

Self-Esteem for the Adult Child

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When the melancholic dejectedly desires to be rid of life, of himself, is this not because he will not learn earnestly and rigorously to love himself? When a man surrenders himself to despair because the world or some person has left him faithlessly betrayed, what then is his fault except that he does not love himself the right way.

Soren Kierkegaard in Works of Love.

Professionals know a lot about love addiction. We know less about recovery, but we are learning. What we do know for certain is that recovery (healing from love addiction) is a step by step process. First the love addict must admit that they have a problem and reach out for help; next they must change how they think and behave, as well as their values concerning romantic love—that it is a want not a need.

Once addictive behavior is under control, recovering love addicts must turn inward and heal some of the underlying issues which turned them into love addicts in the first place. Foremost among this is building self-esteem. Love addicts cannot heal without taking this step because low-self esteem robs love addicts of the confidence they need to remain single until the right man comes along. Love addicts with low-esteem are needy and quickly become infatuated. They settle for less than they deserve, and they avoid cutting their losses because without self-esteem they are so lonely. Not to mention haunted by their past.

While I could go on and on about how low self-esteem feeds love addiction, it might be more helpful to elaborate on what high self esteem does for recovering love addicts. It helps them because now they can:

- Stand alone until love is a want, not a need.
- Discover a willingness to grow and change (maturation, self-actualization).
- Make their own needs a priority.
- Look after themselves enough to make life enjoyable.
- Find joy in life.
- Get through the hard times.
- Discover their authentic (true) self.
- Wait for the right person to come along.
- Overcome loneliness.
- Heal the wounds of childhood.
- Develop self-control.
- Love others in a healthy way.
- Experience the joy of solitude.
- Displace depression.

- Reduce anxiety.
- Protect themselves from abusive and manipulative people, e.g. narcissists.
- Want to be creative (what Joseph Campbell calls “follow your bliss”).

Building Self-Esteem

Low self-esteem is the by-product of a difficult childhood. If a child is neglected, abused, or abandoned, they blame themselves even if they are dealing with a problem that is obviously that of the parent. Even something like depression is internalized by the child who takes responsibility for it. I call this (from the child’s perspective) “mom sad; me bad.” Later, children may mature to the point that they can put the blame on the inadequate parent, but by then the damage may already be done. The child is self-alienated, ashamed, or just lacking in the confidence we need to thrive and avoid dependency on other people.

It isn't always easy to measure the relationship between the degree of neglect or abuse, and one's level of self-esteem. Usually, the more you were neglected or abused the less self-esteem you have. However, this is not the only factor that should be considered when trying to measure the impact of neglect and abuse on self-esteem. One should also consider the level of sensitivity each child is born with and any insulation they might have had while growing up.

Because of the causal relationship between self-alienation, shame, low self-esteem and love addiction, I would like to suggest a cognitive behavioral approach to feel better about ourselves.

Steps to Building Up Self-esteem

1. Adopt an *attitude* of self-acceptance or self-love. This means really understanding that you are a worthy person despite your shortcomings. This is a mindset. Then, once you have a general acceptance of your worth as a human being, spend some time focusing on your specific attributes. This enhances your self-worth. Just don't get carried away.
2. Affirmations are an important part of building ourselves up to a level of optimum confidence. I like affirmations like “I’m ok; I am a work in progress; be patient God is not through with me yet. Affirmations that put myself in true perspective—not better than others but certainly as good as.
3. You can’t burn down a house and feel good about yourself. You must earn some of yourself. Consider self-respect from self-discipline, being responsible, honoring your own value system, and handling adversity well.
4. Self-respect, which is a kind of conditional love, does not necessarily contradict the notion that you should love yourself unconditionally. Both concepts are important to maintain self-esteem. You must try to find the balance between loving yourself unconditionally and pushing yourself to do things that will engender self-respect.
5. Pick your friends carefully. You have no choice about your co-workers and family, but friends are a choice, one you did not have as a child.
6. Get to know yourself and then place a high value on who you are.

7. Stop trying to be perfect. No one is perfect.
8. We value what we take care of. So take care of yourself. Discard negative people and unhealthy relationships. (This includes pampering.)
- 9 Do nice things for other people but don't over do it. Altruism builds self-esteem but too much giving is co-dependent.
10. Stop comparing yourself to others. You are special in your own way and this is the attitude you must have about yourself.
11. If you have a monopoly on giving to build a false sense of self-esteem, learn how to receive. For instance, stop dismissing compliments and returning gifts. Let the love come in.
12. Everyone has a gift. Find it and spend time doing it. Then find an audience even if it is just your family.
13. Many love addicts have a hard time standing up for themselves. This has to change. So start setting limits (saying no), expressing your opinion, walking away from neglect or abuse, being assertive when appropriate, and no longer apologizing when you haven't done anything wrong.
14. Prepare yourself mentally for those times when people try to drag you down (people you can't avoid like co-workers). Learn how to keep from taking them so seriously, as well as how to filter out inappropriate criticism.
15. Spiritual-minded people can try seeing themselves as a special child to an omnipotent deity. I know for sure I am a child of God, and "God does not make any junk," as they say in AA.

Low self-esteem goes hand and hand with love addiction as I have tried to explain in the beginning of this article. Therefore it is obvious, in recovery, how important it is to build yourself up and surround yourself with people who validate you.

The most common mistake love addicts make, as well as moving too quickly, is to let their current partner pick up where their abusive and neglectful parents left off. Be diligent. Be thoughtful. Keep working on it. The most genuine and long-lasting form of happiness comes from loving yourself and demanding respect from other or walking away if you don't get it.