



Chapter 3

SELF-ESTEEM & MENTAL HEALTH

3.1 – The Key to Healthy Self-Esteem



Hey everybody, Tom Thelen here. As a teen, I only understood **part** of the definition of self-esteem. I thought it only meant having self-confidence in our abilities and achievements, and like most teens, I thought I was doing just fine. Looking back on my teen years, I can see it so clearly now... self-esteem was a huge struggle for me. On a subconscious level, I was covering up my insecurities by projecting a larger-than-life, class clown image. On the outside, I was confident and funny, but on the inside, I was full of self-doubt and sometimes even self-hate (although I didn't know it at the time). I could never live up to my unfair expectation of being perfect all the time, so I lived with a constant fear of failure and rejection.

What is Self-Esteem?

Self-esteem is your overall sense of self-worth. It makes us ask questions like, “**Do I have what it takes?**” and “**Will I ever be good-enough?**”¹ Healthy self-esteem gives us the courage to push ourselves and try new skills, because we know even if we fail, we ourselves are not failures. Low self-esteem, on the other hand, is the voice of doubt in the back of our heads holding us back in life.² **The paradox is this: healthy self-esteem is both self-confidence and humility at the same time.** Healthy self-esteem is based on full self-acceptance. It means being confident enough to acknowledge your strengths while remaining humble enough to laugh at some of your weaknesses. The attitude is: *I'm not perfect, and that's okay.* It's part of our essence as human beings: each of us is a work in progress. This is an important lesson I've learned from multiple counselors over the years, and the reality is: I'm still learning it!

When we look at our own shadow (as a metaphor for our self-esteem) we tend to see it one way or the other. Either we see something smaller than we truly are, or we project something larger than real life. Take a look at the shadow metaphor, and notice the similarities between **self-minimizing** and **self-projecting**.

The Shadow Metaphor



Self-Minimizing

Low self-confidence
Defeated perfectionism
“I’m never good enough.”
Critical of myself
Blind to my strengths
= **Low Self-Esteem**

Self-Projecting

High self-confidence
Prideful perfectionism
“I’m the best at everything”
Critical of others
Blind to my weaknesses
= **Low Self-Esteem**

Self-minimizing shows itself in low self-confidence, so it appears to be the opposite of **self-projecting**, which looks like extremely high self-confidence. In reality, **both are expressions of the same thing: low-self-esteem.**³ Did you catch that? Sometimes the loudest, most dominant people can struggle with self-

esteem issues, even without realizing it. Of course, we should never judge anyone or make assumptions based on their outgoing personality. This is merely a reminder that all personality types can struggle with self-esteem, and it's not always so obvious on the outside.

Perfectionism & Failure

The question for you is: how do you see your own shadow? You can find a big clue in how you respond to mistakes and failures. Notice in the metaphor how **self-minimizing** and **self-projecting** are both built on the lie of **perfectionism** – the subconscious belief that our value depends on being perfect... all the time... in all areas of life. Since perfection can never be fully achieved, it creates internal stress and doubt about our own self-worth. Perfectionism is always just out of reach, like a carrot on a string, and when we fail to grab hold of it, we end up feeling like failures and imposters. Rather than accept our mistakes, we're forced to hide from them or shift the blame to others.

Finding true self-esteem means rejecting the lie of perfectionism, lowering our pride, and accepting our inevitable mistakes and weaknesses. When we no longer have to be perfect, it gives us a sense of lightheartedness and an attitude of grace for ourselves and for the people around us. We don't have to take everything so seriously because we know no one is perfect, everyone farts in class from time to time, everyone poops, it always stinks, and all of this... is just part of life.

What about you? It's easy to talk about self-esteem as a general topic – something a lot of **other people** deal with, but it's difficult to talk about our own struggles. As humans, we are naturally afraid to expose our deepest questions, fears, and vulnerabilities. Sometimes we don't want to know the answers. Discovering the truth is scary, but it's also a tremendously worthwhile pursuit that brings clarity and self-acceptance. In this chapter, I'm challenging you to think deeply and ask tough questions about your own life, because the truth is: we all struggle with self-esteem to varying degrees throughout life, and talking about our struggles is a huge step toward mental health.

3.1. Discussion Questions

1. What do you think it means to have a healthy level of self-esteem?
2. Is it possible to have high self-confidence and low self-esteem at the same time? Why or why not?
3. Describe the meaning of the shadow metaphor.
4. In this section, Tom indicated how healthy self-esteem helps us not take everything so seriously. What do you think he meant by that?

5. What can you do to have more grace and understanding for yourself and for the people around you?
6. In the space below, write down one strength you're proud of and one weakness you want to work on in your life.



