

Self-Esteem Issues and Answers

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What is Optimal Self-Esteem? The Cultivation and Consequences of Contingent vs. True Self-Esteem as Viewed from the Self-Determination Theory Perspective

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Self-esteem is a concept that is treated ambivalently by psychologists. On the one hand, it is clear that a sense of worth and confidence, both aspects of self-esteem, can yield many benefits in terms of motivation and mental health. On the other hand, there is suspicion that too often self-esteem is misplaced, inaccurate, or vulnerable. Many people have an inflated sense of self-worth, mismatched with actual merits or accomplishment. Others, particularly narcissists, may well have high self-esteem, but nonetheless are insensitive, self-centered and often poorly regarding of others (Paulus & Williams, 2002). Finally, there is something disconcerting about people esteeming themselves—a concept that seems in principle to lack humility and grace.

This ambivalence is, in our view, well placed. Self-esteem can be an asset, but it can also be problematic, even when high. This is why the study of self-esteem has required a more differentiated approach; one that recognizes that the self-regard people manifest differs as a function of its antecedents or foundations, yielding different consequences for adjustment (Kernis, 2003; Ryan & Deci, in press). In self-determination theory (SDT; Deci & Ryan, 2000; Ryan & Deci, 2000), we distinguish between two different types of self-esteem, each built on different grounds, and each motivating different types of behaviors. Specifically, we distinguish *contingent self-esteem* from *true self-esteem*; the later being most easily characterized as “optimal” (Deci & Ryan, 1995).

Contingent self-esteem (CSE) is a sense of worth that is based on the introjection of externally defined standards. It is evident wherever a person's evaluations of self

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are based on meeting certain goals, comparing well with others, or gaining outside admiration or accolades. Examples include the student who feels herself to be worthy or lovable only when she gets A's, or the man who needs to surround himself with conspicuous material goods to feel important and successful. CSE is unstable and fragile, in the senses outlined by Kernis (2003), because should a setback occur, or external admiration not be forthcoming, the individual's self-esteem can plummet, or conversely, when success at these extrinsic outcomes occurs, self-inflation follows. Indeed, CSE describes a dynamic in which one's sense of self rises and falls in accord with the attainment of attributes that have come to be adopted as markers of worth. Moreover, because self-esteem fluctuation is painful, people with high levels of CSE are vulnerable to introjecting others' goals to gain admiration, and/or distorting events to maintain their fragile sense of worth. They are more self-conscious (Ryan & Kuczowski, 1994), more prone to extrinsically focused lifestyles (Ryan, Sheldon, Kasser, & Deci, 1996), and more likely to conform to external controls than people whose self-esteem is less contingent (Deci & Ryan, 1995).

In contrast, true self-esteem is a sense of self as worthy, not by virtue of external trappings or specific accomplishments, but because one experiences one's worth as inherent or "given." Indeed, true self-esteem is a sense of worth that is noncontingent. It does not inflate when one succeeds, nor crumble when setbacks occur. This is not to say that successes do not yield positive feelings and failures disappointments, but the *worth of the self as a whole* is not implicated in each event. Moreover, because people with true self-esteem are not basing their worth on specific external outcomes, material successes, or others' contingent approval, they are less prone to introjection, and they behave with greater integrity and authenticity.

WHY THE DISTINCTION HAS BEEN NECESSARY

The need for a distinction between the more optimal or true self-esteem, and the less optimal CSE has become increasingly clear as research on self-esteem has burgeoned. The reason is that the same indicator, evaluations of self-worth, can be high for quite distinct reasons. When traditional self-report measures of self-esteem are completed, people with CSE may, depending on whether they are meeting the standards they perceive to determine their worthiness, report high scores. Those with true self-esteem are also likely to record high scores, because they would reflectively endorse the idea that they are worthy of both love and regard. Yet, despite that high score, those with true self-esteem are not ongoingly concerned with self-esteem because their sense of self-worth is not in question. Esteem is not a salient issue in everyday life. In contrast, those with CSE, whether high or low, are preoccupied with the question of self-worth. They desire esteem, worry when it is not forthcoming, and that desire and worry over esteem regulates and controls much of their behavior. For those with CSE, self-esteem becomes what Kernis (2003) called a "prime directive," motivating the person to pursue goals that are expected to garner admiration or avoid disapproval.

