Beginnings of Low Self-esteem

Low Self-Esteem

Low self-esteem is having a generally negative overall opinion of oneself, judging or evaluating oneself negatively, and placing a general negative value on oneself as a person. How do such negative beliefs start?

Negative Early Life Experiences

Often, the beliefs we have about ourselves are conclusions we arrive at based on what has happened early in our lives. This means that our experiences in our childhood, regarding our family, our peers, the society we lived in, the schools we went to, etc, have influenced our thoughts and beliefs about all sorts of things, including ourselves.

If we have arrived at very negative thoughts and beliefs about ourselves, it is likely that we have encountered a variety of negative experiences that might have contributed to this, such as: Punishment, neglect, or abuse

- Difficulty in meeting parents' standards
- Not fitting in at home or at school
- Difficulty in meeting peer group standards

- Being on the receiving end of other people's stress or distress
- Your family's place in society
- An absence of positives

In addition, negative experiences as an adult, such as abuse, prolonged stress or traumas, can also influence our beliefs about ourselves.

Negative Core Beliefs

Why we continue to experience low self-esteem today, even when our current circumstances are different from those of our past, is a result of our negative core beliefs. Negative core beliefs are the conclusions about ourselves we have arrived at when we were children or adolescents, as a result of the negative experiences we have had.

For example, a child who was constantly punished and criticised may come to believe "I am worthless," or "I am bad." These thoughts are what we call negative core beliefs - the firmly held and strongly ingrained evaluations of our worth and value as a person, which often take the form of "I am…" statements (e.g., I am stupid, I am not good enough, etc).

Rules and Assumptions

When we strongly believe these negative core beliefs about ourselves, it is not surprising that we feel very bad about ourselves and experience strong negative emotions. To protect ourselves and ensure we keep on functioning, we begin to develop rules and assumptions for how we live our lives. They aim to guard and defend us from the truth of our negative core beliefs. For example, the person who thinks they are "worthless" may develop rules such as "I must please other people" or "I must not express my needs" and assumptions like "Only if I do things perfectly will people like me."

Unhelpful Behaviour

The result of having these rules and assumptions is that they will guide your behaviour and largely determine what you do on a day-to-day basis. Makes sense, doesn't it? So, depending on your rules and assumptions, you will try very hard to do everything perfectly, do what it takes to please people, never assert your needs, ... and the list can go on.

Dormant Low Self-Esteem

What this means is that on the surface you can feel fairly good about yourself if you are able to meet these rules and live up to the standards you have set for yourself. However, there are disadvantages to following these rules and assumptions.

Firstly, you are putting yourself under a lot of pressure so that you manage your self-esteem and don't feel bad about yourself. Secondly, following your rules and assumptions keeps your negative core beliefs intact because you never challenge or test them.

So your low self-esteem is just lying dormant, waiting to be awakened by the slightest bump in the road. Therefore, changing these negative core beliefs and unhelpful rules, assumptions and behaviours is important in developing more healthy self-esteem.

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