

Self-Esteem: The Immune System of Consciousness

There are realities we cannot avoid. One of them is the importance of self-esteem.

Regardless of what we do or do not admit, we cannot be indifferent to our self-evaluation. However, we can run from this knowledge if it makes us uncomfortable. We can shrug it off, evade it, declare that we are only interested in “practical” matters, and escape into baseball or the evening news or the financial pages or a shopping spree or a sexual adventure or a drink.

Yet self-esteem is a fundamental human need. Its impact requires neither our understanding nor our consent. It works its way within us with or without our knowledge. We are free to seek to grasp the dynamics of self-esteem or to remain unconscious of them, but in the latter case we remain a mystery to ourselves and endure the consequences.

Let us look at the role of self-esteem in our lives.

A Preliminary Definition

By “self-esteem” I mean much more than that innate sense of self-worth that presumably is our human birthright—that spark that psycho-

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therapists and teachers seek to fan in those they work with. That spark is only the anteroom to self-esteem.

Self-esteem, fully realized, is the experience that we are appropriate to life and to the requirements of life. More specifically, self-esteem is:

1. confidence in our ability to think, confidence in our ability to cope with the basic challenges of life; and
2. 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.

Later I will refine and condense this definition.

I do not share the belief that self-esteem is a gift we have only to claim (by reciting affirmations, perhaps). On the contrary, its possession over time represents an achievement. The goal of this book is to examine the nature and roots of that achievement.

Dr Stonebrink, "You have to earn the right to feel good about yourself."

The Basic Pattern

To trust one's mind and to know that one is worthy of happiness is the essence of self-esteem.

The power of this conviction about oneself lies in the fact that it is more than a judgment or a feeling. It is a motivator. It inspires behavior.

In turn, it is directly affected by how we act. Causation flows in both directions. There is a continuous feedback loop between our actions in the world and our self-esteem. The level of our self-esteem influences how we act, and how we act influences the level of our self-esteem.

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If I trust my mind and judgment, I am more likely to operate as a thinking being. Exercising my ability to think, bringing appropriate awareness to my activities, my life works better. This reinforces trust in my mind. If I distrust my mind, I am more likely to be mentally passive, to bring less awareness than I need to my activities, and less persistence in

the face of difficulties. When my actions lead to disappointing or painful results, I feel justified in distrusting my mind.

With high self-esteem, I am more likely to persist in the face of difficulties. With low self-esteem, I am more likely to give up or go through the motions of trying without really giving my best. Research shows that high-self-esteem subjects will persist at a task significantly longer than low-self-esteem subjects.¹ If I persevere, the likelihood is that I will succeed more often than I fail. If I don't, the likelihood is that I will fail more often than I succeed. Either way, my view of myself will be reinforced.

If I respect myself and require that others deal with me respectfully, I send out signals and behave in ways that increase the likelihood that others will respond appropriately. When they do, I am reinforced and confirmed in my initial belief. If I lack self-respect and consequently accept discourtesy, abuse, or exploitation from others as natural, I unconsciously transmit this, and some people will treat me at my self-estimate. When this happens, and I submit to it, my self-respect deteriorates still more.

The value of self-esteem lies not merely in the fact that it allows us to *feel* better but that it allows us to *live* better—to respond to challenges and opportunities more resourcefully and more appropriately.

The Impact of Self-Esteem: General Observations

The level of our self-esteem has profound consequences for every aspect of our existence: how we operate in the workplace, how we deal with people, how high we are likely to rise, how much we are likely to achieve—and, in the personal realm, with whom we are likely to fall in love, how we interact with our spouse, children, and friends, what level of personal happiness we attain.

There are positive correlations between healthy self-esteem and a variety of other traits that bear directly on our capacity for achievement and for happiness. Healthy self-esteem correlates with rationality, realism, intuitiveness, creativity, independence, flexibility, ability to manage change, willingness to admit (and correct) mistakes, benevolence, and cooperativeness. Poor self-esteem correlates with irrationality, blindness to reality, rigidity, fear of the new and unfamiliar, inappropriate conformity or inappropriate rebelliousness, defensiveness, overcompliant or

overcontrolling behavior, and fear of or hostility toward others. We shall see that there is a logic to these correlations. The implications for survival, adaptiveness, and personal fulfillment are obvious. Self-esteem is life supporting and life enhancing.

High self-esteem seeks the challenge and stimulation of worthwhile and demanding goals. Reaching such goals nurtures good self-esteem. Low self-esteem seeks the safety of the familiar and undemanding. Confining oneself to the familiar and undemanding serves to weaken self-esteem. Low self esteem can also seek challenges and accomplishments to prove/compensate

The more solid our self-esteem, the better equipped we are to cope with troubles that arise in our personal lives or in our careers; the quicker we are to pick ourselves up after a fall; the more energy we have to begin anew. (An extraordinarily high number of successful entrepreneurs have two or more bankruptcies in their past; failure did not stop them.)

