

# healthy self-esteem



## What is Self-Esteem?

As human beings, we tend to place a value or a measure of worth to ourselves or aspects of ourselves. So, self-esteem usually refers to how we view and think about ourselves and the value that we place on ourselves as a person. Many people struggle with low self-esteem, so it is important to understand what healthy self-esteem looks like. If you are struggling with low self-esteem, this information sheet may give you an idea of what to aim for. If you have already been working to improve your self-esteem, this will help you to summarise your progress, in conjunction with the *Healthy Self-Esteem* worksheet.

## Healthy Self-Esteem



Healthy self-esteem is about thinking about ourselves and our worth in a **BALANCED** way. It is absolutely okay and appropriate that we recognise our weaknesses. What we need to do is accept that we all have weaknesses, and make a decision about whether or not we want to improve on them. We also need to recognise, acknowledge, and celebrate our strengths and successes. Also, don't forget any skills and abilities that might be neutral. Remember, it's all about being balanced!

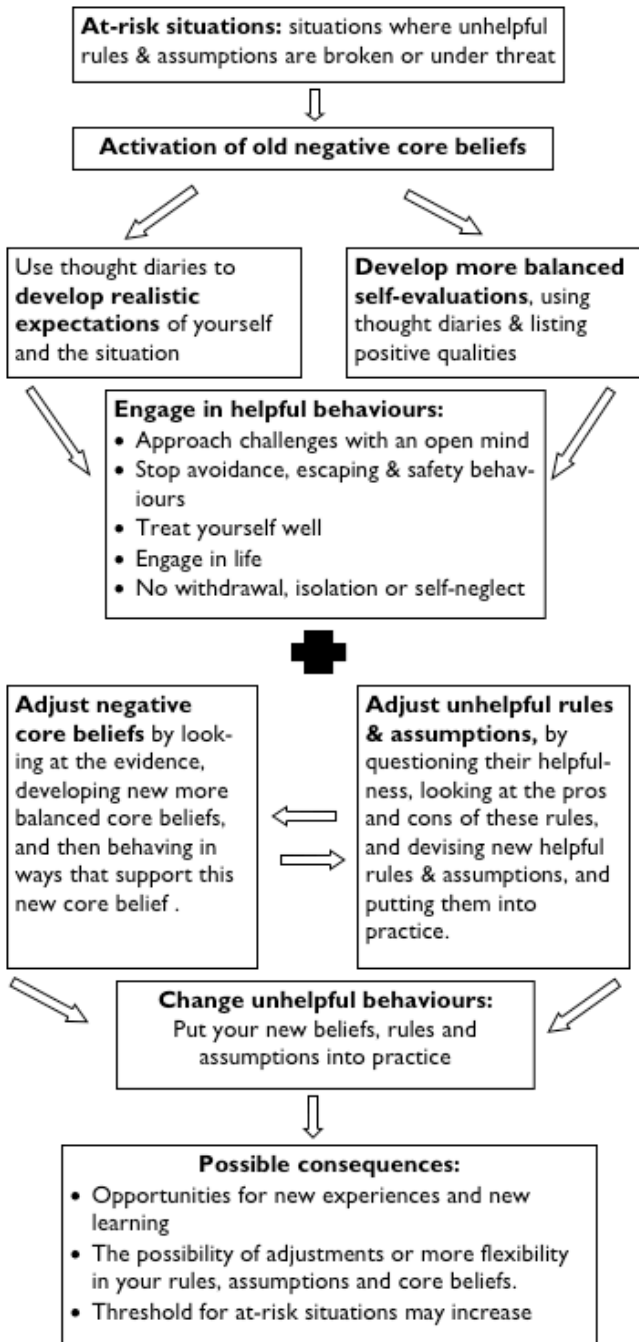
## Coping with At-Risk Situations

Having healthy self-esteem doesn't mean that you will never encounter an at-risk situation again, that is, a situation where you might be reminded of that old negative view of yourself. It also doesn't mean that you will never again think of yourself in a negative light. If you have done some work on your self esteem, then the situations that are risky for you will be less frequent than before, as the threshold for activating a negative view of yourself will now be higher. That means it will take a lot more to 'set off' your low self-esteem than before. Everyone might think of themselves in a negative way or get down on themselves at times. The important thing to remember is not to do it too often.

