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Rethinking Self-Esteem
Why nonprofits should stop pushing self-esteem and start endorsing self-control

By Roy Baumeister

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rethinking Self-Esteem

Why nonprofits should stop pushing self-esteem and start endorsing self-control

by ROY BAUMEISTER

FOR THREE DECADES, I and many other psychologists viewed self-esteem as our profession's Holy Grail: a psychological trait that would soothe most of individuals' and society's woes. We thought that high self-esteem would impart not only success, health, happiness, and prosperity to the people who possessed it, but also stronger marriages, higher employment, and greater educational attainment in the communities that supported it.

Psychologists have not been alone in their faith in self-esteem. Organizations ranging from the Girl Scouts to the Benevolent & Protective Order of Elks, from the Southern Baptist Convention to the Jewish Community Center Association sponsor programs to increase self-esteem. Public initiatives like the California Task Force to Promote Self-Esteem and Personal and Social Responsibility deployed widespread interventions to improve citizens' self-regard.

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From Little League coaches to legislators, many Americans are convinced that success – whether defined as raising good children, sustaining healthy relationships, training successful athletes, curing the ill, reforming criminals, improving economies, clearing pollution, or ending inequality – hinges on self-esteem.

Recently, though, several close analyses of the accumulated research have shaken many psychologists' faith in self-esteem.¹ My colleagues and I were commissioned to conduct one of these studies by the American Psychological Society, an organization devoted to psychological research.² These studies show not only that self-esteem fails to accomplish what we had hoped, but also that it can backfire and contribute to some of the very problems it was thought to thwart. Social sector organizations should therefore reconsider whether they want to dedicate their scarce resources to cultivating self-esteem. In my view, there are other traits, like self-control, that hold much more promise.

I'm OK, You're OK

What is self-esteem? By definition, it is how people evaluate themselves. Its synonyms include self-worth, self-regard, self-con-

fidence, and pride. Note that this definition doesn't imply anything about reality. People with high self-esteem may indeed have accurate perceptions of their many fine qualities. But they may also just be arrogant. Likewise, people with low self-esteem may indeed have neurotic delusions of worthlessness. But they may also just be modest.

At the beginning of the self-esteem movement in the 1970s (and even now), many Americans believed that we suffered from an epidemic of low self-esteem. Were this idea not taken so seriously, it would probably be laughable – try telling people in other countries that one of America's main problems is low self-esteem.

There are now ample data on our population showing that, if anything, Americans tend to overrate and overvalue ourselves.³ In plain terms, the average American thinks he's above average.

Even the categories of people about whom our society is most concerned do not show any broad deficiency in self-esteem. African Americans, for example, routinely score higher on self-esteem measures than do European-Americans.⁴

Coaching Character

Michael Lewis (right) is the best-selling author of "Moneyball." In his recent memoir, "Coach: Lessons From the Game of Life," he recounts a paradox surrounding Coach Fitz, his choleric high school baseball coach: While alumni are fundraising to rename the school's gym after the coach, parents of current students are lobbying to get him fired. Lewis spoke to *SSIR* about how this story reflects a generational change in the meaning of self-esteem:

When I was coming up through high school, there was a fairly widespread belief that self-esteem wasn't given, but acquired. Coach Fitz gave us a mechanism to get self-esteem. He hollered at us. He put us through boot camp. But by the end of it we had learned how to deal with pain and failure, how not to blame our

problems on other people. Coach Fitz made us better than we thought we could be.

Now the belief seems to be that people are born with a fixed quantity of self-esteem, and that the trick is to preserve it. If a coach benches kids, or makes them feel bad, or plays them against better teams, parents worry about chipping away at that fixed quantity. And then they worry that these seemingly bad things in childhood will lead to bad things in adulthood.

But it's all psychobabble. The notion that we can trace all our adult disappointments back to childhood traumas of one sort or another is not total bull, but it's close enough. And it's been swallowed by everybody.

