

## UNDERSTANDING SELF-ESTEEM

What is self-esteem? Maybe, how a person feels about themselves. In our Western society self-esteem is viewed as either high or low. In reality, there are many grades of self-esteem between high and low, yet there are no words in between high and low to describe the degree of self-esteem. That in itself is instructive. The Inuit People, commonly known as Eskimos, have over sixty words for ice. To these people, ice is a core element, and therefore having many words to describe different states, or densities of ice is essential. In our Western society we teach children to be careful of the traffic in streets. In the Inuit society they teach their children to be careful of rotten ice and so they have a word for that type of ice and because of this word the children become aware of that type of ice's inherent danger. I believe that the number of words assigned to a topic by a culture is a good way of knowing to what degree that subject is valued. Ice, and many words for the Inuit. Self-esteem and only two words for our Western society.

While everyone would agree that self-esteem is important to human relations, it is not viewed that way by our Western culture; the foundation of which is intellectual and not intuitive. It views feelings in a binary way, either high or low, or to put it another way, either on or off. In reality there are many states of self-esteem for how one feels about oneself is variable and not a constant. Without words to describe these states of self-esteem means that we, in our human relationships, are unable to communicate coherently as to our state of feeling. We try, but fail miserably. Our culture fails to provide descriptive words, and to date, no one has spent the time to craft the necessary words.

It's a bit silly. Just look at how many words we have to describe the degree to which a steak is cooked, such as raw, rare, medium rare, medium, medium well, well done, and burnt. When we talk of self-esteem, it is like saying the word, "world." Certainly we acknowledge that we live on a planet, which we call Earth. But certainly there are numerous continents, which differentiate not only geographic locals, but also cultures. So, in a similar way it is absurd to speak of human feelings in such a global general way by using one word, "self-esteem" as a description of human reality. We need to differentiate different attitudes, values, and functions, which when combined together and measured to the degree of operation, would in a way describe how any one human is doing from a feeling and an emotional competency viewpoint.

In this perspective, I have re-introduced self-esteem by viewing self-esteem as a derivative of one's level of function. How fully an individual functions basically determines how well one feels. To increase one's feeling of well being, one then has to increase one's ability to function. So let's take a look at a list of categories of human function and a rough system to scale the degree to which each of these functions are operational so that we can get a somewhat objective view of one's self-esteem.

See Attached Self-Esteem Scale

With this tool in hand a person can evaluate at some point in time, one's own functional level. Of course in sharing this scale with others they too, with or without our help, can evaluate their then current functional level. Each category is an important function, and until one is fully functional, one cannot help but to be to some degree somewhat dysfunctional. So being aware of one's or another's self-esteem no longer has to remain an unfair, inaccurate, and gross measurement as a result of using a binary scale of either high or low. With the new Self-Esteem Scale in place the evaluation is now based upon a measurement of degree of function in numerous categories when combined together provides one with a sense of an individual's competency. Each of these categories can be viewed as a skill, and as with any skill, the skill can be taught. Maybe education would be more relevant if the curriculum was composed of each of these categories, starting in kindergarten and completing in high school so as one acquires the essential skill-set in each of these categories one's sense of competency will be elevated. In other words, by the time an individual graduated from high school they would be fully functional, and on the way they would have also acquired the essential applied skills of the technological culture within which we live.

While the above may be extremely beneficial, it doesn't exist at this time, so let's take a deeper look into our culture's view of self-esteem. When a child is viewed as having high self-esteem they are usually viewed as healthy and conversely low self-esteem in a child means a break down in mental health. Children viewed as having low self-esteem are seen as being "in trouble" and in need of help.

Self-esteem is not a constant. There are numerous variables that may affect one's feeling about one's self-worth. In one setting one may feel accepted and in another not accepted. It wouldn't be unusual for that person to have their self-esteem swing from high to low.

Competition and the caliber of participants can also affect one's feeling about one's abilities. In one setting one may find one's self-esteem boosted by participants whose skills are less adequate. In another setting one may find the participants at a higher level of competency and one's self-esteem being challenged.

In another perspective, having high self-esteem then may not necessarily be a fixed sign of mental health. One may "reside" in high self-esteem for a while and at that time in one's life one may be viewed as mentally healthy.

While the above is fairly traditional in its perspective it may be interesting to look at some perspectives that are challenging and unorthodox.