So even after improving your self-esteem, you will still encounter at-risk situations in which the rules and assumptions you have for living are broken or threatened to be broken. But you can handle them differently, cope differently, respond differently. Remember that the effect of your past experiences on how you see yourself today can be worn down by practicing new ways of thinking & behaving day-to-day.

## A Model of Healthy Self-Esteem

Have a look at the Model of Healthy Self-Esteem to see what it is you can do differently to continue building a healthy view of yourself.



# what is low self-esteem?

## What is Self-Esteem?

As human beings, we tend to place a value or a measure of worth to ourselves or aspects of ourselves. So, self-esteem usually refers to how we view and think about ourselves and the value that we place on ourselves as a person. If the value we place on ourselves is often negative, this is when we run into problems with self esteem.



## Low Self-Esteem

Have you ever been dissatisfied or unhappy with yourself on the whole? Do you ever think that you are weak, stupid, not good enough, flawed in some way, inferior to other people, useless, worthless, unattractive, ugly, unlovable, a loser, or a failure?

Everyone uses these words on themselves at times, usually when they experience a challenging or stressful situation. However, if you often think about yourself in these terms, then you might have a problem with low self-esteem.

*Low self-esteem is having a generally negative overall opinion of oneself, judging or evaluating oneself negatively, and placing a general negative value on oneself as a person.*

People with low self-esteem usually have deep-seated, basic, negative beliefs about themselves and the kind of person they are. These beliefs are often taken as facts or truths about their identity, rather than being recognised as opinions they hold about themselves.

## The Impact of Low Self-Esteem

**Frequent Self-Criticism.** A person with low self-esteem probably says a lot of negative things about themselves. They might criticise themselves, their actions, and abilities or joke about themselves in a very negative way. They might put themselves down, doubt themselves, or blame themselves when things go wrong.

**Ignoring Positive Qualities.** When compliments are given to them, they might brush such comments aside or say that "it was all luck" or "it wasn't that big a deal." Instead, they might focus on what they didn't do or the mistakes they made.

**Negative Emotions.** A person with low self-esteem might often feel sad, depressed, anxious, guilty, ashamed, frustrated, and angry.

**Impact on Work/Study.** A person with low self-esteem might consistently achieve less than they are able to because they believe they are less capable than others. They might avoid challenges & opportunities for fear of not doing well. They might work extremely hard and push themselves to do more because they believe they need to make up for, or cover up, their lack of skill. They might find it hard to believe any good results they get are due to their own abilities or positive qualities.

**Relationship Problems.** In their personal relationships, people with low self-esteem might become upset or distressed by any criticism or disapproval, bend over backwards to please others, be extremely shy or self-consciousness or even avoid or withdraw from intimacy or social contact. They might also be less likely to stand up for themselves or protect themselves from being bullied, criticised, or abused by partners or family. On the other hand they can be overly aggressive in their interactions with others.



**Recreation and Leisure.** People with low self-esteem might not engage in many leisure or recreational activities, as they might believe that they do not deserve any pleasure or fun. They might also avoid activities where they could be judged or evaluated in some way, such as competitive sports, dancing, art/craft classes or participating in any type of competition or exhibition.

**Personal Self-Care.** People who do not value themselves might drink excessive amounts of alcohol or abuse drugs. They might not bother to dress neatly, wear clean clothes, style their hair or buy new clothes. On the other hand, they might try to hide any inadequacies by not allowing themselves to be seen by others unless they look absolutely perfect.

## Cause or Effect?

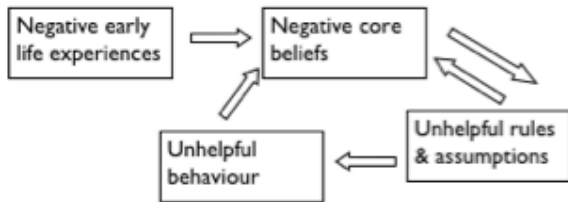
It is important to know that low self-esteem is a common problem for many people in our society - so you are not alone. Low self-esteem can occur as part of a current problem (such as depression), or as a result of other problems (such as chronic illness, relationship problems) or it can be a problem in itself. Either way, the good news is that you can take steps towards developing more healthy self-esteem.