3.2 – Self-Esteem Triggers and Tools



What's up, guys! It's Dr. Kirleen again. I have been a licensed mental health professional for over 20 years. In that time, I've helped people tackle things like divorce, death, depression, anxiety, and more. But you might be surprised to know the number one issue I see children, teens, and adults struggle with is low self-esteem. Your view of yourself can change the trajectory of your life.¹

If you're thinking, "It's too late for me" because your self-esteem has been low for a long time, I want you to refuse to give up on yourself. I'm living proof that self-esteem can change. As I shared earlier in the book, I struggled with self-esteem issues as a teen, but with tools and support, my self-esteem is now healthy. Of course, no one is perfect, and sometimes I still struggle, but now I know how to get out of my head and put negative thoughts to rest. So, today I'd like to help you learn how to use some of the same tools that I've seen work in real life for both teens and adults.

Self-Esteem 101

As Tom described, self-esteem is your overall evaluation of yourself, and many times, that self-evaluation gets distorted by perfectionism. If you have low self-esteem, it can lead to allowing people to treat you like a doormat. You may struggle to set boundaries, leading to toxic relationships. The good news is: when you learn how to value yourself, you gravitate towards people who value you, too!

It's crucial to understand self-esteem can fluctuate in different areas of your life. For instance, you may feel super confident about your academics or sports but struggle with how you look physically. You shouldn't look at self-esteem as good or bad, but instead, use words like "healthy" or "unhealthy," and realize you can sometimes have both at the same time.

Envision an apple. A healthy apple may have some bumps or bruises on it, but when you bite into it, it's still delicious. It's still going to give you great nutrition. Self-esteem is the same way. A person with healthy self-esteem is someone who

can celebrate their strengths and recognize areas that need improvement. They don't chase perfection, and they know it's okay to show up as 100% themselves.

As a counselor, I know it's common for people to beat themselves up for struggling with self-esteem. Go easy on yourself! Our brains are hardwired to focus on the negative. This is called **negative bias**, and it causes us to put more energy towards the negatives we find in ourselves instead of the positives.³ This is a protection mechanism that has allowed humans to survive for centuries.

4 Triggers for Low Self-Esteem

Self-esteem can fluctuate in different areas of our life. One day you're feeling great in a specific area, and the next day, the little voice in the back of your head is tearing you down again. Let's talk about the most common triggers for low self-esteem I've found in my 20 years of experience.

1. **Jealousy and self-comparison** always have the potential to make us second-guess our worth. When we start looking at our neighbors and comparing their success with our own, our self-esteem becomes triggered.
2. **Staying in toxic relationships** where we aren't valued is a massive knock to your self-esteem. If you surround yourself with toxic people who don't see your value, it will be harder for you to see your own self-worth. If you want to heal from something, you have to separate yourself from the thing that makes you feel bad.
3. **Fear of not being enough.** Having a fear of not being smart enough, pretty enough, fit enough, or enough, in general, can trigger lasting feelings of low self-esteem.
4. **Holding on to past hurts.** When we hold on to anger and resentment from wounds in our past, it prevents us from fully loving life and being our best selves. If you're stewing in the pain of the past, you'll also find yourself struggling with self-esteem.

When you recognize something, you can change it. So, ask yourself which of the four self-esteem triggers (jealousy, toxic relationships, fear, or past hurts) you relate to most. Getting honest and comfortable with your triggers puts you on the right track to doing something about it.

4 Tools for Healthy Self-Esteem

Self-esteem is a skill you can build with practice. The more you recognize your triggers, the easier it is to shift the narrative and bring yourself back into the healthy zone of self-esteem. There are several steps you can take to work towards moving your self-esteem into the healthy zone.

1. **Be self-aware.** Self-awareness is the ability to see yourself clearly and objectively through reflection and introspection. Ask yourself a power question. Ask, “How am I feeling at this moment?” Practice being self-aware every day, and you will hone this skill.
2. **Take a non-judgmental perspective** on the thought you’re having. Stop giving your thoughts so much power. Your thoughts do not define you. If you’re feeling jealous, insecure, or scared, take a look at the thoughts and know that thought isn’t necessarily true. This will stop you from spiraling into a cycle of shame.
3. **Replace negative thoughts** with neutral thoughts. Neutral thinking emphasizes judgment-free thinking, especially in crises and pressure situations. It’s a realistic perspective on the situation that leaves room for all possibilities. Neutral thinking allows you to be honest about what you feel but leaves room for you to move forward.
4. **Example Negative Thought:** I failed my math test. I’m horrible at math and will probably fail this class.
5. **Example Neutral Thought:** I definitely bombed that math test, but I’ve done fairly well on other math tests, so I’ll keep trying.
6. **Be intentional about remembering your wins.** Remember all the things you have accomplished, and that makes you proud. Give yourself evidence to support your value and worth.

When you find yourself struggling with self-esteem (as we all do sometimes), I want you to come back to this chapter, so you can identify your triggers and use the tools for healthy self-esteem. Everything takes time and practice, but with consistency, you can knock the self-esteem monster out of your life.

3.2 – Discussion Questions

1. Which of the Four Triggers of Low Self-Esteem has the biggest effect on you, and why?
2. What is one negative thought you’ve had about yourself in the past? What are some ways you can replace that negative thought with a neutral thought?
3. Which of the 4 Steps to healthy Self-Esteem do you need to work on the most in your life, and why?



