

Understanding Self-Image and Confidence

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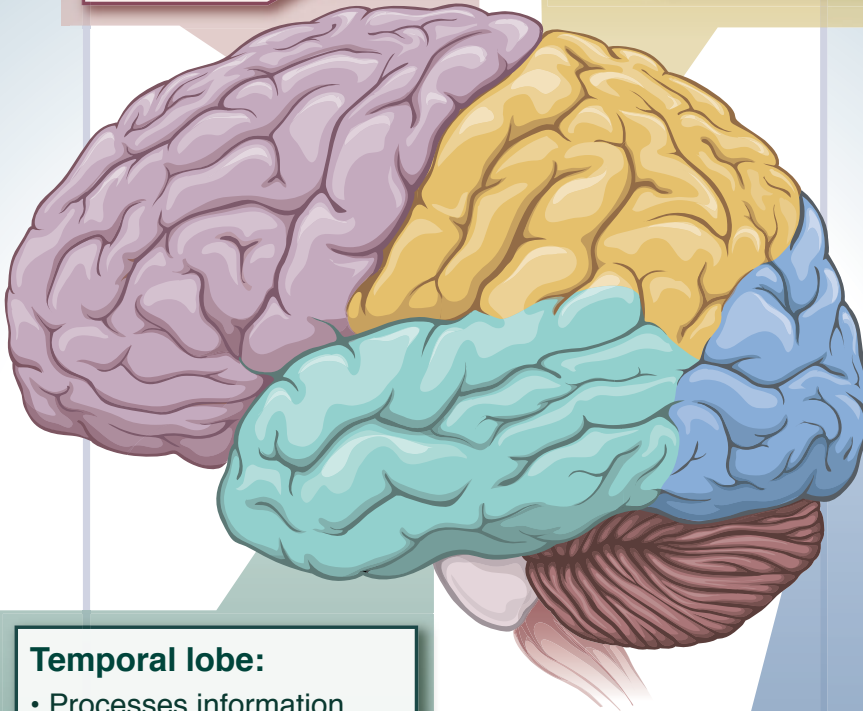
The Human Brain: Thought, Behavior, and Emotion

Frontal lobe controls:

- Thinking
- Planning
- Organizing
- Problem solving
- Short-term memory
- Movement
- Personality
- Emotions
- Behavior
- Language

Parietal lobe:

- Interprets sensory information such as taste, temperature, and touch



Temporal lobe:

- Processes information from the senses of smell, taste, and hearing
- Plays role in memory storage

Occipital lobe:

- Processes images from the eyes
- Links information with images stored in memory

Source: Mayo Foundation for Education and Research, "Slide Show: How Your Brain Works." www.mayoclinic.org.



CHAPTER 2

Positive Self-Image and High Self-Esteem

Is an individual's self-image mostly positive or mostly negative? The answer to that question determines how that person feels about himself or herself in general. The more positive self-image is as a whole, the higher self-esteem is. People talk about the benefits of good self-esteem, but they often do not really know what that means. To social psychologists, self-esteem is a measure of how positively or negatively people feel about themselves, especially how closely this perception matches their view of their ideal selves. Self-esteem is not dependent on just one trait or aspect of a person, such as intelligence or popularity. It is an overall evaluation of the self that tends to remain stable over time. People see themselves, in general, either as good and worthy or inadequate and less worthy.

In part, however, even overall self-esteem can vary from day to day or from moment to moment, depending on experiences. That is because how people feel about themselves is often dependent on whether they believe others are viewing them positively. For instance, a young man who has just delivered a successful speech and received much applause and praise will bask in the accomplishment and feel his self-esteem rising. That same young man may feel his self-esteem fall after being dumped by his girlfriend. Nevertheless, a person's overall sense of worth and adequacy generally overcomes temporary failures and bad experiences as time passes. If he or she has developed an identity as a good and worthwhile person, then both self-image and ongoing self-evaluation remain positive.

Maturity and Self-Esteem

Most people maintain a positive self-image and relatively high self-esteem. Several factors determine a person's self-esteem. One important factor is age. Many studies have found that from middle adolescence and into adulthood, self-esteem rises steadily until people are in their late sixties. In some studies, people were followed over several years and retested for self-esteem periodically. In other studies, large numbers of people of all different ages were evaluated for their levels of self-esteem. No matter what the study method, the results held true—self-esteem increases with age. Psychologists call this phenomenon the “maturity principle.” They theorize that during the teen years, it is normal for people to be confused about their self-identity and unsure about how they fit into society, what their roles are, and how well their actual selves match their ideal selves. As people mature, however, they find acceptable social roles, establish good social relationships, and feel both comfortable and confident with their place in the world.

