

Feeling Good About Yourself

[To succeed, romantic love] asks a reasonably good level of self-esteem. If we enjoy healthy self-esteem—if we feel competent, lovable, deserving of happiness—we are very likely to choose a mate who will reflect and support our self-concept. If we feel inadequate, unlovable, undeserving of happiness, again we are likely to become involved with a person who will confirm our deepest vision of ourselves.

—Nathaniel Branden, "A Vision of Romantic Love," in Robert J. Steinberg and Michael Barnes' *The Psychology of Love*

- ◆ Do you love yourself?
- ◆ When you look in the mirror, do you feel excited by your own potential?
- ◆ Do you love and accept your physical body and take good care of it?
- ◆ Do you feel that you deserve to get good things?
- ◆ Can you figure out what you want and need?
- ◆ Can you ask for what you want in social situations?
- ◆ Can you ask for what you want in sexual situations?
- ◆ Do you feel comfortable in a relationship where someone loves you and values you for your good qualities?

Self-Esteem

Self-esteem is *the* major ingredient in feeling good about yourself, which in turn determines a lot about your ability to be emotionally intimate and sexual with others. Satisfying intimacy within a relationship *begins* with self-love: a genuine interest, concern, and respect for yourself. As a small child, your self-confidence and self-respect was either nurtured or subverted by the adults in your life, and depended on whether or not you were respected, loved, valued, and encouraged to trust yourself. But since those early years, your self-esteem also has been influenced by the choices and decisions you, yourself, have made.

Self-esteem has two parts, according to Nathaniel Branden, author of *How to Raise Your Self-Esteem* (1987): a feeling of personal competence and a feeling of personal worth. It reflects your implicit judgment of your ability to cope with the challenges of your life, and to master them, and of your right to be happy—to respect and stand up for your interests and needs.

According to McKay and Fanning's book *Self-Esteem* (1992), studies of young children show clearly that parents' style of child-rearing during the first three or four years determines the basis of the child's self-esteem. After that, most studies of older children, adolescents, and adults do not find it easy to delineate the primary influences of high or low self-esteem and their effects.

Any time a man seems to be falling in love with me, I find myself pushing him away. When I think of undressing, honestly, I get nauseous—that's how afraid of the inevitable rejection I am. I just can't stand the pain of him finding out how empty I am inside. I can't figure out what it is that he sees in me.

—Sue, 29

At this point, I'm just so anxious about my erections that I don't ever feel safe sexually with Tricia anymore. Each time we try to make love, I just feel like such a failure. I know how much she likes the feeling of me in her. She should be able to count on me to be able to do this for her. I feel like a failure, big time. I can't get these negative voices out of my head. It's getting to the point where I don't even want to start anything, for fear that I won't be able to finish it.

—Kevin, 45

If you were lucky, you had normal self-esteem by the age of three or four. A child who feels secure in her own worth and identity within the family is able to reach out, to get close to others, first in friendships with peers—in playgroups, nursery school, kindergarten, and primary school. Later, in adolescence and young adulthood, if you had good self-esteem you used these same skills you learned in being friends with other children, and went on to form love-based, mutually satisfying sexual relationships.

On the other hand, not having self-esteem leads to making poor choices in friendships and love objects. In part, this comes from a lack of knowledge about what a loving relationship feels like. Partly a person stays in an unhealthy relationship because she doesn't feel she can ever do better—and this only perpetuates a downward spiral of less and less self-esteem.

Alana grew up in a family with critical, distant parents. Her feelings of inadequacy, caused partly by learning disorders, led her to feel like a nobody at school. Her parents did not pay much attention to her school problems, so that Alana never did well at academics. She also felt aloof from her family.

At fifteen, Alana "solved" her problem of low self-esteem by getting involved with Troy, a boy six years older than she. Alana's parents were so uninvolved with her that they didn't stop her from going out with a boy so much her senior.

