

In Kernis, M.H. (Ed.), *Self-Esteem issues and answers: A source book of current perspectives* (pp. 288-296). New York: Psychology Press.

Should people with low self-esteem strive for high self-esteem?

Joanne V. Wood, Danu B. Anthony, and Walter F. Foddis
University of Waterloo

People who have high self-esteem (HSEs) are happier and psychologically healthier than people who have low self-esteem (LSEs; Baumeister, Campbell, Kreuger, & Vohs, 2003), and are more likely to have satisfying and stable relationships (e.g., Leary & MacDonald, 2003). Does this mean that LSEs should strive to have high self-esteem? We suspect that they should not, at least not directly. We propose that certain methods for elevating state self-esteem—those that readily engage self-evaluative processes—can be ineffective or even backfire for LSEs.

Similarly, Kernis (2003) and Crocker and Park (2004) have proposed that striving for high self-esteem is detrimental. They argued that the goal to enhance self-esteem leads to excessive defensiveness and interferes with fundamental needs, ultimately resulting not in “true” high self-esteem, but in contingent or unstable self-esteem. Although these views may well be correct, our focus in this essay is different. We distinguish between “self-evaluative” and “non-self-evaluative” methods, and focus on specific mechanisms by which self-evaluative methods may be ineffective or worse. We also propose that relatively non-self-evaluative methods may benefit state self-esteem.

We warn at the outset that our thinking about this self-evaluative/non-self-evaluative distinction is in a nascent stage. Considerable empirical work is needed to verify the distinction and to examine underlying mechanisms. What we are most confident of at this point is that self-evaluative methods can, under some circumstances, be harmful to state self-esteem. In our lab, surprising results have emerged for two experiences that are widely believed to boost self-esteem: positive self-statements and success events.

Positive Self-Statements Can Backfire

The belief that people benefit from positive self-statements is widely held in North America. It is promoted by the mass media, including television shows (e.g., “Oprah”) and magazines. Bookstore shelves groan under self-help books concerning self-esteem, many of which advocate the daily use of such self-statements as, “I am loving, lovable, and loved” (Sheehan, 1998, p. 40) and “Every day I like myself more” (McQuaig, 1986, p. 55).

Despite the widespread belief that positive self-statements are beneficial, we have found that they can be useless or worse (Wood, Lee, & Perunovic, 2004). For example, in one experiment, we cued participants to repeat the phrase, “I am a lovable person” four times a minute for four

minutes (Wood et al., 2004). Disguised measures of mood suggested that HSE participants felt happier, but LSEs felt worse, relative to participants who did not repeat a phrase. In another experiment, we examined the use of positive self-statements to prepare for stressful situations. We led participants to believe that they would meet with a stranger of the opposite sex, during which time they would be evaluated for their social skills (Lee & Wood, 2004). Results revealed that for people who were insecure in their social skills—and therefore most likely LSE—repeating the phrase, “I feel very confident. People like me and I have good social skills”, triggered negative thoughts about themselves.

In sum, we have evidence that sometimes, when LSEs repeat highly positive self-statements, their moods get worse, not better; their feelings about themselves worsen, rather than improve; and their self-related thoughts become more negative, not positive. Thus, positive self-statements can be harmful for the people who seem to “need” them the most. In contrast, for HSEs, positive self-statements can boost thoughts and feelings about themselves.

Successes Benefit HSEs Much More than LSEs

Perhaps a more effective route to boosting state self-esteem would involve not self-*persuasion* (as from positive self-statements), but an *experience* that would convince LSEs of their self-worth, such as achieving a success. Indeed, it has become well-accepted that LSEs and HSEs both benefit from success (e.g., Brown & Dutton, 1995).

Contrary to this view, we have found that success is experienced differently by LSEs and HSEs (Wood, Heimpel, Newby-Clark, & Ross, 2004). Although success brings pleasure to both groups, it raises LSEs’ anxiety, and, paradoxically, triggers negative self-relevant thoughts. In two experiments, we manipulated success by leading some participants to think they had performed superbly on several tests of “cognitive abilities”. LSEs in the success condition reported more tension and more physical symptoms of anxiety (e.g., trembling) than HSEs, as well as more than LSEs in the no-feedback condition. Our studies also uncovered similar self-esteem differences in anxiety and in self-relevant thoughts for successes in everyday life.

