“Why Feel Good about Who You Are?”

By Greg Fields, M.S.

What comes to mind when you hear the word “self-esteem” (SE)? Many of us have felt the sting of low self-esteem at some point in life. These struggles are as unique as the individuals who endure them. Others seem to have no problems at all with the way they view themselves. Wherever you may be, it would be helpful to gain a deeper understanding of self-esteem.

SE is the feeling we have about ourselves. You may know it better as a sense of pride. The formal definition is “a favorable appreciation or opinion of oneself”. You can see that the idea itself is basically a positive one, but just as with pride, you can experience extremes of SE. One person’s opinion of herself may be too high or too low. In fact, SE may bounce between these poles over the course of a lifespan.

Self-esteem ebbs and flows throughout our lives. It may surprise you to know that this is normal. For instance, SE goes down during the college years for both the conventional and unconventional student. The new skills, abilities, and capacities you are acquiring can lead to a drop in sense of worth. There is good news to go along with this reality. SE also tends to increase over the course of life until about age 60.

What does this mean for you? If you wonder whether you have anything to contribute, doubt your worth, question your abilities, or feel uncertain about what you have or will achieve, then you should know that you are indeed normal.

You may feel a bit better about the downturns but still want to know how to have a healthy SE. Alfred Adler has a helpful view of the concept of SE. He notes that none of us have everything we need to survive, which means we all have deficits. This means we will always face obstacles.

Our esteem or worth does not grow, in a proper sense, when too much or too little is done to help us overcome the obstacles. Instead, our sense of worth and opinion of the self emerges from an engagement in tasks that are just beyond our abilities. In other words, SE develops through challenge and difficulty.

One final note to make about SE is what it might do for us. Good, healthy SE has a significant impact on a number of areas of life. For instance, it affects how satisfied we are with our job and relationships. It can influence the kind of vocation we enter and how much we make. SE has an effect on the positivity or negativity of our emotions and our health.

When we overcome obstacles, our sense of competence, mastery, and capacity increase. This increase brings about that healthy appreciation or opinion of the self. It evokes a feeling of pride in the best sense of the word, and this feeling can reshape the very life that we live.