Although she didn't particularly feel valued by Troy, he had a car, and Alana felt that being seen with him would give her status at school. Alana felt more like one of the "cool kids." Unfortunately, Troy didn't really love Alana. He cultivated a highly sexual, somewhat exploitative relationship with her. This left her with even worse feelings of worthlessness than she had had before she met him. In addition, as an adult, she had to struggle with sexual problems caused by the ruthless way in which Troy disregarded her feelings during sex.

If you don't feel good about yourself, it may not occur to you that you are a good enough person to have a kind partner—this may lead to choosing a lover who is overly critical, addicted to substances, abusive, etc. Furthermore, you may be confused over whether or not your partner is really treating you badly, whether or not the relationship problem is your fault, and whether or not you are simply "getting what you deserve." Subsequently, leaving even a poor relationship is difficult, because you desperately want the small positive benefits you get from the current relationship (i.e., living in a nice house, or a sense of "belonging" that is better than one

you had as a child) and don't really believe that you are good enough to do better. Staying stuck in the poor relationship further damages your self-esteem because it seems to prove your lack of worth to others and to you—thus perpetuating your declining self-esteem. Low self-esteem may also cause you to be more vulnerable to sexual trauma in adolescence and reinforce the negative effects you may have suffered as the result of violence in your family (be sure to read chapters 10 and 11).

Sam grew up in a chaotic family, with a mother who was hospitalized several times during his early years, and a father who went out to work but had nothing left over for the children when he came home.

There was no sense of order in the house, and none of the children felt valued. Many times, there wasn't enough money, and the family lived in housing where there were not enough beds for everyone. Sometimes Sam's father would drink, too, and collapse on the couch (which was Sam's "bed") so that Sam had trouble sleeping. The children weren't kind to each other, either. Sam's older sister would awaken him in the early morning, while he slept on the couch, by putting on a bright light so that she could iron her clothes. Sam literally didn't feel that he had a place in the world. He felt he wasn't worth much.

He was very frightened of relationships with other kids and later was not comfortable with girls. He didn't date much, because he was too frightened of rejection. Finally, in his midtwenties, he was "chosen" by a woman who wanted to marry him. After several years of marriage, it became clear that the woman was a chronic gambler and was putting them further and further into debt. Nevertheless, Sam was too frightened of feeling abandoned and alone again, and he stayed with his wife.

If you grew up with a parent who was continually critical, it is likely that you have developed an internalized critical monologue, often unconscious and automatic, which can cripple your self-esteem to such a degree that it makes it difficult and painful to get through the times in a relationship when a partner is angry or faultfinding of you.

David grew up in a home in which his father was continually criticizing his every move—he had struggled for years with his feelings of low self-esteem. A homosexual man in his early thirties, he had been struggling to find a stable partner for some years. When he finally met Frank, David knew that he wanted to get serious.

They became very close to each other emotionally and had a healthy, loving emotional and sexual bond. After a year, they moved in together.

But once Frank and David made the commitment to each other, David began to feel insecure, and to have sexual problems. They entered sex therapy, to figure out what the cause might be.

When Frank and David began living together, small conflicts inevitably arose: for example, Frank was a neat-nik, and David was not used to being tidy. When Frank began to fault David for being a slob, David felt his old anger from childhood welling up. But he was too frightened of Frank leaving him, of losing Frank's love, to actually talk about his feelings. Instead, David tended to withdraw. Instead of focusing on simply changing the small behaviors that bothered Frank, or having the confidence that with enough talking they could work out whatever the problem was, he froze. David became progressively more obsessed with the idea that he had ruined Frank's life, that he couldn't do anything right, and that Frank would leave him. When they were making love, these feelings and thoughts created enough anxiety and self-consciousness to interfere with his erections.

As it turns out, David's inability to deal with conflict in an intimate relationship was related to David's critical father and David's lack of self-esteem. In therapy, Dave learned to challenge his father's perfectionism and reassure himself with several correcting thoughts: that he and Frank were a team and Frank loved him, that Frank was *not* Dave's father, and that Dave *could* please Frank.

