



Part 1: The Vicious Cycle of Low Self-Esteem

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THE ORIGINS OF LOW SELF-ESTEEM

In order for low self-esteem to exist there has to be a set negative beliefs that sustain and hold it in place. Those negative beliefs are the undeniable truths people hold as fact about themselves. They feel these 'truths' are carved deeply into the hardest of granite, but in actuality they are written in soft, shifting sands. They are no more truths than to say the world is flat or the Earth is the centre of the universe. These negative beliefs may feel like facts - solid, real, and unmovable. In reality they are only opinions. As we all know opinions can be mistaken, inaccurate, biased or completely wrong. Opinions can change based on new information and new experiences.

The ideas you have formed about yourself are based on your unique experiences. If your collection of experiences have been positive then your view of your self will most likely be positive. This is also true if your experiences have been negative. You will tend to have a negative view of your self.

A majority of the conclusions we draw about ourselves were established when we were children trying to make sense of a complex world from a limited and biased perspective of a child's mind. These conclusions have solidified into a beliefs about who we are, our place in the world, what this means or that means and so on.

Over time these beliefs slip into the back of minds and away from our everyday awareness. Though we are oblivious to them they are still in the background grinding away 24/7. All of our thoughts, emotions, behaviour and physical sensations are filtered through our beliefs limiting our perspective of the world. Although establish in childhood, many of those beliefs still persist to the present day.

HOW DOES EXPERIENCE CONTRIBUTE TO LOW SELF-ESTEEM?

My coaching approach is established on the fundamental idea that the beliefs we hold about ourselves are based on the lessons learned from our experiences. We form conclusions about what something means as a way

of trying to make sense of events. Unfortunately, there is the tendency to forget that the conclusions we draw are only opinions. Instead, we start to treat our conclusions as irrefutable facts.

The lessons we learn come from our experiences, stories we've heard, what people have told us, our direct observations, what we read and what we see on TV. They are also formed by the household we grew up in, our friends, or siblings, our parents, our culture and our society. A majority of our strongest beliefs form from the lessons learned quite early in life - our childhood.

Examples:

- failing to meet our parents standards
- experiences of neglect, punishment or abuse
- feeling of being the odd-one out, an outsider or disconnected from the group
- being on the receiving end of other people's anxiety, depression and/or distress.
- belonging to a group that is the focus for prejudice

AN EXAMPLE

One of my clients is a very successful lawyer and works for one of the top firms in Oslo. She had a upper-middle-class upbringing and both of her parents were also lawyers. To the best of their ability they provided her with all that she needed to get the best start in life.

They invested time in her. They helped her with her homework, drove her back and forth to handball, swimming and tennis. They made sure she was never lacking for books, clothes, and toys. She travelled every holiday with them to different parts of the world. They showed their love and caring by meeting all of her practical needs. But that was limit of their affection. They never held her, cuddled or kissed her.

It was only when she saw how affectionate and loving other parents were with their kids that she noticed a gaping emptiness in her life. As a child she would try to hold her father's hand, but he would always find a way to disengage. When she tried to hug her mother she would stiffen and gently

back-off. When she was a little older she would try to breach the subject with her parents, but they always managed to change the topic.

She eventually came to the conclusion that no matter what she did or how she reached out to her parents there was something off-putting about her. Her base line belief, "I am unlovable."

WHAT ARE THE REASON FOR EVENTS THAT HAPPENED AGES AGO STILL INFLUENCE HOW WE OPERATE TODAY?

The conclusions we make about our experiences form the judgements we hold about ourselves. These conclusions form the base-line thinking about who we are and are the pillars that support our low self-esteem. If you want to discover yours find a situation where you have low self-esteem and then complete this sentence: "I am..."

The irrational and distressing ideas that people develop about themselves grow from their experiences they have been exposed to. From their own subjective viewpoint their opinions make perfect sense, given what has happened to them. Objectively, on the other hand, they are opinions. They are not fact. Opinions can change, modify and evolve.

I'd like to me ask you a few questions and please take the time to write down some of your answers:

What names do you call yourself when you are angry and frustrated?

