

INSIGHTS THAT MY CLIENTS HAVE TAUGHT ME

SELF-IMAGE

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“Your son has a low self image,” can be the most feared words that a teacher can tell the parent.

Self Image, Self Worth, Self Esteem are all names for the same concept. What is a self image and how does a child get to have a low self image?

When a child is born, that child does not have a low or high self image (concept). What happens after birth determines how that child feels about him/her self. It is estimated that for most children, 70% of that child’s self image is learned by the time they reach first or second grade, around six or seven years old. From that time on, the person looks for evidence and sets up “tests” to reinforce the self image. “If you loved me. . .”

Teachers can usually tell you which children in their class have poor self images. These children are often identified as “not living up to their abilities,” or “working below their capacities.”

What is a self image? A self image, whether positive or negative, is what a person believes and feels about him/her self. A good way to figure out the elements of a self image is to look at someone (maybe yourself) and ask, “What would I be feeling and thinking if I had a low self image?” Your self image is composed of two parts: What you think about yourself and what you feel.

So, how would you think/feel if you had a **low** self image?

Unloved, Unlovable
Ugly
Dumb
Insecure
Depressed

Worthless
Fat
Angry, frustrated

Violent
Alone
Lonely

Powerless
Left out
Different
Confused
Abused

When a baby is born, do they feel unlovable, powerless, worthless, different, fat, confused, etc.? So where does the child/adult learn these beliefs? If they are not born with these beliefs, then how did they get them? Somebody is teaching them to have a low self image.

How do we teach our children to have a low self image? Most of us have no clue how or when we are teaching our children their self worth.

I have a friend who has two children. The first was very serious and somewhat withdrawn. The second child was happy go lucky and never took anything too seriously. The parents would say, "Jonnie, you are so happy and easy to get along with." What was the first child learning? The more they said it, the more happy the second child became, and the more the first child became what???

In our early years, most of our self image comes from having close intimate relationships with people that love us and in whom we trust.

The second part of your self image consists of having a job, skill or ability that you feel good about and get recognized for. Parents take their children to dance and music classes. In school, the child learns skills in math, language, and sports. Parents and grandparents play a big part in validating these skills during the early years.

When Darren was 7 years old he wanted to take karate. Mom thought that would be a great idea, "We could take it together and be in the same class." Not a good idea. How does a 7 year old compete with his mother and feel good about the skills that he is learning? Finally, the agreement was that Daren would take the karate class and when he had worked up three belts, then mother could start and he could help Mom learn. By doing this, Darren was able to get a good boost to his self image.

As illustrated above, a child's positive self image is the result of two external conditions:

- Having close emotional and supportive relationships with people who value and love the child and treat him/her with respect.
- Having a skill or ability that is recognized and rewarded.

As you get older, you will never lose the need to have these two elements in your life if you are to maintain a positive self image. The problem I often see in adults is a tendency to put all their eggs into one basket. Men tend to put all their energies into working hard, which often translates into long hours at the job and playing hard, hunting, fishing, skiing, bike riding, etc.

Women, on the other hand, tend to put their energies into children, husband, house, etc. If the woman chooses to work outside the home, it is often just a side line to help out the family finances, not a place she expects to get much of her significance and self worth. Women often do not expect to get the majority of their value from their job.

To add to the problem, some women will choose to study to become a secretary instead of studying to get their MBA or they will study to become a nurse, instead of studying to become a doctor. For these women, there is an automatic glass ceiling because they are afraid to make more money or appear to be smarter than he is because it will somehow threaten his manhood.

Since men get the majority of their sense of value and self worth from work and women get theirs from their families, the result is both men and women who put all their eggs in one basket. Then, if something goes wrong, they lose the basket with all their eggs. What is left can be a suicidal and/or homicidal person.

There is one more element to your self image, your expectation of where you "should" be in your career and family. The multimillionaire who loses half of his money in an economic downturn may become suicidal. The mother who loses her children and her husband in a nasty divorce may become suicidal or homicidal. The woman who discovers that she is not able to have children may end up very depressed. If expectations are set too high, then no matter how successful you are, your self image will always be low. The problem is that children with low self images usually grow up to be adults with low self images.

Here is the formula for how you created your self image. For example, perfectionists will always feel like a failure because they can never do it good enough to keep loved ones in their lives.

$$\text{SELF CONCEPT} = \frac{\text{SUCCESS (A + B)}}{\text{EXPECATIONS}}$$

Where: **A** = Emotional Close and Supportive Relationships,
B = Job, skill or ability that you feel good about and get recognized for.

On a scale of one to ten, with ten being the highest, how would you rate yourself as being successful in **A** and **B**?

Did you notice that how high you rated yourself was also your expectation for yourself in **A** and **B**?

What **should** your life look like today? Have you reached the goals you set for yourself? Is your job fulfilling? How **should** people treat you as compared to how people treat you? Is your relationship all that it could be? How is your life living up to your expectations?

In last month's Empowerment Quiz, the questions were about the areas in which you see yourself powerless, which is a measure of self image. The twenty-five questions were nothing more than your expectations of yourself and for those around you! Did you mark true to, "People should make me happy?" If you did mark it true, is it not then one of your expectations of how people should treat you? Each time you answered True to a statement, it was a negative mark against your self image. (The only person who can make you happy is yourself.) As a result of this expectation, you will be disappointed from time to time and not feel loved or important.

The good news is that you do not have to have a low self image. You can change your expectations and beliefs; you can strive to be successful in your relationships by learning communication and problem solving skills and you can learn the knowledge and skills to acquire that job, skill or ability that you feel great about – you can be empowered.

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