Kevin grew up in a rather repressive home, with parents who administered a lot of discipline and very little love. His father, who worked as a physicist, was gone a lot of the time. Even when his father was home, he wasn't present emotionally. His mother seemed upset to be trapped at home with the children, and seemed to take very little pleasure in Kevin and his siblings. Nevertheless, she was the favorite parent, since at times she showed some concern and love.

Kevin's mom's standards for his schoolwork were very high, and he was forever disappointing her. He really longed for some closeness and for her love, but eventually, he simply put these feelings away. He became a very meticulous adolescent, perfectionistic and self-critical.

Kevin was too much of a nerd to date much in high school, but when he got to college, he began to date. He fell in love with an engineering student, Tricia. All of the longing for love he had held back from his childhood came out in a gush, and Kevin was startled by the strength of his feelings of yearning and love.

Things went very well in the beginning of the relationship, and Kevin and Tricia got married. Both Kevin and Tricia worked, and life was good, as was their sexual relationship. However, after they had children, Tricia decided to stay home for a few years. After a while, she became resentful at Kevin for not participating with the children.

Kevin was devastated at Tricia's criticism. It awakened old feelings from his childhood, and he began to have erectile difficulties. The problem got worse and worse, with Kevin withdrawing totally from Tricia.

When they finally went to sex therapy together, Kevin finally realized that his constant feelings of self-criticism during sex made his performance anxiety even worse. Things got better as both partners understood their role in the problem. Tricia understood, now, that her criticism had awakened long-smoldering feelings of being abandoned, and she became much more complimentary and understanding. Kevin began to consciously talk back to his internal critic and deal with his performance anxiety by focusing on his own sexual pleasure and by reminding himself of the many different pleasures he could give to Tricia, even if he had occasional erectile difficulties.

It's Not Too Late

You might be asking yourself what you can do now about your problems with self-esteem, if things have gone badly for you thus far. The answer lies in identifying and manipulating your own internal negative *schemas* about the present. A schema is a belief system you use to organize your understanding of life and to help you make decisions. A negative schema is usually based on injurious experiences you actually had in your past.

Some examples of negative schemas (Korn 1997) would be the following:

- All people will abuse me, hurt me, or manipulate me.

- There is no meaning or justice in the world.
- I will eventually be abandoned.
- I am not capable of functioning independently in life.
- I am powerless.
- I must be in control of everyone and everything around me.
- I am bad, disgusting, unlovable, defective, evil.
- I'm a freak, an alien.

As you look at these schemas, perhaps you might recognize one you hold. I hope that you will notice that if you make current life choices as a result of any of these schemas, you are guaranteed not to get what you want.

For example, look at the first schema: "All people will abuse me, hurt me, or manipulate me." Regardless of the abusiveness of your past, of course you will want a future life filled with people who will love you and treat you well. However, if you follow this negative schema in your current life, you will most likely either avoid relationships altogether or fall into a negative one, since that is all that you think is possible.

In almost all cases, no matter how dire your childhood, if you challenge your negative schemas, and force yourself to take responsibility for making more optimistic choices among all of the possibilities the future holds, life will improve.

There are numerous small things that you can do to raise your sense of competence and general self-esteem. And each of these "little" things will then influence your sense of sexual self-esteem. Each small step can be very frightening to do, but just pushing through the fear itself, and making more optimistic choices, is very empowering. Self-esteem is critical to healthy sexuality.

Lucy grew up in an atmosphere of total emotional neglect and developed into a fearful person. She felt frail in her own body, frightened of danger, and afraid that others would reject her. She was lucky enough to be married to a wonderful man, but she didn't feel secure enough to relax during sex, or to ask for what she wanted in their sexual interludes. She couldn't have orgasms.

