How Positive is Your Self-Image?

by KATHY TAYLOR-ROGERS

How we see ourselves is very important and plays a pivotal role in many aspects of our lives. The more positive our self-image is, the more likely we will be to take chances and do those things that may be a little anxiety-provoking, such as applying for a promotion or new job, volunteering to make a presentation or getting to know new people. Unfortunately, a negative self-image prevents us from achieving our true potential.

As human beings we have a natural tendency to critically analyze what we do and question whether we are doing what we are doing well enough. Some degree of critical reflection is normal and healthy. It is when we become overly critical of everything that we do, how we look and how we think that we are perceived by others, that we can experience serious difficulties with our self-esteem. This in turn negatively impacts other facets of our lives. A lot of this type of criticism of ourselves is done on a subconscious level. Sometimes we forget that we have the power to define who we are and then change that definition if we do not like it. Changing self-perception is not an easy task but it is quite possible. Judging ourselves too harshly and then rejecting who we are is very painful and can cause enormous damage to our self-esteem or self-concept. This is where the phrase, "We are our own worst enemy", rings true. This makes it important to raise this type of behavior to a conscious level so that we can analyze it and change it.

The first giant step in changing self-concept is being able to recognize that we have become too critical of ourselves and become willing to learn how to stop our inner voice from overly critical "self-talk". In most cases the critical self-talk for those individuals with a poor self-esteem is very distorted and the criticism does not "fit" the situation. We can use broad "put downs" such as "I'm lazy" or "I'm no good" or "I'm stupid", when we encounter difficulty in one specific aspect of our lives. This is too harsh because we are inferring that we are no good at anything, when in fact we are probably just not as good as we would like to be at one particular thing. Realistically, no one is perfect at everything. In order to overcome this tendency to be overly critical it is important to begin to identify when you are judging yourself too harshly, analyze why this is a distortion and replace this critical "self-talk" with more reasonable labels for the situation. An example might be when you realize you forgot to take the garbage out on garbage day and your critical voice says, "I am so stupid". When you analyze the situation, you recognize that forgetting something does not mean that you are stupid. Maybe you just need to come up with a system the night before garbage day that reminds you to take the garbage out the next morning. This is a simple example, but in most cases we can take any instance of overly critical "self-talk" and analyze it to determine where the distortion is and how it should be changed. Sometimes upon critical reflection we may learn about aspects of our personality or behavior that we can improve upon in order to boost our view of ourselves.

> "Some degree of critical reflection is normal and healthy. It is when we become overly critical of everything that we do, how we look and how we think that we are perceived by others, that we can experience serious difficulties with our self-esteem."

An important step in raising self-esteem is spending time reflecting upon our strengths. Have you ever sat down and done a personal inventory of all of the good qualities that you possess? Most of us do not take the time to reflect upon our strengths and the aspects of our personalities that people admire in us. Often our perceived "negative" qualities or flaws overshadow our many positive qualities that we may possess, such as patience, kindness, generosity, compassion, organizational skills, leadership, positive parenting, good cooking

skills, hardworking, punctual, positive outlook, competent, sociable, creative, independent, funny, good listener, good communicator, good mediator, flexible, entertaining, responsible, neat, dependable. The list is endless but we need to take "time out" to reflect and do an honest assessment of our strengths and all of the wonderful qualities that we offer ourselves and those around us.

We are so busy in our lives that we neglect to spend necessary time critically reflecting on a conscious level to determine whether we need to make personal changes that would enable us to think more positively of ourselves and therefore feel better about whom we are. Critical reflection is a process whereby we consciously stop and take time to critically reflect upon our lives. We take time to identify our assumptions that form the basis for our actions. As a part of this process we need to acknowledge reality and consider whether there are other possibilities for how we could make changes that would enable us to feel better about our life. Critical reflection is all about taking control and acknowledging our strengths and our weaknesses and making conscious decisions regarding changes to self that will in turn improve our self-concept. This is very different from the subconscious, overly critical self-talk that we allow to negatively influence our lives. As professionals we may be very competent but not feel confident. The opposite can also be true and we may feel confident within our professional life but lack confidence within our personal life. It is important to use critical reflection to raise these issues to a conscious level in order to take control and make the changes that are needed in order to raise our confidence both on a personal and professional level.

As teachers we often have a powerfully positive impact on the children that we teach without even recognizing or realizing this impact. Too often we get brought down by the negative challenges that come up during the day and we lose sight of the positive influence that we have daily in the lives of so many. Positive self-esteem is extremely important, as we need to love and accept ourselves before we can recognize the love and positive influence that we can have on others. It is important to take the time to reflect upon the gifts and strengths that we have to offer. Recognizing these gifts will help us to build upon them and strengthen them, which will assist us in feeling better, about who we are.