



# *Self-Esteem as a Protective Factor for Adolescents:*

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Helping Teens Cultivate a Healthy  
Relationship with Themselves

Nancie Tormey, Ph.D.



## *This workshop will:*

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★ Define self-esteem and related concepts

★ Explore developmental influences on self-esteem in adolescents



★ Discuss consequences of high and low self-esteem



★ Offer strategies for increasing self-esteem and self-compassion among adolescents



## *Adolescent development*

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- ★ The primary developmental task of adolescence is building a sense of self.
- ★ This process occurs at a time of rapid physiological, emotional, and cognitive change.
- ★ The goal is to develop a positive sense of self that is flexible enough to adapt to new situations, yet stable enough to provide a sense of continuity of self.





# *Adolescence and self-esteem*

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★ A time of intense self-evaluation and social comparison.



★ Teens attempt to establish their identity and their place in the social hierarchy.



★ The intense pressures faced by most teens means that their self-evaluation is often unfavorable.



# *A Matter of Life and Death*

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- ★ Our self-concept is not our *actual self*.
- ★ It's a (distorted) portrayal of our habitual thoughts, emotions, and behaviors— an appraisal of our self-worth.
- ★ We identify so strongly with the image we construct, that painting a positive rather than negative image can feel like a matter of life and death.



# *Two Psychological Aspects of Self-esteem*

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## ★ “Feeling good”

- An emotional appraisal of one’s self-worth (e.g. contentment, satisfaction).



## ★ “Doing well” in the world

- The good feeling is rooted in the success of our “commerce with the world”.



Seligman, 2007



# *Contingent self-worth*

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★ “Contingent self-worth” refers to a sense of self-esteem that depends on success or failure.



- Personal attractiveness
- Peer approval
- School/work success
- Feeling virtuous
- Family support





# *How Self-esteem Develops*

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- ★ It is a work in progress
- ★ Self-esteem is largely developed during childhood, but is variable depending on our experiences.
- ★ It is based on our family history, life experiences, and how we perceive aspects of ourselves such as our abilities, personality, relationships and appearance.





# *How Self-Esteem Develops*

## *(cont'd)*

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- ★ Self-esteem develops as a side effect of mastering challenges, working successfully, overcoming frustration and boredom, and winning.
- ★ *The feeling of self-esteem is a byproduct of doing well.*
- ★ Once a child's self-esteem is in place, it kindles further success.

Seligman, 2007 (p.33)



# *Childhood Experiences that Lead to Low Self-Esteem*

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★ Being raised in a harshly critical environment

★ Being verbally or physically abused

★ Being frequently ignored, ridiculed, or teased



★ Being expected to be “perfect” all the time

★ Experiencing excessive failures in sports or school



★ Being judged as unattractive by peers

★ Having few social connections in community



# *Childhood Experiences that Lead to Healthy Self-Esteem*

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- ★ Earning and receiving praise
- ★ Working hard to overcome obstacles
- ★ Being listened to and validated
- ★ Being spoken to respectfully
- ★ Getting attention and affection
- ★ Achieving success in school or sports
- ★ Building at least one close friendship
- ★ Feeling connected and valued by family, peers and community



## *Costs of High Self-Esteem*

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★ In our culture, we have to feel “special” and above average to feel good about ourselves.



★ In order to feel better than average, we have to put others down.



★ We puff ourselves up with an inflated view of self in order to feel good about ourselves— this leads to narcissism.



# *Effects of Low Self-Esteem*

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- ★ Low self-esteem has a negative impact on these domains:
  - moods (depression, anxiety, anger, hostility)
  - thoughts (self-deprecation, negative or low expectations)
  - behaviors (risk-taking, substance use)
  - relationships (distrust, avoidance)
  - goals (low expectations, fear of change)



# *Three Faces of Low Self-Esteem*

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## ★ “The Imposter”

- “Masks” happiness and success, but is terrified of failure and afraid of being “found out.”

## ★ “The Rebel”

- Acts like others’ opinions don’t matter. Lives with anger about not feeling “good enough.”

## ★ “The Loser”

- Acts helpless and unable to cope, and waits to be rescued.

(University of Texas at Austin, Counseling & Mental Health Center, 1999)



# *How Self-Esteem Affects Our Thinking*

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- ★ Teens with healthy self-esteem tend to make use of “self-talk” that is positive and reassuring.
- ★ Teens with low self-esteem tend to have “self-talk” that is overly harsh, critical and judgmental toward themselves.



# *Functions of Self-criticism*

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- ★ Self-criticism may be an evolutionarily based survival mechanism designed to keep oneself safe.

