

Self-Esteem

Building a more compassionate and accurate relationship with yourself

Self-esteem is how we evaluate our own worth, value, and capability. It is not a fixed trait, but shaped by experience, relationships, internal narratives, and choices. Low self-esteem often develops from early criticism, invalidation, trauma, or comparison, and becomes maintained by self-critical thinking patterns, avoidance, and people-pleasing. The good news: it can change.

How Low Self-Esteem Maintains Itself

Low self-esteem creates a self-fulfilling cycle: you believe you are not good enough → you avoid challenges or seek constant reassurance → you miss opportunities to build genuine competence and evidence of your worth → the belief is reinforced. Interrupting this cycle is the core of treatment.

Key insight

Self-esteem built on achievement, appearance, or others' approval is *inherently fragile*.
Unconditional self-worth – the belief that you have value as a human being regardless of outcomes – is the durable foundation we're building toward.

Evidence-Based Tools

01 Identify and Challenge the Inner Critic

Notice self-critical thoughts ("I'm a failure," "No one really likes me"). Write them down. Ask: Would I say this to someone I love? Is this thought based on fact or fear? What would a compassionate friend say? Practice generating a kinder, more accurate alternative, not toxic positivity, but realistic compassion.

02 The Evidence Log

Keep a running record of experiences that contradict your negative self-belief. If your core belief is "I'm incompetent," note every instance of competence, however small. The brain has a negativity bias; deliberately logging disconfirming evidence corrects it.

03 Values Clarification

Self-esteem grounded in personal values is more resilient than that based on external approval. Identify 5 values that matter deeply to you (e.g., honesty, creativity, connection). Ask: Am I living in alignment with these? Small acts of values-consistent behaviour build authentic self-regard.

04 Self-Compassion Practice

Self-compassion is not self-indulgence; it is treating yourself with the warmth you would offer a good friend. When you notice self-criticism, pause and try: (1) Acknowledge the pain ("this is hard"), (2) Recognize shared humanity ("struggle is part of being human"), (3) Offer yourself kindness ("may I be gentle with myself right now"). Research shows self-compassion outperforms self-esteem as a predictor of psychological wellbeing.

05 Mastery and Pleasure Activities

Engage *deliberately* in activities that build competence and bring enjoyment. Each completed task — however modest — creates real evidence of capability. Track what you complete, not just what remains undone.

06 Assertion and Boundaries

People-pleasing is a common low self-esteem strategy that backfires, as it communicates to yourself that your needs don't matter. Practice expressing preferences, setting one small boundary per week, and tolerating the discomfort of disappointing others. This is how self-respect is built, not found.

What Low Self-Esteem Is Not

- It is not humility: Genuine humility involves accurate self-appraisal, not self-diminishment
- It is not modesty: It often masks deep shame and prevents authentic connection
- It is not a personality trait: It is a learned pattern that can be unlearned

Daily Practices

- Morning: Name one thing you appreciate about yourself → a quality, not an achievement
- Evening: Record one moment from the day where you acted in line with your values
- Weekly: Write down three specific examples that contradict your inner critic
- Ongoing: Notice when you discount compliments or positives — and choose not to