

What Is Self-Esteem?

1 Comment



Self-esteem results from viewing yourself positively within the context of your surroundings. How

well you get along with peers and family members and how you judge yourself in comparison with others shapes your self-esteem. Whether at home, school, or the workplace, how well you understand and respond to ever-changing interpersonal demands also shapes your self-esteem.

It is precisely this area—the area of interpersonal relationships—in which individuals with a [learning disability \(LD\)](#) may have the greatest difficulty. And this can foster feelings of inadequacy and low self-esteem. With help and support, however, individuals with LD can build the self-esteem they need to achieve success in any arena.

Why Is Self-Esteem Important?

Whether or not you have LD, self-esteem is a powerful predictor of success. Positive self-esteem may be as important to success in school and on the job as the mastery of individual skills. Learning disabilities, however, often pose big hurdles to positive self-esteem. In turn, they contribute to a hard-to-break cycle of self-doubt, frustration and failure.

Struggling daily with the challenges posed by a learning disability can erode enthusiasm and confidence. Knowing one's assets and liabilities and feeling good about yourself can be invaluable. It helps with negotiating the sometimes-tumultuous path to success in school, the workplace, at home and in the community at large.

How Does Social Competence Affect Self-Esteem?

Building social competence is an important step in becoming a self-reliant and confident person. Socially competent people know how to easily move from person to person, or group to group, seemingly relaxed and at ease, regardless of whether they are talking or listening. They also know how to:

- Initiate and maintain positive relationships with peers and others
- Interpret social situations, judging how to interact
- Interact without drawing negative attention to themselves
- Sustain attention on the speaker
- Contribute to conversations
- Control their impulses to draw attention to themselves, even in well-intended ways.

Once again, it is these traits that often pose the greatest challenges to individuals with LD. Family members and peers can help individuals with LD develop positive self-esteem with empathy, respectful communication, attentiveness, acceptance and positive reinforcement.

What Contributes to Low Self-Esteem In People With LD?

Not all people with LD have problems with social competence and self-esteem, but many do. Individuals with LD are especially vulnerable to attacks on their feelings of self-worth. Unfortunately, individuals with LD are also commonly confronted with low expectations from others. They are frequently, though not intentionally, the target of spoken and unspoken messages of disappointment from peers, parents and supervisors, for example. Others' low expectations may influence the expectations individuals with LD have of themselves, thereby serving to erode self-esteem.

Here are ways poor social competence may show up in people with LD:

Poor communication style and social awareness

- May appear to be overly egocentric and disinterested in the opinions of other speakers (when nothing could be further from the truth)
- Has difficulty judging when it is his or her turn to participate in a conversation
- May misinterpret others' feelings
- Is unaware of when his or her behaviors are bothersome or annoying
- May have problems with visual-spatial planning and self-regulation, resulting in difficulties in judgment: they may misjudge how close to stand to someone during conversation, how to assume and maintain a relaxed posture or when it might be appropriate to touch.

Lack of self knowledge

- Is unsure how to understand his or her personal strengths and weaknesses, or how to explain them to others
- Has trouble evaluating and reflecting on his or her behavior in social interactions

Inadequate language skills

- Has limited vocabulary, or has difficulty retrieving the right words for the situation
- Has trouble with topic selection
- Talks around a topic, providing extraneous, less critical information in response to a question
- When asked to expand on something, is more likely to repeat rather than clarify his or her point
- In conversation, is more likely than peers to rely on gestures
- Is unsure when to end a conversation.

Inaccurate perceptions about social status

- Has difficulty knowing how he or she fits in to a peer group, which often results in "hanging back," being passive or "sticking out" in a crowd for trying too hard to belong
- Has limited success getting noticed in positive ways within a peer group
- Is perceived as less popular and therefore more frequently rejected or ignored by peers—sometimes resulting in further self-imposed isolation.

Inaccurate perceptions about ability to effect change

- Believes that outcomes are controlled by external influences (luck, chance, fate) rather than as a result of his or her own efforts
- Assumes a posture of "learned helplessness:" believes that because he or she struggled with something in the past, there is little they can do to change a negative outcome in the future, so they stop trying and hope for the best.

What Strategies Help Build Self-Esteem and Confidence?

In their book, *The Power of Resilience: Achieving Balance, Confidence and Personal Strength in Your Life*, Dr. Robert Brooks and Dr. Sam Goldstein offer parents guideposts to help children and adolescents develop the strength and skills they need to cope successfully with the challenges they face. Here are some key things, adapted from the book, that parents can do to help:

- **Be empathetic.** See the world through your children's eyes.
- **Communicate with respect.** Don't interrupt or put them down; answer their questions.
- **Give undivided attention.** Children feel loved when we spend one-on-one time with them.
- **Accept and love children for who they are.** This will allow them to feel more secure in reaching out to others and learning how to solve problems.
- **Give children a chance to contribute.** This communicates your faith in their abilities and gives them a sense of responsibility.
- **Treat mistakes as learning experiences.** Children whose parents overreact to mistakes tend to avoid taking risks, then end up blaming others for their problems.
- **Emphasize their strengths.** A sense of accomplishment and pride give children the confidence to persevere when they face challenges.
- **Let them solve problems and make decisions.** Avoid telling children what to do; encourage them to come up with solutions to problems.
- **Discipline to teach.** Do not discipline in a way that intimidates or humiliates your child.

Additional Resources

- [No One to Play With: The Social Side of Learning Disabilities](#) by Betty B. Osman
- [Learning Disabilities and ADHD: A Family Guide to Living and Learning Together](#) by Betty B. Osman.
- Raskind, Marshall H., et al. (1999). Patterns of Change and Predictors of Success in Individuals with Learning Disabilities: Results From a Twenty-Year Longitudinal Study. *Learning Disabilities Research & Practice* 14, 135-49.
- [The Search Institute](#)
- [The Power of Resilience: Achieving Balance, Confidence and Personal Strength in Your Life](#) by Robert Brooks and Sam Goldstein

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