# beginnings of low self-esteem

## Low Self-Esteem

Low self-esteem is having a generally negative overall opinion of oneself, judging or evaluating oneself negatively, and placing a general negative value on oneself as a person. How do such negative beliefs start?

## Model of Low Self-Esteem: Beginning



## Negative Early Life Experiences

Often, the beliefs we have about ourselves are conclusions we arrive at based on what has happened early in our lives. This means that our experiences in our childhood, regarding our family, our peers, the society we lived in, the schools we went to, etc, have influenced our thoughts and beliefs about all sorts of things, including ourselves. If we have arrived at very negative thoughts and beliefs about ourselves, it is likely that we have encountered a variety of negative experiences that might have contributed to this, such as:

- ◊ Punishment, neglect, or abuse
- ◊ Difficulty in meeting parents' standards
- ◊ Not fitting in at home or at school
- ◊ Difficulty in meeting peer group standards
- ◊ Being on the receiving end of other people's stress or distress
- ◊ Your family's place in society
- ◊ An absence of positives



In addition, negative experiences as an adult, such as abuse, prolonged stress or traumas, can also influence our beliefs about ourselves.

## Negative Core Beliefs

Why we continue to experience low self-esteem today, even when our current circumstances are different from those of our past, is a result of our negative core beliefs. Negative core beliefs are the conclusions about ourselves we have arrived at when we were children or adolescents, as a result of the negative experiences we

have had. For example, a child who was constantly punished and criticised may come to believe "I am worthless," or "I am bad." These thoughts are what we call *negative core beliefs* - the firmly held and strongly ingrained evaluations of our worth and value as a person, which often take the form of "I am..." statements (e.g. *I am stupid, I am not good enough, etc*).

## Rules and Assumptions

When we strongly believe these negative core beliefs about ourselves, it is not surprising that we feel very bad about ourselves and experience strong negative emotions. To protect ourselves and ensure we keep on functioning, we begin to develop rules and assumptions for how we live our lives. They aim to guard and defend us from the truth of our negative core beliefs. For example, the person who thinks they are "worthless" may develop rules such as "I must please other people" or "I must not express my needs" and assumptions like "Only if I do things perfectly will people like me."



## Unhelpful Behaviour

The result of having these rules and assumptions is that they will guide your behaviour and largely determine what you do on a day-to-day basis. Makes sense, doesn't it? So, depending on your rules and assumptions, you will try very hard to do everything perfectly, do what it takes to please people, never assert your needs, ... and the list can go on.

## Dormant Low Self-Esteem

What this means is that on the surface you can feel fairly good about yourself if you are able to meet these rules and live up to the standards you have set for yourself. However, there are disadvantages to following these rules and assumptions. Firstly, you are putting yourself under a lot of pressure so that you manage your self-esteem and don't feel bad about yourself. Secondly, following your rules and assumptions keeps your negative core beliefs intact because you never challenge or test them.

So your low self-esteem is just lying dormant, waiting to be awakened by the slightest bump in the road. Therefore, changing these negative core beliefs and unhelpful rules, assumptions and behaviours is important in developing more healthy self-esteem.

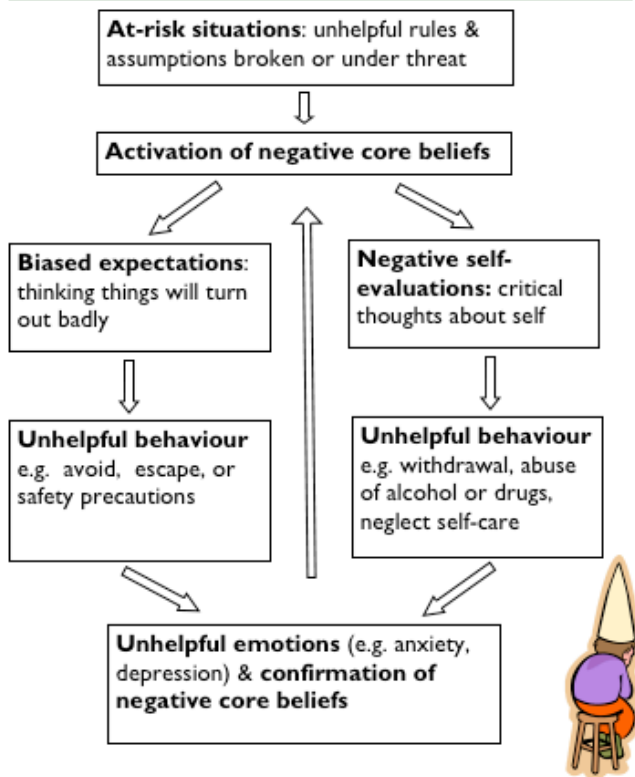
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# what maintains low self-esteem?