Underlying Motivations and Mechanisms

Why do positive self-statements and successes fail or backfire? We propose that self-evaluative methods arouse inhibiting motivations, heighten self-focused attention, and exacerbate the salience of self-discrepancies from one’s standards.

Arousing Inhibiting Motivations

Positive self-statements and success experiences may arouse motivations in LSEs to self-verify and self-protect. Swann’s self-verification theory proposes that people try to maintain their self-views, because stable self-views afford clarity and predictability (Swann & Schroeder, 1995). Success and positive self-statements may trigger LSEs’ self-verification motives because they contradict LSEs’ doubts about their competence and self-worth (Brown & McGill, 1989; Pinel & Swann, 1996). The second motive, self-protectiveness, was proposed by Baumeister, Tice, and Hutton (1989). Baumeister et al. argued that whereas HSEs aim for self-enhancement, LSEs aim

for self-protection; HSEs strive to feel good about themselves and to be seen favorably by others, whereas LSEs strive instead to avoid revealing their deficiencies. Several empirical studies have supported this portrait of LSEs as self-protective (e.g., Wood, Giordano-Beech, Taylor, Michela, & Gaus, 1994). In the eyes of a self-protective person, a success may provide new opportunities to reveal one's deficiencies. LSEs may fear that their success is fragile and will reverse, or that it will bring higher standards that they cannot achieve (cf. Blaine & Crocker, 1993). After the success of being hired for a new job, for example, LSEs may worry that they cannot meet other people's expectations (Wood et al., 2004).

These two motives—self-verification and self-protection—are likely to fuel the mechanisms we discuss next.

Heightening Self-Focused Attention

Direct, self-evaluative methods of improving self-esteem necessarily involve focusing attention on the self (cf. Crocker & Park, 2004; Leary, in press). Self-focused attention has at least three untoward effects to which LSEs should be especially vulnerable. First, self-focus intensifies one's emotional state (Wood & Dodgson, 1996). Because LSEs are generally more anxious and depressed than HSEs (Leary & Downs, 1995), self-focus should exacerbate these feelings. Second, self-focus may disrupt social functioning (e.g., Reis, Sheldon, Gable, Roscoe, & Ryan, 2000) by decreasing one's ability to empathize with others or to embrace others' support and love.

A third effect of self-focus is that it intensifies attention to one's standards (Carver & Scheier, 1998). Such attention can facilitate adaptive self-regulation, but it also can be painful and counterproductive for LSEs (Wood, Saltzberg, Neale, Stone, & Rachmiel, 1990; Wood & Dodgson, 1996). In particular, we propose that positive self-statements and successes often remind LSEs that they do not measure up to their standards. Because of the centrality of such processes, we discuss them in detail next.

Intensifying Salience of Self-Discrepant Standards

Previous theory and evidence concerning feedback receipt and attitude change leads us to suspect that when LSEs achieve a success or repeat a positive self-statement, they fairly automatically compare this information to their self-conceptions to judge its fit (Eisenstadt & Leippe, 1994; Jussim, Yen, & Aiello, 1995). This process can yield memories and thoughts that confirm or disconfirm the information. For example, after succeeding on a test of "cognitive abilities", LSEs may recall a math test on which they failed. Information about the self also leads people to compare their self-conceptions to their ideal standards (e.g., Aronson, Blanton, & Cooper, 1995). LSEs in particular may readily think of ways in which they fall short of their ideals. Hence, even positive information about the self may serve as a painful reminder of one's "self-discrepancies" (Higgins, 1987).

When LSEs repeat the statement, "I am a lovable person," then, they may say to themselves, "But I know I'm not as lovable as I could be, or as lovable as X..." When a violinist with LSE hears applause for a beautiful solo, she may enjoy it, but soon think of flaws in her performance,

recall occasions when her she did not play well, think of true virtuosos who play far better, or worry that she cannot repeat her fine performance next time.

