

BUILDING SELF-ESTEEM FOR HEALTH & HAPPINESS

by Michelle Kelley, LCSW

When I was a young girl, there were several running jokes in my extended family – all of which made me seem and certainly feel as though I was somehow not good enough. Looking back, I don't know why it was so amusing but I went along with the jokes because I was a “good girl” – and going along with jokes, even if they are hurtful is what “good girls” did – and still do, today. How many of us have laughed at dumb blond jokes when really, what's funny about putting someone down because of the color of their hair?

Although I'm sure the intent of these jokes was not to hurt me, I took to heart their implied messages:

- Michelle isn't very smart
- Michelle won't amount to much.
- Don't bother to envision or pursue a better, brighter future for yourself.

Years later, when I had to leave college and move back home due to my failing grades I was demoralized, wondering if those implied messages were true after all.

Fortunately, I found a good counselor who helped me recognize and question my silent assumptions, my negative self-talk and my misguided beliefs. Under my counselor's guidance, I learned how to tame and master the twin demons of self-doubt and self-hatred. With the support and encouragement of my close family and friends, I developed the strength, the will, and the skills I needed to eventually create a life I love.

Today, my passion and my mission is to coach, counsel and guide women and girls who struggle, as I did years ago, with feelings of self-doubt and low self-esteem. I show them how to get unstuck, to figure out what they really want, to change the beliefs and behaviors that are holding them back, and change or get out of toxic relationships.

Signs of Low Self-Esteem in Women and Girls

- “I hate my body”
- “I hate my hair”
- “I'm not smart enough or good enough.”
- “I don't really deserve him”
- “I'm too fat”
- “I'm too thin”
- “I wish I were someone else”



These are the silent, persistent thoughts that plague women and girls with low self-esteem. It's interesting to note that boys and men rarely, if ever, talk about themselves this way. They may suffer from low self-esteem, but low self-esteem in boys and men manifests in very different ways – one of which is through arrogance.

I can recall working with a young girl who was unhappy with her looks because she would rather have blond hair and blue eyes. It breaks my heart to see girls of any age, especially elementary school girls, feeling anxious and depressed because they don't look, feel or act the way our media and culture say they should.

We, as parents, need to have regular conversations with our daughters about the messages they see in our media about girls and women. We need to teach our daughters how to resist and immunize themselves against these damaging and demoralizing messages that create unrealistic and dangerous expectations for how they should look, behave and feel.

Why Low Self-Esteem is Dangerous

Low self-esteem in women and girls is a sneaky, insidious and dangerous thing. It can lead to:

Bad Relationships

Women who suffer from low self-esteem tend to choose friends, boyfriends and husbands who treat them badly and reinforce their poor self-image. They get stuck in bad relationships and bad marriages, afraid to speak up for themselves or leave and search for someone better suited for them. They are susceptible to physical and emotional abuse. They often think, “What if this guy is as good as it gets? If I let go of him, I may never find a better man. The next man I find may be worse. This guy may be the best that I deserve.”

building self-esteem continued on page 54

Unsatisfying, Dead-End Careers

Women who suffer from low self-esteem are often afraid to ask for a raise, to pursue a promotion, or take the risks needed to advance themselves professionally. They may have subtle, unrecognized feelings that “I can’t do this. Someone else is better qualified. What if I get rejected?” They find it hard to imagine something better for themselves.

Depression and Anxiety

Women and girls who struggle with low self-esteem have trouble recognizing and identifying their real wants and needs. They don’t pursue friendships and activities that would give them joy because they don’t trust or believe that they “have what it takes” to get what they want. They often say “yes” when they want to say “no.” They settle for less than they want or need. Over time, this pattern of giving in and giving up can lead to issues with anxiety and depression.

Positive Self Esteem is Good for Your Health

It has been said that positive self-esteem is the immune system of consciousness. When you build up your self-esteem, you build up your immune system and become more resilient in the face of life’s inevitable disappointments and setbacks.

Steps to Building Up Self Esteem

Girls and women can start laying the foundation for success in life by developing their emotional intelligence and practicing a specific set of skills that will build their self-esteem. For example:

- Train yourself to hear, recognize and question the inner voices of self-doubt and self-hatred that hold you back and undermine your happiness.
- Step outside your comfort zone and do one thing that scares you. Raise your hand and speak up in class. Start a conversation with someone you admire but are afraid to talk to. Try a new sport. Join a new group. Enroll in a class that appeals to you.
- Recognize that everyone experiences rejection throughout their lives and being rejected does not mean there is something inherently wrong with you. Rejection is a natural and inevitable part of life. Allow yourself to embrace rejection and move on.
- Stop saying “yes” when you would rather say “no”. Notice when you find yourself striving to please people by saying what you think they want to hear, instead of what you truly believe. Develop scripts you can use in uncomfortable situations to protect yourself and preserve your integrity. Practice saying what you really mean (diplomatically, of course).

Today, I am grateful to everyone who helped me overcome my self-esteem and self-confidence issues. I am grateful to have a life I love, a family I love, and a career I love. You can too!

Michelle Kelley, LCSW, is a licensed counselor and the owner of Girls Stand Strong in Warrenton. Michelle works with children, teens and adults to help them develop the emotional intelligence, critical thinking skills and the self-confidence they need to succeed in their personal, academic and work lives. For more information about Michelle’s forthcoming seminar, “Preparing Your Teen for College and Beyond,” please visit www.GirlsStandStrong.com or call 703.505.2413



The Heroine’s Journey

To every girl and woman who is feeling fearful, rejected, dejected, disrespected, stuck and unable to get where they want to go in life, I can say from my own experience: There is a heroine inside you who is ready, eager and able to guide you if you will pay attention and follow her.

You don’t have to stay stuck in a job or in relationships where you pretend to be someone other than who you really are inside. It is possible to have a rewarding life with fulfilling work, surrounded by people who love you for who you really are, who value and support your true, authentic self.

Overcoming Low Self-Esteem Will Help You Create a Future You Love

My grandparents’ generation stayed in the same job for life, even if they were unhappy. That way of living is long gone. Today, we are called on to imagine the future we want for ourselves, and then identify the stepping stones to creating the future we want. We must seek out and cultivate the relationships that will bring us joy, knowing that we deserve joy in our lives and that joy is, indeed, possible. It takes a good amount of positive self-esteem to take those steps and make that leap of faith.

Most people are not aware of the unconscious labels and messages that they carry around in their heads. They don’t realize that they are unconsciously stuck in roles that were assigned to them by family and friends when they were young. They mistake their own voice for the negative messages and put-downs they absorbed in their childhood.