Low self-esteem is having a generally negative overall opinion of oneself, judging or evaluating oneself negatively, and placing a general negative value on oneself as a person. In a previous information sheet, we explored how low self-esteem begins. In this sheet we will explore what helps maintain low self-esteem, that is, what keeps it going on a day-to-day basis in the 'here and now.'

## Model of Low Self-Esteem: Maintenance



## At-Risk Situations

At points in our lives we will encounter situations where it is extremely difficult to live up to or follow our rules and assumptions. For example, someone who has the rule "I must do things perfectly" will find starting a new job very difficult, as it is almost impossible to live up to this rule given the circumstances. These are called "at-risk situations" because they are situations where the rules and standards set for ourselves are at risk of being broken or have been broken. When these situations occur, the negative core beliefs we are trying so hard to protect ourselves from become activated, and our low self-esteem goes from being dormant to very active.

## Unhelpful thinking

The activation of our negative core beliefs means we start to engage in a lot of negative thinking about the situation we are in and more generally. We tend to either expect that things won't work out (biased expectations) or criticise and blame ourselves (negative self-evaluations).

A lot of this negative thinking arises because generally humans tend to process information in our environment in ways which confirm and maintain our beliefs. We tend to only pay **attention** to information which confirms our beliefs, ignoring or minimising other information, and we also tend to **interpret** information in a way that supports our beliefs. For example, if you have a negative core belief "I am a failure" then you will tend to only notice events which support this, minimising your successes, and you might also interpret things in an all-or-nothing way which supports the idea that you are a failure ('I only got a B - I failed').



## Unhelpful Behaviours

Unhelpful thinking and unhelpful behaviours tend to go hand in hand. For example, if we have biased expectations that things won't go well, we will tend to avoid or escape the situation. If we have negative self-evaluations such that we are harsh and critical towards ourselves, we will tend to isolate ourselves from others, be passive and neglect or abuse ourselves in some way.

## The End Result

The outcome of all this unhelpful thinking and behaviour, is that we experience unhelpful emotions, such as depression and anxiety. Our unhelpful thinking, behaviours, and feelings lead just confirm our negative core beliefs and lead us to restrict our lives. We never approach life with an open mind and so miss opportunities which over time can change how we see ourselves.

## The Good News

While we cannot change the past, we can do something about the things we do on a day-to-day basis in the 'here-and-now' that maintain the negative core beliefs we have about ourselves. This means that things can be different and you can overcome low self-esteem. What is important now is that you commit to making the effort to address your unhelpful thinking and unhelpful behaviours from day to day.

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# overcoming biased expectations

## Biased Expectations

Biased expectations are negative thoughts that commonly occur when you encounter an 'At-Risk Situation' that is, when it looks likely that your unhelpful rules or assumptions will be broken and hence your negative core beliefs have been activated. When this happens, you will tend to make predictions about how things will turn out and these predictions often tend to be negative and lead to feelings of anxiety.

You will tend to:

- Overestimate the likelihood that bad things will happen
- Exaggerate how bad things will be
- Underestimate your ability to deal with things if they don't go well
- Ignore other factors in the situation, which suggest that things will not be as bad as you are predicting.

For example, someone with the negative core belief "I am stupid" might then have the rule "I must never let others see my true abilities". So when encountering the at-risk situation of attending a quiz night with friends, their biased expectations might be "I'll make the team lose" or "The others won't want me on the team", and hence they will feel quite anxious.

## Challenging Biased Expectations

One way to address biased expectations is to challenge them 'head on.' **Remember that our thoughts and expectations are often opinions we have picked up or learned, rather than facts.** They can be questioned, and should not be something we just blindly accept if they are causing us distress.

