you also have the “Right” to ask for what you really want or need. Check out the “Charter of Human Rights”. Many people have a problem in asking for what they really want (and we are not just talking about ‘things’ here). What you want might be: approval, help, more attention, more time, time for yourself, forgiveness, safety, variety, rest, peace of mind, trust, etc. These are often the important things. This is especially true for people under stress, in depression, or with anxiety – or those with low self-esteem. Many people have a problem asking certain people for what they really want (parents, colleagues, friends, partners, boss, children, colleagues, etc.). Many people have problems in asking for what they want when they ... (need help, are embarrassed, have an idea, feel selfish, feel guilty, feel vulnerable, feel stupid, are in a position of lesser power, or are afraid the answer will be “No”, etc.). Check out your own fears. Don’t let them stop you asking for what you want or need.

The most effective way for you to ask for what you want, and an important skill you may need to practice, is to formulate a clear and assertive request. You may want to prepare this a little in advance. And you may need to determine certain ‘facts’ in order to do this effectively: We shall look at this process a little later, in the next section.

SELF-ESTEEM 4: BECOMING MORE ASSERTIVE

Basic Principle:

Being positively assertive is communicating our thoughts and feelings, openly, honestly, clearly and without violating any other person's rights. It is a healthy alternative to being aggressive, or to being passive.

Being Assertive Means That:

- We are able to say what we think and feel;
- We are able to ask for what we want;
- We can say 'Yes' or 'No' clearly and firmly;
- We can express a range & depth of emotions;
- We can express personal opinions;
- We can communicate effectively in relationships;
- all without restricting ourselves unduly through fear of criticism, censure or lack of confidence.

Being Unassertive:

We are usually unassertive (compliant, conforming, submissive, obedient, reserved, repressed, or quiet) because we have 'learnt' or 'been forced' to be so. Young babies are naturally self-assertive; their survival depends on it. But those around us gradually shape our behaviour, through the messages they give us, and the general level of encouragement (or lack of it), as well as by more overtly repressive or deprived circumstances. Lack of self-assertion can become chronic. In the long-term, being unassertive depletes our self-esteem, and the more we become unassertive, the more we lack a sense of identity. This can result in a corresponding lack of: sense of purpose, faith, good feelings about the world and ourselves, feeling in control, trust, 'joi-de-vivre', etc. Negative feelings, depression, anxiety or stress can even result, and furthermore these can have physical and psychological repercussions.

Becoming More Assertive:

This is really the only way out of the above (unassertiveness). Becoming more assertive can improve our sense of identity, our self-confidence, our pleasure in ourselves, our lives & the relationships around us, and our general mental & physical health. It can reduce feelings of depression, anxiety, and stress. It can save energy, and can give pleasure. It all sounds very simple, but it is not necessarily easy. It usually takes time, practice, a safe place to start, and possibly some help. However, it is well worth the effort.

Practical Steps:

There are several practical steps to take:

- First** You have to understand the theory and the underlying principles of this approach. Most of this is stated above, so you have already taken the first step(s).
- Next** You have to recognize what the differences are between the passive, the aggressive and the assertive styles of communicating - in yourself, and in the people around you. See what you like and dislike in yourself, and others; see what you admire, and would like to be like. This will give you some good clues as to 'how' to be different, or more assertive. You are probably already fairly aware, somewhere, what might work for you, and what might not. Follow that.
- Then** You have to identify one or two situations where you feel you would really like to, or need to, become more assertive. You need to choose these a little bit carefully, as they need to be relevant to, and possible for, you. It is a test of these new principles within yourself.

You can create some simple checklists to help identify those situations where you feel quite uncomfortable, or where you would like to feel more assertive. You might want to choose a relatively safe arena in which to start, where the possible repercussions might not be too dramatic, or where it is relatively safe. Don't put your job or marriage on the line. Check it out with someone you trust. Devise a 'fall-back' plan. Try to have a 'lead-in' statement.

Further Suggestions:

Practice a little bit first: you might want to prepare what you want to say; role-play it, or rehearse it a little. Try things out with the help of a friend, or a therapist/counsellor. Don't worry too much; it will always be different to what you imagine. You can probably imagine the worst, and it is usually never as bad as *that*. Also allow yourself the potential to make small mistakes and your ability to learn from these.

Don't be put off by your fears about the reactions of others. Sometimes you just think or 'know' that there are going to be repercussions as other people have come to 'assume' that you are like 'so' or 'such.' However they may be getting a surprise sometime soon as well. So don't let those fears stop you. You may also be quite surprised yourself soon, as people often quite like self-assertion in others.

Transfer the results of the above into a real life situation. Don't raise your expectations too high; don't assume total failure. Get some feedback; modify things appropriately – maybe you could have been more assertive, or could have said 'this' rather than 'that'; or in a slightly different way; and then just repeat and continue to become more assertive. This is just the start, but hopefully it is the start of something increasingly positive.

Watch Out for Negative Thought Patterns:

There are internalised statements, which all carry a similar (familiar) flavour. These are like:

- *It would be very selfish to say what I want.*
- *I'm not good enough, so why bother to push myself, or try for another situation.*
- *If I get assertive, I'll just upset someone else. So I will stay quiet.*
- *I might really embarrass myself, and then that will be worse.*
- *If they say 'No', it will prove that this has all been a huge mistake.*
- *I shouldn't have to say all this: people should know what I want.*
- *I am almost bound to make a mistake, so I won't bother trying.*
- *I have been like this for so long; I haven't the energy to change now?*
- *The present situation is 'all right'; why rock the boat?*
- *They will just laugh at me, or get angry.*
- *Nobody likes me. Why bother trying to make a relationship with them anyway?*

Identify Your Negative Thoughts:

What negative thought patterns do you have, that are effectively stopping you becoming more assertive? Try to get them clearly identified, written down and clearly labelled as "Negative." These thoughts (and the fears behind them) are what is stopping you. 'You' have been stopping you, through these negative thought patterns and fears. They are not really 'you'. They are just negative thoughts. So, start by making a list - and keep on adding to it when you identify a new one. Then see that all these thoughts are really obstructions: they are stopping you becoming 'you'.

Now comes the hard bit. How can you stop them stopping you? Where is the little switch inside you that you can turn and say "*Enough! No more. I've had it, already.*" "*I am going to live my life the way I want to.*" So, you must now work quite hard to clear each one of these negative thoughts out of the way. For each thought, write out a 'challenge' to that negativity: find a different statement, a more real or relevant one. A more positive one, that you can stand behind.