

## STRATEGIES FOR DEVELOPING SELF-ESTEEM

Self-esteem can be raised through various strategies that apply in many life situations, by risk-taking, removing internal barriers, becoming more assertive, reducing stress, and giving to others. This handout offers strategies on how to develop self-esteem.

### STRATEGY ONE: RISKING

Self-esteem strategies share a common element that is necessary for effectiveness: risk-taking. **Risking** means *the willingness to try a new behavior or thinking style*. To risk implies “to put one self out there.” It means effort and work. Most important, risk-taking significantly improves your chances for higher self-esteem. The risk-esteem connection is crucial. The more willing you are to try new things, the better your chances for success are. The more successes you chalk up, the stronger the foundation for self-esteem becomes. As we have indicated, enhancing your self-esteem greatly depends on competence and success in the areas of life that are important to you. Self-esteem is earned, not given.

The obvious question is: if risk-taking is essential to the development of self-esteem, why not just do it? The answer lies in a four-letter word: fear. As highlighted in the circle model, critical messages and experiences at home, at school, and in the world at large may stifle risk-taking. Fear of being “shot down” stifles initiative. Therefore most people decide, based on the evidence, to incorporate messages like “don’t even try,” “be seen and not heard,” and “it’s not worth it” into their life scripts. This self-talk leads to inaction, stagnation, and a lack of successes on which to build self-esteem.

#### BARRIERS TO RISK-TAKING

A person may avoid risk-taking for the following reasons, among others:

- *Perfectionism*: Attempting to get everything just right all the time or spending so much time perfecting a project that it often doesn’t get done: the risk of imperfection is too great.
- *Maintaining status quo*: Conserving and protecting what self-esteem you do possess by avoiding changes. Risk-taking means if you fail, you may lose even more self-esteem. The status quo is known and safe.
- *Failure*: Having risked and failed, then beating up on oneself for “blowing it,” learning not to try; it hurts too much.
- *Catastrophizing and awfulizing*: Imagining every horrible consequence of action and the negative and critical reactions of others and becoming immobilized by those horrible thoughts.
- *Ignorance*: Not knowing how to develop risk-taking behaviors.

## STRATEGY TWO: TAKING POSTIVE RISKS

Healthy self-esteem is built on overcoming obstacles and moving beyond what is accepted or ordinary. It is built on overcoming your fears, insecurities, worries, and your own self-imposed limitations.

Most risk experts suggest that risk taking is at the heart of all creative endeavors, is responsible for worldly innovations, and has aided many people in their quest for success.

There is an old story about Thomas Edison. He was at a meeting when someone from a crowd yelled, "Mr. Edison, how does it feel to have failed over four hundred times at making the light bulb work?" Mr. Edison stopped, turned, and answered, "My dear sir, I have never failed at my attempts to make the light bulb work. I have successfully identified four hundred ways that it will not work." Risk taking involves this type of fearless, optimistic thinking.

The economy of risk taking grows more each year. From bungee jumping to level-four white-water rafting to skydiving to snake handling, the business of risk taking is huge. Risk taking does not have to involve imminent physical danger or climbing mountains, but it does involve a hefty degree of personal desire to grow, and a belief that you can accept the unknown.

There are several major benefits to risk taking. First, it increases your confidence about what can be done. Second, it can increase your sense of control about your life and help reduce feelings of victimization and helplessness. Next, risk taking decreases your anxieties and fears. It provides practice for, and participation in, decision-making, and finally, risk taking can increase your motivation level. It develops character and courage, extends creativity, boosts confidence, and helps establish a sense of both limitations and possibilities.

While risk taking is a productive, and yes, necessary way to help develop your self-esteem and assist you in moving beyond your comfort zone, it does not have to paralyze you. Risk taking will come in small steps for some and larger steps for others. The most important think about risk taking is that you must want the outcome *from the risk*. Risk taking is a private issue and others' opinions, judgments, and criticisms should not come into play. Risk taking is your decision.

Risk taking is naturally scary, but it is also one of the most important things you can do to move beyond your zone of comfort, reduce your anxieties about the future, and minimize your worries about stagnation. To take risks means that you are working toward growth and renewal.