Psychologist Charles Stangor believes that the rise in self-esteem with maturity is related to the comparisons between the ideal self and the actual self that everyone makes. He explains that when a person's perceived self-image is largely different from the person's ideal self, then self-esteem drops. The closer the ideal is to reality, the higher self-esteem is. Stangor asks, “Could it be that older adults have a current view of self that is closer to their ideal than younger adults, and that this is why their self-esteem is often higher?” Some evaluations of adults do provide evidence that elderly adults see their self-image and their ideal self as more alike than do younger adults. Stangor uses this evidence to conclude, “In part, older adults are able to more closely align these two selves because they are better able to realistically adjust their ideal standards as they age . . . and because they engage in more favorable and age-appropriate social comparisons than do younger

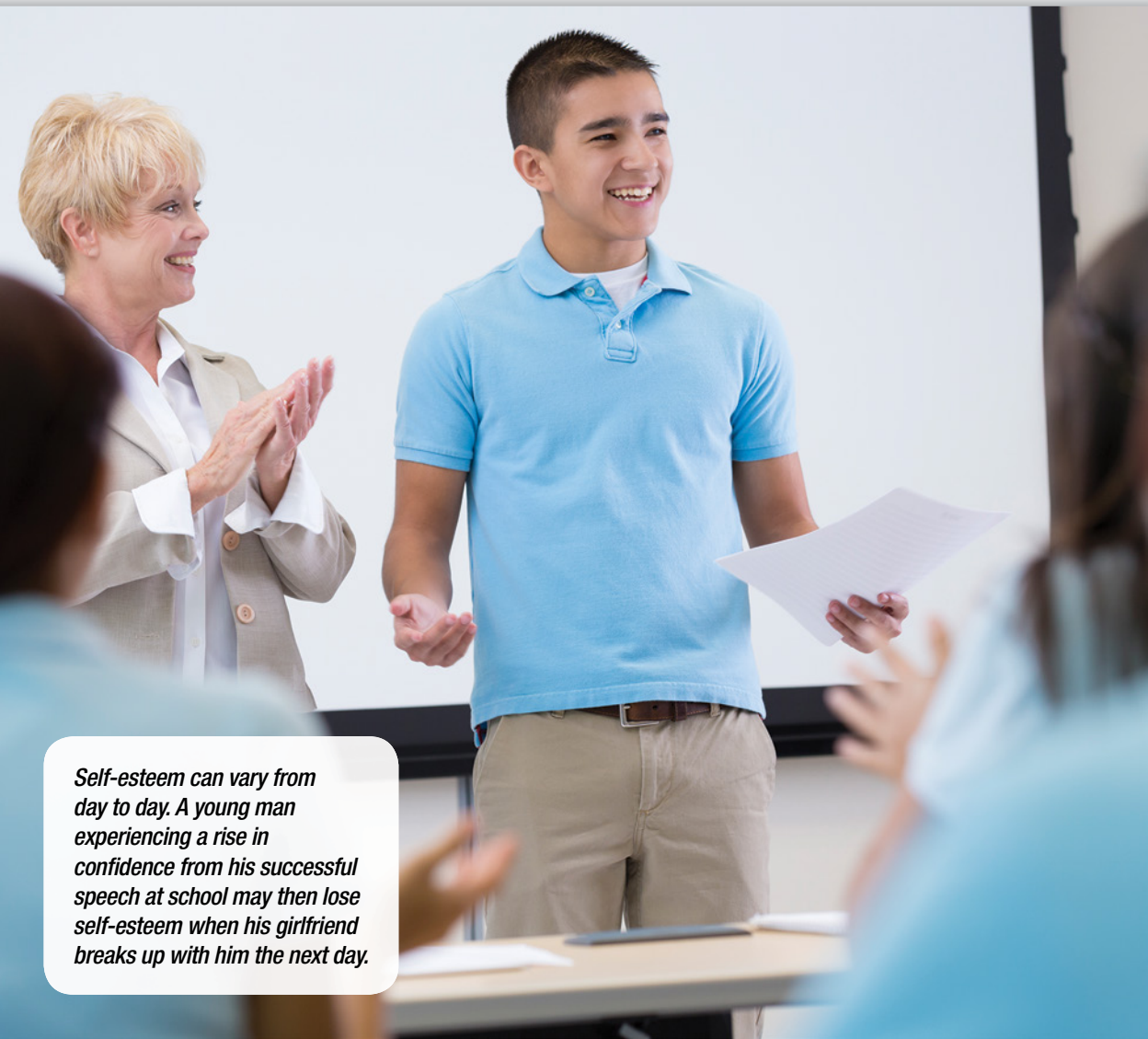
WORDS IN CONTEXT

self-identity

The overall, generally permanent understanding a person has of himself or herself.

adults.”¹³ This seems to be true both for young adults and middle-aged adults. Compared to younger people, older adults less often try to be someone they are not. They are comfortable in their own skin. They have chosen social groups in which they are accepted and appreciated. They engage in activities in which they have determined that they can be successful. They are not experimenting with different behaviors and social roles to which they are not suited.

In a practical sense, mature adults also often have achieved a relatively high status in their career, which would increase their sense of self-worth. They are typically free of the burdens of child rearing and can concentrate on their work, relationships, social



Self-esteem can vary from day to day. A young man experiencing a rise in confidence from his successful speech at school may then lose self-esteem when his girlfriend breaks up with him the next day.

roles, and larger community. They can devote their energies to self-improvement and self-reflection. Perhaps these circumstances, too, contribute to positive self-image and high self-esteem.

