# Nourishing Self-Esteem

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We all have a mental picture of who we are, how we look, what we're good at, and what our weaknesses might be. We develop this picture over time, starting when we are very young. A lot of our self-image is based on interactions we have with other people and our life experiences. This mental picture (our self-image) contributes to our self-esteem.

According to Kendra Cherry, a psychology expert, the term self-esteem is used to describe a person's overall sense of self-worth or personal value. Self-esteem can involve a variety of beliefs about the self, such as the assessment of one's own appearance, beliefs, emotions and behaviors. Unfortunately, it is often seen as a personality trait, which means that it tends to be stable and enduring.

In my opinion, self-esteem is about how much we feel valued, loved, accepted, and thought well of by others; and how much we value, love, and accept ourselves. People with healthy or positive self-esteem are able to feel good about themselves, appreciate their own worth, and take pride in their abilities, skills, and accomplishments. However, people with low self-esteem may feel as if no one will like them or accept them or that they can't do well in anything. Low self-esteem is thinking in which an individual views him/herself as inadequate, unlovable, and/or incompetent. Once formed, this negative view fills every thought, producing faulty assumptions and ongoing self-defeating behavior.

Naturally we all experience problems with self-esteem at certain times in our lives, especially during our teenage years when we're figuring out who we are and where we fit in the world. The good news is that, because everyone's self-image changes over time, self-esteem is not fixed for life. So if one feels that their self-esteem

isn't all it could be, there is a chance that it can be improved. That's why Teen Empowerment Uganda (TEU) is keen on boosting self-esteem among teens.

**Why Is Self-Esteem Important?**

*"After talking about body changes with Madam Jackie, I now feel comfortable with my body. I no longer feel ashamed about my body. I can be friends with anyone. I'm not afraid to participate in class anymore..."* says Banura J, St. Theresa Primary School, Entebbe.

Banura may not be the only one feeling this way. Self–esteem is important because how we feel about ourselves can influence how we live our lives. People who feel that they're likable and lovable (in other words, people with good self-esteem) have better relationships. Those with high self-esteem are more likely to ask for help and support from friends and family when they need it. Experts in psychology say that people who believe they can accomplish goals and solve problems are more likely to do well in school. Having good self-esteem allows individuals to accept who they are and live life to the fullest.

Self-esteem plays a role in almost everything we do. For instance a child with high self-esteem may do better in school and find it easier to make friends. Such children tend to have better relationships with peers and adults.  They feel happier, find it easier to deal with mistakes, disappointments, and failures and are more likely to stick with something until they succeed. It takes work to develop good self-esteem, but once one does, it changes how she or he views life.   It is the lens through which we view all of our experience.  If a boy with low self-esteem tries out for the basketball team and is not selected, he may decide he's just not good at basketball, or good at sports.   If a boy with high self-esteem tries out for the basketball team and is not selected, he is more likely to work to increase his skills so he will make the team the next time.

**What are the causes of low Self-esteem?**

*"Thank you TEU, you have inspired me, I'm, empowered because of you..."* says Ajuna Anna, St. Theresa Primary School, Entebbe.

Having high or low self-esteem may be influenced by how others see or treat us and how we see ourselves. Parents, teachers, peers and other adults influence the ideas we develop about ourselves especially when we are still young children. For instance if parents spend more time criticizing than praising a child, it can be harder for a child to develop good self-esteem. Since teens are still forming their own values and beliefs, it's easy to build self-image around what a parent, teacher, or other person says.

*"Big girls in my class fear to participate in class because when they make a mistake everyone laughs. Even some teachers make fun of them. This can make them have low self- esteem."* says Juuko Peter, St. Theresa Primary School, Entebbe.

According to JoAnn Deak, Ph.D., author of *Girls Will Be Girls,* self-esteem can be damaged when someone whose acceptance is important (like a parent or teacher) constantly puts one down. However, she says for some Teens criticism doesn't have to come from other people. Some teens also have an "inner critic," a voice inside that seems to find fault with everything they do. Unfortunately, such Teens sometimes unintentionally model their inner voice after a critical parent or someone else whose opinion is important to them. Over time, listening to a negative inner voice can harm a person's self-esteem just as much as if the criticism were coming from another person. Some people get so used to their inner critic being there that they don't even notice when they're putting themselves down.