The higher our self-esteem, the more ambitious we tend to be, not necessarily in a career or financial sense, but in terms of what we hope to experience in life—emotionally, intellectually, creatively, spiritually. The lower our self-esteem, the less we aspire to and the less we are likely to achieve. Either path tends to be self-reinforcing and self-perpetuating.

The higher our self-esteem, the stronger the drive to express ourselves, reflecting the sense of richness within. The lower our self-esteem, the more urgent the need to “prove” ourselves—or to forget ourselves by living mechanically and unconsciously.

The higher our self-esteem, the more open, honest, and appropriate our communications are likely to be, because we believe our thoughts have value and therefore we welcome rather than fear clarity. The lower our self-esteem, the more muddy, evasive, and inappropriate our communications are likely to be, because of uncertainty about our own thoughts and feelings and/or anxiety about the listener’s response.

The higher our self-esteem, the more disposed we are to form nourishing rather than toxic relationships. The reason is that like is drawn to like, health is attracted to health. Vitality and expansiveness in others are naturally more appealing to persons of good self-esteem than are emptiness and dependency.

An important principle of human relationships is that we tend to feel most comfortable, most “at home,” with persons whose self-esteem level resembles our own. Opposites may attract about some issues, but not about this one. High-self-esteem individuals tend to be drawn to high-self-esteem individuals. We do not see a passionate love affair, for example, between persons at opposite ends of the self-esteem continuum—just as

we are not likely to see a passionate romance between intelligence and stupidity. (I am not saying we might never see a “one-night stand,” but that is another matter. Note I am speaking of passionate love, not a brief infatuation or sexual episode, which can operate by a different set of dynamics.) Medium-self-esteem individuals are typically attracted to medium-self-esteem individuals. Low self-esteem seeks low self-esteem in others—not consciously, to be sure, but by the logic of that which leads us to feel we have encountered a “soul mate.” The most disastrous relationships are those between persons who think poorly of themselves; the union of two abysses does not produce a height.

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The healthier our self-esteem, the more inclined we are to treat others with respect, benevolence, goodwill, and fairness—since we do not tend to perceive them as a threat, and since self-respect is the foundation of respect for others. With healthy self-esteem, we are not quick to interpret relationships in malevolent, adversarial terms. We do not approach encounters with automatic expectations of rejection, humiliation, treachery, or betrayal. **Contrary to the belief that an individualistic orientation inclines one to antisocial behavior, research shows that a well-developed sense of personal value and autonomy correlates significantly with kindness, generosity, social cooperation, and a spirit of mutual aid,** as is confirmed, for instance, in A. S. Waterman’s comprehensive review of the research in *The Psychology of Individualism*.

And finally, research discloses that high self-esteem is one of the best predictors of personal happiness, as is discussed in D. G. Meyers’ *The Pursuit of Happiness*. Logically enough, low self-esteem correlates with unhappiness.

Love

It is not difficult to see the importance of self-esteem to success in the arena of intimate relationships. There is no greater barrier to romantic happiness than the fear that I am undeserving of love and

that my destiny is to be hurt. Such fears give birth to self-fulfilling prophecies.

If I enjoy a fundamental sense of efficacy and worth, and experience myself as lovable, then I have a foundation for appreciating and loving others. The relationship of love feels natural; benevolence and caring feel natural. I have something to give; I am not trapped in feelings of deficiency; I have a kind of emotional “surplus” that I can channel into loving. And happiness does not make me anxious. **Confidence in my competence and worth, and in your ability to see and appreciate it, also gives birth to self-fulfilling prophecies.**

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But if I lack respect for and enjoyment of who I am, I have very little to give—except *my unfilled needs*. In my emotional impoverishment, I tend to see other people essentially as sources of approval or disapproval. I do not appreciate them for who they are in their own right. I see only what they can or cannot do for me. I am not looking for people whom I can admire and with whom I can share the excitement and adventure of life. I am looking for people who will not condemn me—and perhaps will be impressed by my persona, the face I present to the world. My ability to love remains undeveloped. This is one of the reasons why attempts at relationships so often fail—not because the vision of passionate or romantic love is intrinsically irrational, but because the self-esteem needed to support it is absent.

We have all heard the observation, “If you do not love yourself, you will be unable to love others.” Less well understood is the other half of the story. **If I do not feel lovable, it is very difficult to believe that anyone else loves me. If I do not accept myself, how can I accept your love for me? Your warmth and devotion are confusing: it confounds my self-concept, since I “know” I am not lovable. Your feeling for me cannot possibly be real, reliable, or lasting. If I do not feel lovable, your love for me becomes an effort to fill a sieve, and eventually the effort is likely to exhaust you.**

Even if I consciously disown my feelings of being unlovable, even if I insist that I am “wonderful,” the poor self-concept remains deep within

to undermine my attempts at relationships. Unwittingly I become a saboteur of love.

