



New Trends  
in Psychology

## Self-Esteem

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**Abstract:** Self-esteem in psychology corresponds to the very meaning of the word: it is the esteem that a person has of himself, the answer to the questions “how much am I worth?”, “do I like it or not?”, “am I safe or not?”, “my way of satisfying myself or not?”. This is a very important theme, as it is intertwined with both the main characteristics of the character (such as being introverted or extroverted) and with many types of discomfort that can arise in the course of existence (for example, certain forms of depression or fears that dictate the emergence of anxiety). Self-esteem is the value that a person attributes to himself or herself in life in general and in various contexts. It is important for everyone to be able to observe themselves closely and get to know themselves a little better.

**Keywords:** self-esteem; value; personality; self-confidence

### 1. Saying About Self-Esteem

My favourite definition of self-esteem in psychology is that developed by psychotherapist Nathaniel Branden:

*“The essence of self-esteem is trusting your own mind and knowing that you deserve happiness”.*

Because it sums up two very important components of self-esteem: the judgment of our abilities (locked in “trusting one’s mind”) and the affection we feel for ourselves

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(the feeling of love that makes us recognize ourselves as people worthy of happiness).

In fact, self-esteem should not be considered exclusively as an evaluative fact, linked to rationality. On the contrary, the rational evaluative component is strongly influenced by a much deeper, affective aspect (self-love), which affects reason to the point of making us express evaluations that are incompatible with reality (because, for example, we overestimate or underestimate ourselves in relation to the emotions we feel about ourselves).

## **2. Self-Esteem and Life**

The degree of self-esteem affects many areas of a person's life:

*- In communication: if I believe I am worthy, I can state and communicate my thoughts without hesitation, I can make demands and complain when something is not as I want it to be. If I believe I am not worthy enough, I will remain silent or please others.*

*- In relationships: if I think it's worth it, I meet people I like, seek them out and build relationships with them based on exchange. If I think I'm not worth enough, I'm more likely to distance myself from everyone or go looking for the very people who reinforce my negative view (self-centered people who treat me with little attention).*

*- At work: if I believe I am worthy, I will seek the job I believe I deserve, be willing to take responsibility, seek new challenges.*

*If I think I'm not worth enough, I'll look for a job that doesn't challenge me too much, where I don't have to make decisions (for fear of failure), I'll also settle for a job I don't like because I don't deserve more.*

## **3. Is my Self-Esteem Stable or Unstable?**

Self-esteem is not a fixed quality throughout life: sometimes a single event that we experience as a personal failure is enough to change the assessment we make of ourselves. For example, the loss of a job, the loss of an important and long-lasting relationship, and the realisation that we are getting older can all take a heavy blow to our self-confidence.

However, while it is true that self-esteem is built up and can change over a lifetime, there is a baseline level of self-esteem that is reinforced during early relationships (in the family, with people who raised us when we were not able to value ourselves) that tends to remain stable.

In fact, it is true both in terms of what we already know how to do, and in terms of the degree of confidence of being able to develop new learning in a particular area (e.g. learning a foreign language, gaining skill in a new sport, increasing competence).

Acquiring a sense of self-efficacy about one's work is fundamental because:

- Those who value their self-efficacy positively accept challenges and have the motivation to sustain the commitment to achieve them. They don't give up in the face of failure, they persevere and try again.
- Conversely, those who rate their self-efficacy negatively perceive the most difficult tasks as a threat and avoid or abandon them after a few attempts, hindering the possibility of success.

Self-esteem and perfectionism

#### **4. Accomplishments and Self-esteem at Work**

In addition to self-esteem, in psychology we talk about self-efficacy. Self-efficacy is the rational evaluation by which a person assesses their abilities.

The feeling of self-efficacy corresponds to the recognition of skills or competences in relation to a particular area in which they need to be demonstrated. It is a judgement: the belief that one can try one's hand at a particular field. The appreciation of others can be a source of nourishment, bolstering the self-confidence of those with lower baseline self-esteem, making the person more confident in moving through the world. However, leaning on the gaze of others or seeking confirmation in successes makes you weaker when you fail to get what you hoped for. You act as if you can have control over these external sources, but control over the world is not possible.

One risk with this way of gaining self-esteem is to take the perfectionism approach: setting yourself very high standards is a trap that people with low baseline self-esteem often fall into and struggle to get out of. Perfectionism is a form of self-imposed slavery that can be applied to different areas of a person's life.

For example, in school or professional life, perfectionism manifests itself by striving to perform at the highest levels, taking space from other aspects of life to devote oneself solely to study or professional activity.

Perfectionism can condition a person's existence and can be a risk to self-confidence, as perfection is a goal that is difficult to reconcile with human existence and can only be a source of frustration. Perfectionism, in short, which is used as an antidote to low basic self-esteem, becomes a source of discomfort and unease.

### **5. Self-esteem and Anxiety about Success**

The phenomenon known as "impostor syndrome" (Clance and Imes, 1978) or "Achilles syndrome" (Clarkson, 1994) consists of the difficulty in recognizing oneself as fully competent and capable and - even in the face of obvious successes and acknowledgements of esteem - experiencing feelings of inadequacy, adding to the fear of being "exposed" in one's own incompetence.

This attitude is based on unresolved self-esteem and results in what N. Branden calls "success anxiety": a strong fear of not being able to fill the role to which one is assigned or not being able to run one's own business. A fear which, according to the mechanism of self-fulfilling prophecy, leads the person to sabotage their plans, i.e. to implement behaviours which, in the long term, end up compromising personal fulfilment.

When these mechanisms occur, there is no other way but to address the sources of self-esteem distortion and try to strengthen personal security.

### **6. How to Work to Strengthen Self-Esteem?**

Self-esteem can be addressed with different tools: coaching, psychological counselling, psychotherapy are all useful ways of working on self-worth.

If the aim is to increase one's sense of personal efficacy in a particular area (e.g. at work), a coaching course or a brief psychological counselling intervention may be appropriate. In this case, we focus on a specific goal and concentrate on redefining the person's self-esteem.

Conversely, when the goal is to rebuild a low self-esteem that depends on an insecurity that has grown over time psychotherapy is the most effective method of

intervention. In fact, with psychotherapy the person can come into deep contact with the emotions they experience towards themselves and begin to find confirmation in their individuality.

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