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Repack Your Mental Luggage

Daring to go after the greatest dreams in your life requires good self-esteem. Good self-esteem means that you respect your needs, although they may seem strange to those around you. It means that you are happy and thankful for who you are. This does not mean that you are blind to your shortcomings, but it does mean that deep down, you believe in yourself.

I believe that my own self-esteem was given a good start early in my life. This was due in part to me having good parents who did not over-protect me. Despite my physical disability, I was given room to develop my independence and my own personal integrity. It was also due in part to my being surrounded by many others who encouraged me and who helped me come to terms with who I really am. A child's self-esteem develops in conjunction with the people around him or her.

So a positive childhood environment helps to encourage good self-esteem. For me, this has helped me at an early stage to develop a relationship with myself in which I found it worthwhile discussing things with myself. I have gotten a lot of good advice that way. I think we all have this basic need – to trust ourselves enough to talk through things with ourselves. It gives us strength and it makes it easier for us to put off important decisions until we've taken the time to think things through thoroughly. There are many theories about how to improve our self-esteem. There are also many terms for describing our relationship with ourselves:

	Self-confidence
	Having faith in yourself
	Self-respect
	Self-esteem
	Self-image
	Dignity
+	<u>Pride</u>
It's all about how you relate to yourself.	

It can be rather difficult to distinguish between all these terms. It seems especially difficult to draw a distinct line between self-confidence and self-esteem. Some would argue that self-confidence is linked to what you do. A person who is good with computers can experience self-confidence when learning a new program.

According to this way of thinking, our self-esteem, on the other hand, is something that we develop early in life and always carry with us. It is an integral part of who we are rather than something that stems from what we do. I find this way of looking at self-esteem useful.

Achievers usually have good self-confidence but poor self-esteem. They have a need to always be achieving one thing after another. That is what gives them their greatest feelings of self-worth. But in doing this, they are building their relationship to themselves upon superficial factors, and this can be dangerous.

When they do not succeed, their feelings of self-worth take a dive. This can turn into a vicious cycle in which perceived failure weakens their relationship to themselves, which in turn leads to even more failure.

You can see how important it is then to strengthen your self-esteem and not only maintain self-confidence. Even if our sense of self is established early in life, I believe that it is never too late to improve it.

Poor self-esteem can have many causes. Our culture does not exactly promote good self-esteem. From our childhood on, we are bombarded with lessons that teach us that we should be like everyone else. It's important to have the right toys and the right clothes. Without them, we don't belong. All of this can't help but influence how we see ourselves and discourage us from expressing our individuality.

Even school contributes to this striving for “aliqueness”. Being hurled into a class of 30 students with only one adult is not the best way to encourage individuality. This occurs at an impressionable age. Most schoolchildren today never have the possibility of developing a personal relationship with their teachers. Teachers do not have the time to give each student the attention he or she needs.

We all need to be recognized for who we are if our self-esteem is to develop. And we learn who we are through others telling us. Even when we become adults, we face intimidating obstacles to our self-esteem. In today’s society it’s quite important to behave and act in the same manner as everybody else if you want to be accepted.

Too many of us are convinced that life is nothing more than a game of eating and sleeping and of making and spending money. We concentrate on making money rather than on discovering our individuality and originality. It should be obvious that this is not a good way of strengthening our self-esteem. If we don’t accept who we really are and learn to express ourselves truly in our daily life, then it will be difficult to develop a positive sense of self. One prerequisite to enjoying life and to celebrating yourself is learning to express your true nature. If you do not learn to do this, it will always be nagging at the back of your mind. In the long run, it will wear down your self-esteem.

Poor self-esteem can find expression in an exaggerated tough-guy attitude on the one side and in exaggerated modesty and awkwardness on the other. Poor self-esteem is usually most noticeable when we run into difficulties.

For many of us, facing difficulties results in us beginning to question our abilities. We can be afraid of the consequences of our problems, and we can begin to doubt that we have what it takes to get through them. Dealing with difficulties becomes even more trying when we are experiencing self-doubt.



A lack of self-esteem can easily make a bad situation worse. “When it rains, it pours” is perhaps an expression of our fear that difficulty in our lives will attract even more difficulty.

One of the classic examples of failure is Laurel from Laurel and Hardy. Everyone feels sorry for him. We are uncomfortable when watching such characters, as we are reminded of how poorly we ourselves behave in similar situations.

Laurel is bossed around by Hardy and has to live with poor self-esteem. Hardy, on the other hand, is arrogant, and because of this usually lands himself as well in troublesome situations. So you have to admit that he too lives with poor self-esteem. If they both had better self-confidence, they probably wouldn’t end up in so much trouble, or they would at least do a better job of getting themselves out of trouble. But they probably wouldn’t be as funny, either.

When do you feel confident? Why?
When do you lack confidence? Why?
Do you think this lack of confidence influences how well you do what you do? How?
Have you figured out ways of boosting your confidence?
Are you able to “discuss” things with yourself?

So how does one improve his self-esteem and create a better way of relating to himself?

There are a great number of self-help methods these days. It’s just a matter of picking and choosing. There is a wealth of books that show us different ways to flourish in our relationships with one another, within ourselves and in life itself.

