



# Part 2: The Vicious Cycle of Low Self-Esteem

by Jason Birkevold Liem  
Leadership & Communication Coach  
@MINDtalkCoach

Imagine driving down a familiar winding mountain road and knowing when you take the next bend there will be the same old weathered detour sign indicating the need to find an alternative route. For as long as you can remember that same sign has been there. You've never really questioned it until recently. You simply follow it's suggestion and find another path to your destination.

### (Part 1: The Vicious Cycle of Low Self-Esteem)

Instead of the straight shot between point A and point B the road outage means you always have to go out of your way, using a lot of time and energy, to get to where you need to get. But that's OK you tell yourself, although slightly annoyed. "The sign is there for a reason. It's meant to keep drivers safe", you reason to yourself. You think about all the potential life-risking hazards you are avoiding by taking the long safe road. Although, you can't deny the growing irritation with the sign.

On one particular day you cross a mental threshold and bring your car to a stand-still in front of the detour sign. You are kind of fed up with the bloody sign. Why hasn't anybody from the road maintenance department done anything about it? When you think about it, you don't even know what the 'it' is. Is it a rock fall that has covered the road, a bridge that is out, a giant hole in the ground, a massive tree blocking the way?

That day you decide enough is enough. You make the decision to take your chances and ignore the detour sign. You drive cautiously looking for any signs of a road hazard. Nothing. You continue driving expecting something around the next curve in the road, but again nothing. You drive and drive and before you know it you have arrived at point B. Why the detour? Good question. Nobody is really sure. What you do know is that you've saved time and energy. No more worrying. No more concern. No more gnawing anxiety. You feel only relief and freedom.

## **WELCOME TO LOW SELF-ESTEEM**

Welcome to low self-esteem. There are very few people in life that I've met, including myself, that doesn't have low self-esteem in one form or another. The 'supposed' road block is the base-line belief that forms the core of our low-self esteem. The detour sign are the rules we set up in order to prevent us exposing the vulnerabilities of our low self-esteem. The long, round-about routes we take to get to our destination are the precautions we set up in the form of avoidant behaviour to relieve the anxious predictions we have about

the future. The precautions we take in order to prevent our predictions from becoming true and exposing our low self-esteem.

Consider for a moment that our brains are wired to be in a constant state of vigilance searching for dangers that threaten our well-being. As a part of this evolutionary deep-wiring is the brain's tendency to remember the negative more than the positive in order to build a data base of knowledge to avoid future threats to ourselves.

## **THE STATISTICS**

Now consider these statistics. On average 40% of our thought is spent wandering around in our past. Since our brain's harp on the negative a great majority of our past recollections tend to be self-critical in nature. We throw disparaging remarks at our selves for past performances, for indiscretions, for mess-ups, for forgetting things, for silly comments, for how we handled a situation and the list goes on. We get lost in self-critical rumination and we can't seem to let go. Where we don't give a second thought to punishing ourselves relentlessly, but it would give us great pause if we thought about doing the same to someone we cared about. (Self-critical thoughts will be the focus in Part 3 of this series of posts.)

Another 50 % of our head time is spent trying to see through the fog of the future - to predict how situations will play out. Unfortunately, just like the nature of our thoughts regarding the past, the same mechanism of concern and worry tends to dominate our thoughts about the future. Instead of cutting through the fog we get lost in it. Instead of strategizing and objectively planning for the future, most of our time is creating anxious predictions about how how life will unravel and things will fall-apart.

It's estimated only about 10% of our time is focused on the present - on the here and now. Studies have shown when the mind is present it tends to be calm, collected and cognizant. This means the infrastructure that is holding up sustaining low self-esteem is abated, even if it is only temporary.

