

Low Self-Esteem

So you passed the exam to get into this school (that puts you pretty high in any ranking of intelligence) but somehow, you don't believe it?

Secretly, you think you're an imposter and you're only here because you got lucky on entrance exam day?

Maybe on top of that, you're not one of the 'populars' – making friends always seems a bit of a challenge and you can't see why anyone would like you anyway?

You do your best but inside there's a voice that's constantly telling you that you're 'not good enough' and you never will be?

Maybe you have plenty of friends, you really are one of 'the populars', you seem to do well at more or less everything – but there's still this nagging uncertainty inside – you just don't rate yourself well at all?

Inside your head, there's a voice that's really good at beating you up:

'I'm useless!'

'I never do things right!'

'Other people are better than me!'

'I don't deserve anything good to happen!'

'I'll never be any good.'

This is low self-esteem and it can make you feel really low and depressed and worthless. It can stop you from speaking up for yourself, contributing in class or taking on challenges. It can stop you from taking steps to meet new people or make friends. You can start hiding the 'real you' because you think you're not acceptable – so you put on a front which you think is better in some way.

Obviously, we all have days when things go badly and we want to kick ourselves – the odd day like that isn't a problem. But if you're hearing those miserable voices most or all of the time, that's low self-esteem and it would be good to start to tackle it. It's a real kill-joy.

Many of us have been taught from childhood to be modest, not to show off or boast. Fair enough. Arrogance is deeply unappealing. But if we can't realistically acknowledge the good stuff about ourselves, that's very sad – and can make us feel terrible.

There are lots of reasons why you might have developed low self-esteem – this isn't the place to discuss them. This is the place to consider what you can do about it!

So here goes!

Where do you start?

It can be really useful to try to identify what's the thinking deep down at the bottom of your low self-esteem. You can try doing this on your own or you may need the help of a counsellor or coach. One way of doing it is through an exercise called '**The Downward Arrow**'

Start with a simple sentence about yourself.

Eg. I will never be one of the 'populars' – I'm just not cool enough.

Now ask yourself the question: 'So what? What's so bad about that?'

Let's see how that might go with a boy called Tim:

- I won't have any friends and people will think I'm a loser.
- *So what? What's so bad about that?*
- I will be lonely. I'll just get left on my own.
- *So what? What's so bad about that?*
- If I'm on my own, I'll be miserable.
- *So what? What's so bad about that?*
- If I'm miserable, there's no point in me being here. What's the point of me? Aaagh!

TIM'S BOTTOM LINE

When you get to the point where you think you can't go any lower or you'd end up saying the same thing over and over again, that's your **BOTTOM LINE**.

So in Tim's case, his low self-esteem is linked to a fear about having 'no point'

Tim now knows what he's up against – he's identified his monster!

What next? Well, like most monsters, they're easier to deal with when you can see them properly – and now Tim can.

So now he needs to start beating up the monster instead of beating himself up!

But how?

Tell yourself a different story.

The mind is a great story-teller. Basically, we function on the basis of the stories we believe. For example, we all know what to do with money because our society's story is that a small greenish piece of paper is worth five pounds. That's a modern story. In the past, a five pound note would have had no value – you had to have the actual gold. There are countless ways that our minds function through the stories we believe. Often we call these stories **RULES**. For example, we have a rule that it's wrong to eat people – but it's just a story that we have collectively chosen to believe. In earlier societies, some believed a story about it being fine to eat your enemies.

Tim believes a story that his mind has made up about him having no point. We don't need to know why – we just need to accept that this is a story that he is believing and living by. The crucial thing is that **HE DOESN'T HAVE TO BECAUSE IT'S ONLY A STORY!**

He has a choice – he can carry on living that story – or he can decide to change it!

So what other stories *could* he tell himself?

1. He could choose to believe a story called 'There is a point to Tim' and he could list all the ways that he has point and purpose.
2. He could choose to start creating a new story called 'A New Purpose for Tim' and spend some time deciding what he wants his point to be and what steps he's going to take to achieve it.
3. He could look at some of the stories he's told himself in his Downward Arrow and challenge them. For example, he's told himself a story about not having any friends and being a loser.

Is that a true story? He could look at the evidence – does he *really* have no friends? How many people REALLY think he's a loser?

Realise that beating yourself up is a habit that you can change.

A vital thing to realise about these stories is that the more you think them, the better you get at it! Like any habit, the more you carry it out, the easier it is! Our brains are very plastic – that means they can be changed – and we quite literally build stronger and better neural pathways by thinking things over and over again. So the more Tim thinks 'I am a loser', the easier it will be to think that thought, because that particular neural pathway gets stronger every time it's used. When you have a persistent thought like that, it's important to start letting the neural pathway die by choosing a more helpful story to replace it. It takes time: like any new habit, it will take a while to build it up and you will need to be persistent. So Tim needs to start thinking that as human beings go, he's doing OK!