To challenge your biased expectations means that you dissect them, evaluate how accurate or likely they are, examine what evidence you base your expectations on, and look at any positive things you may be ignoring. In this way, you are like a detective or lawyer, trying to get to the facts of how realistic your expectations are, and putting things in perspective.



Challenging your biased expectations isn't something you should do in your head as this can get messy and confusing. The best way is to write it down. To help you through the challenging process step by step, we suggest using the worksheet *Thought Diary for Biased Expectations*.

Using a thought diary will help you develop more **realistic expectations** and a decrease in the intensity of your negative emotions, particularly anxiety. Notice that your biased expectations and negative emotions will probably not disappear totally by using a thought diary, but it will make them more manageable so you can approach situations with an open mind, try new things, and often be pleasantly surprised by what you find, instead of letting your negative opinion of yourself constantly restrict how you live your life.

## Experimenting with Biased Expectations

When we expect negative things of ourselves and our abilities, we will act accordingly and either **avoid** the situation totally, try the situation but **escape** when things are too overwhelming, or be overly cautious and engaged in **safety behaviours** to help get us through (e.g., taking a friend, over-preparing to face the situation, taking medication to cope or placing certain conditions on approaching the situation - such as turning up/leaving early). We do this to protect ourselves, but ultimately it is unhelpful and makes things worse because we never test our predictions to see how accurate they are.

The next step to overcoming biased expectations is to be like a scientist and conduct an experiment to test how true our predictions are. The point of experimenting with our biased expectations is to stop avoiding, escaping and using safety behaviours, and instead to start approaching situations and see if what we expect actually eventuates. Sounds scary I know, but when planned and done properly, this can be a powerful way of overcoming our biased expectations. As with a Thought Diary, there are some steps you have to work through to properly experiment with your biased expectations, and these are shown on the worksheet *Experimenting with Biased Expectations*.



The aim of both Challenging and Experimenting with your biased expectations is to develop more realistic expectations of yourself. By making more realistic predictions in your day-to-day life, you will think and act differently, in a manner inconsistent with someone with low self-esteem. Behaving in a manner that is inconsistent with your low opinion of yourself, is the path to overcoming this negative opinion. When you do this, you will start to gather new information about yourself, which will allow you to see yourself in a less harsh, more positive and capable light.

# negative self-evaluations

## Negative Self-Evaluations & Low-Self-Esteem

Negative self-evaluations are negative thoughts that commonly occur when you encounter an 'At-Risk Situation' that is, when your unhelpful rules or assumptions are broken and hence your negative core beliefs are activated. When this happens you will tend to evaluate yourself in a negative way, becoming harsh and critical of who you are as a person. You will tend to:

- Tell yourself that you "should" have done this or "shouldn't" have done that, chastising yourself and beating yourself up, for not meeting the standards you have set for yourself
- Put negative and derogatory labels on yourself, calling yourself hurtful names like "pathetic," "useless," "idiot," and
- Make sweeping generalisations about yourself, based on a very specific event, saying things such as "I am always doing this," or "Everything is ruined."



When you are so critical of yourself, you will tend to behave in particular ways – often engaging in unhelpful behaviours. You may:

- Withdraw or isolate yourself from family or friends,
- Try to overcompensate for things,
- Neglect opportunities, responsibilities or self-care
- Be passive rather than assertive with others

At the end of the day, the unhelpful thoughts and behaviours contribute to you feeling depressed, low, sad, guilty – and this is taken as confirmation that your negative core beliefs are true.

Some people think that making negative self-evaluations is a good thing. Some people think that being critical and harsh on yourself keeps you grounded, or stops you from getting too big for your boots, prevents you from becoming a 'tall poppy, or that it spurs you on, motivating you to do better. Some of these might be commonly held beliefs, but are they really true? Is putting yourself down and criticising yourself actually a good and healthy thing to do? If it is, then we would do it to our loved ones regularly, however most of us respond the opposite way, with compassion and encouragement when times are tough. So if this is what you would do for other human beings, why is it that you don't do it for yourself?

## Challenging Negative Self-Evaluations

One way to address your negative self-evaluations is to challenge them, and develop more balanced self-evaluations. Our thoughts and evaluations are often **opinions** we have, rather than **facts**. Therefore they are open to question, and should not be something we just blindly accept if they are causing us distress. Instead, you can dispute, dissect, examine, and assess them – like a detective or lawyer would, to see how realistic they are and put things in perspective.

