

Confidence and self-esteem

Confidence and self-esteem are not the same thing, but they are closely related. Confidence is an attitude about how you will deal with future challenges; it can be transient and specific. For example, you may be confident that you'll manage the hike to the mountain-base but un-confident about climbing the mountain. You may be less confident when you have a hang-over than you are when you're clear-headed.

Self-esteem is a more general, deep-rooted and lasting state of mind. Nathaniel Brandon described it like this: '*Confidence in our ability to think, confidence in our ability to cope with the basic challenges of life, and confidence in our right to be successful and happy, the feeling of being worthy, deserving, entitled to assert our needs and wants, achieve our values, and enjoy the fruits of our efforts.*'

With all the hype there has been about 'building self-esteem' over the past 20 years¹, we can forget that high self-esteem can be as much of a problem as low, involving boasting, big-headedness, smugness, arrogance, narcissism, and blindness to one's own shortcomings.

The factor that appears to have the biggest influence on a person's self-esteem is their parents – partly through their genes and partly through the degree of love, concern, acceptance and interest shown throughout childhood and adolescence.

People with low self-esteem tend to:

- avoid challenges and opportunities
- be very isolated
- avoid responsibilities or devote their whole life to being responsible for others
- be overly dependent on others
- rely on others to make decisions for them
- describe themselves in very limited terms or put themselves down
- rely more on other people's opinions than their own
- have missing skills (e.g. social skills)
- present themselves as highly emotional and depressed.

Although you can raise people's *confidence* by giving them positive feedback about themselves, this is less effective with people who have general *low self-esteem*, since they will discount information that contradicts the opinion they have of themselves. Such people need to learn new skills, particularly about ways of interpreting events, and to focus and build on what they can do well.

¹ See, for example, the Joseph Rowntree Foundation report *The Costs and Causes of Low Self-Worth* by Nicholas Emler (2001)