I attempt love but the foundation of inner security is not there. Instead there is the secret fear that I am destined only for pain. So I pick someone who inevitably will reject or abandon me. (In the beginning I pretend I do not know this, so the drama can be played out.) Or, if I pick someone with whom happiness might be possible, I subvert the relationship by demanding excessive reassurances, by venting irrational possessiveness, by making catastrophes of small frictions, by seeking to control through subservience or domination, by finding ways to reject my partner before my partner can reject me.

A few vignettes will convey how poor self-esteem shows up in the area of the intimately personal:

"Why do I always fall for Mr. Wrong?" a woman in therapy asks me. Her father abandoned the family when she was seven, and on more than one occasion her mother had screamed at her, "If you weren't so much trouble, maybe your father wouldn't have left us!" As an adult, she "knows" that her fate is to be abandoned. She "knows" that she does not deserve love. Yet she longs for a relationship with a man. The conflict is resolved by selecting men—often married—who clearly do not care for her in a way that would sustain her for any length of time. She is proving that her tragic sense of life is justified.

When we "know" we are doomed, we behave in ways to make reality conform to our "knowledge." We are anxious when there is dissonance between our "knowledge" and the perceivable facts. Since our "knowledge" is not to be doubted or questioned, it is the facts that have to be altered: hence self-sabotage.

A man falls in love, the woman returns his feeling, and they marry. But nothing she can do is ever enough to make him feel loved for longer than a moment; he is insatiable. However, she is so committed to him that she perseveres. When at last she convinces him that she really loves him and he is no longer able to doubt it, he begins to wonder whether he set his standards too low. He wonders whether she is really good enough for him. Eventually he leaves her, falls in love with another woman, and the dance begins again.

Everyone knows the famous Groucho Marx joke that he would never join a club that would have him for a member. That is exactly the idea by

which some low-self-esteem people operate their love life. If you love me, obviously you are not good enough for me. Only someone who will reject me is an acceptable object of my devotion.

A woman feels compelled to tell her husband, who adores her, all the ways in which other women are superior to her. When he does not agree, she ridicules him. The more passionately he worships her, the more cruelly she demeans him. Finally she exhausts him, and he walks out of their marriage. She is hurt and astonished. How could she have so misjudged him? she wonders. Soon she tells herself, "I always knew no one could ever truly love me." She always felt she was unlovable and now she has proved it.

The tragedy of many people's lives is that, given a choice between being "right" and having an opportunity to be happy, they invariably choose being "right." That is the one ultimate satisfaction they allow themselves.

John Bradshaw

A man "knows" that it is not his destiny to be happy. He feels he does not deserve to be. (And besides, his happiness might wound his parents, who have never known any happiness of their own.) But when he finds a woman he admires and who attracts him, and she responds, he is happy. For a while, he forgets that romantic fulfillment is not his "story," not his "life script." Surrendering to his joy, he temporarily forgets that it does violence to his self-concept and thus makes him feel out of alignment with "reality." Eventually, however, the joy triggers anxiety, as it would have to for one who feels misaligned with the way things *really* are. To reduce his anxiety, he must reduce his joy. So, guided unconsciously by the deepest logic of his self-concept, he begins to destroy the relationship.

Once again we observe the basic pattern of self-destruction: If I "know" my fate is to be unhappy, I must not allow reality to confuse me with happiness. It is not I who must adjust to reality, but reality that must adjust to me and to my "knowledge" of the way things are and are meant to be.

Note that it is not always necessary to destroy the relationship entirely, as in the vignettes above. It may be acceptable that the relationship continue, *providing I am not happy*. I may engage in a project called *struggling to be happy* or *working on our relationship*. I may read books

on the subject, participate in seminars, attend lectures, or enter psychotherapy with the announced aim of being happy *in the future*. **But not now; not today.** The possibility of happiness in the present is too terrifyingly immediate.

What is required for many of us, paradoxical though it may sound, is the courage to tolerate happiness without self-sabotage.

“Happiness anxiety” is very common. Happiness can activate internal voices saying I don’t deserve this, or it will never last, or I’m riding for a fall, or I’m killing my mother or father by being happier than they ever were, or life is not like this, or people will be envious and hate me, or happiness is only an illusion, or nobody else is happy so why should I be?

What is required for many of us, paradoxical though it may sound, is the courage to *tolerate* happiness without self-sabotage until such time as we lose the fear of it and realize that it will not destroy us (and need not disappear). One day at a time, I will tell clients; see if you can get through today without doing anything to undermine or subvert your good feelings—and if you “fall off the wagon,” don’t despair, pull yourself back and recommit yourself to happiness. Such **perseverance is self-esteem building.**

Further, we need to confront those destructive voices, not run from them; engage them in inner dialogue; challenge them to give their reasons; patiently answer and refute their nonsense—dealing with them as one might deal with real people; and distinguish them from the voice of our adult self.