Gilbert, 2009





## *Functions of self-criticism (cont)*

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- ★ Children who are constantly criticized start to use self-criticism as a protective measure.
  - They believe self-criticism will prevent them from making mistakes.
  - They can blunt the force of other's criticism by making it redundant, i.e. saying it to themselves.

– Neff, 2011



## *Function of Self-criticism (cont)*

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- ★ Self criticism allows us to indulge in feelings of *righteous indignation toward our own inadequacies*.
- ★ “I’m so just and fair that I will now punish myself without mercy.”

Neff, 2011 (p. 28)



# *We cannot instill self-esteem directly*

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- ★ Attempts by parents and school systems to bolster children's self-esteem by *teaching them to feel good about themselves* has eroded children's sense of worth.
- ★ By emphasizing how a child *feels* at the expense of what the child *does*, we are making this generation more vulnerable to depression and narcissism.

Seligman, 2007



# *A caution about unconditional praise*

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- ★ When we reward a child or teen with praise regardless of what he/she does:
  - The teen may become passive, having learned that praise will come regardless what he does.
  - The teen may have trouble appreciating that he has actually succeeded later on when he really does.
  - The teen's trust in you will be undermined.

Seligman, 2007



## *Unconditional love, but contingent praise*

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- ★ Love, affection, interest, and warmth should all be delivered unconditionally.
- ★ The more of these, the more secure the child or teen will be and the more he will explore, take chances, and find mastery.
- ★ But *praise* should be contingent on success and graded to fit the accomplishment.



Seligman, 2007



# *Strategies to Foster Self-esteem*

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## ★ Behavioral approach (doing well)

- increase mastery experiences; make a “success file”, increase connections within community



## ★ Teach teens self-compassion (feeling good)





## *Part 1: “Doing well”*

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- ★ Since self-esteem is a byproduct of our commerce with the world, we need to help adolescents expand their worlds and their mastery experiences.





# *Behavioral Interventions*

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- ★ Facilitate academic motivation and success
- ★ Increase mastery experiences
  - Help teens find opportunities to succeed at helping others, learning new skills, teaching someone etc.
- ★ Make a “success file”
  - Ask teen to make a file of their accomplishments, awards, small successes, achievements...
- ★ Help teen make connections
  - Learn what interests and inspires the teen and help them find a local mentor, group, club, or team.







# *Capitalize on the Adolescent Changes*



- ★ The natural adolescent inclinations toward novelty, arousal and excitement that emerge in association with puberty create a unique opportunity to harness these intense emotions in the service of positive goals.
- ★ We can help adolescents direct these energies in healthy ways: passion to create art, music, to succeed in a sport, to participate in humanistic efforts, to achieve an academic goal, to learn a trade, to develop an entrepreneurial idea...

Dahl, R.E. (2004). *Annals of New York Academy of Sciences*. 1021: 1-22



# *Harness the Energy and Enthusiasm*

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- ★ Help teens experience adult maturity through the *right* kinds of employment or volunteer activity.
- ★ “Stretch the teen envelope”
  - Do fewer things for teens, and give them tasks just beyond their current level of comfort and competence.
- ★ Provide adult connections
  - Teens desperately need to interact with adults on a more mature level, and such interaction will help them blossom.



Allen, J. & Allen, C.W. (2009) *Escaping the endless adolescence*. New York: Ballantine Books



## *Part 2: “Feeling good”*

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★ Intrapersonal compassion skills





# *Self-appreciation*

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## ★ Self-esteem

- Predicated on separation and comparison, i.e. being or doing better than others and therefore feeling special.

## ★ Self-appreciation

- Based on connectedness, i.e. seeing our similarities with others.



# *Self-compassion*

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- ★ Self-compassion enables us to experience emotions of care and connectedness right alongside our painful feelings.
- ★ These feelings don't depend on being special or on meeting ideal goals.
- ★ Rather, they come from caring about ourselves-- fragile, imperfect, and magnificent as we are.



# *Video Clip - Kristen Neff, Ph.D.*

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★ Self-esteem versus self-compassion





# *Three Core Components of Self-Compassion*

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\* *Self-kindness* (being gentle and understanding with ourselves)



\* *Recognition of our humanity* (feeling connected with others vs. isolated by our pain)



\* *Mindfulness* (holding our experience in balanced awareness).

Neff, 2011 (p. 41)



## *Self-kindness*

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- ★ Make an active effort to soften the self-critical voice, but do so with compassion rather than self-judgment.
  - “I know you’re trying to keep me safe, and to point out ways that I need to improve, but your harsh criticism and judgment is causing me unnecessary pain.”

