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What is Self-Esteem?

Step 1 of building positive self-esteem is to understand what self-esteem means. Your self-esteem is...

how you think and feel about yourself.

These thoughts and feelings can involve:

- your awareness of who you are

- how you think about your characteristics and traits

- how you think about your abilities and skills

- how you think about your strengths and weaknesses

- how you think about the mistakes you make

- what expectations you place on yourself

- your awareness of what you want from life

- whether you accept yourself for who you are or not

- whether you approve or disapprove of yourself for who you are

- whether you are proud or ashamed of who you are

- whether you wish you were different or not

- whether you believe you have to change who you are to meet other people's expectations or not

- how you view yourself in comparison to others

- how you think and feel about what other people say about you

- how much you believe in yourself

- how confident you are in your abilities

- how much you believe in your ability to develop and grow as a person

- how worthy you think you are as a person

- how you value your contribution to the world

- how you think and feel about certain situations based on your thoughts and feelings about yourself.

These thoughts and feelings can vary at different times in our lives or across different parts of our lives. For example, Tansy, aged 17 years, thinks and feels negatively about herself in most aspects of her life and has done so for as far back as she can remember. However, Fiona, aged 10 years, has only just started to think and feel negatively about herself in response to a difficult life experience that she has recently gone through, and Craig, aged 13 years, only thinks and feels negatively about himself in certain situations. We call these our 'trigger situations' and they tend to be social- or task-based situations.

Here are some examples of the kinds of THOUGHTS AND FEELINGS that other young people have about themselves. Some of these thoughts and feelings may sound familiar to you.

'All the girls in my year at school are prettier than me. I feel like such a freak beside them.' (Sandi, 15)

'I wish she was my friend. She's so good at everything! I feel stupid compared to her.' (Tess, 15)

'I'm so useless. I can't get anything right!' (Lucy, 13)

'I don't like myself much. I'm such a failure at everything!' (Vinny, 12)

'I'll never be good enough. I'm always letting my parents down. I wish I wasn't me.' (Carrie, 10)

'Other people might be better than me at maths and science, but that's OK as I'm good at music and art!' (Martin, 14)

'Some people in my class tease me because they're good at sports and I'm not, but I don't care. I don't have to be like them. I'm me and that's OK.' (Beccy, 12)

'I might not get As at school, but I'm proud of myself for who I am. I'm a kind person and that's what counts.' (Heather, 13)

'My best friend Max is a much better person than me. He got picked by a Premiership football club to play for their youth team. I just play for the school B team. I'm pathetic; he's a champion!' (Daniel, 16)

'I'll never get a girlfriend. Who would want to go out with someone like me? I'm a nobody.' (Ricardo, 16)

'I start at a new school soon. But I'll never make any friends as I'm such a loser!' (Tony, 11)

'I have a stutter. I know everyone in my class thinks I'm weird because of it. And they're right – I am weird!' (Molly, 10)

These thoughts and feelings can also impact on how people behave and on their lives in general. Here are the same young people describing how they BEHAVE in response to their thoughts and feelings about their bodies. Again, some of these behaviours and impacts may sound familiar to you.

'I started self-harming as a way to cope with how ugly I feel.' (Sandi, 15)

'I would always put off doing my homework because I knew I wasn't as good as my friend at it. So she started helping me with it, but now I let her do it all for me as it feels easier for me that way.' (Tess, 15)

'Whenever I start anything, I just end up quitting before I've finished as I know I'll just mess up at it anyway.' (Lucy, 13)

'I avoid doing so many things as I know I will only fail at them if I was to try.' (Vinny, 12)

'I work so hard to try and please my parents that I'm tired all the time. I get angry with myself when I don't do well enough.' (Carrie, 10)

'I try my best in maths and science at school but I spend all my spare time on the things I love and know I am good at – music and art!' (Martin, 14)

'I just ignore the people who tease me at school and try my best in sports lessons. But I put more energy into the things that I know I am good at.' (Beccy, 12)

'I work hard and do the best I can at school. I can't ask any more of myself than that.' (Heather, 13)

'I don't try very hard at football practice any more as I know I'll never be good enough to get picked for a Premiership team like my friend.' (Daniel, 16)

'I'm always asking my mum if she thinks someone will fall in love with me one day.' (Ricardo, 16)

'One girl in my class says nasty things about my stutter when the teacher isn't around. I just agree with her and tell her she's right.' (Molly, 10)

'I did everything I could to try and fit in at my old school. I would even do things that I didn't want to do in the hope that they would become my friend. I just couldn't say "no".' (Tony, 11)

Some of these young people have positive self-esteem and some of them have low self-esteem. What determines this is how they THINK, FEEL AND ACT.

think   feel   act
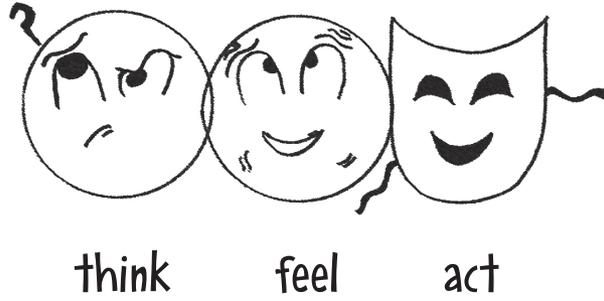
You will learn more about the links between our thoughts, feelings and behaviours and how these links help to determine whether we have positive or low self-esteem as you progress through this workbook, as understanding this is key to building positive self-esteem.

But first you need to assess exactly how you think and feel about yourself at this point in time and what impacts these thoughts and feelings are having on your behaviours and on your life in general. This is Step 2 in building positive self-esteem. There is a questionnaire in the next chapter to help you to do this.