Because they experience an inherent sense of worth, the actions and goals of persons with true self-esteem are more likely to reflect abiding values and interests,

rather than merely “what others might think.” And while successes and failures may affect feelings and well-being, the self as a whole is not evaluated accordingly. This separates our view of CSE from that of Crocker, Luhtanen, Cooper, and Bouvrette (2003), who define contingent worth in terms of a person being affected by positive or negative events, internally or externally defined, in any domain. Our definition is more specific, because although we also believe that goal-related outcomes impact people, not all people use those events to gage their self-worth in general. Further, because CSE stems from contingent regard, it tends to be focused on externally defined standards such as appearance, popularity, wealth, or other publicly accessible markers of status, and SDT specifically predicts negative effects of this external focus, which is what Crocker et al. found. And because meeting or not meeting these external standards affects one’s whole sense of self, people with CSE are more preoccupied, sometimes desperately so, with meeting those standards. The materialist must make more money, the socialite must be popular, and the fitness fanatic must stay lean. This reflects what we describe as the paradox of self-esteem: Those who need it, don’t have it; those who have it, don’t need it (Ryan & Brown, 2003; Ryan & Deci, in press).

DEVELOPMENTAL AND SOCIETAL FOUNDATIONS OF CONTINGENT VS. TRUE SELF-ESTEEM

It is important to note here that some level of contingent self-esteem is modal for adults, and in fact, most of us experience CSE differentially across different life domains (Assor, Roth, & Deci, 2004). But individual differences in CSE are robust and impactful, both within and across domains. Moreover, we suggest that while CSE vulnerability can be domain-specific (e.g., an athlete who has hinged self-esteem completely on sport success), many people with high CSE experience it across extrinsic outcomes such as image, popularity, and materialism. For instance, people focused on image also tend to be hooked on related issues of popularity, appearance of success, materialism, etc. This is why some people are so susceptible to consumerism, conformity, fashions, and fakery. To the extent that individuals believe that they are only worthy if sufficiently attractive, successful, popular, smart, or any other externalized characteristic, they may be willing to twist themselves into a pretzel to gain an edge in these attributes. One becomes “ego-involved” (Ryan, 1982) concerning specific outcomes such as money, beauty, or performance, feeling as if these criteria are what confirm one’s worth.

In SDT’s formulation, the roots of CSE lie in contingent regard (Deci & Ryan, 2000). When parents, teachers, or other significant figures are invested in specific outcomes they often wittingly or unwittingly convey that their love, regard, or support is contingent on the child attaining that outcome. The child is lovable only if brave, smart, athletic, attractive, or whatever else the desired outcome might be. Often such contingent regard concerns precisely those standards the adult has accepted as a condition for their own worth, or areas where he or she feels the child’s image or status may reflect the adult’s social worth (Grolnick, 2003). In any case, when contingently regarded the child is prone to “introject” these conditions

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of worth, judging themselves in accord with these external signs of merit. For example, Gagné, Ryan, and Bargmann (2003) showed that athletes with unstable self-esteem were significantly more likely to report that their motivation for sport was either introjected or driven by external factors such as parental or coach approval. Assor et al. (2004) showed that persons with contingent self-esteem perceived their parents as withdrawing or withholding love after failures and lavishing it after successes, in essence teaching contingent self-worth. These investigators further showed that the parents who did this reported that their own parents treated them similarly, suggesting that CSE is a motivational dynamic whose grip may be multigenerational.

It is not just parents, coaches and teachers, however, who can foster CSE. Today's media saturated world attempts to prompt consumerism precisely through activating a sense of contingent self-esteem. Advertisements strategically foster a sense of insecurity and social comparison, and then promise a product to remedy the problem (Kasser, Ryan, Couchman, & Sheldon, 2003). In fact, much consumerism is driven by desires for products that will lead others to esteem us for our image, youth, and success. But of course, even if that promise were true, the esteem one would garner would be contingent. Peer groups and colleagues can further this dynamic, holding out approval for those who have or do what is fashionable, and disparaging those who do not conform to what has been popularly sanctioned.

