

Understanding Low Self-Esteem in Autistic Individuals

(From a Clinicians Perspective)

Causes of Low Self-Esteem:

Self-esteem is not something that we are born with and a major factor in a person's developing self-esteem is influences from the environment. Many environmental factors can positively and negatively influence self-esteem. For instance, things that can positively influence self-esteem include, coming from a supportive family that values and accepts the person's thoughts and feelings, encouraging independence while creating safe limits, setting healthy standards and goals that are achievable but require some effort, and having parents with high self-esteem model these behaviors. However, many things can lower a person's self-esteem, including experiences in childhood and adulthood. Below are several factors that can negatively influence self-esteem.

- **Overly critical parents:** Parents who are constantly critical or set impossibly high standards of behavior that can leave a person feeling guilty for not achieving those standards and that a person will “never be good enough.” Adults with this type of experience may continue to strive for perfection to overcome a long-standing sense of inferiority and self-criticism.
- **Childhood loss:** If a person is separated from a parent as a result of death, divorce, or unexplained parental leave, they may feel abandoned. Because of this, a person may grow up with a sense of emptiness and insecurity inside that can be re-stimulated very intensely by the losses of significant people in their adult life.
- **Experiences of abuse:** Abuse can leave you with a complex mix of feelings, including inadequacy, insecurity, lack of trust, guilt, and/or rage. If the abuse was perpetrated by a family member, this can create confusion since the person who is supposed to care for you can also hurt you.
- **Overly protective parents:** While protective parenting is an important factor for developing healthy self-esteem, overprotectiveness can leave a child feeling that they are not capable of taking care of their own needs and that they need to rely on others for protection and security. It can also inhibit a person from developing their own sense of self and identity.
- **Parental neglect:** Some parents, because they are preoccupied with themselves, their work, or other concerns, simply fail to give their children adequate attention and nurturing. Children left to their own devices often grow up feeling insecure, worthless, and lonely.
- **Parental substance abuse:** Chronic drinking or substance abuse creates a chaotic, unreliable family atmosphere in which it is difficult for a child to develop a basic sense of trust or security.

- **Negative experiences from peers:** While growing up, a person may base much of their self-worth and esteem on the reflection of how well-liked they are by peers. As a result, experiences of bullying, isolation, and rejection by peers can lead to self-blame and feeling inadequate. These feelings can remain with us throughout our lives and can reduce our willingness to make friends, which can reinforce those negative feelings about ourselves. For people with Autism, challenges with making and maintaining friendships or feeling excluded by peers can certainly influence a person's confidence in their social abilities and ultimately their self-esteem.
- **Stigmas and stereotypes about Autism:** Because the presentation of Autism is unique to each person with this diagnosis, society may hold negative stigmas and stereotypes about an Autistic person. As a result, this can influence how a person treats Autistics (treat them more like a child, do not view them as an independent individual, or make assumptions about what the person can and cannot do). These stigmas and stereotypes can make an Autistic person feel less about themselves, which can influence their self-esteem.
- **Mental health challenges:** Common mental health challenges experienced by Autistic individuals include anxiety and depression. These disorders can be caused by environmental influences (such as the negative experiences listed above) or can be caused by a person's biology or genetics. Anxiety and depression are disorders that reshape a person's perception of situations, other people, the world, and themselves. These negative views can inhibit a person from taking action to improve their well-being, which can influence their self-esteem. For instance, a person with social anxiety may be fearful of judgment from others, so they may not make efforts to connect with new people and build friendships. As a result, they may isolate themselves, which can make them feel inferior and even less likely to try to make friendships.

Solutions for Improving Self-Esteem:

Improving self-esteem is not something that happens overnight, but multiple solutions can help to rebuild and strengthen self-esteem. These solutions include behavioral changes (specific acts a person can do) and cognitive changes (changing the way we think about things). It should be noted that some of these solutions are best applied while working with a therapist.

BEHAVIORAL SOLUTIONS:

- **Recognizing strengths:** Everyone has strengths, even if they don't feel that they do. Strengths can be common, such as communication abilities, athleticism, and creativity; and they can be less common like adaptability, openness to feedback, empathy, and reliability. Being able to identify strengths (common or uncommon) is the first task. The second task is evaluating how much a person is using this strength. Sometimes, a person is not using their strength enough which may be influencing how they feel about themselves. Sometimes, we are over-using our strength which can lead to burnout and disinterest. Finding the right balance of using strengths will help make us feel better and strengthen our self-esteem.

