

What Is Wrong With Feeling Good?

 talentdevelop.com/wrong-feeling-good

Douglas Eby - resume

by Elizabeth Mika

As it turns out, plenty. Although you wouldn't know it in the US while listening to various experts and propaganda channels, each extolling the superiority — political, military, moral and cultural — of this wonderful country of ours.

But since various election-year analyses have focused on the political dimensions of this trend often enough, here we will address some of the individual aspects of the so-called self-esteem problem.

And a problem it is and uniquely American at that. Because, as it seems, high self-esteem is something we, Americans, all want. To be sure, a similar obsession with self-esteem is rarely, if ever, found in other civilized countries, whose languages often do not even possess an adequate equivalent of the term.

Here, however, self-esteem is a major preoccupation of psychologists, educators and pundits alike. Whole enterprises are built on the conventional wisdom which teaches us that high self-esteem is good, while low self-esteem can be hazardous to our health.

Apparently, self-esteem is so beneficial that we can never have too much of it. Every bookstore and library has rows of books devoted to the art of raising and cultivating this, never high enough, feature of our self-assessment.

The whole self-help business is based on the premise that we, mere mortals, do not have a sufficient level of high self-esteem, and thus need to work on improving the situation (preferably by heeding advice of various experts, who benefit handsomely from repeating the obvious).

And because we are so enamored with high self-esteem, it has become a major objective of our various educational approaches.

As I'm reading another recently released report, showing that American students trail behind many others from all over the world in academics, I recall the problem some Chicago public schools faced several years ago.

A large group of students was not allowed to graduate when it was discovered that they could not read, write and do math on an appropriate grade level. The news coverage of the situation focused on the detrimental effects that not graduating with the rest of their peers would have on the students' self-esteem.

Indignant parents were shouting to the cameras about pain and injustice inflicted on their children. Nobody bothered to point out that those children simply were not ready to graduate, since they had not mastered their basic academic skills. What mattered most was that their self-esteem would suffer.

Now, to be sure, there is nothing wrong with feeling good about ourselves, of course not. But high self-esteem is something that is easy to overdose on at times, especially when it becomes a value in itself, instead of remaining a by-product of our actions.

Among our “certain unalienable Rights” are “Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness”, but there is no mention of High Self-Esteem. And perhaps for a good reason.

Consider for a moment that psychopaths — individuals with non-existent or underdeveloped conscience – as well as people with paranoid ideations are known to have chronically high self-esteem.

Think Adolf Hitler, Joseph Stalin, and scores of others, more contemporary unscrupulous characters, not exactly a group of guys you would want to associate with (I hope). High self-esteem, and a total disregard for essential human values (such as empathy and respect for dignity of others, for example), is something they all have in common.

Let’s face it, having chronically high self-esteem is often a sign of either stupidity, delusion, or a lack of conscience — or all three combined. So what is so desirable about it? The feeling-good-no-matter-what part?

On the other hand, the most creative and morally advanced people are typically not models of high self-esteem. Their inner lives are often plagued by self-doubt, worries, fears, and feelings of inferiority.

One reason for this chronic insecurity is that they base their self-evaluations on very high personal standards, and thus their own behavior seems inadequate and far from ideal in comparison.

But this insecurity is usually a sign of an active conscience at work. Moreover, the insecurity and the demons it feeds, are necessary elements of a creative temperament and we have plenty of evidence that without them no meaningful creative efforts, especially in art, can be undertaken.

Czeslaw Milosz, Polish poet and writer, and a Nobel laureate, who died this year, attested to this, when he confessed: “From early on writing for me has been a way to overcome my real or imagined worthlessness”. Imagine that.

There remains something positive to be said about not feeling too comfortable with oneself. Perhaps all great human endeavors have at their root feelings of inferiority.

The common wisdom wants people to snap out of it, to feel better about themselves, no matter what. The therapy business often supports this view by offering techniques whose sole purpose is to elevate our sagging self-worth.

However, telling yourself that you are good enough, handsome enough, and everybody likes you is not going to work, especially when your behavior is far from what you want it to be, and, more importantly, from the respectable standards of decency and humanity.

Self-esteem needs to be based on your authentic feelings and actions. If who you are and how you behave is way off from who you would like to be (and you are perceptive enough to notice the difference), your self-esteem will undoubtedly “suffer.”