In therapy, it became clear that her whole life was constrained by the dread she felt. She confessed that in the summer, she wouldn't even wear shorts on a hot day, because she was so frightened that people might look at her body, or might say something upsetting to her. To challenge this fear, we decided that Lucy

should start taking walks in her neighborhood—a very frightening idea. Lucy pushed herself to take these walks, in graduated steps—first brief walks wearing pants and long-sleeved tops, and finally taking longer walks wearing shorts and a short-sleeved blouse. It was a liberating process to challenge her fears. To her surprise, no one said anything awful to her, and the neighbors were friendly and called out to her. As she felt more powerful and competent in the world, and more comfortable in her body, asking for what she needed, sexually and socially, came more naturally. As Lucy could ask for the specific kinds of touches she liked from her husband, she became orgasmic.

The relationship between sexuality and self-esteem is circular. Being sexual *per se* is a poor way to deal with a deficit in self-esteem. Sexuality cannot be safe and healthy if you are being sexual with someone who exploits you or doesn't consistently care about you.

Developing good self-esteem sets the stage for good relationships with trustworthy people. Lucy's example, literally overcoming the results of a neglectful, lonely childhood and low self-esteem step-by-step, is a good metaphor for you if you need to recover your self-esteem.

The exercises which follow will help you realistically assess the choices you have made which have enhanced or dampened your self-esteem so far. If you spend time on the exercises in this chapter (and utilize the resources for this chapter—see page 255), you will be more likely to wait until you have a relationship in which there is emotional intimacy and commitment. At that point, being sexually intimate may well further enhance your self-esteem.

Exercises

Assess Your Self-Esteem

Write down the three things you like best about yourself:

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____

Imagine that you want to make contact with someone you don't know, but to whom you are attracted. Imagine that you have to "sell" yourself to that person. Write a 20-second commercial for yourself.

Oftentimes, low self-esteem leads to poor choices in friendships and lovers. If you think you've made such choices, fill in the following chart.

Person I chose who was bad for me	Reason I chose him/her	Bad belief I gained as a result	Correcting Belief About Myself
_____	_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____	_____

If you have made poor choices in your relationships in the past, describe here the kind of sexual partner (or friend, if you haven't become sexual yet) you want and deserve.

Low self-esteem sometimes makes it difficult to ask for what you want sexually, even in a healthy relationship. If you have been secretive about your sexual wishes in a healthy relationship, compose a list of those wishes

here. Try to arrange the wishes in order, starting with the ones which might be the easiest to ask for, and ending with the ones which would be the most threatening to ask for. Then write in today's date and a target date by which time you will ask for each of these wishes.

	Today's Date	Target Date
Wish 1 _____	_____	_____
Wish 2 _____	_____	_____
Wish 3 _____	_____	_____
Wish 4 _____	_____	_____

Assess Your Sexual Perfectionism

No one has the perfect body, and no one is the perfect lover. If your sexual self-confidence is marred by the rigid, perfectionistic demands you make on yourself, document them here. First list the demand you make of yourself that makes it threatening for you to participate in a sensual or sexual situation with a loved person. Next, write yourself a soothing statement which you can use the next time you judge yourself so harshly. Using this statement will help you overcome your criticism and move forward into the desired sexual situation.

1. Criticism _____
Retort or Correcting Thought _____
2. Criticism _____
Retort or Correcting Thought _____
3. Criticism _____
Retort or Correcting Thought _____

Low self-esteem often leads to perfectionism, which can interfere with your ability to relax and focus inward on your own sexual pleasure. If you are now aware of that pattern, list your distracting, perfectionistic thoughts, and next to each, write a focusing or breathing image which will help your body experience pleasure by focusing on an activity or a part of your body you like. (For instance, "I will ask to be touched on my thighs and focus on how erotic that feels.")

**Perfectionistic Thought
or Belief During Sex
Which Inhibits Pleasure**

**Competing Way to Focus on
Pleasure**