Some tips on risk taking, large or small:

- Ignore your critics.
- Know and understand yourself and what you want from the risk.
- Be prepared to take the risk and expect the unexpected.
- Use your goal-setting skills to help you along.
- Don't give up or back down at the first sign of trouble or defeat.
- Realize that not all risks pay off immediately.
- Understand that risk taking is an investment in your future.
- Know that risk taking will help you build healthy self-esteem.

## **STRATEGY THREE: HOLDING BACK THE FEARS**

A major part of risk taking involves overcoming your intimate fears. Fear can be crippling. To some it is a motivator; to others it is a devastating de-motivator. It is the “thing” that keeps them from growing and experiencing life.

Fear, however, can be good for us as well. Fear can help keep us safe. It keeps us alert and arouses in us the notion that something is wrong, out of place, or askew. It warns us. However, irrational fear can cause us to become reclusive, stagnant, and steal our very desire to live.

The terms *fear* and *anxiety* are often used interchangeably, but they are different. Fear is an emotion of distress. Anxiety is a state of uneasiness about the future. You can also look at them in the light; fear is when you are afraid and you know what you are afraid of. Anxiety is when you are afraid and you don't know what you are afraid of.

Everyone has felt fear at one point or another. It is a normal human response. To fear is normal. In fact, fears often arise for good reasons: emotional and physical survival. Irrational and paralyzing fear is a warning signal that more than a normal protective mechanism is operating.

## **STRATEGY FOUR: VISUALIZING YOUR SUCCESS**

You are sitting on the bank of a small stream on a checkered blanket. A picnic of breads, cheeses, luscious fruits, a fine bottle of your favorite wine, and the person of your dreams surround you.

You are listening to your favorite music on a small portable CD player. The music only adds to the beauty of intensity of the moment. You lean back on the blanket as the other person gently kisses you on the lips and offers you a sip of wine. You are lightheaded from the moment, the music, the surrounding nature, the sound of the babbling stream, and the touch of another person's hand on the side of your face. You lay back and close your eyes and enjoy this perfect moment in time.

Were you there? Could you see yourself lying next to the stream?

## **EXERCISE TO REDUCE FEAR**

To isolate and examine sources of fearful feelings.

To specify causes and cots of fears, and solutions for overcoming them.

### **INSTRUCTIONS**

Take a moment to dissect an example of fear in your life today. Answer the following questions:

1. Describe an action you are afraid to take. Do not judge yourself for having this fear. Be honest. (Example: "I'm afraid to ask my supervisor at work for time off to take a class.")
2. What are you afraid of in yourself? About the other person or people? (Example: "I'm afraid of how embarrassed and tentative I might sound talking to my supervisor. I'm also afraid she'll think I'm not dedicated if I leave work early three days a week.")
3. What is the worst that could happen if you take this action? (Example; "She'll say no and treat me shabbily. I'll be miserable at work.")
4. What are the chances of that happening? (Example: "About 5 percent.")
5. What is the best that could happen? (Example: "She'll say yes! I'll further my education!")
6. What are the chances of that happening? (Example: "About 75 percent.")
7. What is the reward for your remaining fearful? (Example: "I don't rock the boat. She'll think I'm dedicated.")
8. What is the cost of remaining fearful? (Example: "I don't further my education. I stay stuck. I'll probably kick myself later. I don't want to stay in this job forever!")
9. What are three ways to handle this fear? (Example: "I'll rehearse with my friend before I actually talk to my supervisor. I'll think of ways in which my going to school will benefit my present employer. I'll talk to my friends so I don't stew about it all day.")

Share your answers to these questions with two or three trusted classmates or friends. Brainstorm three more practical ways to overcome fears that your partners can try. Be careful not to sabotage yourself by using "Yes, buts." When you are fearful of making a change, it can be tempting to keep yourself from acting by finding reasons why the new behavior won't work and telling yourself, "Yes, I could do that, but...." Catch yourself using this behavior and make a healthier choice.