

In Defense of Self-Esteem

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By its February 3 publication of Lauren Slater's article *The Trouble With Self-Esteem*, the New York Times Sunday Magazine has performed a valuable public service, bringing back into national public debate the vital issue of whether we can cultivate a more constructive, self-realizing, and responsible society by developing in our youth a healthy, authentic self-esteem.

Slater's cynical and deeply misguided appraisal of self-esteem warrants a published response by an opposing coalition of leaders in the field. The people of America (especially our parents and their children) deserve to be apprised of both sides of this provocative debate, so we can all make truly informed decisions regarding the efficacy and significance of self-esteem in our daily lives and at every level of our society.

We all decry the social epidemics of our time, such as the rise in drug abuse and the recent upsurge in school violence. In 30 years the United States has seen a 300% increase in adolescent suicide and a 1000% increase in adolescent depression. This shocking reality is the fuel that drives the national movement in self-esteem.

Indeed, most studies on self-esteem have correlated these negative behaviors in our youth to the breakdown of family and community support systems used to nurture healthy self-esteem. Although perspectives on how to supplement these support systems may vary, most educators, counselors, parents and community leaders agree that developing healthy, authentic self-esteem in our youth is one of our most effective and promising means of prevention of destructive behavior.

Ultimately, our view of self-esteem is tethered to the centuries-old debate about our essential human nature, going as far back as Comenius in the 1590's. Comenius believed that a newly born child does not arrive into this world as an empty vessel, but is more like a seed awaiting to be nourished. We affirm this faithful view of our humanity. We believe nurturing a healthy self-concept based on competence and self-worth is a sensible alternative to the shame, contempt and hopelessness that has become so pervasive in our youth today.

For this reason the self-esteem movement continues to represent the cutting edge in cultivating healthy people and healthy communities. Moreover, it represents our most promising and effective means of building social capital and developing sustainable solutions to our most persistent societal problems.

Toward a more constructive definition of self-esteem

Over the last 30 years, authorities in the fields of psychology, education, and healthcare have attempted to clarify what is meant by high self-esteem. They agree that high self-esteem implies the

healthy, authentic nature of self-esteem, rather than just "liking yourself a lot" or "feeling good about oneself" as Lauren Slater's article suggests. Characteristics such as conceit, egotism, arrogance, narcissism, or a sense of superiority are not considered by most authorities to be aspects of authentic self-esteem. To the contrary, such characteristics are more indicative of defensive, pseudo, or low self-esteem.

In 1988, assemblyman John Vasconcellos charged the California Task Force To Promote Self-Esteem and Personal and Social Responsibility (to) lead a public study of whether healthy authentic self-esteem correlates with various troubling behaviors including violence, drug abuse, welfare dependency and school failure. In the course of its 3-year work, the Task Force formulated its definition of self-esteem. Based on two years of research, public polling, and expert deliberation the Task Force defined self-esteem in its 1990 report as our capacity "to appreciate our own worth and importance, to be accountable for ourselves, and to act responsibly toward others."

Most authorities now agree with Nathaniel Branden Ph.D., renowned psychotherapist and author, who defines self-esteem as "the disposition to experience oneself as being competent to cope with the basic challenges of life and being worthy of happiness." This definition was acknowledged by psychology professor Christopher Mruk Ph.D. of Bowling Green University in his book *Self-Esteem: Research, Theory, and Practice* to be the one sound definition that has withstood the test of time.

Our sense of competence is grounded in the belief that we are generally capable of producing desired results. It arises from being secure in the efficacy of our mind and emotions, and from our ability to make appropriate, constructive, life-affirming choices and decisions. It comes as a by-product of trusting ourselves, living consciously, striving to be "realistic" in how we view ourselves and others, and by taking pride in our accomplishments. Having confidence in ourselves makes us less vulnerable to the threats of others, which enables us to be more tolerant and respectful of others, to be more responsible, fair and open-minded.

Our sense of worthiness is based upon our core beliefs about ourselves and our human nature. To believe we are all worthy of love, life, and liberty is to believe we are all deserving of respect, nurturance, and happiness. Authentic self-esteem is life-affirming, not to be dismissed as some "romantic, sometimes silly ... belief that we are special from head to toe," and certainly not some scam by psychotherapists to retain their clientele, as Slater's article suggests. Rather, it's a by-product of having faith in who we are and what we do.

Defending the efficacy of self-esteem

Parents, educators, and counseling professionals are continually being encouraged to establish conditions that foster healthy self-esteem, and for several compelling reasons. To begin, low self-esteem has been closely associated with so many problem behaviors, especially among adolescents. Rothman reported as many as 50% of our nation's adolescents are "at risk" in school due to low self-esteem. They are easily influenced or manipulated by others, and are often subject to being scapegoated by their peers. They can be observed either withdrawing from social contacts or attempting to prove their significance by showing off, engaging in risky behavior, bullying others, or developing notions of grandiosity to compensate for feelings of inadequacy.

Psychiatrist James Gilligan described these behaviors as the "wish to ward off or eliminate the feeling of shame and humiliation - a feeling that is painful, and can even be intolerable and overwhelming -

and replace it with its opposite, the feeling of pride. Synonyms for pride include self-esteem, self-love, and self-respect, [while] synonyms of shame include disrespect, dishonor, and disgrace." Similarly, FBI profiler John Douglas found most violent and dangerous criminals he studied attempt to diminish their feelings of low self-esteem by blaming others for their own real or imagined shortcomings, and concluded that any violent act "is the result of a deep-seated feeling of inadequacy."