What Self-Evaluative Methods Fail to Do

Consider also what self-evaluative methods do not do. First, to the extent that people have feelings about themselves that are beyond their awareness (e.g., Jordan, Spencer, & Zanna, 2002), self-evaluative methods such as self-statements are incomplete, because they address only conscious thoughts and feelings. Second, theorists have argued that secure high self-esteem requires meeting the needs of competence, autonomy, and relatedness (Ryan & Deci, 2000), as well as “authenticity”—thinking, feeling, and acting in ways that reflect one's true self (Kernis, 2003; Kernis & Goldman, in press). If so,¹ self-evaluative methods seem to offer little. Following advice to repeat something self-discrepant may undermine one's autonomy, and is unlikely to make one feel competent. Although successes should serve one's competence needs, they may not benefit self-esteem when they are pursued to serve “extrinsic” goals, such as monetary reward or fame (Ryan & Deci, 2000), or when they occur in an “external” domain, such as physical appearance, rather than in an “internal” domain, such as moral virtue (e.g., Crocker & Luhtanen, 2003; Foddis, Wood, & Moore, 2004). Moreover, as we have already suggested, the self-focus engendered by self-evaluative methods may interfere with relatedness needs.

What does boost self-esteem?

If we are correct about the dangers of self-evaluative methods, three strategies may be effective in boosting LSEs' state self-esteem: (1) teaching LSEs to engage in less self-destructive self-evaluation; (2) encouraging LSEs to direct their self-focus to their positive features; and (3) reminding LSEs of valued qualities while bypassing the self-evaluative process.

Training LSEs to engage in more adaptive self-evaluation is the basic goal of cognitive-behavioral therapies for self-esteem (e.g., Warren, McLellarn, & Ponzoha, 1988). Therapists encourage LSEs to replace irrational and harsh self-related thoughts with more realistic, beneficent alternatives. This approach is promising, but more studies are needed that include control groups that rule out such confounds as therapist attention and placebo effects.

The second strategy involves focusing LSEs' self-evaluation on their desirable qualities rather than on their weaknesses. LSEs do have attributes that they value (Anthony, Wood, Holmes, & Cameron, 2004; Pelham, 1991). Listing one's favorable attributes appears to raise state self-esteem (McGuire & McGuire, 1996). One function of friends and partners may be to remind one of one's qualities. Arndt and his colleagues showed that participants' defensiveness can be reduced when they are reminded of people who accept them unconditionally and when others validate their expression of their “true” selves (Arndt, Schimel, Greenberg, & Pyszczynski, 2002; Schimel, Arndt, Pyszczynski, & Greenberg, 2001). Remarkably, Murray, Holmes, and Griffin (1996; 2000) showed that when LSEs are loved by a spouse who sees more virtue in them than they themselves do, their self-esteem increases over a year.

When LSEs focus on their good points, however, danger awaits. As described earlier, even positive feedback can remind LSEs of standards that they are not meeting. The hazards of self-evaluation for LSEs are illustrated in studies that have examined the seemingly benign activity of

listing one's desirable attributes. Although doing so can raise self-esteem (McGuire & McGuire, 1996), it does not under conditions that undermine one's confidence (Briñol & Petty, 2003). For example, when people high in self-doubt recalled examples of their self-confidence, their state self-esteem dropped if they were required to list 12 examples (Hermann, Leonardelli, & Arkin, 2002). Participants apparently inferred from their difficulty in retrieving 12 examples that they did not meet the standard of self-confidence after all.

Similarly, although others' admiration can make one feel good, it may not help to be admired for the wrong reasons. Arndt and his colleagues showed that participants' defensiveness was *not* reduced when they received social approval for their accomplishments, rather than for qualities that reflected their "true" inner selves (Arndt et al., 2002; Schimel et al., 2001). We suspect that for LSEs in particular, admiration for one's accomplishments may suggest that others' love is conditional on their meeting certain standards.

We are suggesting, then, that for LSEs, any self-evaluation—even if focused initially on positive attributes—is hazardous. But how can LSEs ever feel better about themselves without evaluating themselves? It seems that what is required is the third strategy—to subtly remind LSEs of features they like about themselves, without triggering a thorough self-evaluation in that domain, and especially not of their entire selves. Positive moods may fill this bill; they enhance positive thoughts and feelings about the self (e.g., Brown & Mankowski, 1993), yet they inhibit self-focused attention (Green, Sedikides, Saltzberg, Wood, & Fortana, 2003), and can encourage a style of thinking that is not careful or analytical (Isen, 1987).

