

Teenage Love Addicts

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Self-Esteem

“When the melancholic dejectedly desires to be rid of life, of himself, is this not because he will not learn earnestly and rigorously to love himself? When a man surrenders himself to despair because the world or some person has left him faithlessly betrayed, what then is his fault except that he does not love himself the right way.” Soren Kierkegaard in *Works of Love*.

It is hard to know whether we are born with self-esteem, and then sometimes lose it, or whether we are born without it and never get a chance to develop it. Either way, the lack of self-esteem (what we call low self-esteem) is a painful disorder. It can be seen as both a mental and spiritual wound.

Even children born with a natural reservoir of self-esteem need to be validated by those around them if they are to build on that sense of self-worth. Love and attention are the most important forms of validation. Unfortunately, sometimes things do not go the way they should and children do not receive the nurturing they need to thrive. Instead they are neglected, abandoned, bullied, and sometimes abused. This causes children to unconsciously assume that something is wrong with them. They don't want to believe that the grownups around them are bad, so they conclude that they themselves are bad or flawed. If they are flawed, then they assume that they are worthless.

Neglect can range from mild to severe. Abuse can be sexual, verbal, or physical. Shaming is the worst kind of verbal abuse, robbing children of a positive self-image. It is important to note that not all neglect and abuse

occur inside the home. Many children are neglected or abused at school. (Being bullied at school is a form of abuse.)

It can be difficult to measure the relationship between the degree of neglect or abuse, and one's level of self-esteem. Usually, the more neglected or abused the child is, the less self-esteem he or she retains. However, this is not the only factor that should be considered when trying to measure the impact of neglect and abuse on self-esteem. One should also consider the level of sensitivity with which each child is born and any insulation he or she might have had while growing up.

Sometimes neglect and abandonment do not stem from the absence of love, it is unintentional. For instance, the death of a parent is unintentional, but it is perceived by a child as abandonment. Likewise, many children feel abandoned when their parents must go to work. Even if neglect is unintentional, the impact is the same. Children feel something is wrong with them, and they develop low self-esteem. When I was five years old, my mother became very ill and I was sent to my grandmother's house. I was not intentionally abandoned, but I *felt* abandoned and neglected. When I came home, I was not the same child, and the perceived abandonment contributed to my low self-esteem.

Trauma, even the kind that is unrelated to neglect or abuse, can also rob children of self-esteem. This is because children typically think that they are bad when something bad happens to them. (Unintentional trauma can be an accident, a prolonged illness, a frightening experience, etc.) This is a cultural belief as well. People throughout the ages have associated a carefree life with worthiness. They think they are bad if hardship comes into their lives and good if there is abundance. In the Bible, Job asks God why he is suffering such hardship since he was such a good servant.

Parents are like mirrors, and should reflect an image of loveliness to their children. When parents are depressed, angry, distracted, shame-based, or have low self-esteem, they reflect a negative image to their children who then conclude (unconsciously) that they are flawed as well. This is how parents pass on shame and low self-esteem even when they are trying to be good parents.

Once a child has low self-esteem, it begins to feed on itself. Due to their poor self-image, children are incapable of compensating for neglect and abuse by loving themselves. They are also unable to accept the small doses of love their parents do provide, or the love of other people they may meet as they are growing up. This triggers more shame and low self-esteem, which in turn produces other painful emotions and conditions such as:

- o chronic insecurity
- o chronic anxiety
- o depression
- o feelings of alienation
- o loneliness
- o a profound hunger for love
- o an exaggerated fear of abandonment and rejection
- o feelings of deprivation
- o feelings of emptiness
- o confusion or fear when love is available
- o anxiety when things are going well
- o some kind of addiction

Teens with low self-esteem suffer emotional pain. Fortunately, this pain can become a bridge to psychological healing if identified and treated.

Increasing Self-Esteem in Teens

I want to start out by saying that some teens must work harder than others to reclaim their self-esteem, and twice as hard to keep it. It would be nice if once we all felt good about ourselves we could maintain that feeling, but it rarely works that way. Self-esteem can be elusive. One minute it's there, and the next minute it seems to have vanished. I would also like to point out that while many of the following suggestions will help teens increase their self-esteem by *self validation*, other recommendations will encourage seeking out the validation of others to enhance self-esteem. This may seem contradictory. Many people feel that we can love ourselves unconditionally from within and have no need for the love of others. However, I feel that we do need some outer validation. We are only human, and no matter how strongly we believe in ourselves we need a little support. This is especially true for teenagers. What is important to remember, is that our validation of

ourselves should come *first* and it is *more important* that what others think of us. We must teach teenagers this.

To the teenager with low self-esteem . . .

1. Adopt an *attitude* of self-acceptance or self-love. This means really understanding that you are a worthy person despite your shortcomings. Make the decision that you are a worthy person.
2. Once you have a general acceptance of your worth as a human being, spend some time focusing on your specific attributes. This enhances your self-worth.
3. Learn how to superimpose new information over your old negative tapes. (all the hurtful things people have said about you.) This is the best way to diminish inappropriate self-criticism which erodes self-esteem.
4. Reclaim your *self-respect*—the pride or satisfaction that comes from:
 - o Self-discipline
 - o Being responsible
 - o Doing the right thing
 - o Handling adversity well
 - o Ignoring peer pressure

Self-respect, which is a kind of conditional love, does not necessarily contradict the notion that you should love yourself unconditionally. Both concepts are important to maintain self-esteem. You must try to find the balance between loving yourself unconditionally and pushing yourself to do things that will make you proud of yourself.

5. Surround yourself, whenever possible, with people who validate you (people who like you just the way you are). Like it or not, your relationship with others can erode your self-esteem. So make a point of choosing your friends carefully. You do not have a choice about your family, but you are free to pick and choose most of your companions.

6. Get to know yourself—who you are, your values, needs, wants, taste, etc. How can you value what you do not know? Write your life story. Write about your dreams for the future.
7. Stop trying to be perfect. No one is perfect. We all live in the shadow of perfection and are perfectly imperfect.
8. Do nice things for yourself. Take care of yourself. This self-care validates your self-worth.
9. At the same time, do nice things for other people. There should be some balance in your life between taking care of yourself *and* being kind to others.
10. Stop comparing yourself to others. You are special in your own way and this is the attitude you must have about yourself.
11. Learn how to receive, especially if you are a people pleaser or have always had a monopoly on giving. Stop dismissing compliments and returning gifts. Let the love come in.
12. Be creative. Everyone has a talent and they should use it. This stimulates self-satisfaction and reinforces the positive things you have been thinking about yourself.
13. Stand up for yourself, especially if you don't usually do this. Remember that you value what you take care of. Standing up for yourself means:
 - o Setting limits (saying no)
 - o Expressing your opinion
 - o Walking away from neglect or abuse
 - o Being assertive when appropriate
 - o No longer apologizing when you haven't done anything wrong.
14. Make amends if you have hurt someone. (If you are a people pleaser make sure you are the guilty party. People pleasers are known to apologize just to keep the peace or out of *misplaced* guilt.)

15. To protect your newfound self-esteem, prepare yourself mentally for those times when people try to drag you down (people you can't avoid like classmates). Learn how to keep from taking them so seriously, as well as how to filter out inappropriate criticism. Seek out an adult to help you do this.

If you work very hard on this task of building up your self-esteem, you will have taken a great step forward. Your life will change and you will be genuinely happy—perhaps for the first time in your life. And it gets better. There is no end to the happiness you will know when you love yourself.