Challenging your negative self-evaluations isn't something you should do in your head as this can get messy and confusing. The best way is to write it down. To help you through the process, we suggest using the worksheet *Thought Diary for Negative Self-Evaluations*. This helps you work through the process step-by-step, making things clearer and more useful for you.

The Thought Diary will first ask you to **identify your negative self-evaluations**. To do this, ask yourself:

- What is the situation I am in?*
- What am I saying to myself?*
- How am I evaluating myself?*
- How am I putting myself down?*
- How am I criticising myself?*



Now you are ready to begin to **challenge your negative self-evaluations**, by asking yourself:

- What is the evidence for my evaluations?*
- What is the evidence against my evaluations?*
- Are these opinions I have of myself or facts?*
- How helpful is it for me to evaluate myself in this way?*
- How else could I view the situation? What other perspectives might there be?*
- What advice would I give to a friend in this situation?*
- Are there any positives that I am ignoring?*
- What would be more helpful behaviour I could carry out?*

The ultimate aim of doing this Thought Diary is for you to develop more **Balanced Self-Evaluations**, which takes a lot of practice. If you work through the entire Thought Diary for challenging your negative self-evaluations, it is likely that you will experience a decrease in your belief in the negative self-evaluations you were making and a decrease in the intensity of your negative emotions, particularly depression. A Thought Diary will help you see yourself in a less harsh, more positive and kinder light, rather than letting your negative opinion of yourself constantly interfere with how you live your life.

# acknowledging your positives



## Low Self-Esteem: Ignoring the Positives

If you were asked to list some positive qualities about yourself, how would you respond? If you suffer from low self-esteem, you might struggle to bring things to mind.

Other people might not have trouble recalling positive qualities, but may still feel uncomfortable thinking about, talking about, or writing about the positive qualities they have. Many people might consider it as conceited, arrogant, or stuck up to think about such things.

But in order to promote a balanced evaluation of yourself, it is ok to notice and acknowledge your positive aspects, and to behave like someone who has positive qualities and who is deserving of happiness and fun.

Many people who suffer from low self-esteem have a tendency to only pay attention to things which confirm their negative view of themselves. If you struggle with low self-esteem, you probably rarely pay attention to the positive things you do, your positive qualities, positive outcomes or positive comments from others. Most of the time all you pay attention to are your negative qualities and you feel comfortable dwelling on these negatives. Ask yourself how fair is that? By getting you to begin acknowledging your positives, you are really tipping the scales of self-evaluation back into balance. These scales have been pretty off balance (towards the side of negativity) for some time now.



Keeping a 'Positive You Journal' is one way to practice taking more notice of the positive qualities you do have.

## Start with a 'Positive Qualities' Record

When we notice something and it's really important for us to remember it, what is it that we do to help us remember? We write things down, make a note of it, or make a list if there are many items. The same approach applies here. To start acknowledging your positives, you need to write them down.

Before you start on the Positive You Journal, you need to make a Positive Qualities Record - list down all the positive qualities you can think of, no matter how small, insignificant, modest, or unimportant you think they are.

### If you get stuck, ask yourself questions like:

- What do I like about who I am?
- What positive characteristics do I have?
- What are some of my achievements?
- What are some challenges I have overcome?
- What are some skills or talents that I have?
- What do others say they like about me?
- What are some attributes I like in others that I also have in common with?
- If someone shared my identical characteristics, what would I admire in them?
- How might someone who cared about me describe me?
- What do I think are bad qualities? What bad qualities do I not have?



## I Don't Have ANY Positive Qualities

As you start your *Positive Qualities Record*, you need to listen out for negative self-evaluations coming through, and the tendency you may have to discount or minimise anything positive about yourself. Remember that this is a nasty habit that may rear its head when you try to do this exercise. Should this happen, just acknowledge it and try to move on with the task.

Remember, you don't have to do these positive things absolutely perfectly or 100% of the time – that is impossible. So be realistic about what you write down. For example, if you tend to be 'hardworking,' but recall the one time you took a sick day after a big weekend, you might say to yourself "I can't write that down because I haven't done it 100%." If you take that attitude, you are not being fair and realistic with yourself.

