

## STRENGTHENING SELF-ESTEEM

### Self-esteem - What is it?

Self-esteem is actually our assessment of our own self. It is essentially a measure of self worth and importance. When this self assessment is positive, we see ourselves as valuable and worthwhile and we develop a strong self-esteem. When it is negative, we feel worthless, incompetent and unfortunate and our self-esteem remains weak. Self-esteem is an important part of the personality that has been shaped from the very early years. Depending upon the success or failure and one's reaction to every significant situation in life, self-esteem either grows stronger or gets weakened considerably.

*Let us imagine a pot that is like the cup, only larger. Everyone of us has one such invisible pot inside him. The level of water in the pot determines how we feel about ourselves, about others, and how we get along with people.*

*This pot can be filled by a lot of things that happen. When a person speaks to you, recognising you as a worthy being, your pot is filled a little. If he compliments you on your dress or on a job well done, the level in your pot goes up still higher. There are a million ways to raise the level in another's pot. Writing a friendly letter, remembering something that is special to him, giving him a hand when his work is heavy, are a few ways. When one's pot is full of this emotional support, one expresses warmth and friendliness to people. Did you ever experience a series of very favourable things which made you feel worthwhile, want to be good to people? At that time, your pot was full.*

*But, remember, some people have dippers and they can get their dippers in your pot and empty it. This, too, can be done in a million ways. For instance, when a child's feelings are trampled upon ('I don't care about what you think/want'), thoughts belittled ('What a lousy idea!') and abilities criticised ('You can never do anything properly'), the pot gradually gets empty. Pots are emptied many times because people don't really think about what they are saying or doing.*



*When a person's pot is emptied, he is very different than when it is full. If you compliment a person whose pot is empty, instead of accepting it gracefully, he is likely to reject it or reply in a defensive manner.*

*The story of our lives is the interplay of the filler and the dipper. Everyone has both. The unyielding secret of the filler and the dipper is that when you fill another's pot, it does not take anything out of your own pot. The level in your own pot gets higher when you fill another's, and, on the other hand, when you dip into another's pot, you do not fill your own ... you lose a little.*

For a variety of reasons, people hesitate filling the pot of another and consequently do not experience the fun, joy, happiness, fulfillment, and satisfaction connected with making another person happy. Let us put aside our dipper and resolve to touch someone's life in order to fill their pot and consequently fill our own.

### **Self-esteem is the opinion you have of yourself**

Self-esteem is the sum total of one's self-confidence, self-worth and self-respect. The fundamental nature of self-esteem is based on understanding, accepting and liking oneself. Strong self-esteem implies that one feels good about one's beliefs, thoughts, feelings and desires. It is based on your attitude to the following:

- Your value as a person
- The job you do
- Your achievements
- How you think others see you
- Your purpose in life
- Your place in the world
- Your potential for success
- Your strengths and weaknesses
- Your social status and how you relate to others
- Your independence or ability to stand on your own feet

Strong self-esteem is important because it provides a foundation for dealing with life's many challenges. Improving our self-esteem can give us the confidence, strength, and resilience to face

and overcome many obstacles. Self esteem is therefore crucial to us and is a cornerstone of a positive attitude towards living

### **What is low self-esteem?**

Low self-esteem results from having a poor self image caused by our attitude to one or more of the above. Example: You do not value highly the job you do or you feel you have no purpose in your life. Low self-esteem can result in poor and dysfunctional relationships, can lead to depression and can create a very bleak and negative outlook of life. It causes unhappiness, insecurity and poor confidence. Other's desires may take preference over ours. Inner criticism, that nagging voice of disapproval inside, causes us to stumble at every challenge and challenges seem impossible.

### **What sort of persons were we when we were taking drugs?**



*An arrogant young man who thought he knew everything, visited a Master to learn about meditation.*

*He approached the Master and asked, "Sir, what is meditation?"*

*The Master had the ability to evaluate a person at a glance. He looked at the man and was silent. When the man repeated his question, the Master said politely, "Son, it is time for tea. Let us have our tea, and we will discuss meditation afterwards".*

*The Master started pouring tea into the young man's cup. Even after the cup had been filled to the brim, he continued to pour.*

*The young man watched the tea overflow until he could no longer contain himself.*

*"Sir, the cup is overflowing!"*

*"Like this cup," said the teacher, "You too are full of your own opinions, conclusions, speculations and prejudices. How then can I teach you about meditation, unless you first empty your cup?"*

Like this young man, we too were full of our own opinions, justifications, conclusions and prejudices and that is the main reason why everyone went away from us. Our self-esteem was very weak; we had a negative self image which came in the way of building relationships and being successful. We felt worthless and developed a few qualities which further alienated us from those around us.