Whereas the foundations of CSE lie in insecurity linked with the promise of contingent approval, the development of true self-esteem is understood within SDT as an outgrowth of supports for basic psychological needs. True self-esteem is developmentally facilitated by caregivers who convey caring and relatedness noncontingently, support the child's autonomy, and facilitate a sense of competence. A person who feels unconditional relatedness, autonomy, and competence in ongoing life "has" self-esteem, of a stable and persistent quality. Such individuals are neither preoccupied with the question of esteem, nor worried about retaining it. In this sense, they are less motivated by the search for esteem, and less likely to focus on others' regard as a primary basis for deciding what is important in life. For example, using longitudinal data, Kasser, Ryan, Zax, and Sameroff (1995) showed that mothers who were more supportive of their child's needs for autonomy and relatedness had teenagers who were less materialistic and better adjusted. These investigators suggested that thwarting needs for autonomy and relatedness sets up a desire for trappings of worth to stave off inner insecurity. In short, SDT posits that the basis of true self-esteem is the satisfaction of basic needs for relatedness, competence, and autonomy, and when these are fulfilled, self-esteem concerns evaporate (Ryan & Deci, in press).

HOW CAN A PERSON MOVE TOWARD MORE OPTIMAL SELF-ESTEEM?

Given the dynamics of CSE it seems clear that, the more salient it is, the more one pays costs levied in terms of diminished growth, integrity, and well-being. It

is also clear that there are many forces that work to keep CSE robust from controlling parents and partners to creative marketers. Is there any antidote?

From the SDT perspective, a key to “unhooking” from CSE, and to living a fuller, more satisfying life, is the cultivation of *awareness*. We define awareness as authentic appraisal of what is going on both within oneself and in one’s social context. In awareness a person holistically represents what is occurring, what drives actions, and what is truly satisfying and fulfilling. Awareness in this view is not self-consciousness (how one thinks one is viewed by others) but rather an open and nonjudgmental consciousness of self and environment (being in touch with what is occurring). Awareness is foundational in the process of regulation (Deci & Ryan, 1985), and helps a person sort out what is a genuine value or interest, and what is salient because of what others think or because of contingencies in the social environment. Awareness is what supports interest and volition, and identifies obstacles to it.

One operationalization of awareness is *mindfulness*, a state in which one openly perceives and processes what is occurring in the present (Brown & Ryan, 2003; in press). When mindful one witnesses the passing drama of feelings, social pressures, desires, and even of being esteemed or disparaged by others without getting “hooked” or attached. Open observation allows access to the inputs most important to congruent, integrated action, and to being able to resist the ongoing pressure of CSE to regulate action. In short, mindfulness supplies a better foundation for self-regulation than concern with what others esteem (Ryan & Brown, 2003).

There are many routes to greater awareness and mindfulness. Obvious, of course, is personal training in mindfulness, such as through meditation. Another route is psychotherapy which, when meaningful, helps people to gain perspective and reflectively consider one’s motives, actions, and circumstances (Epstein, 1995). As Rogers (1963) noted, effective therapy, by creating an atmosphere that is unconditionally regarding, helps to clarify the phenomenal field. In turn, this facilitates a higher sense of vitality and better self-regulation (LaGuardia & Ryan, 2003). Relatedly, awareness is also facilitated in informal interpersonal contexts where one can share, symbolize and process events, and experience without being contingently regarded or controlled. In fact, it is with others who noncontingently value a person who is honest and clear talk emerges, and from that greater awareness typically grows (Ryan, La Guardia, Solky-Butzel, Chirkov, V. & Kim, Y. (2005) La Guardia & Ryan, 2003). There are other informal routes through which we can gain more awareness as well, such as through quality time spent in solitude, wherein one can authentically reflect and deepen one’s understanding of self and others.

Finally, according to SDT, gaining optimal self-esteem comes about not by seeking esteem, but by actually leading a life that satisfies basic psychological needs. By cultivating awareness of one’s basic needs for autonomy, competence and relatedness, and by seeking out relationships, vocations and interests in which those needs can be truly satisfied, a sense of self that is vital and well is nurtured, the self-esteem motive itself weakens and atrophies, and extrinsic goals become less salient. Those who find opportunities to satisfy needs and to increase their awareness of themselves and their surroundings thus find the whole phenomenon

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of self-esteem to be less and less important in life. And in the SDT view, the less salient self-esteem is, the more optimal is one's self-esteem.

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