How does self-esteem affect our daily life?

"...What progress, you ask, I made? I have began to be a friend to myself..."
—*Hecato Greek philosopher (Patricia Demierre-Berberat)*

General explanation

As mentioned in the quotation above, the secret of a healthy self-esteem is to accept your weaknesses, see your strength and try to live your own life.

Official definitions about self-esteem mention that it is seen as a personality trait. How someone sees oneself including generally feeling about oneself, one's abilities, attributes, emotions, appearance and behaviours. As we all know you can have a high or a low self-esteem and apart from that it can also change on the daily bases or develop during the lifetime. Everyone experiences low self-esteem from time to time or in different situations. However, the way in which you deal with a situation affects your daily life and your self-esteem as well.

Sometimes the term self-esteem is misused as to proclaim feeling good and superior, or having power over other people. However, you cannot have too much self-esteem. On the contrary, a healthy self-esteem has nothing to do with narcissism, egotism, arrogance or a sense of superiority. These attitudes are more signs of low self-esteem, which reflect bad behaviour. Unhealthy behaviour leads to harmful coping strategies like for example aggression, violence towards oneself or close relationships, alcohol, drugs, risk behaviour or not speaking up for yourself.

A reason why communities and parents should or are interested to help people and their children to develop a healthy self esteem is because it leads to more tolerance and respect for others. Individuals who accept responsibility for their own actions and their life, have integrity, take pride in their accomplishments, know how to motivate themselves, are willing to take risks and are more capable of handling criticism and stress. Additionally they are more able to choose healthy relationships and have fewer problems with challenges. Therefore with a healthy self-esteem they trust their own feelings and being. They are constructive, responsible and trustworthy and that would have a positive impact on society. Inversely people with a low self-esteem are prone to having a lower immune system in general. Additionally they are more at risk of depressions, anxieties, eating disorders, aggression issues, addictions and are over sensitive and easily upset. With low self-esteem they need others people's encouragement all the time and therefore are at risk to be manipulated.

Due to the fact that we are listening to statements of others without any reflection, we lose our sense of self and what is good for us. It could go so far that you feel not living your own life any more. Already Socrates wanted to challenge people to reflect other's statements. Therefore this topic engaged a lot of philosophers and psychoanalysts and psychotherapists since then.

How does a low self-esteem develop?

This question is hard to answer, because there is not that one factor which causes a low self-esteem. First of all your natural characters are the biases where to build on. Later everyone follows a different path of living and develops different core beliefs over the lifespan. These are influenced through the community where we are living in, relationships we are developing and experience are making.

Especially negative experiences in early childhood can have a huge impact on your self esteem. During that time you are much more vulnerable and dependent on other people's help and care. With bad experiences during that time you might not develop a healthy resilience or the feeling of being important and worthwhile. This negative feeling might have an impact on how you see yourself today.

Apart from that, meaningful negative events and experiences during adolescence and adult life might also shake your core beliefs and might lower your self-esteem. Sometimes it takes a while and you do not really notice the negative impact and the changes of your core beliefs immediately. Especially when you have a weak day or time, negative experiences and judgmental statements of other people can affect you more than on another day.

A few examples of negative experiences that could have an impact on your core beliefs / self esteem:

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- being subject to abuse – sexual, emotional or physical, and the loss of control associated with this
- having your physical and emotional needs neglected in childhood
- failing to meet the expectations of your parents
- feeling like the 'odd one out' at school
- coming from a community which often experiences prejudice, such as being an asylum seeker, or being poor but living in a wealthy neighbourhood
- peer pressure to conform to social norms which you don't agree with
- bullying or excessive pressures at work
- trauma
- physical ill-health – its impact on your quality of life and activities you can do
- bereavement
- facing redundancy or being unemployed
- social isolation and loneliness. ...." (mind, for better mental health, online)

With a low self-esteem you have a higher inner criticizer, which is convinced to know best what is good for you and who you are! It is not to be mistaken with a healthy inner voice, which tries to

lead you through your life. The voice I am talking about could develop into your real enemy. It is this one which involves all the musts, should, ought, etc. in your head. It puts you down without any evidence and judges you as "…being inferior, not good enough, not as good as others…" As already mentioned this criticizer could have developed through other people's statements in combination with your core beliefs, living situation and mostly over a longer period of time. To free yourself and shift your view into another direction takes some time and is also a lot of work.

How to get a healthy self-esteem?

To start improving your self-esteem you need to look inside and try to explore your inner criticizer. Sometimes it might be helpful to do it together with a person you trust (like a very good friend, family member or with professional help).

Additionally you have to discover where the inner voice comes from. One reason might be that it developed because people made a particular statement about you (e.g. a teacher, parent, peer, etc). Therefore you have to look at your relationships. Do people who are not supporting you but causing you harm surround you? Therefore you have to reflect and see how you could change these relationships. (Being more assertive? Reducing the contact to these people? etc.)

A hard part might be to discover again what your real needs are.

On the Internet you find a lot of suggestions and exercises, which you can follow in order to develop a more healthy self-esteem. With all these ideas you have to listen to your caring inner voice and try to learn to trust your gut instinct again. However the way is not easy and it is also okay to look for professional help in order to get started.

When you tried a different behaviour and get positive feedback first, there might be another day/situation where you don't have the same success as expected. Depending on your mental state in this situation you might be frustrated. Therefore you have to act with caution and start in a safe environment first.

Good luck!!

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October 2012