Steele's "self-affirmation" tasks may operate similarly. When participants simply complete a scale highlighting a value they cherish (e.g., politics, aesthetics), they do not engage in the strategies they normally use to reduce dissonance (e.g., Spencer, Josephs, & Steele, 1993).² Completing such a values scale also diminishes LSEs' defensiveness as they await an evaluative task (Spencer, Fein, & Lomore, 2001). Self-affirmation tasks of this type may heighten self-focus mildly, but they should not lead to self-focus in domains in which people typically self-evaluate, such as achievements or social attractiveness. Rather, completing a scale that concerns one's value may subtly allow people to express an authentic, favorable aspect of themselves (à la Kernis, 2003) without triggering a full-blown self-evaluation.

Conclusion

What distinguishes the methods that elevate state self-esteem from those that are ineffective? Speculation is hazardous, because (a) methods empirically demonstrated to raise self-esteem are scarce, (b) methods may be effective for different reasons, and (c) the effective methods probably differ from the ineffective methods on many dimensions. It is also unclear whether methods effective for raising state self-esteem, even if used frequently, will have a lasting impact on trait self-esteem. However, one feature that the methods that are effective in raising state self-esteem seem to have in common—and a way in which they differ from positive self-statements and success experiences—is that they do not seem likely to automatically instigate self-evaluation processes. Being in a positive mood, engaging in a self-affirmation task (à la Steele), thinking of a person who has accepted oneself unconditionally, and being loved are less likely to trigger self-focused attention or comparisons with one's ideal standards. Hence, these methods

may “fly under the radar”, and thereby avoid stimulating deleterious self-evaluative processes. Research is needed to test these possibilities.

Footnotes

¹We say “if” because although evidence supports these ideas, clear causal connections between either authentic functioning or meeting the three needs and high self-esteem have not been demonstrated. The most convincing evidence comes from within-person studies that show that specific experiences in which people feel competent, autonomous, and connected to others are also experiences in which their self-esteem is heightened (e.g., Reis, Sheldon, Gable, Roscoe, & Ryan, 2000). These studies are correlational, however, so it is not clear that meeting these needs *causes* self-esteem to increase. Perhaps when people feel good about themselves, they can more readily do what is required to satisfy their needs.

²A reduction in defensiveness (such as in the Arndt et al. studies and in many self-affirmation studies) seems to imply a boost in state self-esteem, yet the same manipulations that reduce defensiveness often do not yield changes on dependent measures of self-esteem. However, obtaining such changes on self-report measures may require complicated circumstances (Pyszczynski, Greenberg, Solomon, Arndt, & Schimel, 2004), so we see these methods as promising in their impact on state self-esteem.