And so parents increasingly micro-manage their children's progress through life, anxious that screw-ups at age 14 might keep their kids out of Harvard. They send their kids to private schools and, in exchange for

their money, expect to control the school.

This is going on at the same time as the phony exaltation of teachers. But if you really want to encourage good people to teach, you have to let them do what they do best without parental interference. You have to stop worrying about decreasing self-esteem.

My life has gone extremely well. But in those moments that did not go so well, Coach Fitz's is the voice I hear. I don't think that anyone could enter my life now who could influence me to that extent. You are so much more pliable when you are at that age. There are people who have that gift of getting inside. When parents block them, it is a terrible waste.

–Alana Conner Snibbe



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Girl Scouts read about self-esteem with Olympic gold medalist Dominique Dawes, the national spokeswoman for uniquely Me! The Girl Scout/Unilever Self-Esteem Program. The program is a response to an alleged nationwide problem of low self-esteem among girls in underprivileged communities. Recent evidence suggests there is no such problem.

And although women have slightly lower self-esteem than men, the difference seems to be mostly due to women's dissatisfaction with their bodies: Men think their bodies are OK, but women think they are fat or otherwise unattractive. Women do not think they are less socially skilled than men, however, or less intelligent, less moral, or less able to succeed. Overall, the differences between men's and women's self-esteem are so small that many do not consider them to be meaningful.⁵

Tales Out of School

The idea that boosting kids' self-esteem will make them do better in school is widely popular. Many schools have programs aimed at developing students' self-esteem. Students are encouraged to make collages and lists that celebrate their wonderfulness. Prizes are given to everyone just for showing up.

These well-intentioned programs are grounded in the earliest studies of self-esteem and academic achievement. Using questionnaires, these studies usually found that people with higher self-esteem had moderately better grades.⁶ Indeed, a review of more than 100 studies with more than 200,000 students as subjects confirmed that there is a positive correlation between self-esteem and school performance.⁷

While these findings fueled the belief that high self-esteem leads to good grades, many scientists were skeptical. Most people who deal with statistics know that just because A and B are correlated does not mean that A causes B. So although a correlation between self-esteem and grades could very well mean that high self-esteem causes good grades, it could also mean that good grades cause high self-esteem. Or it could even mean that some third force – growing up in a good family, say, or living in a privileged neighborhood – causes both high self-esteem and good grades, instead of one causing the other.

To tease out what causes what, social scientists began to study how people's self-esteem and grades change over time. That way they could at least establish which came first: the high self-

esteem or the good grades. One of the first major studies of this type, which is still respected and discussed today, tracked 1,500 10th-graders from all over the country as they moved through high school and beyond.⁸ The study's authors found that students' self-esteem

rose after getting good grades and fell after getting bad grades. In contrast, they did *not* find that people's grades improved after their self-esteem rose, nor did they find that people's grades dropped after their self-esteem fell. In other words, good grades were the horse and self-esteem was the cart, not the other way around. Many other studies with younger children have reached the same conclusion.⁹

If self-esteem is a result, not a cause, of good schoolwork, then enhancing self-esteem is a waste of time in the pursuit of better classroom performance. This is probably why, despite the countless programs aimed at boosting self-esteem in schoolchildren, there is very little published evidence of their effect on grades. One thorough review of all sorts of school-based programs, including Head Start and Upward Bound, concluded that trying to boost self-esteem generally had no discernible effect on academic achievement.¹⁰

And so to do better at math, for example, kids should do math exercises, or develop problem-solving skills, or cultivate better study habits – not repeat to themselves that they are brilliant and talented. Hardly any other countries have self-esteem programs comparable to ours, and if these programs actually could improve academic performance, they would be terrific “secret weapons” to propel American students to the top. Instead, American students score near the bottom in international competitions, while rating their own performances as among the best.

Whom Do You Love?