You may want to enlist the help of a trusted friend or family member who will support you in this task – two heads are better than one and an outsider might have a different perspective of you, than you do of yourself.

## Some Ideas to Get You Started

There is an endless list of possibilities when listing positive qualities - each of us is different. Here are just a few suggestions of things which may apply to some of us:

Considerate	Reliable	Health-conscious
Resourceful	Avid Reader	Artistic
Organised	Good listener	Good-humoured
Strong	Well-travelled	Able to enjoy nature
Adventurous	Creative	Friendly
Appreciative	Diligent	Animal-lover
Funny	Good cook	Charitable
Loved	Active	Praise others
Responsible	House-proud	A good friend
Movie buff	Determined	Outdoors person

## The 'Positive You' Journal

Using the *Positive You Journal*, recall specific examples of how you have demonstrated each of the positive attributes you have listed in the Positive Qualities Record. For example:

### Considerate

- I took my friend some flowers and a book when they were sick.
- I offered a listening ear to my colleague who was going through some difficult times.
- I lent my brother some money when he was down on his luck.

Once you have listed some past examples like the one above, use the journal to start noticing your positive qualities on a daily basis. Each day, set out to record three examples from your day, which illustrate certain positive qualities you have. Write exactly what you did and identify what positive attribute it shows in you. For example, on one day you may note down that you mopped the floors (house-proud), finished writing out a budget (diligent), and played with your children (fun to be with).

Doing this will take some time, but is well worth the effort. Noting down the specific incidents that illustrate your positive qualities will allow the list to have an impact on your view of yourself, making it real.

# adjusting negative core beliefs

## Identifying Negative Core Beliefs

Your negative core beliefs reflect the negative, broad, and generalised judgements you have made about yourself, based on some negative experiences you might have had during your earlier years (eg. "I am a failure," or "I am no good").

If you are not clear as to what your negative core beliefs are as yet, you need to first pin them down and identify them, before you can start changing them. To uncover those negative core beliefs, you will need to think about the implications of the specific clues and information you already have, that is, think about what they say about the overall view you have of yourself.

Some areas to consider in identifying your negative core beliefs include:

- Negative life experiences you have already identified
- Biased expectations you have noted
- Negative self-evaluations you have become aware of
- Difficulties you had thinking of your positive qualities
- What you fear will be the outcome if you don't fulfil your old rules



Important questions to ask yourself throughout this 'identification' process are: *What does this information mean about me as a person? What does this clue say about who I am?*

## Adjusting Negative Core Beliefs

Once you have identified the negative core beliefs which you hold about yourself, you can take steps to adjust these and develop more balanced, helpful beliefs about who you are as a person. We suggest using the worksheet *Adjusting Negative Core Beliefs*, which outlines the following steps:

### 1. Choose a negative core belief to work on.

Note how much you believe the negative core belief now, when it's most convincing, and when it's least convincing. Note how the negative core belief makes you feel.

### 2. Develop a new, balanced core belief.

When developing a new core belief, you want to aim for something that is more positive, balanced, and realistic. Think of something that is a more accurate reflection of yourself. It is important that the work you do on your negative core beliefs is not just about squashing the belief that you have been carrying around,

but also about promoting a new balanced view of yourself. The important thing is that the new belief is more balanced, weighing up all the information available, and including both your strengths and weaknesses (eg "I am great at many things, average at others, and weaker in some areas, just like anyone"). Make sure that you are not painting an overly positive view of yourself (eg., "I am 100% perfect"), as this will be unrealistic, and it is unlikely that you will believe it.

### 3. Examine the evidence for and against your old belief.

To start to chip away at your old negative core belief, we first need to examine the evidence you base this belief on. What evidence do you have for this negative view of yourself? What experiences do you use to justify this negative core belief?



Next it is time to assess how credible and accurate the evidence is, like being a lawyer who questions how good the evidence is. This is where you also ask yourself: *Are there alternative ways of understanding this evidence? Are there other explanations you have not considered? Are there other ways of interpreting or making sense of the evidence, other than condemning who you are as a person?*

### 4. Find support for your new belief.

Firstly, gather evidence that is consistent with this new view of yourself, paying attention to evidence from the past/present and looking out for appropriate evidence in the future. Secondly, you need to experiment with this new view of yourself. This means that you need to test it out, try it on for size, and act in ways that are consistent with the new you. Ask yourself how someone who believed this kinder view of themselves might act or behave? What things could you do to obtain more evidence for your new balanced core belief? What new experiences might further support this new perspective you are developing?