What labels do you give yourself? (e.g. I am... incompetent, fat, lazy, stupid, not worthy, of little value, weak, insignificant etc.)

What messages or labels have stuck to you from your parents, teachers, friends?

What are the conclusions you have made about yourself?

What are your base-line thoughts about who you are and what you are about?

One of the key messages I give to all of my clients is that your base-line beliefs are not something you are born with. They are ways of thinking you have picked up along way as you walked down the path of life. They come from the conclusions you took away from your varied experiences. These

opinions - these meanings - may very well feel like facts - but they are NOT facts.

If the conclusions we reach about ourself is an opinion, then it is important for us to realize that opinions can be formed by misinterpretations, misunderstandings, miscommunication and misinformation. The negative beliefs that sustain your low self-esteem, however well rooted they are in experience, are most likely inaccurate and biased.

Please understand that most of the opinions we have drawn about our selves were formed when we were children - when we lacked the sensibilities and maturity of adulthood. The child that you were did his or her best to make meaning of an event and experience that may have been too complex for a child to comprehend.

COGNITIVE BIASES

Cognitive biases are a result of the brain creating short-cuts to thinking. The problem is that it also creates inflexible, fixed patterns of thought that limit the information to form a more objective and nuanced picture. There are two specific cognitive biases that contribute to sustaining unhealthy thinking to fuel low self-esteem.

CONFIRMATION BIAS

The first is confirmation bias which is the tendency to notice anything that is consistent with the negative ideas you have about yourself. You become adept at identifying anything that supports your beliefs. The insidious thing with cognitive biases is that they function at an unconscious level. It requires no conscious effort. This means if you have negative beliefs about your character, your short comings, your physical appearance, your abilities, your flaws and weaknesses your brain will make them evidently clear to you.

Conversely, any information that counters your negative belief will be ignored by your brain. For example, you'll fail to be aware of the 9 out of 10 people who interested and engaged with your presentation, and only focus on the one individual who doesn't seem interested. This then

confirms your base-line belief that, “I am not of value. I am not interesting. I am a complete failure.”

FIXED MEANING BIAS

Low self-esteem not only twists the perception you have of yourself, but it also distorts the meanings you attach to what you see and experience. Fixed-meaning bias ensures you will tailor the meaning you give to any event (positive, neutral or negative) so it fits with the prevailing view of yourself. If you gave a really good presentation, participants were engaged and you gave excellent answers to questions answer, you would ascribe your success to plain-luck and not to your skill. (i.e. ‘The audience was just being kind’, ‘They were going easy on me’, ‘ They really didn’t find it interesting. They were just pretending’, ‘They probably pitied me’).

...AND AROUND AND AROUND IT GOES...

We all carry the burdensome baggage of negative beliefs. Some carry heavier loads than others. Nonetheless, negative beliefs form the foundation of our low-esteem. Consequently, they filter what information comes into our brains and the cognitive biases function to keep the system in place and functioning.

Since we may have low and negative judgements about ourselves, we will anticipate that events will turn out in a negative way. Since our expectations are loaded with failure more than likely we set up a self-fulfilling prophecy where our efforts will be half-hearted and almost guaranteeing failure. In many cases, no matter how things turn out we are likely to put a negative spin on events.

Then our brains will store memories of what happened from a negative perspective. This in turn will strengthen the negative beliefs we hold making it more likely to predict the worst in the future.

The key take away is that beliefs are just that beliefs. They are the conclusions we make about some event or experience, usually based on limited information, a stressed situation and a biased perspective. Beliefs are not facts, but they can feel like facts.

Cognitive biases insure we see what we want to see in order to support our beliefs. Our thoughts, emotions, physical sensations and behaviour are the results of our twisted and distorted beliefs. The entire apparatus ensures we stick to the low self-esteem regimen.

If we don't wake up to this mechanism of the brain, it will keep chugging on. It will keep the prejudices you have about yourself all fuelled up. It will restrict your life and prevent you from searching out a more expansive, more nuanced, more balanced picture of who you really are.

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