High self-esteem is also rumored to be necessary for good rela-

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High self-esteemers are more likely to stand up to bullies and to defend self-esteem are also more likely to be bullies themselves.

tionships. In order to love and be loved by others, the conventional wisdom says, you have to love yourself. A lot.

As was the case with academic achievement, the early returns from questionnaire studies on self-esteem and interpersonal skills were very encouraging. People with high self-esteem described themselves as more popular than did people with low self-esteem.¹¹ They also rated themselves as better at making new friends, at communicating about themselves, at providing emotional support, and at resolving interpersonal conflicts, as compared to people with lower self-esteem.¹² In their own eyes, at least, people with high self-esteem are very good at getting along with others.

But if you ask the people who have to live or work with high self-esteemers what they are like, you get a less rosy picture. When a person's roommates, classmates, or teachers rate his or her social skills, their (perhaps more objective) ratings have nothing to do with the person's self-esteem.¹³ People with high and low self-esteem are equally liked and are viewed as having the same amounts of social finesse, with two exceptions: Those with high self-esteem are perceived as taking more initiative in meeting people than are those with low self-esteem; and no one likes people with extremely low self-esteem.

Other experiments further show that when pairs of strangers have a get-acquainted conversation, people with high self-esteem aren't liked or admired more than are people with less self-esteem, and sometimes they are even viewed more negatively. Nevertheless, they think that they have made a better impression on the other person, as compared to people with low self-esteem.¹⁴

And so, overall, self-esteem doesn't make people nice or popular. Instead, people with high self-esteem run a greater risk of thinking "Wow, they really loved me," when others are actually thinking "What a conceited jerk!"

So Good, They're Bad

Does low self-esteem lead to violence? Like many, I had simply accepted this alleged fact. When researching my book on human violence,¹⁵ though, I decided to track down the evidence for it. Many authors repeated the idea that low self-esteem causes aggression and violence, always citing some prior source, but as I followed the trail of footnotes, I found myself turning in circles. There were no laboratory studies. There weren't even the sort of correlational findings that ignited the initial enthusiasm for self-esteem as a silver bullet for poor school performance. In short, there was no proof.

Instead, what I found is that most aggressors have high opinions of themselves.¹⁶ Self-loving brutes run the gamut from playground bullies, to violent gang members, to wife beaters, to warmongering tyrants like Hitler and Saddam Hussein.

In laboratory studies, the most aggressive people are those who score high on a particularly nasty variety of high self-esteem called narcissism. Narcissists believe in their own supe-

riority, feel entitled to special treatment, and crave others' admiration. These findings touched off objections by some in the self-esteem movement (such as Nathaniel Branden) who said narcissism wasn't "real" self-esteem. Instead, these self-esteem advocates argued, narcissists seem egotistical on the surface but are in fact full of inner self-doubt. In other words, they said, narcissism is really a kind of hidden low self-esteem.

Yet many studies of narcissists, including aggressive people, have searched for signs of low self-esteem beneath narcissism's bluster, only to conclude that they have no such core of self-doubt.¹⁷ Narcissists are not self-haters masquerading as self-lovers. Instead, they are not secure enough in their sense of superiority to be indifferent to the opinions of others, and so are constantly seeking to get more confirmation of how great they are. They are secure enough, however, to be cruel to anyone who tries to burst the bubble of their inflated self-worth.

There is also a logical flaw in the argument that violence stems from hidden low self-esteem. Nonhidden low self-esteem doesn't cause aggression.¹⁸ That is, when low self-esteem is not hidden, it is not violent. Why, then, would it turn violent only when hidden? The reason would have to do with the fact of being hidden and with what is hiding it. But that brings us back to the egotistical surface act. So even if it were proven true that violent, narcissistic people are egotistical on the surface (which they are) and full of low self-esteem on the inside (which they are not), the cause of aggression would have to be located in the egotistical surface persona, rather than in the hidden low self-esteem.