### ***Self-centred***

We gave importance only to our own needs, feelings, likes and dislikes. We were never willing to consider the feelings or needs of others.

### ***Highly critical***



We were critical and cynical. We constantly used to make negative judgments about the behaviour of others. We did this mainly to cover up and rationalise our actions. Even if others put in a lot of effort, we were not satisfied and we made it a point to single out minor slips, and condemn them severely. We firmly believed that every one was unjust. We constantly misinterpreted others' actions and behaviour and made ourselves and others miserable.

### ***Diffident***

We were diffident and saw even minor failures as proof of our inadequacy. We were not aware of any of our abilities and therefore failed to utilise our potential. We were not willing to take up any responsibility. We would expect others to do our duties also and if there was a setback, we held them accountable for it.

## **What are the qualities of a person with a strong self-esteem?**

### ***Self-confident***

A person with a strong self-esteem knows his strengths and feels secure in accepting his limitations. He is able to place a lot of confidence in himself and in his ability to handle problems.

This confidence stands him in good stead through the triumphs and failures he faces. A crisis does not lead to despair, and triumphs do not lead to over-confidence.

### ***Goal-oriented***

He sets appropriate and realistic goals. When he sets his mind on a goal, he is willing to put in any amount of hard work to achieve it. For the person with positive self-esteem, hard work is not a threat. On the contrary, it adds excitement to the whole exercise. More important is that he is prepared to own up responsibility for his failures as readily as he does for his successful endeavours.

### ***Appreciative***

A person's feelings about others, corresponds with his feelings about himself. The individual, who feels happy and good about himself, can make others feel 'good' about themselves too. He is able to readily acknowledge the goodness of others. He is warm, appreciative and shows genuine interest in and regard for others. These qualities help him in establishing meaningful relationships.

A story from the Mahabaratha makes it clear that it is our perception that makes the difference.

*Lord Krishna called Dharmaputra and Dhuriyodhana and asked Dharmaputra to go round the world and find one person who is wicked and bad and asked Dhuriyodhana to find a person who is good and noble.*

*After a few days, Dharmaputra came back looking very happy and contented, and told Krishna, "What a beautiful world you have created. Everyone is nice and friendly, I could not find even one wicked person".*

*Dhuriyodhana came back angry and agitated and told Krishna, "The world has come to an end. Everyone is so cruel and hard hearted, I could not find even one good person in the whole universe."*



*The world is a reflection of our own selves. If we are happy and contented like Dharmaputra, the world appears beautiful with caring people. If we are angry and resentful like Dhuriyodana, we look at the world with anger and resentment and blame others for making it an ugly place.*

### **Contented**

This person is able to accept himself with his limitations and weaknesses while clearly being aware of his assets and strengths. He tolerates and accepts imperfections in himself. He is fully aware of his limitations and continues to grow despite their presence. In short, he does not focus on what he does not have and cannot do. He looks into himself and sees what he has and can do.

### **Is it possible for us to develop a strong self esteem now?**

If our self-esteem continues to be weak, it would come in the way of our recovery. So we need to strengthen it. The wonderful thing is that it can be built at any point in life regardless of age, educational background and social standing. Building up self-esteem is definitely a slow process that requires a lot of patience and perseverance. But it is really worth the effort.

*Mahana lived in an island in the Pacific. Her internal self-esteem pot was empty. Her father's pot too was empty. He would always taunt his daughter, "You are no good. You cannot cook; you cannot take care of the household. No one will marry you".*

*There was a custom in that village. The bridegroom would give cows to the girl's father at the time of wedding. The number of cows varied according to the girl's accomplishments.*

*Mahana's father repeatedly remarked, "No one will give you even one cow. In fact, I may have to give two cows to marry you off." Mahana felt very sad. She had now become skinny, walked with her shoulders hunched and head bowed. She was scared even of her own shadow.*

*Johnny was a young man from a neighbouring island with a strong self-esteem. He was one of the eligible young lads of the island. He wanted to marry Mahana and approached her father. All Mahana's father's cousins urged him to ask for three cows and hold out for two until he was sure Johnny would give*

at least one. But, when Johnny came, Mahana's father said in a grandiose fashion to him, "I want five cows for my daughter!"

The villagers laughed. "He had been saying that no one would marry his daughter. Now he is asking for five cows!"

But Johnny said, "Sir, I offer eleven cows for the hand of your daughter in marriage". The moment he left that place, Mahana's father started complaining, "He is not going to come back. Once he goes home, he will think about his offer. Your marriage would be the only one to be cancelled at the last minute, on this island!"

