

The 'Self-Esteem' Myth

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...The 'self-esteem myth' - [is] the idea that an individual's self-esteem is central to success, happiness, performance, and behaviour. This idea that self-esteem is an essential part of a healthy personality is now virtually institutionalized in American (and Australian) culture. A quick visit to the local bookstore will reveal a myriad of titles loosely arranged under the category 'self help'. The entire educational structure, especially at the elementary level, takes self-esteem as a basic imperative for the educational process...

Now, a team of researchers has taken a closer look at the idea that self-esteem is a crucial factor in personal happiness, achievement, and behaviour. Their research conclusively destroys the self-esteem myth and demonstrates that the nation's obsession with self-esteem was never based on science in the first place.

The researchers, Roy F. Baumeister, Jennifer D. Campbell, Joachim I. Krueger and Kathleen D. Vohs, published their findings in the January 2005 issue of *Scientific American*: *'Boosting people's sense of self-worth has become a national preoccupation. Yet surprisingly, research shows that such efforts are of little value in fostering academic progress or preventing undesirable behaviour'*. This article...should serve as a reminder that the reign of pop psychology has produced social effects that continue to influence the minds and lives of countless Americans (and Australians). Many of the most cherished assumptions of secular psychology run into direct conflict with the Christian worldview. The self-esteem myth is a prime example of how unbiblical thinking can lead to countless problems...

The team aims their sights at the self-esteem movement and, in particular, at the *National Association for Self-Esteem [NASE]*, a group which aims to *'promote awareness of and provide vision,*

leadership and advocacy for improving the human condition through the enhancement of self-esteem'. But, as these researchers counter, 'regrettably, those who have been pursuing self-esteem-boosting programs, including the leaders of NASE, have not shown a desire to examine the new work, which is why the four of us recently came together under the aegis of the American Psychological Society to review the scientific literature'...

These scientists discovered that many of the advocates of self-esteem have no idea what self-esteem is, and have no means of measuring it. It turns out that most of the theorists and investigators who have been dealing with the issue have simply asked persons what they think of themselves. As these researchers argue, *'Naturally enough, the answers are often coloured by the common tendency to want to make oneself look good ... psychologists lack any better method to judge self-esteem, which is worrisome because similar self-ratings of other attributes often prove to be way off'*.

Interestingly, this quartet of scientists reviewed the literature that argues for a correlation between physical attractiveness and self-esteem. As it happens, those who register self-esteem also report themselves to be physically attractive. The complicating factor in all this is that others do not see these individuals in the same way - at least in terms of their physical attractiveness. As these authors explain, *'What seemed at first to be a strong link between physical good looks and high self-esteem turned out to be nothing more than a pattern of consistency in how favourably people rate themselves'...* The researchers argue that both high self-esteem and low self-esteem are rooted in a person's larger worldview and self-concept. Those with low self-esteem... are not merely negative about themselves, they are negative about everything ... While self-esteem advocates have argued that high self-esteem leads to a lowering of social prejudices, these researchers found exactly the opposite: *'people with high self-esteem appear to be more prejudiced'*.

This team also accused self-esteem proponents of confusing correlation and causation. *‘If high self-esteem brings about certain positive outcomes, it may well be worth the effort and expense of trying to instill this feeling. But if the correlations mean simply that a positive self-image is a result of success or good behaviour - which is, after all, at least as plausible - there is little to be gained by raising self-esteem alone’.*

When it comes to academic performance, the evangelists for self-esteem have argued that raising students’ feelings about themselves would lead to greater academic achievement. The team found *‘that ... multiple studies, certainly do not indicate that raising self-esteem offers students much benefit. Some findings even suggest that artificially boosting self-esteem may lower subsequent performance’.* In other words, telling children they are doing well when they are actually doing poorly is a destructive lie that misleads the student and, if anything, leads to even further frustration.

Another claim routinely made by self-esteem advocates is that adolescents are likely to show more sexual restraint and behavioural control if they demonstrate high self-esteem. *‘The results do not support the idea that low self-esteem predisposes young people to more or earlier sexual activity. If anything, those with high self-esteem are less inhibited, more willing to disregard risks and more prone to engage in sex ...* When it comes to alcohol consumption ... some studies have shown that high self-esteem is linked to frequent alcohol consumption. All this suggests that adolescents with high self-esteem may translate much of that confidence into risk-taking behaviour.

An individual’s high self-esteem does seem linked to a personal sense of happiness ... the team raises again the question of correlation versus causation. Does self-esteem produce happiness, or does happiness tend to boost self-esteem?

What about all those self-esteem programs? ... *'We have found little to indicate that indiscriminately promoting self-esteem in today's children or adults, just for being themselves, offers society any compensatory benefits beyond the seductive pleasure it brings to those engaged in the exercise'*...Those pushing the self-esteem agenda hold sway throughout the educational establishment, the psychological community, and the culture at large. An entire industry of self-esteem enhancing seminars, conferences, books, and therapeutic programs means big business and big money. Furthermore, the idea that self-esteem - feeling good about ourselves without reference to reality, achievement, virtue, or behaviour - is a prerequisite to contentment is...seductive and dangerous.

The Christian worldview completely reverses this cycle. The Christian finds satisfaction, not in a sense of self-worth, but in knowing the one true and living God...the gospel makes clear that the Christian's identity is found in Christ - not in the self. As a matter of fact, this is one of the most transformative and liberating realities of the Christian faith.

(*'Apostasy Alert'* - Excerpt from article by R. Albert Mohler, Jr.)



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