Sex, Drugs, and Self-Esteem

Another fond hope of the self-esteem movement was that bolstering kids' self-esteem would keep them from indulging in sex, drugs, and alcohol. Once again, some findings show encouraging correlations – for instance, unwed teenage mothers were less likely than other girls to have high self-esteem.¹⁹ But does that mean that these girls' low self-esteem caused them to become pregnant? Or, more plausibly, did their self-esteem drop as a result of losing their teenage freedom, getting saddled with an infant, and having no spouse to provide help and support?

The more careful studies that track people over time have generally found no relationship between self-esteem and early onset of sexual behavior²⁰ – or a small effect in the opposite direction.²¹ If anything, higher self-esteem in kids leads to earlier sex, possibly because the initiative-taking that comes with high self-esteem leads to earlier dating.

Alcohol and drug use show similar patterns. Either there is no link to self-esteem, or high self-esteem portends more and earlier substance use.²² People with high self-esteem in particular seem to downplay the risks associated with alcohol and drugs, just as they downplay their own risk in sexual activity.²³ With cigarette smoking, again, there are a few weak

the victims of bullying. But initiative has a dark side: People with high



ing high self-esteem to produce across-the-board benefits is unrealistic and quite out of step with the data.

What Self-Esteem Is Good For

Self-esteem does seem to have two good effects. These fall far short of what many psychologists had hoped, but they are not trivial.

The first is happiness. It feels good to think that you are a good person. To be sure, there are no objective measures of happiness, and so a determined skeptic could point out that this finding is just as suspect as the relationship between self-esteem and popularity. There is also the possibility that some third variable, like having a sunny, optimistic temperament (possibly based on genes), predisposes some people toward both high self-esteem and happiness.

Still, high self-esteem both feels good and promotes long-term happiness. This is probably one reason for the enduring popularity of self-esteem programs, despite their failure to deliver substantive benefits: They feel good to all who participate.

The other benefit of high self-esteem is initiative. People with high self-esteem are more likely than others to act on their beliefs and impulses. As noted earlier, they are more likely to start relationships. In groups, they are more likely to speak up, even to criticize the group or question where it is going.²⁶ High self-esteemers are

also more likely to stand up to bullies and to defend the victims of bullying.²⁷

But initiative has a dark side. As also noted earlier, the tendency of young people with high self-esteem to experiment earlier with sex, booze, and drugs probably reflects their initiative. People with high self-esteem are also more likely to be bullies themselves. And so, although self-esteem has its benefits, they sometimes arise at other people's expense.

Control Yourself

As someone who was once on the self-esteem bandwagon but now stands among its critics, I am sometimes asked, "Where should we go from here?"

correlations, but most large studies conclude that smoking does not result from either high or low self-esteem.²⁴

The Buffer Hypothesis

A final hypothesis about high self-esteem is that self-esteem is a buffer against stress. When bad things happen, this line of thinking goes, people with high self-esteem can draw on their inner sense of power, worth, and capability, whereas people without these inner resources are more likely to fall to pieces.

My review of the research shows that the buffer hypothesis is right sometimes and wrong plenty of other times, depending on a complex array of factors.²⁵ As a result, expect-

Ultimately, the difference between self-esteem and self-control is one of just opinion, and raising self-esteem often entails embracing

I first say don't give up on psychology just because we were wrong about self-esteem. The quality of research and the mountains of data are both much higher now than they were when the self-esteem movement started. The fact that psychologists have now learned better should be taken as a positive sign. Most of us resonate with economist John Maynard Keynes' response to a listener who was angry with him for changing his views: "When the facts change, I change my opinions. What do you do, sir?"

