

On the Edge

Timely, Thoughtful and Always Candid

Volume 1, Issue 4
March 2006

Being Your Own Best Friend The Importance of Healthy Self-Esteem

Being able and willing to look back at childhood challenges through the eyes of an adult has been a tremendous vehicle for my own personal growth over the past 10 years. In no area has this been truer than the subject of self-esteem. While all kids (teenagers especially) wrestle with the awkwardness of puberty and slowly transitioning to the adult roles they will eventually play, most figure it out without too many permanent scars. But some, it seems to me, handle the process more smoothly than most. They're typically no smarter, athletically inclined or attractive than others. There's just something on the inside that seems to give them an emotional edge in dealing with the feelings of vulnerability and inadequacy that go with being a teen.

Thinking back to my own days at a private, all-boys school in Columbus, Ohio, there were a few kids who always seemed to have a resilience and depth of character that I didn't understand. No matter how average their appearance, how un-athletic their bodies or how average their best academic efforts, they absolutely flourished in a highly competitive high school environment. They formed strong friendships (many still intact today), were involved in a wide range of extra-curricular activities, always seemed happy, and just really enjoyed the high school experience. In contrast, there were also a few kids possessing great physical and/or mental prowess who, for whatever reason, were never quite at peace with themselves. What marked their behavior was hostility in all the traditional forms: bullying, incessant teasing, practical jokes and even physical hazing of their less aggressive peers. No natural advantages or gifts seemed able to satisfy their need for attention and domination over others.

Fast forward 25+ years. The difference between these two groups was likely the result of something they either learned or didn't learn from their parents...the gift of healthy self esteem. And after hundreds of workshops, keynote speeches and coaching assignments, I believe that there is still no greater gift that a person can have than that inner pilot light that enables accomplishment, perspective and happiness. Adults with healthy self-esteem consistently prosper in the areas of their lives that are most important to them. They may not always be the wealthiest or most "successful" by society's standards, but they are consistently the happiest, most balanced and most well-liked people that we know.

So, just what IS this thing called self-esteem? It has two primary ingredients. First, it's the degree that a person has unconditional warmth and acceptance of themselves just the way they are. That's not to say that they're necessarily content to stay that way, just that they feel good about themselves wherever they are in life. The second ingredient is a sense of confidence to tackle whatever the world has in store for them on any given day. (It's important to note that while some people have one or the other of these elements, both are necessary to fully capitalize on the benefits of self-esteem.) Practically speaking, a person with healthy self-esteem can look in the mirror each morning, smile, and say, "*You may not be perfect, but I like who you are today!*"

Building healthy self-esteem takes time, but can be done by consistently following a few guidelines:

- 1. You're a winner just for playing the game of life.** No matter what you've accomplished or failed at in your life until now, that does not make you more or less worthy than anyone else. Look in the mirror and give yourself the biggest, most genuine smile you can muster. You don't need to be perfect...just willing to go out and give it your best shot today.

2. Stop beating yourself up. We all make mistakes. In fact, mistakes are our primary means of learning as we go through life. At any point in any day, we all make decisions and take the actions that we think are best. Sometimes, we later learn, we were wrong. Rather than beating yourself up, take stock in the lessons learned and tell yourself, *"Next time, I'll do differently"*.

3. Hold yourself accountable for everything you do and correct the mistakes that you can. Good or bad, each of us is 100% responsible for the outcomes of our actions. Giving yourself a break for past errors becomes infinitely easier when you simultaneously develop the habit of acknowledging your mistakes and trying to repair any damage as quickly as possible. Failing to do so actually erodes self-esteem.

4. Celebrate your successes and your efforts. Just as we need to be accountable for fixing our mistakes, we should also learn to give ourselves pats on the back...even if just for giving our best effort. As much as we would like to hope that others will recognize our efforts and accomplishments, it doesn't always happen. If you're always waiting for someone else's praise, you unintentionally put your emotional well-being into the hands of others.

5. Compete with your own personal best. At the end of the day, there is nothing more esteeming than knowing you've given 100% of your effort in the areas of your life that are most important to you. Whether it's parenting, professional endeavors or any of the other roles that we play daily, each of us has a unique blend of skills, knowledge, talents and insights to apply to the tasks at hand. Knowing that we've done the most with what we have and that we're trying to improve from the day before is all anyone (including ourselves) can ask of us.

The irony of developing a healthier level of self-esteem is that other people benefit just as much as we do, and in some cases maybe more. Socially, we treat others with greater respect and become more tolerant of others who are different from us. We are also less likely to engage in behaviors that harm people (physically or emotionally). Professionally, we willingly engage ourselves in tasks and projects with uncertain outcomes. But perhaps most importantly, we set lasting examples for the young people in our lives. Whether for our own kids or for those whose paths we cross only on occasion, role modeling the attitudes and behaviors associated with healthy self-esteem passes on a gift far more valuable than anything money could ever buy.

- *Paul Meshanko*

Author's Note: Want more information on self-esteem?

Visit <http://www.self-esteem-nase.org/> or <http://www.more-selfesteem.com/>.

Copyright © 2006. All Rights Reserved.
This newsletter may be reprinted with permission from the author.