

## **Self-esteem**

The basic urge of human life is the urge to feel good about oneself. This, in other words, is the urge to self-esteem. When we appreciate how important it is for each of us to feel good about ourselves you get an understanding as to why we get upset about things and why we do the things we do.

The semi-trite words “self-esteem” are at the very core of human development. Self-esteem is not an extra indulgence, or a mere vanity, but rather a matter of life and death. The everyday feeling of self-value is the basic motive for human action. It is as much the case for the solicitor as it is for the nurse, it is as much the case for the stay-at-home Mom as it is for the company secretary. We are all obsessed with our own self-esteem.

Before age two our self-value came from just being alive. However, around age two things begin to change. I notice this with my little two-year-old daughter and how her experience of relationships has changed as she has grown. Regretfully for her, the terrible-two's are a time when the child learns painfully that she cannot earn parental approval or self-esteem just by continuing to express herself with her little body. She is finding she has to conduct herself with symbolic codes of behaviour in order to be accepted and supported. For example, we do not permit her to pull the dogs hair, to wander out onto the street in her pajamas, to decorate the hall with permanent marker, or to empty her milk bottle onto the newly ironed clothes.

In other words, her sense of value no longer derives from just doing what her little body wants to do or from the natural cuddles and attention she gets. Her self-esteem is increasingly being derived from symbolic behaviour. Like everyone, her self-esteem will gradually take root in the internalised rules for social and family behaviour as much as it has from her very physical existence. Here the child learns about “No” and “Yes” – the signals that identify the symbolic status of certain activities.

Once the child gets beyond the terrible two's the rest of his/her life is animated by the artificial symbolism of self-worth. As adults we are still doing this. Almost all of our time is devoted to protecting, maintaining, and giving-into the symbolic edifice of our self-esteem. As a child it begins with getting approval from playmates, as adults it is in getting approval from co-workers or spouses, or from a variety of small everyday victories and successes that, if the truth were known, we would be embarrassed to admit.

Whether we like it or not, almost all of our inner life is a traffic in images of self-esteem. We are constantly running an inner newsreel that evaluates whether we really are somebody. We are forever rehearsing or reviewing the most minor of events where the minutest of details seems to assume an immense importance. How good one feels about oneself can become entirely dependent on the littlest of things: it may be our appearance in our clothes, how well the hair is standing up, a bank balance, our competence in a social situation, our getting a job done to spec', a tidy kitchen, a bit of praise received, a well groomed garden, etc.

The basic question we have in life is “Am I of value and significance?” Most of us get this answered in relationships. Our review of our self-esteem is most often packed with faces and people and how they see us. It is rarely a nature documentary! If others think well of us our esteem rises.

As you can see, our sense of esteem is very precarious and while we can sustain it in large part by our symbolic activities, successes, and victories it is hard for us to sustain this all the time if our deepest experience is of being worthless, helpless, mediocre, or inadequate. As we age we begin to realise that our esteem has also to emerge from something deeper. This is the spiritual task facing people in the second half of life.

The reason our mechanisms for establishing self-esteem are so hard to see is because we are largely ignorant of our ways of earning self-esteem. We learned how to establish our self-esteem between 2 and 4 years of age but it was more a process of conditioning than it was logical choice. We were losing and winning battles we did not understand.

For today, though, realise how your self-esteem has become dependent on symbolic rather than physical measures. In realising this you can begin to get a sense of possibility. If your self-esteem is a structure based on symbols, you have great potential and possibility to change them and restructure your inner sense of self.

What if your self-esteem were derived very simply from a deeply felt gratitude of just being alive, and that everything else was just small potatoes in comparison. The truth is that as our days fade and we taste our fragile mortality we realise that is all we should value. We must somehow return to the simple bliss of being alive experienced by the small child before the symbols of self-esteem began to be erected. Dismantle them now.