References

- Anthony, D. B., Wood, J. V., Holmes, J. G., & Cameron, J. J. (2004). *It's what's inside that counts... Or is it?: Interpersonal self-concept and global self-esteem*. Poster presentation at the 2004 International Association for Relationship Research conference.
- Arndt, J., Schimel, J., Greenberg, J., & Pyszczynski, T. (2002). The intrinsic self and defensiveness: Evidence that activating the intrinsic self reduces self-handicapping and conformity. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 28, 671-683.
- Aronson, J., Blanton, H., & Cooper, J. (1995). From dissonance to disidentification: Selectivity in the self-affirmation process. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 68, 986-996.
- Baumeister, R. F., Campbell, J. D., Krueger, J. I., & Vohs, K. D. (2003). Does high self-esteem cause better performance, interpersonal success, happiness, or healthier lifestyles? *Psychological Science in the Public Interest*, 4, 1-44.
- Baumeister, R. F., Tice, D. M., & Hutton, D. G. (1989). Self-presentational motivations and personality differences in self-esteem. *Journal of Personality*, 57, 547-579.
- Blaine, B., & Crocker, J. (1993). Self-esteem and self serving biases in reactions to positive and negative events: An integrative review. In R. F. Baumeister (Ed.), *Self-esteem: The puzzle of low self-regard* (pp. 55-85). New York: Plenum Press.
- Briñol, P., & Petty, R. E. (2003). Overt head movements and persuasion: A self-validation analysis. *Journal of Personality & Social Psychology*, 84, 1123-1139.
- Brown, J. D., & Dutton, K. A. (1995). The thrill of victory, the complexity of defeat: Self-esteem and people's emotional reactions to success and failure. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 68, 712-722.
- Brown, J. D., & Mankowski, T. A. (1993). Self-esteem, mood, and self-evaluation: Changes in mood and the way you see you. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 64, 421-430.
- Brown, J. D., & McGill, K. L. (1989). The cost of good fortune: When positive life events produce negative health consequences. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 57, 1103-1110.
- Carver, C. F., & Scheier, M. F. (Eds.). (1998). *On the self-regulation of behavior*. New York, US: Cambridge University Press.
- Crocker, J., & Luhtanen, R. K. (2003). Level of self-esteem and contingencies of self-worth: Unique effects on academic, social and financial problems in college students. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 29, 701-712.
- Crocker, J., & Park, L. E. (2004). The costly pursuit of self-esteem. *Psychological Bulletin*, 130, 392-414.

- Eisenstadt, D., & Leippe, M. R. (1994). The self-comparison process and self-discrepant feedback: Consequences of learning you are what you thought you were not. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, *67*, 611-626.
- Foddis, W. F., Wood, J. V., & Moore, K. (2004, May). *How self-esteem and narcissism differ in sources of self-esteem*. Poster presentation at the American Psychological Society 16th Annual Convention, Chicago, Illinois.
- Green, J. D., Sedikides, C., Saltzberg, J. A, Wood, J., & Forzano, L. B. (2003). Happy mood decreases self-focused attention. *British Journal of Social Psychology*, *42*, 147-157.
- Hermann, A. D., Leonardelli, G.J., & Arkin, R.M. (2002). Self-doubt and self-esteem: A threat from within. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, *28*, 395-408.
- Higgins, E. T. (1987). Self-discrepancy: A theory relating self and affect. *Psychological Review*, *94*, 319-340.
- Isen, A. M. (1987). Positive affect, cognitive processes, and social behavior. In L. Berkowitz (Ed.), *Advances in experimental social psychology* (Vol. 20, pp. 203-253). New York: Academic Press.
- Jordan, C. H., Spencer, S. J., & Zanna, M. P. (2002). "I love me... I love me not": Implicit self-esteem, explicit self-esteem, and defensiveness. In S. J. Spencer, S. Fein, M. P. Zanna, & J. M. Olson (Eds.), *Motivated social perception: The Ontario Symposium* (Vol. 9, pp. 117-145). Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum Associates.
- Jussim, L., Yen, H., & Aiello, J. R. (1995). Self-consistency, self-enhancement, and accuracy in reactions to feedback. *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, *31*, 322-356.
- Kernis, M. H. (2003). Toward a conceptualization of optimal self-esteem. *Psychological Inquiry*, *14*, 1-26.
- Kernis, M. H., & Goldman, B. M. (in press). From thought and experience to behavior and interpersonal relationships: A multicomponent conceptualization of authenticity. In Tesser, A., Wood, J. V., & Stapel, D. (Eds.). *The Psychology of Self: On the Edge of Understanding*. Psychological Press.
- Leary, M. R. (in press). *The curse of the self: Self-awareness, egoism, and the quality of human life*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Leary, M. R., & Downs, D. L. (1995). Interpersonal functions of the self-esteem motive: The self-esteem system as a sociometer. In M.H. Kernis (Ed.), *Efficacy, agency, and self-esteem. Plenum series in social/clinical psychology* (pp. 123-144). New York, US: Plenum Press.
- Leary, M., R., & MacDonald, G. (2003). Individual differences in self-esteem: A review and theoretical integration. In M. R. Leary & J. P. Tangney (Eds.), *Handbook of self and identity* (pp. 401-418). New York, US: Guilford Press.