– Neff, 2011 (p.53)





## *Self-kindness*

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- ★ Even though self-criticism causes us pain, we can still honor those thought patterns for trying to keep us safe.
- ★ We can teach teens to understand the harm they do themselves through constant self-criticism, while also having compassion for these same tendencies.

Gilbert, 2009



# *Recognition of our Humanity*

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- ★ Feeling connected with others in the experiences of life rather than feeling isolated and alienated by our suffering.
- ★ Learning to view the unpredictability of life and our human frailties and weaknesses as something of beauty as opposed to a terrible tragedy.

Neff, 2011



## *Tell Teens About Famous People Who Have Succeeded “Against the Odds”*

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★ Beethoven’s music teacher told him he was a hopeless composer.

★ Sylvester Stallone was a juvenile delinquent.



★ Thomas Edison’s teachers told him he was too stupid to learn.

★ Michael Jordan was cut from his high school basketball team.



★ Walt Disney was fired by a newspaper editor for lack of ideas.

(Bernstein, 1996)



# *Mindfulness*

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- ★ Mindfulness allows us to see that our negative thoughts and emotions are just thought— thoughts and emotions, not necessarily reality.
- ★ They are therefore given less weight— they are observed but not necessarily believed.



# *Analogy of a movie theater*

*Neff, 2011*





*Imagine a red cardinal flying  
across a clear blue sky...*

*Neff, 2011*





# *Practice “Loving Kindness Meditation”*

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★ May I be safe, May I be peaceful,  
May I be kind to myself, May I accept  
myself as I am.



Neff, 2011



# *SACRED Self*

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- ★ **S**oftness with Self
- ★ Find Five Positive **A**tttributes
- ★ **C**reate a Kind Environment
- ★ **R**adical Self-Acceptance
- ★ **D**eeply Like Yourself



(Used with permission from Juliet Nelson, PhD, LCP of Bert Nash Center, Lawrence Kansas; unpublished manuscript)





## *Softness with Self*

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- ★ Notice when you are being hard on yourself with words or actions and agree to be “softer.” Add a gentle tone to your inner-voice. Be gentle and loving with yourself.
- ★ Practice soothing yourself with a gentle touch; rub your tired arms, stroke your hair, softly touch your cheek.



# *Find Five Positive Attributes*

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- ★ Find 5 things you can reliably recognize as positive about yourself.
- ★ Make sure you choose things you know are true about you, and that do not waiver, even when other things fall apart.
  - Character traits, past accomplishments, physical attributes, relationships, etc.
- ★ Think of these aspects when you are struggling with self-criticism.



# *Create a Kind Environment*

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- ★ Try to spend time with people who are kind and gentle.
- ★ Avoid people who tend to blame, criticize, or otherwise reinforce your negative self-talk.
- ★ Arrange your room or locker to positively reflect yourself.
- ★ Make plans with yourself that are special and follow through.



# *Radical Self-Acceptance*

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- ★ Willingly accept all aspects of self.
- ★ Acceptance doesn't mean approval or agreement; it is simply the acknowledgement of what is.
- ★ Accept that you are human, that you have both failings and accomplishments in your life, and that you are inherently both flawed and gifted.
- ★ Accept yourself wholeheartedly without fear that doing so will make you worse.



## *Deeply Like Yourself*

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- ★ Notice hatred or intolerance toward yourself.
- ★ Step back from thoughts that are self-critical.
- ★ Remember that liking yourself is worth actively working on.
- ★ It does not make you self-centered, but increases your ability to like and help others.
- ★ Consider yourself one-of-a-kind, and therefore, sacred.



# *Which wolf will win?*

*Neff, 2011*



*A J Valentino*



# *Self-esteem Summary*

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- ★ Self-esteem is an appraisal of one's *self-worth*.
- ★ It develops as a side effect of mastering challenges, working successfully, overcoming frustration and boredom, and winning.
- ★ We can't teach it directly, but we can help adolescents to develop persistence and to take on challenges that will help them to develop mastery in areas where they have interest and strengths.



# *Self-compassion Summary*

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- ★ Self-compassion picks up precisely where self-esteem falls down— whenever we disappoint ourselves or feel inadequate.
- ★ It does not require us to feel better than others, or to evaluate or judge ourselves at all.
- ★ Self-compassion is always available to us.

Neff, 2011





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**750 Washington Road, Mt. Lebanon, PA 15228**  
**412-805-4951**

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