

The Practice of Self-Esteem

by Lindsey Hall and Leigh Cohn

Many people say that low self-esteem is rich soil for the development of an eating disorder. The reasoning is that if a person is not confident about "who they are" on the inside, they will try live up to external standards. Since losing weight is so often thought of as a "good" thing in our culture, individuals who do so are richly praised and admired. Although this seems like it would be good for anyone's self-esteem, it is exactly what makes an eating disorder so insidious. Weight loss is a success determined and measured by external standards, and as such does not feel deeply meaningful or fulfilling. And the resulting sense of self-esteem is often fleeting and false. Do we lose self-esteem when or if the weight comes back? When are we "thin enough?" Does this mean that someone living in a large body does not have or is undeserving of self-esteem?

Our philosophy is that self-esteem is not something that involves being "good enough" or "doing the right thing" or even being a certain way. We are all different kinds of people - shapes, sizes, colors, aptitudes, interests, faiths, and so many other variables. One thing we do have in common, though, is an inner core of goodness. And when we turn away from this inner self and try to live up to external standards, we become alienated from ourselves and feel empty inside. We compare ourselves to others and become our own harshest critics. But if we make a commitment to turn inward and get to know ourselves, we will come in contact with an inner goodness and will "feel full" with self-love! (There was a time when the phrase, "You're full of yourself," was a negative thing to say. We disagree!)

So, in a way, gaining true self-esteem and bolstering recovery from an eating disorder is less a process of changing one's self than it is a recognizing of the "self" that is already there - an important, worthwhile human being, a source of compassion, creativity, wisdom, contentment and happiness. This means developing a relationship with yourself based on the conviction that you are an inherently good person, which takes practice just like anything new.

Here are a few suggestions for practicing self-esteem:

- Take time every day to sit with yourself and listen for your inner voice. Write in your journal afterwards.
- Stop putting yourself down for having such a strange illness. Even an eating disorder serves a purpose. What does yours do for you?
- Do something nice for someone else. See how appreciative they are?
- Realize that the fear of losing control is, in part, a result of being disconnected from your inner self. The more time you spend getting to know that inner person, the more faith and trust you will gain in your decisions and actions.
- Stop focusing on those things you lack because you are giving them life! In the same vein, listen to your thoughts as well as what you say out loud. Try to turn your negatives into positives. Your mind can be your best friend or your worst enemy, but you are in charge!
- Appreciate who you are instead of trying to be somehow "perfect." You are always a perfect you.
- Remember that there is no such thing as a "perfect" recovery, either. Recovery begins when you are ready and travels its own path. You're in a new place after even one small step forward.

Lindsey Hall and Leigh Cohn have written about self-esteem in BULIMIA: A GUIDE TO RECOVERY and SELF-ESTEEM: TOOLS FOR RECOVERY