## **MAKING FUTURE PREDICTIONS**

It is quite natural for us to try to make predictions about how a situation may play out. If we do it from a reflective mindset it helps us to prepare for possible eventualities. It allows us to strategize and plan for possible outcomes and to constructively deal with them. That is provided our mindset

stays open and flexible. This means we stay receptive to new information and are willing to adapt our predictions to variations in circumstances. If we are coming from a mindset that is rooted in low self-esteem it becomes very difficult to make realistic predictions, because the base-line beliefs that form it are treated as cold, hard truths. They are treated as facts rather than the opinions they actually are. Anxiety based predictions become rigid and inflexible, unable to adapt to new information or changing circumstances. It is an all-or-nothing stand point.

Anxious predications are specifically thoughts that have an obsessive focus on how thing will negatively play out in the future. These thoughts may take the form of comments and statements describing worst fears, but they can also take the form of images similar to a photo or a screen-capture. They may also be in the shape a video clip of the of how the future event will go completely side-ways - vivid and vibrant with detail making it extremely convincing to the brain.

Anxious predictions are triggered when there is the hint that our Rules of Protection will collapse meaning our low self-esteem may be exposed. They work in a number of ways.

- 1 There is an exaggerated belief that something terrible will happen.
- 2 There is an exaggerated belief how bad it will turn out.
- 3 There is a great underestimation about the person's ability to deal with the situation.
- 4 There is a gross underestimation about the resources available to deal with the situation.

The major problem with anxious predictions is that they build convoluted precautions with the idea to protect, where in fact they are doing the complete opposite. Instead of helping us they are actually hinder us, because we never actually get the chance to see if they have any validity. Are the precautions we take actually necessary? Is there actually anything to expose? Have we set up the entire idea of who we are based on a misinformed opinion?

For those I've worked with over the years, it is earth-shattering when they come to the realization that what they believed was an impenetrable granite

fortress of factual truth about who they are is actually a house-of-cards based on ill-informed opinion ready to be toppled with the slightest breeze.

## **IDENTIFYING ANXIOUS PREDICTIONS**

Dealing with anxious predictions is a two-step process. First of all we need to wake-up to what situations tend to trigger our anxiety and to be cognisant of the predictions we make about the future. The second step is to be clear as to the precautions we set up in order to it to prevent our predictions from coming true. These precautions are a measure we employ to protect us from breaking the Rules of Protection that protect our low self-esteem.

Of course it makes complete sense for us to take precautions when there is a real danger. When it comes to low self-esteem the precautions we take are usually based on protecting something that is only an illusion.

As we spoke in Part One the entire system of rules and anxious predictions is set up to protect our base-line belief, which in most cases, was set up early in life when we were inexperienced, unaware and unequipped to understand the complexities of the situation we were facing. We tried to make meaning of something we were ill-equipped to make proper sense of.

When one is faced with a genuine threat it makes perfect sense to take steps to prevent it from causing harm. The threats we face tend to be more perceived than actually real, but which can feel very real in the moment. But once we take the action to stand back and take a good look at it we can see them for the illusions they are.

Technically, such precautions are called safety-seeking behaviours precisely, because they are things we do to keep ourselves safe protect ourselves from breaking our rules of protection.

If we want to be more open, flexible, calm and reflected we need to deconstruct our anxious predictions. We need to expose them to reality. Just because we believe something, regardless of the strength of our belief, does not make it true.

These are a few of the questions I ask to my clients in order to move them from a reactive to a reflective mindset and to reveal the fallacy of their predictions.

What is the evidence that support what you're predicting?

What is the evidence against what you're predicting?  
What is another way of seeing this?  
What evidence is there too support this new view?  
Realistically, what is most likely to happen?  
If the worst happens, what could be done about it?  
How have you adapted in the past?

Of course the process of rebuilding self-esteem is more involved than simply asking these questions, but it is a strong step in the right direction. From my experience, helping clients to establish healthy predictions based on objective planning and strategy that is rooted in reality is a necessary tool.

Visit us at [www.MINDtalk.no](http://www.MINDtalk.no)

You can also find our online course to better understanding how to manage your brain at:

<https://www.udemy.com/managing-with-the-brain-in-mind>