The Workplace

Next, consider workplace examples of behavior inspired by poor self-esteem:

A man receives a promotion in his company and is swallowed by panic at the thought of not possibly being able to master the new challenges and responsibilities. “I’m an impostor! I don’t belong here!” he tells himself. Feeling in advance that he is doomed, he is not motivated to

give his best. Unconsciously he begins a process of self-sabotage: coming to meetings underprepared, being harsh with staff one minute and placating and solicitous the next, clowning at inappropriate moments, ignoring signals of dissatisfaction from his boss. Predictably, he is fired. "I knew it was too good to be true," he tells himself.

If I die by my own hand, at least I am still in control; I spare myself the anxiety of waiting for destruction from some unknown source. The anxiety of feeling out of control is unbearable; I must end it any way I can.

A manager reads a superb idea proposed by a subordinate, feels a sinking sense of humiliation that the idea did not occur to her, imagines being overtaken and surpassed by the subordinate—and begins plotting to bury the proposal.

This kind of destructive envy is a product of an impoverished sense of self. Your achievement threatens to expose my emptiness; the world will see—worse still, *I* will see—how insignificant I am. Generosity toward the achievements of others is emblematic of self-esteem.

A man meets his new boss—and is dismayed and angered because the boss is a woman. He feels wounded and diminished in his masculinity. He fantasizes degrading her sexually—"putting her in her place." His feeling of being threatened shows up as sullen and subtly uncooperative behavior.

It would be hard to name a more certain sign of poor self-esteem than the need to perceive some other group as inferior. A man whose notion of "power" is stuck at the level of "sexual domination" is a man frightened of women, frightened of ability or self-assurance, frightened of *life*.

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The head of a research and development lab is informed that the firm has brought in a brilliant scientist from another company. He immediately translates this to mean that his superiors are dissatisfied with his

work, in spite of much evidence to the contrary. He imagines his authority and status slipping away. He imagines the new man eventually being appointed head of the department. In a fit of blind rebelliousness, he allows his work to deteriorate. When his lapses are gently pointed out to him, he lashes out defensively—and quits.

When our illusion of self-esteem rests on the fragile support of never being challenged, when our insecurity finds evidence of rejection where no rejection exists, then it is only a matter of time until our inner bomb explodes. The form of the explosion is self-destructive behavior—and the fact that one may have an extraordinary intelligence is no protection. Brilliant people with low self-esteem act against their interests every day.

An auditor from an independent accounting firm meets with the CEO of the client organization. He knows he needs to tell this man some news he will not want to hear. Unconsciously he fantasizes being in the presence of his intimidating father—and stutters and stammers and does not communicate one third of what he had intended. His hunger for this CEO's approval, or the wish to avoid his disapproval, overwhelms his professional judgment. Later, after putting into his written report all the things he should have said to the CEO in person before the report was released, when remedial action might still have been possible, he sits in his office, trembling with anxiety, anticipating the CEO's reaction.

When we are moved primarily by fear, sooner or later we precipitate the very calamity we dread. If we fear condemnation, we behave in ways that ultimately elicit disapproval. If we fear anger, eventually we make people angry.

A woman who is new to the marketing department of her firm gets what she believes is a brilliant idea. She imagines putting it on paper, marshaling arguments to support it, working toward getting it to the person with authority to act. Then an inner voice whispers, "Who are you to have good ideas? Don't make yourself conspicuous. Do you want people to laugh at you?" She imagines the angry face of her mother, who had always been jealous of her intelligence; the wounded face of her father, who had been threatened by it. Within a few days she can barely remember what the idea was.

When we doubt our minds, we tend to discount its products. If we fear intellectual self-assertiveness, perhaps associating it with loss of love, we mute our intelligence. We dread being visible; so we make ourselves invisible, then suffer because no one sees us.

He is a boss who always has to be right. He takes pleasure in emphasizing his superiority. In encounters with staff, he cannot hear a suggestion without the urge to “massage it into something better,” something that “puts my stamp on it.” “Why aren’t my people more innovative?” he likes to say. “Why can’t they be more creative?” But he also likes to say, “There’s only one king of the jungle” or, in more restrained moments, “But someone has to lead the organization.” With a pretense at regret he will sometimes declare, “I can’t help it—I have a big ego.” The truth is, he has a small one, but his energies are invested in never knowing that.

Once again we note that poor self-esteem can show up as lack of generosity toward the contributions of others or a tendency to fear their ability—and, in the case of a leader or manager, an inability to elicit their best from people.

The point of such stories is certainly not to condemn or ridicule those who suffer from poor self-esteem but to alert us to the power of self-esteem in influencing our responses. Problems such as I am describing can all be reversed. But the first step is to appreciate the dynamics involved.

Self-Fulfilling Prophecies

Self-esteem creates a set of implicit expectations about what is possible and appropriate to us. These expectations tend to generate the actions that turn them into realities. And the realities confirm and strengthen the original beliefs. Self-esteem—high or low—tends to be a generator of self-fulfilling prophecies.

