

There are some struggles we never outgrow, and low self-esteem is one that can affect our health at any age. Fortunately, it's never too late to learn to like yourself. Follow our expert-recommended strategies for successful ways to boost your self-esteem.

BY SYDNEY LONEY



worthy of respect

Most of us suffer from periodic bouts of low self-esteem without realizing the impact that they can have on our lives. Yet even these occasional moments when we feel badly about ourselves can affect our work, relationships, happiness and health. The trouble is, we tend to think of self-esteem issues as something we should have overcome in our younger years. By the time we reach a certain age, we expect to be strong and self-assured, no matter what the situation. If only it were that easy.

"Low self-esteem isn't just a teen issue," says Esther Kane, a registered clinical counsellor in Courtenay, B.C., and author of *What Your Mama Can't or Won't Teach You* (Esther Kane, 2006). "It goes on for the rest of our lives. By the time women are 30 or 40, they have this high expectation that they will have it all figured out and then do a terrible number on themselves when they realize that just isn't the case."

Longer periods of low self-esteem can contribute to depression,

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anxiety and eating disorders, but they can also be a huge source of stress and cause physical health issues, says Dr. Kyla Yaskowich, a registered psychologist at Conscious Living in Calgary. "Many women with low self-esteem tend to become perfectionists who try to prove their self-worth by working excessively, which puts them at risk of high stress and, eventually, burnout," she says. Others develop a victim mentality and tend to underachieve, which is equally stressful. "Stress is a huge component of low self-esteem and can compromise your immune system, leading to everything from migraines and insomnia to gastrointestinal illnesses and cardiac problems," says Yaskowich.

The key is to identify when and why you're experiencing low self-esteem and take steps toward boosting your sense of self-worth. This will help you become strong, self-assured and worthy of the most important kind of respect: your own.

WHY WE LACK IT

On average, self-esteem is relatively high in childhood, but that begins to change when people hit their teens. "Puberty is a very challenging time, especially for girls," says Yaskowich. "There's a lot of self-consciousness surrounding body image and weight gain that makes them more susceptible to low self-esteem."

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10 ways to boost your self-esteem

- 1. BE AWARE.** Get to know yourself and understand when the negative feelings you're experiencing are due to a low self-esteem attack (LSEA), says Esther Kane, a registered clinical counsellor in Courtenay, B.C. "Identify what you're feeling and rationalize it by saying, 'This is what's happening, but it's just an LSEA and it will pass,'" she says.
- 2. ASSERT YOURSELF.** In relationships, be assertive by communicating your needs, feelings and opinions openly, says Dr. Kyla Yaskowich, a registered psychologist at Conscious Living in Calgary. "You usually avoid doing this in order to get people to like you, but then that acceptance isn't based on anything authentic and you sacrifice your integrity," she says. "If you can be yourself in a relationship and the other person still wants to be with you, a much stronger sense of self-esteem will emerge."
- 3. BE ALONE.** Spend time with your thoughts and feelings through journaling, meditation or yoga, or spend time by yourself in nature. "If you're distracted all the time, it's difficult to know what your feelings and values really are," says Yaskowich. "By taking time to focus on these things, you'll soon find that external sources of self-esteem will matter less."
- 4. ACCEPT YOURSELF.** "Accept any shortcomings you might have as part of being human and gently work on areas that you want to change without feeling the need to change in dramatic ways," says Yaskowich.
- 5. STAY POSITIVE.** If one negative thing happens in a day, that tends to be what we focus on. Low self-esteem is often based on feelings, so it helps to think them through. "Write down all your negative thoughts about yourself on paper and, on the other side, counter them with evidence to the contrary," says Kane. It's a good exercise to help you see that you're focusing on the wrong things.
- 6. DISCOVER YOUR INNER PASSIONS.** It's important to nurture your talents and interests, says Yaskowich. Creative activities, such as photography, writing, gardening and playing an instrument, are a good way to do that, she says.
- 7. BE A ROLE MODEL.** "If you want to learn something, you study it, so find people who have what you want and study them," says Kane. "It's also important to find role models in greater society, such as a favourite female singer, who make you feel strong and powerful."
- 8. NURTURE YOURSELF.** "Do things that have no goal or objective other than just to make you feel good," says Yaskowich.
- 9. TAKE RESPONSIBILITY.** Don't blame others for the decisions you make. "Taking responsibility is extremely empowering and will help you make decisions based on your own inner truth rather than approval from others," says Yaskowich.
- 10. ASK FOR HELP.** When you're experiencing low self-esteem, look at how much sleep you're getting and whether you're eating well. "If the feeling can't be attributed to these physical things, if it goes on for days on end, if you're not functioning in your daily life or if you can't think your way out of it, it may be a sign that you need help," says Kane.

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Some women are never able to outgrow low self-esteem related to body-image issues, says Janet Polivy, a psychology professor at the University of Toronto. "There are those people who spend their whole lives thinking that appearance is more important than anything else," she says. "And there are plenty of women who are willing to do or spend anything to change the way they look."

Other women are only affected at certain times, such as when they have specific – and perhaps unrealistic – expectations of where they should be at a certain age, says Yaskowich. "Many women hit a milestone age and feel a lack of self-worth because they haven't achieved a certain level of success," she says. "It's something I see in my clinical practice all the time." As women age, they tend to give themselves inappropriate benchmarks for things in life and fixate on what Yaskowich refers to as "external sources of self-worth" – they panic because they are not married or haven't reached a particular point in their careers. "Instead of appreciating the things that are in their lives, they focus on all the things that they haven't achieved yet," she says.

For women, self-esteem is also frequently linked to a desire to please others. "Girls and women often grow in relation to other people, and we learn about ourselves mirrored through others," says Kane. Because of this, many women will experience what she calls low self-esteem attacks (LSEAs). "Women are particularly vulnerable to these at every age," she says. "And at some points – if we're sick, tired or stressed at work or if someone attacks

us personally – we're even more likely to experience LSEAs. These are times when we can temporarily forget who we are and everything we do for the world. We forget how fabulous we are because we become so dependent on having to hear it from other people."

WHY WE WANT IT – AND HOW TO GET IT

"Self-esteem is directly related to happiness," says Yaskowich. "When you feel good about yourself, you tend to be happier." High self-esteem also acts as a buffer to the effects of stress and allows you to cope better with failure and loss. "At every stage of life, people with high self-esteem also tend to attract people," she says. "This increases their social support and further helps them if they have to go through something negative, like a job loss or physical illness."

One of the best ways to prevent low self-esteem from affecting your relationships and your health is to find ways to develop inherent self-worth instead of focusing on external sources, such as money, status, relationships and recognition from others, says Yaskowich. "The problem with having all your self-esteem based on external sources is that they're very fragile," she says. "If you lose your job or your partner leaves you, it can shake your whole world, your sense of identity and everything you've built your self-worth on." While it's important to have achievements and establish healthy relationships, it's just as important to build a strong sense of self-worth by learning to nurture and accept yourself, she says. 🧠