It can be worth a jump back in time to take a closer look at how our interest in the self, or in relating to ourselves, got its start, in other words, at how our interest in psychology got started.

As far back as the ancient Greeks, it was declared that one of the most important things a person could do was to know himself. We would have to trace the start of modern psychology, however, back only a hundred years or so to a man named Sigmund Freud.

As a medical doctor, Freud became interested in helping “hysterical women.” (Perhaps he would have been of help to my ex-wife.) Freud’s interests turned primarily to childhood as well as to sexuality. It must be remembered that he lived at that end of the Victorian Age. His theories were therefore experienced by many as both liberating and objectionable. He was the developer of psychoanalysis, which is still practiced today.

It was Freud's theory that many personal problems stem from unresolved childhood trauma, usually of a sexual nature. In psychoanalysis, a person under direction of a psychoanalyst attempts to revert to childhood in order to resolve unpleasant and unresolved childhood experiences. This type of treatment can take several years. Once it is finished, a person should be able to live happily and in good mental health for the rest of his life. Then he is supposed to be "fixed".

Within psychology, you may say that the behaviorist movement followed the psychoanalytical movement. According to behaviorism, a person is not nearly as complex as Freud believed. There is no reason, therefore, to ransack our childhood in order to attain good mental health.

Behaviorists see man rather as an animal that follows a variety of impulses. Behaviorists are greatly interested in the tangible results that can be gleaned from experimenting on animals. They then attempt to apply the results of these experiments to human psychology. The resulting discussions can sometimes be quite grotesque.

One of the central tenets of behaviorism is that of conditioning. One example of conditioning is when a dog learns tricks based on whether or not we reward him for doing so. According to the behaviorists, employers can use this same method to improve employee performance. Employers need only dangle the right carrot before their employees or administer effective penalties.

Behaviorists, then, view man as little more than a machine with input and output, or as a system of stimulus and response. They leave out everything in between, such as thoughts, feelings and reflections. Instead, they believe that man is a slave to his impulses.

This viewpoint was of course questioned because of its limited view on man. Out of this protest against behaviorism, there grew what is usually referred to as the third movement in psychology, the humanistic.

This movement protested against behaviorism's simplification of the human psyche and believed that there must be something beyond stimulus and response. Followers of this movement believed that this is what makes humans different from animals. We have the ability to reflect and consider, and to weigh the differences between alternatives. Animals cannot do this. We also have the ability to see our choices in the light of our own experiences and knowledge.

Another characteristic of this third force within psychology was its greater interest in what contributes to a healthy psyche rather than what contributes to an unhealthy psyche. It came as no surprise that need fulfillment was discovered to be one of the primary contributors to a healthy psyche.

An American psychologist by the name of Abraham Maslow introduced what is known as his Hierarchy of Needs (see the diagram below).



It was his contention that as soon as a person has his needs met at one level, his resultant growth enables him to move to the next level of need fulfillment. Those whose needs are met on as many levels as possible are those that he saw as having the best mental health.

In our Western culture, most people have their basic needs met. According to Maslow, however, many of us do not experience satisfaction in regards to higher-level needs such as belongingness or self-actualization. Belongingness is a matter of making sure that you have people around you both at work and in your private life who care about you. Self-actualization means doing what you really want to do with your life. Maslow thought the best way to improve mental health and to build self-esteem is to ensure that even these higher needs are met. That means that it is paramount not to neglect your own personal dreams.

Many philosophers through the ages have said the same thing. By living passionately and loving life, we learn to love ourselves. Through this, our self-esteem is built up and we are able to achieve more in our daily life. Maslow was saying that the more we do what we really want to do with our lives, the more our self-esteem will improve. But I started this section by saying that good self-esteem is a prerequisite to daring to do what we want in life. We have fallen into circular reasoning. Yet I think this describes reality rather accurately. I used the following symbol in one of my early ad campaigns for my workshops:



As we step-by-step reach one goal after the other in our lives, our self-esteem grows stronger, and this in turn leads us into setting our sights ever higher. Hopefully, we move up one level on the spiral each time around.

But where should we start? My answer is this: Lift yourself by your bootstraps! I believe that is exactly what we have to do. We have to take on something that we don't really think we can do. Unless we do this, we might spend the rest of our lives complaining about our poor sense of self-esteem and using it as an excuse from trying to accomplish anything. It's easy to fall into a vicious cycle of experiencing our self-esteem sinking, which leads to passiveness and apathy, which in turn pulls down self-esteem even more.

So:

"Lift yourself by your bootstraps!" before it's too late.

Aspects of Life

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One way of figuring out how you want to organize your life is to take a look at how your life is now and compare that to how you would like it to be. How do you rank the following aspects of your life right now on a scale of 1-15? The answers are for you only. The purpose of the test is to give you greater understanding for and insight into your life. Follow your intuition as you fill in each column.

	Now	Points Possible	Difference	What is missing?
Home		15		
Work		15		
Friends		15		
Free time		15		
Food		15		
Clothes		15		
Sex Life		15		
Love		15		
Finances		15		
Knowledge/Education		15		
Appearance		15		
Sleep		15		
Body		15		
Possessions		15		
Self-Understanding		15		
		15		
		15		
Total				= Potential for Improvement