Such expectations may exist in the mind as subconscious or semi-conscious visions of our future. Educational psychologist E. Paul Torrance, commenting on the accumulating scientific evidence that our implicit assumptions about the future powerfully affect motivation, writes, “In fact, a person’s image of the future may be a better predictor of future attainment than his past performances.”² What we make an effort

to learn and what we achieve is based, at least in part, on what we think is possible and appropriate to us.

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While an inadequate self-esteem can severely limit an individual's aspirations and accomplishments, the consequences of the problem need not be so obvious. Sometimes the consequences show up in more indirect ways. The time bomb of a poor self-concept may tick silently for years while an individual, driven by a passion for success and exercising genuine ability, may rise higher and higher in his profession. Then, without real necessity, he starts cutting corners, morally or legally, in his eagerness to provide more lavish demonstrations of his mastery. Then he commits more flagrant offenses still, telling himself that he is "beyond good and evil," as if challenging the Fates to bring him down. Only at the end, when his life and career explode in disgrace and ruin, can we see for how many years he has been moving relentlessly toward the final act of an unconscious life script he may have begun writing at the age of three. It is not difficult to think of well-publicized figures who might fit this description.

Self-concept is destiny. Or, more precisely, it tends to be. Our self-concept is who and what we consciously and subconsciously think we are—our physical and psychological traits, our assets and liabilities, possibilities and limitations, strengths and weaknesses. A self-concept contains or includes our level of self-esteem, but is more global. We cannot understand a person's behavior without understanding the self-concept behind it.

In less spectacular ways than in the story above, people sabotage themselves at the height of their success all the time. They do so when success clashes with their implicit beliefs about what is appropriate to them. It is frightening to be flung beyond the limits of one's idea of who one is. If a self-concept cannot accommodate a given level of success, and if the self-concept does not change, it is predictable that the person will find ways to self-sabotage.

Here are examples from my psychotherapy practice:

"I was on the verge of getting the biggest commission of my career," an architect says, "and my anxiety shot through the roof—because this

project would have lifted me to a level of fame beyond anything I could have handled. I hadn't taken a drink in three years. So I told myself it was safe to have one drink—to celebrate. I ended up smashed, insulted the people who would have given me the assignment, lost it of course, and my partner was so enraged he quit on me. I was devastated, but I was back in 'safe territory' again, **struggling to rise but not yet breaking through. I'm comfortable there.**"

"I was determined," says a woman who owns a small chain of boutiques, "not to be stopped by my husband or anyone else. I did not fault my husband because he earned less than I did, and I would not allow him to fault me for earning more than he did. But there was this voice inside saying I was not supposed to be this successful—no woman was. I didn't deserve it—no woman could. I became careless. Neglected important phone calls. Became irritable with staff—and customers. And kept getting angrier and angrier with my husband, without ever naming the real issue. After a particularly bad fight with him, I was having lunch with one of our buyers, and something she said set me off, and there was this great big blowup, right there in the restaurant. I lost the account. I began making inexcusable mistakes. . . . Now, three years and a lot of nightmares later, I'm trying to build the business back up again."

"I was in line for a promotion I had wanted for a long time," says an executive. "My life was in perfect order. A good marriage; healthy kids doing well in school. And it had been years since I'd fooled around with another woman. If there was a problem, it was only that I really wanted more money, and now I seemed all set to get it. It was anxiety that tipped me over. I woke up in the middle of the night, wondering if I were having a heart attack, but the doctor said it was just anxiety. Why it came, who knows? Sometimes I feel I'm just not meant to be too happy. It feels wrong. I don't think I've ever felt I deserved it. Whatever it was, the anxiety kept building, and one day, at an office party, I came on to the wife of one of my bosses—stupidly and clumsily. It's a miracle I wasn't fired; when she told her husband, I expected to be. I didn't get the promotion, and the anxiety died down."

What is the common element in these stories? **Happiness anxiety; success anxiety. The dread and disorientation that persons with poor self-esteem experience when life goes well in ways that conflict with their deepest view of themselves and of what is appropriate to them.**

Regardless of the context in which self-destructive behavior occurs, or the form it takes, the motor of such behavior is the same: poor self-esteem. *It is poor self-esteem that places us in an adversarial relationship to our well-being.*

Self-Esteem as a Basic Need

If the power of self-esteem derives from the fact that it is a profound need, what precisely is a *need*?

A need is that which is required for our effective functioning. We do not merely *want* food and water, we *need* them; without them, we die. However, we have other nutritional needs, such as for calcium, whose impact is less direct and dramatic. In some regions in Mexico the soil contains no calcium; the inhabitants of these regions do not perish outright, but their growth is stunted, they are generally debilitated, and they are prey to many diseases to which the lack of calcium makes them highly susceptible. *They are impaired in their ability to function.*

Self-esteem is a need analogous to calcium, rather than to food or water. Lacking it to a serious degree, we do not necessarily die, but we are impaired in our ability to function.