Let's take a look at the relationship between someone with high self-esteem with those who have a lesser sense of self-worth. How then would people with lesser abilities feel when associating with someone of greater ability? Probably less worthy. One of the most disturbing factors of being with someone who is quite capable in a certain setting is that others may feel inadequate when associating with such a person of worth. One may find one's self-esteem dropping when

around a person who is more capable and therefore associating with the person with greater abilities may be uncomfortable. This is a subtle paradox. Someone who has worked hard to develop themselves can inadvertently alienate those around them because of this inverse relationship between competency and comfort. The more competent one is the less comfortable others may be.

Let's take a look at the opposite situation. How would it feel to associate with someone who is less capable than oneself? Probably by associating with a person of less skill would lead to a feeling of competency and well-being.

There is an interesting perspective that comes out of this awareness. A person with low self-esteem can help those around them feel better about themselves. So when someone associates with a person with low self-esteem one "should" feel a sense of appreciation for that person. Helping people feel better about themselves is a very fine quality...it is a gift to be shared with others. By having this awareness a person can then begin to see a positive element within one's own or another person's lack of skills and abilities. Knowing that one is helping people feel better about themselves is quite uplifting on some level. At the least, it can be a starting point for recovery, knowing that as "inadequate" as one may feel, still one is able to assist others.

This paradox of making people feel comfortable or uncomfortable depending on one's level of skills and self-esteem is quite instructive. Suddenly one can see that there are negative qualities associated with high self-esteem and positive qualities associated with low self-esteem. Being aware of the positive qualities in high and low self-esteem it wouldn't be unreasonable then to make the leap to wanting to bring together the positive qualities of high and low self-esteem.

Thinking about this at a greater depth one may see that the whole concept of viewing self-esteem as "high" and "low" may be out of perspective. Perhaps self-esteem would be more completely viewed when seen as being within the concept of "balance." The imagery of a shower would assist us in understanding self-esteem within the concept of balance.

When one gets into a shower one tries to set a balance between hot and cold. One tries to capture the positive qualities of the two extremes. Somewhere in between is a temperature that is comfortable. Viewing the above paradox in the same way one would want to mix the positive quality in low self-esteem, that people are comfortable in one's presence, with the positive qualities associated with high self-esteem such as a sense of well-being, confidence, optimism and a joy in life.

Viewing self-esteem as a balance is then worth contemplating. There are wonderful ramifications in approaching someone with this perspective. There is such an intense stigma associated with labeling one's self or another as having low self-esteem. This stigma can be eradicated by altering the viewpoint to a condition of balance or imbalance. If one loses one's balance it is not viewed as a stigma but rather as a problem of equilibrium. Like riding a bike it takes practice to find the balance. Finding one's balance is not like having to overcome a lifetime of problems. Learning to establish a balance becomes the focus and not mental illness.

Let's take a look at the following situation, and apply the concept of balancing self-esteem and seeing the positive nature of "low" self-esteem. Let's say I am a 6th Grade teacher, and I have a student named Billy who reads at the 3rd. Grade level. I am a good teacher so I reach out to Billy and invite him to meet me before school so that I can give him some special attention. He agrees to come, but the next morning he doesn't turn up. I then arrange to meet him after school, but again he doesn't turn up. I can see that Billy doesn't really want my help, probably because it makes him feel dumb and stupid. His reading level is a problem, but the real difficulty is a problem of self-esteem. He can't take the direct outreach of help. So I get an inspiration.

The next day I go to my friend Mary who teaches 2nd. Grade. I ask her to allow Billy to come to her class to help her slower 2nd. Graders learn to read. Billy reads at the 3rd. Grade level. Billy is surprised but likes the idea that he can help some one learn to read. After he has been doing this for a few months, he's much more excited about reading, and as he helps others to read he finds that he is feeling more comfortable reading more interesting books. Soon Billy is reading at the 4th. Grade level. Next, Billy is asked to help a group of 3rd. graders to read, and within a few months Billy is reading at the 5th. Grade level. It isn't long before he's reading at grade level. In this approach, Billy's problem was an issue of self-esteem and by applying the principal of one feeling better when one is around people who perform less well, the teacher was able to address Billy's self-esteem problem. Billy was lifted up by an upwelling of good feeling. What a novel approach, and one that is certainly more effective then trying to pull some one up. Lifting is so much more gentle than pulling.