### 5. Evaluating your new & old beliefs.

Once you have been through the step-by-step process for adjusting your negative core beliefs, it is important to reflect on what impact this process has had on you. You can do this by re-rating how much you now believe your old negative core belief and compare it to how much you now believe your new balanced core belief. This rating might be something you keep coming back to and reviewing - because these new beliefs will tend to further strengthen over time with practice, and the old beliefs weakened.



# adjusting rules & assumptions



## Helpful & Unhelpful Rules

Rules and assumptions for living guide our behaviour and enable us to cope with our everyday lives. They are necessary for us to make sense of the world around us and to help us function on a day-to-day basis. So, having rules, in itself, is not unhelpful. There are many rules for living that are helpful (eg. you should not drink and drive). **Helpful rules** are realistic, flexible, and adaptable, and they enable us to function healthily and safely. **Unhelpful rules** are unrealistic, unreasonable, excessive, rigid, and unadaptable (eg. I must never ask for help). We will probably feel strong negative emotions when these rules are broken, which is quite likely given that they are unrealistic.

*Rules are learned.* It is not often that unhelpful rules are formally taught. Rather these are developed through trial and error and observations you made in your earlier life experiences.

*Rules can be culture-specific.* The rules and assumptions for living that you have developed reflect the norms and culture of the family and the society or community in which you grew up.

*Rules can be stubborn and resist change.* Rules for living not only guide your behaviour, they also influence how you perceive, interpret, and absorb information throughout your life. We tend to only pay attention to, and make sense of, those things that are consistent with our beliefs and rules. This is why unhelpful rules for living and negative core beliefs can be resistant to change.

## Unhelpful Rules & Low Self-Esteem

To help you get by and manage from day to day, you might have developed rules and assumptions to help protect your self-esteem. You will have developed rules and assumptions as best you can in the world, given the low opinion you have of yourself. These rules and assumptions are usually unrealistic, unreasonable, rigid, and unadaptable. If you are able to stick to, and carry out, these rules and assumptions, you might feel okay about yourself, because then no one will know how bad or worthless you think you are.

But these rules actually keep your negative core beliefs and your low self-esteem in place. Living up to such rules and assumptions means that your behaviour is restricted in such a way that these rules and your negative core beliefs do not have the opportunity to be challenged to see if they are accurate



## Identifying Unhelpful Rules & Assumptions

To identify what unhelpful rules and assumptions you might have developed to get by given your negative view of yourself, ask yourself:

- What do I expect of myself when I am at work or school?*
- What standards do I expect myself to meet?*
- What do I expect of myself when I am socialising?*
- What do I expect of myself in my various roles – child, friend, partner, parent, staff member/supervisor?*
- What do I expect of myself regarding leisure or fun activities, and self-care?*
- In what types of situations do I put myself down?*
- What aspects of myself do I criticise most?*
- What might happen if I relax my standards?*
- What don't I allow myself to do?*
- What do I criticise in other people? What standards do I expect them to live up to?*



You might also identify rules and expectations by:

- Reviewing your thought diaries
- Considering themes which are common to your issues
- Recalling direct messages or family sayings about rules, such as *the only person you can depend on is yourself* or *if you don't aim high you'll never be successful*

## Adjusting The Rules

Adjusting the rules isn't easy, but it might not be that difficult if you have already had some practice at challenging your biased expectations and negative self-evaluations. We suggest the worksheet *Adjusting The Rules* which helps you challenge unhelpful rules and assumptions through:

- Questioning their impact and helpfulness
- Identifying their advantages and disadvantages
- Developing new balanced rules and assumptions
- Thinking of new ways of behaving that would put the new rule into practice.

It might be a good idea to write down your new rules on a card that you can carry around with you and review every now and again. It is important to put the new rule into practice through new behaviours. That is, by acting as if the new, more flexible and realistic rule were true, and seeing what happens! Although it might seem difficult to you now, it will get easier as you keep practicing.