

## Self-Esteem

When many of us begin attending Emotions Anonymous (EA) meetings, one of the things we have in common is a lack of self-esteem. We may not even be aware of it because our symptoms (depression, fear, anger, etc.) mask our feelings of inadequacy. We feel we do not measure up to some impossible standard which we ourselves have set.

We are victims of the "shoulds." The problem with the "shoulds" is they become weapons in our war against ourselves:

"I should be able to cope with anything."

"I should never make mistakes."

"I should be the best at whatever I attempt."

"I should have all the answers."

"I should be able to make everyone around me happy."

"I should always say or do the right thing."

When we cannot live up to these impossible expectations, we prove to ourselves, once again, we are worthless and do not deserve happiness.

We may hide behind pills, food, alcohol, money, sex, work, or sleep to avoid the pain of looking at ourselves. We may put on a front so others will not discover the terrible truth of who we really are. This keeps us in a constant state of tension, fearful that others will see through us. We fear they will discover who we are and feel the same loathing for us we feel for ourselves.

As a defense against our own feelings of inadequacy, because we can't accept our own imperfections, we may look for imperfections in others so we can feel in some way superior. Those around us may feel as if they are constantly being judged and found lacking. Our fault-finding can lead to strained relationships.

Our idea of self-acceptance has always been conditional: When I am in control of my emotions, when I make more money, when I lose or gain weight, when this person loves me — only then will I be acceptable. But even if we do succeed in one area, we can always find other areas in our lives where we are lacking.

When we learn we are accepted and understood by others in EA, we can begin to accept ourselves and be honest with ourselves and others for the first time in our lives. We no longer feel different and alone. We learn we are accepted and loved by our Higher Power and others, not when we are perfect, but as we are now. The key to improving our self-esteem is acceptance of ourselves as we are today.

It's a paradox that when we accept ourselves as we are, we become free to grow and change. If we continue to tell ourselves we have no value, we have an excuse for not changing, but when we know we are valuable as we are, we free ourselves to look for the good in ourselves and others and to become the person we always thought we "should"

be. We can take responsibility for ourselves and accept our mistakes as part of being human. We no longer feel the necessity to judge others by the rigid standards we used for ourselves. Our relationships improve.

The EA program tells us we have choices about the things we say to ourselves about ourselves. For years we believed every negative thought regarding our self-esteem. Now we can begin to make amends to ourselves by becoming aware of our value and focusing on our assets. We forgive ourselves for mistakes, make amends if necessary, and give ourselves permission to be imperfect human beings. With the help of our Higher Power and the EA program, we learn to be gentle with ourselves.