Additionally, setting unrealistic expectations can also affect someone's self-esteem. People have an image of who they want to be (or who they think they

should be). And yet everyone's image of the ideal person is different. For example, some people admire athletic skills and others admire academic abilities. Thus people who see themselves as having the qualities they admire — such as the ability to make friends easily — usually have high self-esteem while people who don't see themselves as having the qualities they admire may develop low self-esteem. Unfortunately, people who have low self-esteem often do have the qualities they admire. They just can't see it because their self-image is nurtured that way. TEU is focusing on helping teens to appreciate their skills and abilities. Also the need to work with adults to provide a supportive environment is very important.

**Why are self -esteem programs not supported?**

- Self-esteem is a soft skill that cannot be measured in quantifiable terms.
- Self-esteem is not tangible, it is felt and expressed.
- Self-esteem takes time to build because it is a behavior.
- Empowerment is not a one shot deal, it's an ongoing process.

**Helpful Tips on How Teens Can Improve their Self-Esteem**

In orders to improve Teen's self-esteem, TEU encourages its Teens to adopt some empowering tips below:

- **Avoid thinking negatively about yourself -** Start thinking about positive things about yourself. When you catch yourself being too critical, counter it by saying something positive about yourself. Each day, write down three things about yourself that make you happy.
- **Aim for accomplishments rather than perfection –** Don't be obsessed with perfection. Instead of holding yourself back with thoughts like, "I won't play netball because I'm short," think about what you're good at and what you enjoy, and go for it.
- **View mistakes as learning opportunities -** Accept that you will make mistakes because everyone does. Mistakes are part of learning. Remind yourself

that a person's talents are constantly developing, and everyone excels at different things; it's what makes people interesting.

- **Try new things -** Experiment with different activities that will help you get in touch with your talents. Then take pride in the new skills you develop.

- **Recognize what you can change and what you can't -** If you realize that you're unhappy with something about yourself that you can change, then start today. If it's something you can't change (like your height), then start to work toward loving yourself the way you are.

- **Set goals -** Think about what you'd like to accomplish, then make a plan for how to do it. Stick with your plan and keep track of your progress.

- **Be realistic** - Do not expect the impossible. It's good to aim high but your goals for yourself should be within reach. Dream about being a star but focus on improving your own game in specific ways.

- **Take pride in your opinions and ideas -** Don't be afraid to speak out.

- **Make a contribution -** Assist a classmate who is having trouble with classwork, help clean up your neighborhood, participate in a charity for a good cause, or volunteer your time in some other way. Feeling like you're making a difference and that your help is valued can do wonders to improve self-esteem.

- **Exercise -** It helps to relieve stress and spend your free time in healthier and happier ways.

- **Have fun -** Enjoy spending time with the people you care about and doing the things you love. Relax and have a good time.

- **Seek professional help –** if low self- esteem is caused by something emotional seek help from a professional counselor, therapist or spiritual mentor. These experts can act as a guide, helping people learn to love themselves and realize what's unique and special about them.

It's never too late to build healthy, positive self-esteem. Decide that your inner voice will only give you constructive feedback from now on.

Since teen years are a time of intense peer pressure, one powerful strategy that parents and teachers can use to help young people develop positive self-esteem is

to encourage conversation and discussion in small groups.  The following ideas are likely to stimulate thinking and reflection.

**Possible Small Group Discussion Topics on Self- esteem**

- Growth and development and its effect on self -esteem
- Body-image, looks and appearance, stress and their effects on self-esteem
- The media, the sexualization of girls and self -esteem
- Peer pressure effects on self- esteem
- Environment and self -esteem
- Bullying and teasing and their effects on self esteem
- Parenting and its effects on self esteem
- Poverty and self esteem
- Academic performance and self esteem
- Communication and self- expression- public speaking
- Emotions and behavior
- Diseases and self esteem