To me, the most promising human strength is self-control. Although the research on self-control is newer, the evidence already looks much better than the case for self-esteem. A 4-year-old child's self-control predicts his school achievement, social skills, and popularity in early adulthood.²⁸ People with lots of self-control have better mental health and make better friends and lovers.²⁹ Bosses with high self-control are rated by their subordinates as fairer and better than bosses with lower scores.³⁰

Conversely, low self-control is a major predictor – some say the single most important cause – of criminality, and the related tendencies to violate norms and break rules.³¹

Moreover, interventions that boost self-control have shown remarkable and sweeping benefits.³² For example, teaching people self-discipline in money management not only improves their cash flow and savings rate, but also leads them to exercise more, to smoke and drink less, and to keep a tidier house. Self-control seems to be a core strength that can be increased to make the person more successful across many domains.

A Familiar Character

Ultimately, the difference between self-esteem and self-control is one of style versus substance, of image versus reality. Self-esteem is just opinion, and raising self-esteem

The Soup of Self-Help

Americans are hooked on self-esteem, as evidenced by the enduring popularity of the "Chicken Soup for the Soul" series. Since the first book's debut in 1993, the 100-plus books in the series have sold more than 100 million copies to an international audience of mostly female fans.

Kim Weiss, director of public relations at "Chicken Soup" publisher HCI, speculates that the books have succeeded because of their ability to make people feel good about themselves. "That's what self-esteem is about," she says. "If you see someone who reminds you of yourself doing something heroic with which you can identify, you will feel good about yourself."

But does all this good feeling translate into tangible, concrete benefits for the person receiving the inspirational message? That's where the warm-and-fuzzy picture just gets fuzzy. Co-creator of the "Chicken Soup" series Jack Canfield is also the founder of both Self-Esteem Seminars

Inc. and the Foundation for Self-Esteem. Although his Web site describes him as "a leading authority in the area of self-esteem and personal development," Canfield himself does not delineate a cause-and-effect relationship between self-esteem and success. "I believe the whole argument about which comes first – self-esteem or achievement – is bogus. Both are important and they both feed each other," he says. "Self-esteem is only one factor among many that affect success and achievement – not the only one," he adds.

Although Canfield is careful not to promise that self-esteem will deliver the moon wrapped in a ribbon, nonprofits may not be getting that nuanced message. Self Esteem Boston Educational Institute Inc. (SEB) is a private nonprofit organization that provides specialized training in self-esteem to substance abusers, victims

of domestic violence, the homeless, and the unemployed. "Our mission is to bring the tools of self-esteem to people," says founder and executive director Marion B. Davis. "When you know these tools, you can have a better and more successful life."

In practice, nonprofits use looser definitions of self-esteem than academic psychologists, which may explain why self-esteem gets more points for success than it actually earns. Canfield himself says the best self-esteem programs don't just offer feel-good support, but also teach participants to take personal responsibility, to monitor and control their behavior, and to set boundaries. Similarly, SEB's curriculum builds life skills alongside self-regard. In both cases, self-esteem in the world includes more than a little of what Baumeister might call self-control.

—Aaron Dalton



style versus substance, of image versus reality. Self-esteem is a more flattering view of an unimproved self.

often entails embracing a more flattering view of an unimproved self.

In contrast, self-control can actually help one become a better person, as opposed to just regarding oneself as a better person. Indeed, self-control sounds a lot like what people used to call character: the ability to live up to goals and ideals, to resist temptations, to honor obligations, and to follow through on difficult tasks or projects. These are good recipes for success in life.

My message isn't entirely new. The Judeo-Christian tradition, which has furnished many of Western civilization's basic values, may not use the exact term "self-control." But core virtues like honesty and trustworthiness require it, and classic vices like lust, gluttony, and wrath reflect failures at self-control.

And what does the Judeo-Christian tradition have to say about self-esteem? Well, pride was one of the seven deadly sins, and showing it was the first sign that Lucifer would turn out to be a bad guy.

My recommendation for nonprofits and policymakers, as well as for parents, teachers, and therapists, is therefore this: Forget about self-esteem, and invest in self-control. □

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