To say that self-esteem is a need is to say:

That it makes an essential contribution to the life process.

That it is indispensable to normal and healthy development.

That it has survival value.

We should note that sometimes lack of self-esteem does eventuate in death in fairly direct ways—for example, by a drug overdose, defiantly reckless driving of an automobile, remaining with a murderously abusive spouse, participating in gang wars, or suicide. However, for most of us the consequences of poor self-esteem are subtler, less direct, more circuitous. *We may need a good deal of reflection and self-examination to appreciate how our deepest view of ourselves shows up in the ten thousand choices that add up to our destiny.*

An inadequate self-esteem may reveal itself in a bad choice of mate, a marriage that brings only frustration, a career that never goes anywhere, *aspirations that are somehow always sabotaged, promising ideas that die stillborn*, a mysterious inability to enjoy successes, destructive eating and

living habits, dreams that are never fulfilled, chronic anxiety or depression, persistently low resistance to illness, overdependence on drugs, an insatiable hunger for love and approval, children who learn nothing of self-respect or the joy of being. In brief, a life that feels like a long string of defeats, for which the only consolation, perhaps, is that sad mantra, "So who's happy?"

When self-esteem is low, our resilience in the face of life's adversities is diminished. We crumble before vicissitudes that a healthier sense of self could vanquish. We are far more likely to succumb to a tragic sense of our existence and to feelings of impotence. We tend to be more influenced by the desire to avoid pain than to experience joy. Negatives have more power over us than positives. If we do not believe in ourselves—neither in our efficacy nor in our goodness—the universe is a frightening place.

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For this reason I have come to think of positive self-esteem as, in effect, *the immune system of consciousness*, providing resistance, strength, and a capacity for regeneration. Just as a healthy immune system does not guarantee that one will never become ill, but makes one less vulnerable to disease and better equipped to overcome it, so a healthy self-esteem does not guarantee that one will never suffer anxiety or depression in the face of life's difficulties, but makes one less susceptible and better equipped to cope, rebound, and transcend. High-self-esteem people can surely be knocked down by an excess of troubles, but they are quicker to pick themselves up again.

That self-esteem has more to deal with resilience than with imperiousness to suffering needs be emphasized. I am reminded of an experience some years ago while writing *Honoring the Self*. For reasons that are irrelevant here, I had great difficulty in the writing of that book; while I am happy with the final result, it did not come easily. There was one week that was very bad; nothing my brain produced was right. One afternoon my publisher dropped by for a visit. I was feeling tired, depressed, and a bit irritable. Sitting opposite him in my living room, I remarked, "This is one of those days when I ask myself whatever made me imagine I know how to write a book. Whatever made me think I

know anything about self-esteem? Whatever made me think I had anything to contribute to psychology?" Just what a publisher likes to hear from his author. As I had written six books by then and been lecturing on self-esteem for many years, he was understandably dismayed. "What?" he exclaimed. "*Nathaniel Branden* has such feelings?" The expression of disorientation and astonishment on his face was comical—so much so that I burst out laughing. "Well, of course," I answered. "The only distinction I'll claim is that I have a sense of humor about it. And that I know these feelings will pass. And that whatever I think, say, or feel this week, I know that in the end the book will be good."

Too Much Self-Esteem?

The question is sometimes asked, "Is it possible to have too much self-esteem?" No, it is not; no more than it is possible to have too much physical health or too powerful an immune system. Sometimes self-esteem is confused with boasting or bragging or arrogance; but such traits reflect not too much self-esteem, but too little; they reflect a lack of self-esteem. Persons of high self-esteem are not driven to make themselves superior to others; they do not seek to prove their value by measuring themselves against a comparative standard. Their joy is in being who they are, not in being better than someone else. I recall reflecting on this issue one day while watching my dog playing in the backyard. She was running about, sniffing flowers, chasing squirrels, leaping into the air, showing great joy in being alive (from my anthropomorphic perspective). She was not thinking (I am sure) that she was more glad to be alive than was the dog next door. She was simply delighting in her own existence. That image captures something essential of how I understand the experience of healthy self-esteem.

People with troubled self-esteem are often uncomfortable in the presence of those with higher self-esteem and may feel resentful and declare, "They have *too much* self-esteem." But what they are really making is a statement about themselves.

Insecure men, for instance, often feel more insecure in the presence of self-confident women. Low-self-esteem individuals often feel irritable in the presence of people who are enthusiastic about life. If one partner in a marriage whose self-esteem is deteriorating sees that the partner's self-esteem is growing, the response is sometimes anxiety and an attempt to sabotage the growth process.

The sad truth is, whoever is successful in this world runs the risk of being a target. People of low achievement often envy and resent people of high achievement. Those who are unhappy often envy and resent those who are happy.

And those of low self-esteem sometimes like to talk about the danger of having “too much self-esteem.”