3.3 – You’ve Always Been Good Enough



Hey everyone, it’s Dr. Kirleen, here with more insights on self-esteem. We’ve all experienced the feeling of being “not enough”... not being smart enough, pretty enough, tall enough, or good enough in some way. Feeling like you’re not enough is as common as the sky is blue. As a therapist, I’ve helped doctors, lawyers, politicians, engineers, and other really smart people get out of their head and disrupt the “not enough” feeling. And I’m not immune – as a teenager, I was the poster child for feeling not good enough. From hating my kinky, curly hair to thinking I had the worst acne to feeling like everyone else was smarter, I constantly questioned my value and worth. I didn’t know as a teen that most of my peers were struggling with the same types of feelings.

In this section, I’m excited to share with you three key lessons for overcoming the “never good enough” feeling. I’m not promising that feeling will go away forever, but I can tell you it can and will get a whole lot better as work on it over time.

Lesson #1 – Don’t Buy the Lie

If you believe you’re “not enough” just the way you are, you will constantly try to fill the hole or compensate for the false sense of inadequacy. The thought that you are inadequate can feel so real, but your emotions are a poor indicator of what is real or not. This is because emotions are actually “outcomes” of what we think or perceive of a situation rather than something that determines how we think.

Psychologists have identified a behavior that explains why we buy the lie of not being enough. The term is called **emotional reasoning**. In short, emotional reasoning is the act of thinking something must be true simply because it “feels” true.⁴ When you engage in emotional reasoning, you are tricked by weak logic, or you accidentally ignore any evidence contrary to your perspective. For instance, if you believe you’re not smart enough, despite the fact you pass all your classes with A’s and B’s and have been told by teachers and parents how smart you are, then your inaccurate belief is based on emotional reasoning.

Lesson #2 – Control the Inner Critic

We all have one — an inner voice that expresses disapproval, criticism, or frustration about ourselves. It might sound like, “You’re stupid,” “You’re a

failure,” “What’s wrong with you?” or “Why can’t you get it together?” Many of us don’t even realize its presence because the critic’s voice is different for each of us. The bottom line is that the inner critic sabotages your self-worth.

Awareness is the first step to controlling the inner critic. Catch yourself the next time you say something negative, critical, or ugly about yourself or about someone else. Identify how the situation triggered your inner critic. Ask yourself, “What are my honest feelings about this situation?” Allow yourself space to dig deep and find your most authentic feelings about what happened, how you feel, and why you feel that way.

Your next step is to dispute the critic. You can do this by pulling from evidence in your life that tells a different story. For example, if your inner critic says, “No one likes you,” you can remind yourself that you have family, friends, teachers, or coaches who think you’re great and enjoy spending time with you.

Lesson #3 – Do it Anyway

You get one life to do the things that light you up. Don’t let the “not good enough” feeling get in your way. Even if you’re scared or unsure of how things will work out, I want you to go for your dreams and never look back. This means you should try out for the team, ask the girl out, apply for the college of your dreams, or anything else that lights you up. Just do it! I’m not saying everything will work out correctly, but what I can tell you is that in the long run, you won’t regret trying.

Anxiety & Overthinking

We’ve all been lost in thought at some point, but overthinking can go farther than that. Overthinking happens when one anxious thought or fear turns into another, and then another... until you’ve fallen down a rabbit hole in your mind. Sometimes, overthinking can lead to physical symptoms of anxiety, like increased heart rate, increased stress, and rising body temperature.⁵

If you find yourself overthinking or worrying about something, and you notice your thoughts spiraling out of control, you can break the cycle. To conquer your anxiety, you have to slow down the tendency to overthink simple situations. Practice mindfulness by bringing your attention back to the present moment. If you’re in class, bring your attention back to your body at the desk, the sound of the classroom, or your work. If you’re in the car, bring your attention back to the view out the windshield, the feeling of the AC, or the sound of the radio. If you’re at home, go outside or find a quiet place indoors to just breathe and be fully present in the moment.

You Are Good Enough

Remember: you're not alone. Everyone (including the people you least expect) will occasionally get stuck overthinking or feeling like they're not good enough. If you use the lessons we shared in this chapter, you can learn how to shut down the lie of perfection and the voice of the inner critic. You can do this by getting comfortable being uncomfortable and facing your fears head-on. Also, don't forget that seeking help from a licensed mental health professional can help you shift any negative beliefs and direct your thoughts to a healthier sense of self-esteem.

3.3 Discussion Questions

1. In Lesson # 1, Dr. Kirleen described the process of emotional reasoning. How can emotional reasoning affect the way we see a situation?
2. In what areas of your life have you ever felt not good enough? Is that voice coming from your inner critic or from some other person in your life?
3. When you're feeling anxious or overthinking everything, which of the three lessons (don't buy the lie, control the inner critic, and do it anyway) seems like a good first step for you, and why?
4. If you're struggling with self-esteem issues, remember you can always talk with a trusted adult or a mental health professional. You're not broken, you're merely a work in progress, just like everyone else.

Chapter 3 References

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