But there is a message there letting you know that some extra or perhaps a different sort of effort is required on your part.

The choice whether or not to listen to this message is yours. And chances are that how you feel about yourself is not that important, after all. As Milosz said: “Satisfaction with oneself. Dissatisfaction with oneself. (...) One and the other seem beneath what should occupy a truly wise person. I was never one. But at least I have respect and admiration for people, who are able to think the least of themselves, whether it is good or bad.”

And here some words from another Polish poet and Nobel laureate, Wislawa Szymborska — a perfect ending to our brief look at the all-American myth of the importance of high self-esteem:

In Praise of Self-Deprecation

The buzzard has nothing to fault himself with.
Scruples are alien to the black panther.
Piranhas do not doubt the rightness of their actions.
The rattlesnake approves of himself without reservations.

The self-critical jackal does not exist.
The locust, alligator, trichina, horsefly
Live as they live and are glad of it.

The killer-whale’s heart weighs one hundred kilos
But in other respects it is light.

There is nothing more animal-like
Than a clear conscience
On the third planet of the Sun.

(trans. By M. Krynski and R. Maguire, in Sounds, Feelings, Thoughts: Seventy Poems by Wislawa Szymborska, 1981, Princeton University Press.)

Quotations are from the book by Czeslaw Milosz, "Nieobjeta Ziemia," Wydawnictwo Dolnoslaskie .Wroclaw 1996. Their English translation by E. Mika.

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Article dated 2004, for publication here courtesy of the author, Elizabeth Mika – a provider of assessment for gifted children and counseling for gifted adults.

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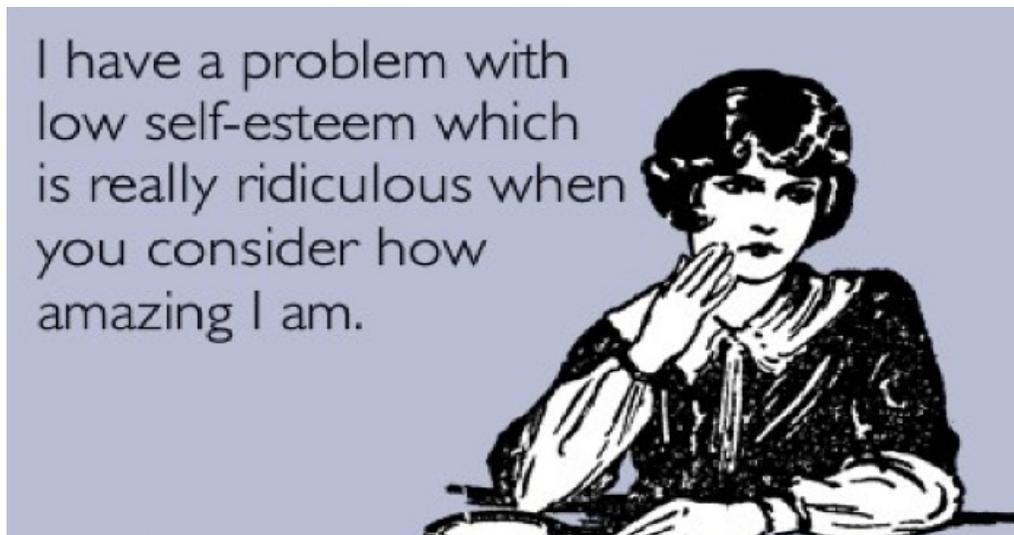
Additional notes by site author Douglas Eby:

See more articles by Elizabeth Mika:

[Theory of Positive Disintegration as a Model of Personality Development for Exceptional Individuals](#)

[Dabrowski's Theory of Positive Disintegration](#)

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The main topics above – **self esteem, self image, self confidence** – are of deep personal interest to me, and have been addressed in many articles on my various sites.

The image above is from the article [Nurturing Our Self-Esteem](#).

John Lennon once expressed a perspective on some of the self esteem challenges experienced by many creative people:

"Part of me suspects that I'm a loser, and the other part of me thinks I'm God Almighty."

See my post [Self Esteem and Self Confidence and Creative People](#) for many other quotes and excerpts from multiple articles.

See archives list of [Self concept articles](#).



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