When Nothing Is “Enough”

As I observed above, a poor self-esteem does not mean that we will necessarily be incapable of achieving any real values. Some of us may have the talent, energy, and drive to achieve a great deal, in spite of feelings of inadequacy or unworthiness—like the highly productive workaholic who is driven to prove his worth to, say, a father who predicted he would always be a loser. But it does mean that we will be less effective and less creative than we have the power to be; and it means that we will be crippled in our ability to find joy in our achievements. Nothing we do will ever feel like “enough.”

If my atm is to prove I am “enough,” the project goes on to infinity—because the battle was already lost on the day I conceded the issue was debatable.

While poor self-esteem often undercuts the capacity for real accomplishment, even among the most talented, it does not necessarily do so. **What is far more certain is that it undercuts the capacity for satisfaction.** This is a painful reality well known to many high achievers. “Why,” a brilliantly successful businessman said to me, “is the pain of my failures so much more intense and lasting than the pleasure of my successes, even though there have been so many more successes than failures? Why is happiness so fleeting and mortification so enduring?” A few minutes later he added, “In my mind I see the face of my father mocking me.” The subconscious mission of his life, he came to realize, was not to express who he was but to show his father (now deceased for over a decade) that he could amount to something.

When we have unconflicted self-esteem, joy is our motor, not fear. It is happiness that we wish to experience, not suffering that we wish to

avoid. Our purpose is self-expression, not self-avoidance or self-justification. Our motive is not to “prove” our worth but to live our possibilities.

If my aim is to prove I am “enough,” the project goes on to infinity—because the battle was already lost on the day I conceded the issue was debatable. So it is always “one more” victory—one more promotion, one more sexual conquest, one more company, one more piece of jewelry, a larger house, a more expensive car, another award—yet the void within remains unfilled.

In today’s culture some frustrated people who hit this impasse announce that they have decided to pursue a “spiritual” path and renounce their egos. This enterprise is doomed to failure. An ego, in the mature and healthy sense, is precisely what they have failed to attain. They dream of giving away what they do not possess. No one can successfully bypass the need for self-esteem.

A Word of Caution

If one error is to deny the importance of self-esteem, another is to claim too much for it. In their enthusiasm, some writers today seem to suggest that a healthy sense of self-value is all we need to assure happiness and success. The matter is more complex than that. Self-esteem is not an all-purpose panacea. Aside from the question of the external circumstances and opportunities that may exist for us, a number of internal factors clearly can have an impact—such as energy level, intelligence, and achievement drive. (Contrary to what we sometimes hear, this last is not correlated with self-esteem in any simple or direct way, in that such a drive can be powered by negative motivation as well as by positive, as, for example, when one is propelled by fear of losing love or status rather than by the joy of self-expression.) A well-developed sense of self is a necessary condition of our well-being but not a sufficient condition. Its presence does not guarantee fulfillment, but its lack guarantees some measure of anxiety, frustration, or despair.*

Self-esteem is not a substitute for a roof over one’s head or food in

* One difficulty with much of the research concerning the impact of self-esteem, as I said in the Introduction, is that different researchers use different definitions of the term and are not necessarily measuring or reporting on the same phenomenon. Another difficulty is that self-esteem does not operate in a vacuum; it can be hard to track in isolation; it interacts with other forces in the personality.

one's stomach, but it increases the likelihood that one will find a way to meet such needs. Self-esteem is not a substitute for the knowledge and skills one needs to operate effectively in the world, but it increases the likelihood that one will acquire them.

In Abraham Maslow's famous "hierarchy of needs," he places self-esteem "above" (that is, as coming after) core survival needs such as for food and water, and there is one obvious sense in which this is valid. At the same time, it is a misleading oversimplification. People sometimes relinquish life itself in the name of issues crucial to their self-esteem. And surely his belief that being "accepted" is a more basic need than self-esteem must also be challenged.³

Self-esteem is not a substitute for a roof over one's head or food in one's stomach, but it increases the likelihood that one will find a way to meet such needs.

The basic fact remains that self-esteem is an urgent need. It proclaims itself as such by virtue of the fact that its (relative) absence impairs our ability to function. This is why we say it has survival value.

The Challenges of the Modern World

The survival value of self-esteem is especially evident today. We have reached a moment in history when self-esteem, which has always been a supremely important psychological need, has also become a supremely important economic need—the attribute imperative for adaptiveness to an increasingly complex, challenging, and competitive world.

In the past two or three decades, extraordinary developments have occurred in the American and global economies. The United States has shifted from a manufacturing society to an information society. We have witnessed the transition from physical labor to mind work as the dominant employee activity. We now live in a global economy characterized by rapid change, accelerating scientific and technological breakthroughs, and an unprecedented level of competitiveness. These developments create demands for higher levels of education and training than were required of previous generations. Everyone acquainted with

business culture knows this. What is not understood is that these developments also create new demands on our psychological resources. Specifically, these developments ask for a greater capacity for innovation, self-management, personal responsibility, and self-direction. This is not just asked at the top. It is asked at every level of a business enterprise, from senior management to first-line supervisors and even to entry-level personnel.