- **Building mastery:** Hobbies and interests are such an important part of adding more variety to life. Not only can they be a fun way to spend time, but they can also help build self-esteem and create a greater sense of community. Having hobbies and interests that we can actively participate in can create feelings of joy and through practice can help a person develop a sense of mastery, which can boost self-esteem. Hobbies and interests can also create a sense of community and a sense of connection to others with shared interests can create more feelings of security and closeness with others.
- **Identifying and incorporating values:** Values are what we find meaningful in life. They are what you care about and consider to be important. Values are different for everybody, and they can change over time. Values are different from goals, as goals can be achieved, and values are more like a compass giving us directions to head in. For example, you may have the goal of going on a jog while placing value on exercise and physical health. Values can help improve self-esteem as they give us a purpose and help us make decisions. When we prioritize our own values, we prioritize our needs and wants, which is important to do when building self-esteem. [Example of Core Values.](#)
- **Setting Goals:** When trying to make positive changes in life, setting goals can be a useful way to achieve changes. However, how we set goals can be quite important. If we set goals that are too high, we may not feel competent to continue them if we cannot achieve them, or setting goals that are too low or easy may not motivate us to continue pursuing our change. Therefore, using strategies like setting SMART (specific, measurable, achievable, relevant, time-bound) goals can be helpful SMART is an acronym for goal setting that helps set good goals and create helpful timeframes.
 - Specific- what do I want to achieve and what do I need to do to achieve it?
 - Measurable- how will I know that I completed the goal?
 - Achievable- is this task something I can actually achieve or do I need to make the task more manageable
 - Relevant- is this task going to contribute to my overall goal?
 - Time-Bound- what is the time frame I want to achieve this task?

When we set good goals and achieve them, it reinforces the feeling of success that makes us want to continue. When we achieve our goals, we feel better about ourselves and also work towards self-improvement.

- [Boundary Setting.](#)

COGNITIVE SOLUTIONS:

Thinking is a powerful thing that changes the way we feel and act in certain situations. For some, changing the way with think about something may seem impossible, but we have a lot more control over our thoughts than some may think. Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT) is a common therapy that has been to be helpful for managing, anxiety and depression, and improving self-esteem by changing the way people think about a situation, which influences how we feel and how we respond. People can apply some of the principles of cognitive behavioral therapy by themselves, but it is often helpful to learn these tools with the help of a therapist.

Self-esteem is based on our perception of our self. Oftentimes, people with lower self-esteem experience “Automatic negative thoughts.” These are quick, automatic patterns of thinking that you have about yourself, others, life in general, or the future and they are generally negative, judgmental, exaggerated, rigid, and usually very convincing. Here is a list of common Automatic Negative Thoughts that individuals with lower self-esteem may experience:

- **Assuming:** assuming the worst without testing the evidence (e.g., “They didn’t text me back so they must not like me.”).
- **Should Statements:** creating demands and expectations for ourselves and others that may be unrealistic or unachievable. (e.g., “I should run 10 miles every day”).
- **All or Nothing Thinking:** holding yourself to impossible standards of perfection (e.g., “If I do not get all A’s on my report card, then I am a failure.”).
- **Overgeneralizing:** taking one experience and believing that it will repeat itself in similar situations (e.g., “I did not get the job offer, I will never get a job offer.”).
- **Labeling:** acting as though a single word describes you completely (“I am a loser.”).
- **Unfavorable comparisons:** comparing ourselves to others and feeling poorly when we are not keeping up with what others may be doing (“I’ll never have a house as nice as theirs.”).
- **Catastrophizing:** thinking the worst possible scenario will happen (e.g., “I made a mistake, now I will be fired and not be able to find another job.”)
- **Personalizing:** seeing yourself as more involved in negative events than you really are (e.g., “If only I played better, we would have won the game.”)
- **Making Feelings Facts:** making your feelings proof of the way things “really are” (e.g., “I feel like they do not like me, so they will never be my friend.”)

After we recognize these Automatic negative thoughts, it is important to check how accurate they are. Most of the time, our thoughts are not accurate and are more exaggerated and negative than the reality of the situation. Here are some things we can ask ourselves to think these thoughts through:

- What is the evidence for this thought? What is the evidence against this thought?
- What might my best friend or a trusted other say in this situation?
- Am I thinking this way because my emotions are intense?

After thinking through the thoughts more, we may develop a more realistic thought and one that is less extreme. Once we have a more realistic thought, our emotions will improve, and we will be able to respond healthily. Making good decisions with stressors creates a greater sense of control in our lives and ultimately improves our self-esteem.