

The Self-Esteem Struggle

Self-esteem is a belief in oneself, or self-respect. And according to many experts, it is something that often eludes many college students. For one reason or another, many young people suffer from a lack of self-esteem, which can affect how they adjust to college life and function as students.

What are some of the signs of healthy self-esteem?

People who have a healthy sense of self-esteem, generally speaking, will feel competent in their ability to cope with life's ever-changing situations. They trust their judgment in most matters and know where to get help when a particular challenge arises. They feel capable of making sound, responsible choices and can handle change when it occurs. All these characteristics lend themselves to a general state of happiness and contentedness.

But healthy self-esteem is not egotism. It is never a feeling of superiority over others. In fact, if a person seems to need to remind others of his talents or skills, it could be a symptom of someone who is trying to compensate for a lack of self-esteem.

What can you expect on campus?

At the college level, issues of self-confidence and competence can surface for the first time as students try to adjust to an unfamiliar setting and challenging academic expectations. The good student might have to work harder to maintain the same grade point average, while the mediocre student might start off with strong concerns about being good enough to make it at all. Being away from home can also contribute to an unsettled feeling and an otherwise self-confident young adult might show signs of insecurity and emotional withdrawal for the first time in his life.

Also keep in mind that students are adjusting to a new social scene as well. Their relationships with friends from home are changing even as new relationships are developing. It takes time for students to find their voice and identity in a different setting.

What can you do to help them adjust?

These dips in self-esteem are normal when people face new challenges. As students continue their academic and social pursuits, and begin to enjoy some degree of success, their self-esteem levels should start to rise again. You can help by:

- **Offering praise, when appropriate.** Make sure your words of praise are reality based, and not wishful thinking. False praise can actually make a vulnerable individual more unhappy with himself, since he will know that he does not deserve the degree of attention he is receiving. But when a student acts responsibly or achieves a goal, be sure to recognize him in a meaningful way.
- **Building on pre-existing strengths.** All students have competencies in various areas and often they just need to be reminded of them, especially as they're being challenged right and left by new things on campus. By focusing on their strengths rather than weaknesses, all students can grow in self-esteem and self-confidence. Encourage students to continue challenging themselves in their areas of competence so that they keep growing in skills and expertise.
- **Helping students to avoid comparing themselves with others.** No matter what we do in life and no matter how hard we try, there is always someone who can do it better. If a student struggling with self-esteem begins to look around at others who have greater skills and achievements, she will back herself into a dangerous psychological corner – and quickly. Remind students that it is their responsibility only to try their best. From that effort alone they can find personal satisfaction and a healthy sense of pride. They do not have to be the best at something in order to be a valuable asset to the campus community.
- **Encouraging students to try new things.** They can never know about a hidden talent or personal strength if they never try new things. Now is the time for healthy experimentation, whether it involves a different academic area, a new responsibility, a new interest or hobby, or even a new group of friends. They might be surprised to find what interests or talents are just waiting to be discovered.