We have reached a moment in history when self-esteem, which has always been a supremely important psychological need, has also become a supremely important economic need.

As an example of how the world has changed, here is *Fortune* magazine's description of the position of manufacturing production operator at Motorola, *an entry-level job*: "Analyze computer reports and identify problems through experiments and statistical process control. Communicate manufacturing performance metrics to management, and understand the company's competitive position."⁴

A modern business can no longer be run by a few people who think and many people who do what they are told (the traditional military, command-and-control model). Today, organizations need not only an unprecedentedly higher level of knowledge and skill among all those who participate but also a higher level of independence, self-reliance, self-trust, and the capacity to exercise initiative—in a word, self-esteem. This means that persons with a decent level of self-esteem are now needed economically in large numbers. Historically, this is a new phenomenon.

The challenge extends further than the world of business. We are freer than any generation before us to choose our own religion, philosophy, or moral code; to adopt our own life-style; to select our own criteria for the good life. We no longer have unquestioning faith in "tradition." We no longer believe that government will lead us to salvation—nor church, nor labor unions, nor big organizations of any kind. No one is coming to rescue us, not in any aspect of life. We are thrown on our own resources.

We have more choices and options than ever before in every area. Frontiers of limitless possibilities now face us in whatever direction we look. To be adaptive in such an environment, to cope appropriately, we

have a greater need for personal autonomy—because there is **no widely accepted code of rules and rituals to spare us the challenge of individual decision making. We need to know who we are and to be centered within ourselves. We need to know what matters to us; otherwise it is easy to be swept up and swept along by alien values, pursuing goals that do not nourish who we really are.** We must learn to think for ourselves, to cultivate our own resources, and to take responsibility for the choices, values, and actions that shape our lives. We need reality-based self-trust and self-reliance.

The greater the number of choices and decisions we need to make at a conscious level, the more urgent our need for self-esteem.

In response to the economic and cultural developments of the past few decades, we are witnessing a reawakening of the American self-help tradition, a great proliferation of mutual-aid groups of every kind, private networks to serve any number of different needs and purposes, a growing emphasis on “learning as a way of life,” a new emphasis on self-reliance that expresses itself, for instance, in an attitude of greater personal responsibility for health care and an increasing tendency to question authority.

If we lack adequate self-esteem, the amount of choice offered to us today can be frightening.

The entrepreneurial spirit has been stimulated not only in business but also in our personal lives. Intellectually, we are all challenged to be “entrepreneurs”—to produce new meanings and values. We have been flung into what T. George Harris has called “the era of conscious choice.”⁵ The choice of this religion or that religion or none. The choice to marry or simply to live together. To have children or not to. To work for an organization or for oneself. To enter any one of a thousand new careers that did not even exist a few decades ago. To live in the city, the suburbs, or the country—or to move abroad. On a simpler level, there are unprecedented choices in clothing styles, foods, automobiles, new products of every kind—all demanding *that we make a decision*.

If we lack adequate self-esteem, the amount of choice offered to us today can be frightening, something like the anxiety of a Soviet citizen on first encountering an American supermarket. And just as some visitors elected to run back to the “security” of a dictatorship, some of us seek

escape in the “security” of cults, or religious fundamentalism, or “correct” political, social, or cultural subgroups, or brain-destroying substances. Neither our upbringing nor our education may have adequately prepared us for a world with so many options and challenges. This is why the issue of self-esteem has become so urgent.

2

The Meaning of Self-Esteem

Self-esteem has two interrelated components. One is a sense of basic confidence in the face of life's challenges: *self-efficacy*. The other is a sense of being worthy of happiness: *self-respect*.

I do not mean to imply that a person of high or healthy self-esteem consciously *thinks* in terms of these components, but rather that if we look closely at the *experience* of self-esteem, we inescapably find them.

Self-efficacy means confidence in the functioning of my mind, in my ability to think, understand, learn, choose, and make decisions; confidence in my ability to understand the facts of reality that fall within the sphere of my interests and needs; self-trust; self-reliance.

Self-respect means assurance of my value; an affirmative attitude toward my right to live and to be happy; comfort in appropriately asserting my thoughts, wants, and needs; the feeling that joy and fulfillment are my natural birthright.

We will need to consider these two ideas in more detail, but for the moment consider the following: If an individual felt inadequate to face the challenges of life, if an individual lacked fundamental self-trust, confidence in his or her mind, we would recognize a self-esteem deficiency, no matter what other assets he or she possessed. Or, if an individual lacked a basic sense of self-respect, felt unworthy or undeserving of the love or respect of others, unentitled to happiness, fearful of asserting thoughts, wants, or needs—again we would recognize a self-esteem deficiency, no matter what other positive attributes he or she