

# Managing low self-esteem: a guide for the foundation year doctor

## Introduction

The word 'esteem' is derived from a Latin word which means 'to estimate'. So, self-esteem is how you estimate yourself. It is only your personal opinion about yourself. Most of the time, we try to estimate ourselves based on our successes or failures, or sometimes comparing ourselves with others.

It is usually thought that self-esteem develops during childhood and is carried on throughout life. The environment in which a child grows, how he/she was treated, whether he/she was simply continuously criticized for any failure or was also admired for the successes all play a part.

## Success or failure?

You should always bear in mind that not everybody is the same and both failures and successes are part of life. A person who does not understand this fact of life often starts suffering from low self-esteem. We all define success and failure in different ways, and sometimes it is based more on other people's opinions than our own. If you are unable to become a rocket scientist, is that a failure? If you suffer a setback on your desired medical career path, is that a failure?

As a foundation doctor, you are surrounded by junior or senior colleagues with different levels of knowledge, experience and competence. You need to have a healthy self-esteem. Learn to accept that someone could be better than you at something in the same way that someone could be worse than you.

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## Time to change

People with low self-esteem are usually unhappy with themselves. Do you wish to carry on with what you thought of yourself in the past? If you read any book on palmistry, it mentions that your future is largely influenced by the lines on the dominant hand, which continuously keep changing. It just means it is entirely in your own hand to change or make your future. You cannot change the past, but you can certainly work hard towards changing the present and the future.

So, if this is a problem for you, it is time to change. A person learns to understand things in life with time and experience and this is an ongoing process. Why do you think what you think of yourself? Use the power you have to change your life by just modifying the way you think, especially about yourself. Understand your potential and have faith in the potential you have to change things in life. It only requires some alterations in the way you think.

How do you change your way of thinking? It is time to rationalize it. Find out the reasons why you think what you think. Sometimes it could be the way you think you look or dress or talk. For instance, if you have to give a presentation in front of an audience, initially you might feel self-conscious about how you look. However, as you try to present good subject matter, your audience may just overlook the external appearance. You would be surprised how sometimes the best-looking person is hated just because of his/her behaviour. At the same time, someone who is considered to be less good-looking could come across as being absolutely adorable just because of the way he/she treats others.

## Celebrate your achievements

Try to keep a diary of your achievements, however small they are; make it an important aspect of your life (Fennell, 1999). It might be simple things, such as how you reassured a patient or treated a patient to the best of your professional capacity. Have pride in what you do.

Every small thing could be a stepping stone for something bigger. Your humble and kind attitude could build up to make you a better doctor. Learn to admire the good qualities in yourself. You might be weak at one thing but excellent at something else.

Have a positive approach. Most of the time, people do not get positive feedback for a job well done. It could be because either most people take good work for granted and do not acknowledge it, or might forget to appreciate it. This does not change the fact that the person is really good at the job. Have faith in what you do and feel proud of your strengths, in the same way as you learn to overcome your weaknesses.

As a human being, you are bound to make errors and there might have been several instances when you have made wrong decisions. Learn from past mistakes and move on. Do not let your negative way of thinking interfere with your progress. It is all in your mind and you just need to change the way you think. People with low self-esteem are very critical about their own selves. Take this habit in your stride and learn to improve.

## Solving the problem

Set small, realistic, constructive goals and work hard to achieve them. Always bear in mind that there are only two options – either you achieve the goal or you do not. Work hard to the best of your capacity and be prepared for the worst. You might come across instances like going for examinations or interviews. If you are not successful, then so what? It is not the end of life. Just modify the goal and look forward to many more opportunities which are waiting.

Even working towards achieving your personal goals can give you a feeling of satisfaction and boost your self-esteem. It can help you to feel capable of doing something. Try and enjoy the process of hard work. Always try to derive some pleasure from working hard and enjoy the sense of achievement, no matter how

small. Do not be discouraged by an unwanted unsuccessful outcome. It is very easy to enter the vicious circle of failure leading to low self-esteem and then similar events going on and on again (Fennell, 1999). Try to break the cycle by eliminating the feeling of being low, and success will be soon on its way.

If you are struggling, you may want to speak to occupational health or your employee assistance scheme. Low self-esteem can be part of mental illness, and you may need to rule it out by seeing your GP. In some areas, you can get cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT) for low self-esteem on the NHS, including group therapy (Hooke, 2006). This may be possible even without a psychiatric diagnosis, and you need to ask your GP.

## Conclusions

If you have a low opinion of yourself, it is in your hands to change it. Keep a diary and celebrate your successes, according to your own definition. Do not let small setbacks get in your way – they happen to the best of us. Seek help if you are in real difficulty. **BJHM**

*Conflict of interest: Dr Hooke has worked in both management and medicine.*

Fennell M (1999) *Overcoming low self-esteem. A self-help guide using cognitive behavioral techniques.* Robinson, London

Hooke R (2006) Low self esteem in GP registrars. *BMJ Career Focus* **332**: 239–40 (careerfocus.bmj.com/cgi/content/full/332/7555/gp239-a)

## KEY POINTS

- Write down positive experiences, no matter how small, and read back through them when you are feeling down.
- Set small realistic goals and take pride in working towards them.
- Only you can influence the way you see and deal with setbacks.
- Try to break the perpetuating vicious circle of low self-esteem.
- Consult your GP or occupational health department if you are in real difficulty.