Mahana was very upset. But Johnny came the very next day with the cows that he promised, married her and took her home.



After one year, when Mahana came back to her village, no one recognised her. She was cheerful, confident, and talked to everyone. She had become very beautiful. She walked with a lift of her shoulders and a sparkle in her eyes that spelled magic. When the father saw this, he said, "My God! If only I had known that my daughter was so very capable, I would have asked for two more cows!"

Mahana went with an empty pot, believing she was worth nothing. Now she knew her worth. When she came back, she was a confident individual. Strong self-esteem makes us confident, cheerful and bright

whereas a weak self-esteem makes us diffident, morose and dull.

### **How exactly do we improve our self-esteem?**

It is important to remember that strong self-esteem evolves from viewing yourself as a valuable and worthwhile person, and is not dependent on how other people view you. You are your greatest asset and can start improving upon your self-esteem today by

- Believing in yourself
- Letting go of past hurts and forgiving others
- Loving and accepting yourself unconditionally

- Planning and setting attainable goals in life
- Visualising yourself achieving and succeeding in life
- Internalising positive affirmations that help you believe in yourself.

### **A few tips that help us strengthen our self-esteem.**

#### *Start liking yourself*

- Make a list of all the things you like about yourself. Be as honest as you can. Modesty doesn't help you here; neither do old critical messages. If you're having trouble finding things you value about yourself, think about the things you value and love in your friends, then see if those things exist inside you, too. Most often, they do. Start developing them.
- Fill a special notebook with your list, or create a set of cards. Make the notebook as beautiful as you can – make it something that makes you feel good when you look at it. Open it up and look at it any time you're feeling down or critical about yourself, or any time anyone says something that triggers your critical self concept. Look at this '**good-things-about-yourself**' book as frequently as you can. It may seem silly, but repetition really does make a difference.
- Try to think of something that you like about yourself, or something that you did today that made you or someone else feel good – no matter how small it may seem. Give yourself the kind of warm praise that you would, to a friend.
- Every time someone tells you something about yourself that makes you feel good, write it down or make a mental note and jot it down later. When you get home, put that note in the 'good things about me' book. Keep on adding notes and read them over every time you need a little boost. If you respect yourself you can respect others, improve your relationships, your achievements and your happiness...

#### *Give 'warm fuzzies' generously*

Appreciation through words (compliments), facial expressions (smile) and gestures (a pat) are called 'warm fuzzies.' If we give these 'warm fuzzies' to others, our self-esteem will increase; at the same time the recipient also feels happy. Giving 'warm fuzzies' is a healthy exercise and calls for recognition of worth in other people. When we treat others with dignity, respect and love, our self-esteem automatically grows stronger.



*There was a valley called Happy Valley where everyone was very happy. There were no fights, no police! What do you think the secret of their happiness was? The villagers had something called 'warm fuzzies' which looked like sponge. They were warm, soft and cuddly. There were two qualities for the warm fuzzies – if a person gives one, it becomes two and whatever good feelings the person has, is passed on to the other person. The villagers shared these warm fuzzies, as a result, love, care and warmth were shared all the time.*

*There was a wicked man in the mountain who did not want the villagers to be happy. He knew that they were happy because of the warm fuzzies. Hence, he secretly removed all the warm fuzzies. Before leaving the village, he told all the villagers, "All your warm fuzzies have disappeared." So, panic ensued, and whatever warm fuzzies were left behind, the villagers stored them in their cupboards.*

*After sometime, the same wicked man brought something called 'cold pricklies' which looked like warm fuzzies but had little invisible thorns inside. He told the villagers, "I have brought something special and superior to warm fuzzies - if you give one, it will become four." All were excited, and picked up a few without knowing their real nature. The nature of cold pricklies is one becomes four and only negative emotions get multiplied and passed on from one person to another. Within a couple of days of sharing, there was a great deal of anger, resentment and jealousy. There were fights everywhere.*

*A few elders in the village approached a saint for a solution to their problem. The saint understood that due to the cold pricklies, there was fight, and hence, he asked them to dump all of them in a secluded area. He asked them to share warm fuzzies again. After a while, happy valley became happy again.*

*Warm fuzzies are the love, care, compassion we give to others. Cold pricklies are anger, resentment and jealousy. The law of nature is what you give is what you get back. We reap as we sow. If we plant a jackfruit, we can expect a sweet jackfruit. Only when we give love, care, and concern to others can we expect it back in return.*

We need to put in some effort to recognise the merits of people around us and express our appreciation explicitly and directly. This helps us to strengthen relationships and build self-esteem.

