

# The Lowdown on High Self-Esteem

By ROY F. BAUMEISTER

**D**oes low self-esteem lie at the root of all human suffering, failure and evil? When I ran my first research study on self-esteem in 1973, that certainly seemed to be the case. Psychologists everywhere were persuaded that if only we could help people to accept and love themselves more, their problems would gradually vanish and their lives would flourish. They would even treat each other better.

Not surprisingly, California led the way, establishing a task force for exploring ways to boost healthy self-esteem to solve personal and social problems. The task force members — like many of us — were undeterred by the weakness and ambiguity of the evidence suggesting a benefit in boosting self-esteem; we all believed the data would come along in good time.

Then-Assemblyman John Vasconcellos (and many other experts) predicted that self-esteem could solve, or at least help solve, such problems as crime, teen pregnancy, pollution, school failure and underachievement, drug abuse and domestic violence. (Vasconcellos even expressed the hope that higher self-esteem would one day help balance the state budget — a prospect predicated on the observation that people with high self-regard earn more than others and therefore pay more in taxes.)

A generation — and many millions of dollars — later, it turns out we may have been mistaken. Five years ago, the American Psychological Society commissioned me and several other experts to wade with an open mind through the enormous amount of published research on the subject and to assess the benefits of high self-esteem.

Here are some of our disappointing findings. High self-esteem in schoolchildren does not produce better grades. (Actually, kids with high self-esteem do have slightly better grades in most studies, but that's because getting good grades leads to higher self-esteem, not the other way around.) In fact, according

## Thinking you're hot stuff isn't the promised cure-all.

to a study by Donald Forsyth at Virginia Commonwealth University, college students with mediocre grades who got regular self-esteem strokes from their professors ended up doing worse on final exams than students who were told to suck it up and try harder.

Self-esteem doesn't make adults perform better at their jobs either. Sure, people with high self-esteem rate their own performance better — even declaring themselves smarter and more attractive than their low self-esteem peers — but neither objective tests nor impartial raters can detect any difference in the quality of work.

Likewise, people with high self-esteem think they make better impressions, have stronger friendships and have better romantic lives than other people, but the data don't support their self-flattering views. If anything, people who love themselves too much sometimes annoy other people by their defensive or know-it-all attitudes. Self-esteem doesn't predict who will make a good leader, and some work (including that of psychologist Robert Hogan writing in the *Harvard Business Review*) has found humility rather than self-esteem to be a key trait of successful leaders.

It was widely believed that low self-esteem could be a cause of violence, but in reality violent individuals, groups and nations think very well of themselves. They turn violent toward others who fail to give them the inflated respect they think they deserve. Nor does high self-esteem deter people from becoming bullies, according to most of the studies that have been done; it is simply untrue that beneath the surface of every obnoxious bully is an unhappy, self-hating child in need of sympathy and praise.

High self-esteem doesn't prevent youngsters from cheating or stealing or experimenting with drugs and sex. (If anything, kids

with high self-esteem may be more willing to try these things at a young age.)

There were a few areas where higher self-esteem seemed to bring some benefits. For instance, people with high self-esteem are generally happier and less depressed than others, though we can't quite prove that high self-esteem prevents depression or causes happiness. Young women with high self-esteem seem less susceptible to eating disorders. In some studies (though not all), people with high self-esteem bounce back from misfortune and trauma faster than others.

High self-esteem also promotes initiative. People who have it are more likely to speak up in a group, persist in the face of failure, resist other people's advice or pressure and strike up conversations with strangers. Of course, initiative can cut both ways: One study on bullying found that self-esteem was high among the bullies and among the people who intervened to re-

sist them. Low self-esteem marked the victims of bullying.

In short, despite the enthusiastic embrace of self-esteem, we found that it conferred only two benefits. It feels good and it supports initiative. Those are nice, but they are far less than we had once hoped for, and it is very questionable whether they justify the effort and expense that schools, parents and therapists have put into raising self-esteem.

After all these years, I'm sorry to say, my recommendation is this: Forget about self-esteem and concentrate more on self-control and self-discipline.

Recent work suggests this would be good for the individual and good for society — and might even be able to fill some of those promises that self-esteem once made but could not keep.

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