- Lee, J., & Wood, J. V. (2004). [Positive self-statements in evaluative situations]. Unpublished raw data.
- McGuire, W. J., & McGuire, C. V. (1996). Enhancing self-esteem by directed-thinking tasks: Cognitive and affective positivity asymmetries. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, *70*, 1117-1125.
- McQuaig, J. H. (1986). *Like yourself and live*. Toronto: Rexdale, Hunter Carlyle Publishing.
- Murray, S. L., Holmes, J. G., & Griffin, D. W. (2000). Self-esteem and the quest for felt security: How perceived regard regulates attachment processes. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, *78*, 478-498.
- Murray, S. L., Holmes, J. G., & Griffin, D. W. (1996). The self-fulfilling nature of positive illusions in romantic relationships: Love is not blind, but prescient. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, *71*, 1155-1180.
- Pelham, B. W. (1991). On the benefits of misery: Self-serving biases in the depressive self-concept. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, *61*, 670-681.
- Pinel, E. C., & Swann, W. B. (1996). *The cognitive-affective crossfire revisited: Affective reactions to self-discrepant evaluations*. Unpublished manuscript, University of Texas at Austin.
- Pyszczynski, T., Greenberg, J., Solomon, S., Arndt, J., & Schimel, J. (2004). Why do people need self-esteem? A theoretical and empirical review. *Psychological Bulletin*, *130*, 435-468.
- Reis, H. T., Sheldon, K. M., Gable, S. L., Roscoe, J., & Ryan, R. M. (2000). Daily well-being: The role of autonomy, competence, and relatedness. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, *26*, 419-435.
- Ryan, R. M., & Deci, E. L. (2000). Self-determination theory and the facilitation of intrinsic motivation, social development, and well-being. *American Psychologist*, *55*, 68-78.
- Schimel, J., Arndt, J., Pyszczynski, T., & Greenberg, J. (2001). Being accepted for who we are: Evidence that social validation of the intrinsic self reduces general defensiveness. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, *80*, 35-52.
- Sheehan, E. (1998). *Low self-esteem: Your questions answered*. Shaftesbury: Element Books Ltd.
- Spencer, S. J., Fein, S., & Lomore, C. D. (2001). Maintaining one's self-image vis-à-vis others: The role of self-affirmation in the social evaluation of the self. *Motivation and Emotion*, *25*, 41-65.)
- Spencer, S. J., Josephs, R. A., & Steele, C. M. (1993). Low self-esteem: The uphill struggle for self-integrity. In R.F. Baumeister (Ed.), *Self-esteem: The puzzle of low self-regard*. (pp. 21-36). New York: Plenum Press.

- Swann, W. B., & Schroeder, D. G. (1995). The search for beauty and truth: A framework for understanding reactions to evaluations. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, *21*, 1307-1318.
- Warren, R., McLellarn, R.W., Ponzoha, C. (1988). Rational-emotive therapy vs. general cognitive-behavior therapy in the treatment of low self-esteem and related emotional disturbances. *Cognitive Therapy and Research*, *12*, 21-37.
- Wood, J. V., & Dodgson, P.G. (1996). When is self-focused attention an adaptive coping response?: Rumination and overgeneralization versus compensation. In I. G. Sarason, G. R. Pierce, & et al. (Eds.), *Cognitive interference: Theories, methods, and findings* (pp. 231-259). Hillsdale, England: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Wood, J. V., Giordano-Beech, M., Taylor, K. L., Michela, J. L., & Gaus, V. (1994). Strategies of social comparison among people with low self-esteem: Self-protection and self-enhancement. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, *67*, 713-731.
- Wood, J. V., Heimpel, S. A., Newby-Clark, I., & Ross, M. (2004). *Snatching defeat from the jaws of victory: Self-esteem differences in anticipating, remembering, and experiencing success*. Unpublished manuscript, University of Waterloo.
- Wood, J. V., Lee, J., & Perunovic, W. Q. E. (2004). *Positive thinking: Power for some, peril for others*. Unpublished manuscript, University of Waterloo.
- Wood, J. V., Saltzberg, J. A., Neale, J.M, Stone, A. A, & Rachmiel, T. B. (1990). Self-focused attention, coping responses, and distressed mood in everyday life. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, *58*, 1027-1036.