Complexity and Self-Esteem

Self-esteem rises throughout a lifetime, but that does not mean that younger people cannot have a positive self-image and good self-esteem. One factor in maintaining that positive self-image, even in the face of bad experiences, is self-complexity. A complex self-image is one that is rich in different ways of thinking about the self. It includes a variety of social roles, past and present experiences, future goals, and varied personal traits. Stangor says:

For example, imagine a woman whose self-concept contains the social identities of *student*, *girlfriend*, *daughter*, *psychology student*, and *tennis player* and who has encountered a wide variety of life experiences. Social psychologists would say that she has high self-complexity. On the other hand, a man who perceives himself primarily as either a student or as a member of the soccer team and who has had a relatively narrow range of life experiences would be said to have low self-complexity.¹⁴

The woman who is high in self-complexity may face a difficult event, such as failing a psychology class or suffering an injury that prevents her from playing tennis. Although either circumstance would be hard to accept, she could turn to other interests and roles where she still feels successful. She could maintain her overall positive self-image, and her self-esteem would remain intact. The man who is low in self-complexity, however, might suffer a devastating blow to his self-esteem if a serious injury permanently ended his soccer career. Soccer was one of the few roles that defined his

WORDS IN CONTEXT

self-complexity

A description of self-image that refers to how many various aspects and roles are a part of a person's self-knowledge.

positive self-image. His negative feelings about losing that identity when he has few other roles to take the place of soccer could lead to low self-esteem. Everyone has to deal with disappointments and failure, but in general, failures hurt less when they do not damage overall self-image. A person with self-complexity is usually happier and psychologically healthier because self-esteem is not threatened by one failure, however large it may seem to be at the time. Of course, a soccer player who never loses that role and remains a star athlete throughout his or her career will also maintain high self-esteem, no matter how lacking in complexity his or her self-image is. Complexity is just one factor that affects self-esteem.

The Benefits of High Self-Esteem

Psychologically, people with high self-esteem experience several benefits, no matter what their age or self-complexity. People with high self-esteem are confident about their own abilities. They are able to make choices, strive for goals, trust their own judgment, and overcome problems. They believe that they are able to accomplish their undertakings and experience success. In general, people with high self-esteem are therefore optimistic. Even in childhood, such individuals feel positive about themselves and the world and expect good things to happen to them. High self-esteem also allows people not to worry too much about what others think of them. They can engage in social interactions comfortably and without fear that others are looking at them and judging them poorly.

Those with high self-esteem also have achieved self-acceptance. This means that they accept themselves for who they are and do not wish to be someone else. They know they have faults and flaws, but overall they are happy with themselves. Finally, people with good self-esteem are resilient. Just as all people do, they deal with negative life events, but they are able to bounce back from life's blows and overcome them. The University of California–Davis Health Center sums up, "Self-esteem affects our trust in others, our relationships, our work—nearly every part of our lives. Positive self-esteem gives us the strength and



Self-Esteem in the Elderly

Even though self-esteem rises as people get older, it does begin to decrease again as people get into their seventies, eighties, and nineties. Approximately one-third of these elderly people have low self-esteem. Psychologists speculate that the decline in self-esteem in old age is related to developing significant physical health issues, losing significant social relationships through death, and perhaps losing a feeling of having a purpose in life. The other main issue identified with a lower self-esteem in elderly people is a decline in socioeconomic status. This means that the elderly are seen as having less value in society when they retire and often experience lower income than they had before they retired. Not every older person experiences lower self-esteem, but many are at risk. On average, those with poor health are most affected.

flexibility to take charge of our lives and grow from our mistakes without the fear of rejection.”¹⁵

David Dean Witt says that positive self-esteem is actually “high social competence, which simply means the effective management of events involving others.”¹⁶ He describes some of the behaviors in social situations that are evident in people with high self-esteem. For instance, these people comfortably make eye contact when they are talking with others. They can cooperate with others in group activities, but they are also able to take on leadership roles and give directions when appropriate. They approach other people in a friendly way, initiate conversations, and are willing to express their own opinions. In short, people with high self-esteem are usually good with social relationships and make other people feel comfortable, too.

Developing High Self-Esteem

High self-esteem begins to develop in childhood from parents who are nurturing and supportive of the child’s personality, temperament, and identity. Parents who are warm and loving and enjoy the company of their child teach the child that he or she is an

People who have high self-esteem generally function well in social situations. They comfortably make eye contact when talking with others.



enjoyable companion and worthy of love and attention. Parents who teach their children how to do things and encourage independent efforts are teaching their children that they are capable and to be proud of their accomplishments and abilities. Parents who appreciate their quiet, bookish child's temperament instead of wishing for an active, outgoing, energetic child demonstrate that the child's natural tendencies are not only OK but positive.

Children also need to be treated with respect if they are to develop high self-esteem. This means treating the child's feelings as legitimate and being sincerely interested in what the child has



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FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

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About-Face (www.about-face.org). This organization's goal is to expose and stand up against the media messages that harm self-esteem and body image in women and girls.



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