Deliberately choosing to behave in a different way.

Low self-esteem often affects our behaviour. If the story you keep telling yourself is that you have no friends because you are a loser, how likely are you to go out there and try to make friends? If you get invited to a party, are you less or more likely to speak to new people? What's likely to happen is what we call a **self-fulfilling prophecy**. You predict that you won't make friends so you behave in ways that are unlikely to attract friends and, sure enough, you don't make friends.

It's therefore crucial to start taking tiny steps not only to telling yourself a new story but to acting out a new story – and yes, it *will* feel like a bit of an act at first, until you've created a new habit and are learning to live a new story. You might choose to do something as simple as starting to walk tall, instead of hunched over. There's a great TED talk on the role posture plays in how you come across and how you feel.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TdU2l0i2Wh0>

Use affirmations.

Affirmations are things we choose to say to ourselves to **affirm** what we want to be. It's important that we say them in the present tense – that's what we do when we beat ourselves up, after all!

Instead of saying 'I'm useless', 'I'm pathetic' etc say things that you want to be, like 'I am confident' or 'I am strong' even if you don't feel that way yet. We don't have a problem with beating ourselves up, even though most of the things we say about ourselves are not true, so why would we have a problem with saying things we *want* to be? Our brains are listening and responding all the time. Many top athletes know and use affirmations to the max, to really exploit their potential.

If you want to know more about using affirmations, follow this link:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BxSY0paCaDE>

Identify your Rules and Assumptions for living

As we noted earlier some stories become rules. We have rules about money and rules about eating people, for example. But we all have our own set of rules too, which will have come from our upbringing, families and experience. You may share some with other people but you'll have others that are unique to you. For example, I feel guilty if ever I put a milk bottle on the table. Why? Because my mum's rule was that only 'common' people did that. Respectable people put milk in a milk jug.

That's a trivial example but our rules and assumptions can seriously affect our self-esteem. Supposing there is an assumption in your family that all boys win scholarships to Warwick School. Both your older brothers did – but you didn't. Can you see how your family's assumption might affect your self-esteem?

Or maybe there's an unspoken rule that you must always try your absolute hardest at all times. Sounds reasonable maybe? But supposing you are trying your hardest at playing the cello but you're tone deaf? How might the rule affect you then?

Adapt your rules and assumptions if they're unhelpful

I often think that the most important thing that counselling give us is awareness. Once we are aware of what's going on, we have a chance of doing something about it or making a change. If we are unaware, we have no chance!

So supposing you've identified the assumption about all the boys in your family getting scholarships to Warwick School and you feel terrible because you didn't?

Well, the first thing to note is that it's an unrealistic and unhelpful assumption. However many clever boys are in your family, anyone can do a bad entrance exam! And maybe you're *not* as clever as the other boys in your family – but so what? Cleverness is not the be all and end all! Frankly, I'd rather have a kind friend than a clever friend any day! So tell yourself some different stories! Make up your own rules and assumptions that help you rather than undermine you!

Next, start on some positive self-talk. This is like an expanded version of doing **AFFIRMATIONS**. Start talking to yourself about all the good things about yourself, even though you didn't get a scholarship. It might go something like this:

I may not have got a scholarship but I'm still really good at some of my subjects and I really like being at Warwick because I've got some great friends. I'm good at making friends – I might not be really cool but no one actually dislikes me. I'm not great at Rugby but who wants to be good at something really common – I'm great at Ultimate Frisbee!

You could include some of your new rules and assumptions:

It's more important to be kind than clever so that's what I'll aim to do. I've always assumed that Mum and Dad are making a huge sacrifice by spending their money sending me here, but actually, they never seem to go without anything they really want, so maybe I'll assume it's OK and they're fine with paying my school fees...

And so on....

Take responsibility for your own Self-Esteem and start building it up.

No one can *give* you self-esteem – you have to decide to have it. They can give you praise and encouragement, but if you've got low self-esteem, you can easily ignore all that or say it doesn't count.

Equally, no one can take it from you. They can be rude to you or put you down, but only you can decide whether you're going to be bothered. As Eleanor Roosevelt famously said:

'No one can make you feel inferior without your consent.'

So whatever your circumstances, rules and assumptions, it's up to you to take responsibility for building up your own self-esteem – but that can be a lot easier with someone there supporting you. If you'd like the support of a counsellor, do get in touch. M.harper@warwickschool.org

We have a great little book in the library called 'Self-esteem and Being You' by Anika Naik. I'd especially recommend the last two chapters – don't be put off by the slightly girly look – it's sensible stuff. And here's a good, though challenging video that might help:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lkIR93Cpy3U>

Good luck!!!

"What's your best
discovery? asked
the mole



"That I'm enough as I am"
said the boy

Meg Harper, Head of Counselling

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