Many empirical studies have documented this correlation between negative behavior and low self-esteem. Keagan reported low self-esteem may either cause or contribute to the development of psychological disorders such as anxiety, defensiveness, drug abuse and alcoholism, depression, interpersonal problems as well as low academic achievement. A research review by Gurnery also found a close link between low self-esteem and juvenile delinquency, violent crime, drug and alcohol abuse, teen pregnancy, and chronic welfare dependency. In addition, the statistical coupling of low self-respect with depression, suicide, teenage pregnancy, school dropouts, eating disorders, and economic outcomes has been well documented. While a few researchers claim to have found a low correlation between negative behavior and low self-esteem, we find most empirical deviations result fundamentally from researchers using varying and sometimes contradictory definitions of self-esteem.

Schools that have implemented self-esteem programs report positive changes in their students. A 12-year study by Hawkins reported in the Archives of Pediatrics & Adolescent Medicine and published in the New York Times found that enhancing self-esteem in 1st through 6th graders reduced risky behaviors and improved school performance and attendance. Children participating in the study were 19% less likely to have committed violent acts, 38% less likely to indulge in heavy drinking, 31% less likely to engage in sexual intercourse, and 35% less likely to have caused a pregnancy or to have become pregnant.

An article published in School Administrator reported on a 3-year control study which found schools that implemented the "Building Self-Esteem" program had less anti-social behavior among the general student population, less absenteeism, more positive leadership, and higher academic motivation. When this program was implemented on a district-wide basis, average daily attendance increased to 99.7%, achievement test scores increased 10-15%, dropout rate declined from 18% to 4.5%, drug abuse declined, and the percentage of students going on to college increased from 65% to 89%.

In a control study of 1,000 students by Dr. Michele Borba, it was found that the number of students in school who were considered "at risk" of school failure or involvement in social problems was reduced by 66% as a result of their participation in a school-wide, skill-based self-esteem program that focused on five elements: security, identity, affiliation (belonging), a sense of purpose and skills of competence. The study revealed a 41% reduction in student physical aggression and a 46% reduction in student detentions for misbehavior.

Numerous other research studies have documented that children who turn out to be highly successful, contributing adults and who lead generally happy lives come from those families which have established conditions that foster healthy, authentic self-esteem. One such longitudinal study was conducted by University of California professor and author Stanley Coopersmith, who followed up on 1739 adolescents and published his findings in his book *The Antecedents of Self-Esteem*. He found that creating family standards of behavior that are clearly defined and consistently enforced, providing unconditional love and respect, and having high expectations were leading factors in developing high self-esteem.

Finally, self-esteem programs have shown to make a long-term difference in the livelihood and well-being of many adults. A longitudinal study of all the children born in the UK in 1970, with follow-ups every five years thereafter, found that low self-esteem was a strong indicator of unemployment in adults. Boys with high self-esteem as young children had a reduced likelihood of unemployment as adults. The report concluded that self-esteem may have a far greater impact on future success than intelligence or talent. What's more, Fortune magazine recently reported today's companies are stressing the need for individuals who adjust easily to change, work cooperatively, exhibit tolerance and respect for others, take on challenges, and show initiative and self-motivation. Executives in the study said high self-esteem is an essential characteristic they look for when hiring new employees.

Challenging the cynical view of self-esteem

Recently a few authors have taken to discounting the efficacy of self-esteem and sought to raise doubts regarding its significance. Nicholas Emler Ph.D. in Psychology Today and Lauren Slater both report on research where the authors associate high self-esteem with having an inflated ego, and with behaviors more commonly associated with insecurity, arrogance and conceit. When researchers use such absurd definitions for self-esteem, it's no surprise they inaccurately conclude that "people with high self-esteem pose a greater threat to those around them than people with low self-esteem."

Further, Slater claims that the main objective of school self-esteem programs is "to dole out huge heapings of praise, regardless of actual accomplishment." Anybody knowledgeable about the published programs knows this is not the case. Most programs are designed to develop attitudes and skills based on reality and actual accomplishment, not heapings of undue praise. Such programs seek to enable students to make better decisions, engage in goal setting, develop more effective social skills, and see themselves realistically. The author trivializes efforts to foster self-esteem by profiling affirmations such as "I adore myself" or "Today I will accept myself for who I am, not who I wish I were." She ignores all the real and effective strategies that are required and practiced to foster authentic self-esteem.

Slater suggests that developing self-control, responsibility, and critical self-appraisal should be an alternative to developing self-esteem. What Slater doesn't acknowledge is that Nathaniel Branden and others identify those same traits as critical steps to developing and retaining healthy self-esteem. Slater concludes that self-esteem and pride can be bad for your health - how ridiculous! When she goes so far as to refer to self-esteem as a quasi religion and implies that mental health professionals propagate the value of self-esteem for personal gain, she does a great disservice to all those who search for ways of increasing the chances our youth will grow to have healthy, productive, and satisfying lives.

Slater's argument against self-esteem has left these readers with a few sobering questions. What made Slater's article so compelling to publish? What authority have we given Slater to single-handedly discredit years of research on self-esteem, simply on the merits of one lone study and her cynical bias? What legitimacy have we given Slater when she neglects the greater part of today's leading research and fails to articulate a credible definition of self-esteem of her own? Finally, what is Slater's own professional experience and expertise with regard to self-esteem?

It's time we move this critical national debate from whether self-esteem is precious and important to how we use objective research regarding self-esteem to develop strategies that effectively grow self-actualizing responsible human beings and a healthy inclusive society. Clearly, authentic self-esteem deserves more serious research and on-going dialogue. For those who dare, the debate about self-esteem invites us to examine our most basic beliefs about ourselves and our essential human nature. Begin by

asking yourself, "Am I deserving of healthy, authentic self-esteem?" If your answer is no, you belong to the Slater school. If your answer is yes, then reject Slater's diatribe and become a champion of healthy self-esteem in every dimension of your life and work!

About the Authors

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