

## Commentary

# Self-esteem and its discontents

By Joachim Krueger, PhD

High self-esteem is widely regarded as a desirable quality in children and adolescents, on a par with intelligence, knowledge, achievement or moral goodness. Its attainment and maintenance have become a primary goal for many people. Profitable industries promise improvements in self-esteem, and the public response has been enthusiastic. Who would not want to feel good about themselves? For these reasons, criticism of the concept of self-esteem is seldom welcomed.

Besides its intrinsic appeal, high self-esteem is often honored as the root cause of many desirable behaviors. By the same logic, socially troublesome behaviors are often explained as outcomes of low self-esteem. The California Task Force, established in 1986, conducted an extensive review of relevant research findings. Unexpectedly, the findings failed to demonstrate any causal relevance of self-esteem. Worse still, self-esteem had little value as a statistical predictor of problem behaviors such as child abuse, academic performance, unwanted teenage pregnancy, crime and violence. Nevertheless, the Task Force recommended that money be appropriated to develop methods for raising levels of self-esteem!

In pursuing the prospect of enhancing self-esteem, the Task Force staked its hope on an appealing but improbable pair of ideas. One was that empirical research had overlooked some beneficial effects of high self-esteem. The other was that even if high self-esteem did not produce desirable outcomes, it would not produce undesirable outcomes either. Many research psychologists have since disputed both of these ideas. Rather than denigrating high self-esteem, these critics question its relevance as a source of socially significant behaviors.

Complex social behaviors have many causes. If society's goal is to increase desirable behavior and decrease the prevalence of undesirable behavior, intervention should focus on factors that have been shown to be effective. Giving students incentives to study harder, for example, is more likely to lift their grades than making them feel good about themselves. Educating teenagers about contraception is more likely to reduce the number of unwanted pregnancies than raising global feelings of self-worth. To the extent that there are relationships between self-esteem and behavior, research indicates that self-esteem is the outcome rather

than the cause. High self-esteem follows successful and goal-directed efforts; low self-esteem follows avoidable failures.

Why does the public's fascination with high self-esteem continue despite the sobering research evidence? One reason may lie in the fact that the concept of self-esteem embodies a deeply held cultural value. A society that stresses individualism and the pursuit of happiness sees self-esteeming individuals as being fulfilled or "actualized." The flip side of this coin is that social problems are understood as individual problems, caused by factors within the person and cured by interventions operating on the person. Such individualized values are far from universal. Many cultures emphasize the individual self less than North American culture does. It seems safe to assume that good feelings are universally appreciated. Strikingly, however, few cultures share the notion that one could feel or should feel good *about oneself*. Indeed, if the language does not supply the tools to express this idea, it is doubtful that the idea has much psychological presence. Many Romance and Germanic languages, for example, only permit expressions of reflexive feelings (*je me sens, me siento, ich fühle mich*). This grammatical construction makes a reference to the self, but the self remains the feeling agent and not the felt object. Inasmuch as cultural and linguistic environments shape the representation of behavioral problems and their causes, they guide and constrain the search for remedies.

In the prevalent cultural representation, high self-esteem is unambiguously good. How could raising it be hurtful? Recent findings suggest that high self-esteem can indeed hurt. People with high self-esteem also tend to be narcissistic and self-enhancing. Narcissists are grandiose and feel that the world owes them respect and that they deserve special treatment. Narcissistically inflated self-esteem is defensive and hostile. The trouble is that self-esteem boosters rarely distinguish between benign and antisocial self-esteem. Self-enhancers see themselves in a more favorable light than they see others and describe themselves more favorably than others describe them. In his book *House of Cards*, Robyn Dawes reported that most students believed they would be less likely than the average person to become sick. This "better-than-

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tribute.

Researchers at McLean Hospital found that neglect can take the form of emotional withdrawal from the child, denial of the child's thoughts and feelings, inconsistent treatment of the child and failure to provide protection for the child.

Four predictors of BPD identified in this study are: female gender, sexual abuse by a male non-caretaker, emotional denial by a male caretaker and inconsistent treatment by a female caretaker.

The study used multivariate analysis of 467 inpatients and a more inclusive list of childhood experiences than in previous research in attempting to clarify the role of many pathological childhood experiences in borderline patients. Analysis was based on semistructured interviews that were conducted by people blind to the diagnosis.

Results show consistently high self-reporting of abuse and neglect. Ninety-one percent of the BPD patients said they had been abused and 92 percent said they had been neglected before the age of 18.

## Recommended Reading

ALCOHOL MISUSE: A EUROPEAN PERSPECTIVE — *Timothy J. Peters (Ed.) International Publishers Distributors, 1996, 200 pages, \$68 (hard), \$27 (soft); fax +44-118-956-8211.*

Although not cast as such, this is an excellent handbook, providing reviews of recent data on the causes and consequences of excessive alcohol intake anywhere, not only in Europe. While two of the 12 chapters relate to European issues (Trends in alcohol consumption in Europe and Alcohol-related adverse social consequences within the European Union), the other 10 chapters deal with "universals": Racial/ethnic and gender differences in alcohol use and misuse, alcohol and nutrition, alcohol and the liver, HIV and alcohol abuse, neuropathology and imaging studies, alcohol and the pancreas, etc. The book is full of interesting and edifying information. It would be better for handbook use if there were a full index; for example, there is no way to easily locate all the pages on the liver without looking at each individually-authored chapter and the headings in those chapters.

While the research does not discount the role of sexual abuse in these patients, the authors of the study conclude that sexual abuse "is neither necessary nor sufficient for the development of BPD." Researchers observed that the abuse "seems to be embedded in an atmosphere of general chaos and neglect by both par-

ents" and that sexual abuse is more likely to occur in that type of atmosphere.

"Reported pathological childhood experiences associated with the development of borderline personality disorder," Mary C. Zanarini, EdD, et al., *American Journal of Psychiatry* 154(8):1101-1105, 1997. For reprints, contact Dr. Zanarini, McLean Hospital, 115 Mill St., Belmont, MA 02178.

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average" effect is extremely robust across characteristics, no matter how desirable or controllable they are. Not surprisingly then, a recent classroom exercise at Brown University showed that all students expected to do better than most of their classmates on the midterm exam. Another method of self-enhancement is to overestimate the desirability of one's own traits. People who concede to be selfish, for example, consider selfishness to be less undesirable than people who claim not to be selfish. Again, this bias does not depend

on the social desirability of the trait. Kind people consider kindness to be more desirable than unkind people do. Significantly, individual differences in self-enhancement are related in differences in self-esteem and narcissism. High self-esteemers and narcissists are most likely to overestimate their own accomplishments and overvalue their own traits. These findings question a uniformly positive interpretation of self-esteem. Only further research can answer the question of whether increases in self-esteem can come without the attendant cost of increasing narcissism and self-enhancement.

Understandably, the quest for

high self-esteem will remain a priority for many of those who do not have it. For better or for worse, however, this goal is already realized for most people. Consistent with the self-enhancement motive, an informal survey revealed that most participants not only reported high self-esteem, but also believed that their own self-esteem was higher than that of most other members of the same group. This is not surprising in a culture in which the happy fool is close to becoming the paragon of mental health. ■

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