*My son won a prize in a drawing competition. I took great pride in relating this to all my colleagues the very next day. Surprisingly, I did not say a word of appreciation to my son. When I realised this, I immediately went to my son and expressed my happiness through a pat, and a few words! I felt good and my son was also extremely happy.*



Due to our drug use, there is a barrier in communicating positive feelings to other people. Now during recovery, we have to break this restraint, learn to appreciate comfortably, easily, instinctively whenever something is done well or better than usual.

### ***Receive 'warm fuzzies' gracefully***

Initially, we feel very uncomfortable when others compliment us even genuinely. If the manager calls up and says, "How marvellous! I never thought you would give up drugs", with weak self-esteem, we may say, "I should have done this long ago. It had taken so long for me to realise." When we develop strong self-esteem, the response is going to be different. "Thank you for your encouragement, sir! I am happy that I have given up and I am able to do my work well."



'Warm fuzzies' are as necessary for maintaining strong self-esteem, as water is for plants. We need to understand that these are invaluable gifts given to us in recognition of our worth. Refusal to accept them is as ridiculous as throwing away a priceless gift. When 'warm fuzzies' are rejected it offends the giver and stops him from giving them in future.

### ***Avoid flattery***

A compliment that is not genuine, is only flattery and therefore, has no use. It is like counterfeit money, which does not have any market value. It improves the self-esteem of neither the giver nor the receiver. This is a dishonest exercise and therefore the giver gradually loses his credibility with others.

## ***Reject unconditional ‘cold pricklies’***

Unconditional ‘cold pricklies’ are those generalised, negatively toned statements. They lack any factual basis and therefore, they will hurt the self-esteem of the recipient.

If somebody hurts us, the first step we have to take is to find out whether there is any truth in what he is saying. If it is true, we have to take note of it and make changes in our attitude and behaviour. If, on the other hand, it is baseless criticism, we can exercise our right to reject (and not react to) it.

*When I was abstaining, my father would often hurt me saying, “Well! I can never believe you are off drugs! I’m sure you must be definitely using without our knowledge!”*

*Initially, I used to feel extremely hurt. Then I thought for a moment. I realised that I had no reason to feel hurt, because his words were not true. After all, why should I feel hurt when those negative remarks don’t belong to me? - Thereafter I felt light”*

The penalties for accepting these negative remarks are high. If every cold prickly were treated as valid, held as further proof of one’s worthlessness and inadequacy, it would only weaken one’s self-esteem.

*A wandering saint was walking along with his disciples. In one of the houses, a woman abused him. The saint walked away without uttering a single word. His disciples got irritated and they told him that he should have shouted back. The saint replied, “If somebody gives you an article, it will belong to you only if you accept it. If you don’t accept it, it will remain with the person who is giving it. In the same manner, the woman’s abuse did not belong to me and that is the reason why I didn’t accept it. If I had shouted back, it would have only meant that I have accepted it.”*



If others ‘pick on’ us for no reason, we need not feel hurt, because their words are not true. After all, why should we feel hurt when those negative remarks don’t belong to us? We can just ignore them. We can pray to God to give us the patience not to react to false criticism.

## Share with someone you trust

At times, even a person with a strong self-esteem experiences periods of uncertainty. During such moments, sharing one's feelings with someone who is empathetic and compassionate will help us strengthen our self-esteem.

*I was trying to get a job in a multi-national company. Unfortunately, I did not get it. I was upset and felt like going back to drugs – “It is not worth staying sober”, I thought.*

*I immediately went to my intimate friend, Ram. He listened to me and drew my attention to the benefits I gained by not taking drugs. He made me aware that my parents are coming closer to me; I was able to repay Rs. 5000/- in the last six months; my mother for the first time stayed with me for 10 days and enjoyed my company. I felt better after talking to him, and left for home in a confident frame of mind.*



During periods of despondency when everything seems lost, being open about our feelings to a supportive listener, gives us an opportunity to receive ‘warm fuzzies’. These ‘warm fuzzies’ which draw attention to our past triumphs and our potential for future achievements, strengthen our self-esteem remarkably.

To conclude, we need to practice the following steps consistently over a period of time to strengthen our self-esteem.

- Nurture yourself
- Compliment people directly by looking at their eyes and experience a warm feeling.
- Receive genuine compliments with grace and confidence
- Avoid flattery
- Ignore unconditional ‘cold pricklies’ and feel secure and comfortable.
- When you feel low, share with someone you trust

