

Self-Worth and Self-Esteem

We often use these words self-esteem and self-worth as if they are the same, interchangeable. It's useful to think about the distinction.

Self-Worth

Refers to the value that we attach to ourselves.

Self-Esteem

Refers to the amount of confidence and satisfaction we have in ourselves.

It is possible to have a reasonable level of self-worth and yet have low self-esteem (lack self-confidence or self-satisfaction) in some area of our life. For example, I can value myself highly as a person but have low confidence in my ability to be a good parent.

However, if we have low self-worth, it's very likely that we will have low self-esteem and lack confidence or self-satisfaction in many areas of our life.

When we lack self-esteem, we are sometimes able to convince ourselves that this means we are of little value (low self-worth). We need to accept that:

| | |
|--------------------|---|
| Self-Worth | is a given. It's the basic right of all human beings to have high self-value. |
| Self-Esteem | may vary, may change but it is under our control. We can increase our self-esteem, our confidence and satisfaction through self-understanding, education, practicing new skills and/or new ways of thinking about ourselves. We can change the picture we have about ourselves. |

When we have a high self-worth and high self-esteem, our psychological pot is full. We can give freely of our compassion, our love because we feel we matter and we believe we have something to offer. We have faith in our own competence. We can ask others for help but we can make our own decisions. When we appreciate our own worth, we can respect the worth of others.

Of course we all experience moments when nothing seems worthwhile. Times when fatigue overwhelms us and the world has dealt us too many disappointments too quickly; these feelings, that may temporarily result in a lowering of esteem or self-worth, are just that, temporary. They are a crisis-of-the-moment from which we can emerge whole.

Many people never experience high self-worth or feel high self-esteem. Their psychological pot is always almost empty. Because they feel they are of such little worth, they always expect to be cheated, stepped on and depreciated by others. Expecting the worst, they invite it and, unfortunately, they often get it. To defend themselves, they hide behind a wall of distrust and sink into loneliness and isolation. Separated from other people, they become apathetic, indifferent toward themselves and those around them. It's hard for them to see, hear or think clearly and, therefore they are more prone to step on and deprecate others.



Permission to photocopy with credit given to The Family Centre

Room 20, 9912 – 106 Street, Edmonton, Alberta T5K 1C5 **Phone** (780) 423-2831 **Fax** (780) 426-4918

Email tfc@the-family-centre.com **Website** www.the-family-centre.com

Self-Worth and Self-Esteem con't

Fear is a natural consequence of this distrust and isolation. Fear constricts and blinds; fear keeps you from trying new ways of solving your problems and so gives rise to still more self-defeating behavior.

When a person whose "pot" is always low experiences defeat he or she often feels quite desperate and/or unable to cope. For some, the way they choose to cope is through drugs, alcohol, suicide or murder. I truly believe that most of the pain, problems and ugliness in life are the result of a sense of low self-worth, of having a "low pot" and not being able to either face it or talk about.

Feeling low is not really the same as having a "low pot". A person whose pot is low experiences undesirable feelings but behaves as though those feelings did not exist. It takes a lot of trust to express feelings of low self-esteem. One way of defending against the feelings is to lie, both to yourself and others.

EXERCISE

- Relax and feel the state of your "pot" today. Is it high or low? Has something special happened to give you this feeling, or do you feel this way most of the time?
- Get in a group of three. Tell one another your feelings, compare the things that make you feel "low pot" or "high pot". You may find that you are surprised... at your feelings!

Self-worth is learned. We learn it in our family. An infant coming into the world has no past, no experience or scale with which to judge his or her own worth. An infant relies on the experiences s/he has with people and the messages they give about her/his worth as a person. For the first five years, the child's self worth is formed exclusively within the family. After s/he starts school, other influences come into play, but the family remains important throughout adolescence.

Outside forces tend to reinforce the feelings of worth or worthlessness that s/he has learned from home: the "high pot" child can weather many failures in school or among peers; the "low pot" child can experience many successes yet feel a growing doubt about his own value. Every word, facial expression, gesture or action on the part of the parent gives the child some message about his worth. It is sad that so many of us fail to realize this truth!

Feelings of worth can only flourish in an atmosphere where individual differences are appreciated, mistakes are tolerated, communication is open, and rules are flexible.

Happily, it is possible to raise anyone's sense of self-worth, no matter what how old or young. Since the feeling of worth has been learned, lack of worth can be unlearned and something new can be learned in its place.

**THERE IS ALWAYS HOPE THAT LIFE
CAN CHANGE BECAUSE WE CAN ALWAYS LEARN NEW THINGS!**

