

Self-Esteem: Lost and Found

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The following article is the story of one woman's struggle with weight and self-esteem. It traces Káča Henley's journey and is intended to provide inspiration and ideas to others, while recognizing that individuals may have good alternative or additional strategies.

Wake up to the 'fugglies'

Sure, self-esteem is important. Just like Motherhood and apple pie. What's the big deal? How can anyone argue the point? Everybody knows that our worth is not measured by the number of inches around our waist. How closely we resemble the current notion of beauty does not determine our value as persons. This is common knowledge.

Except for the days I get up in the morning and I've got the "fugglies"—you know the days that I'm talking about: Even before I look in the mirror I know for certain that I'm fat and ugly, and nobody's going to convince me otherwise.

No matter what I do with makeup and curling iron, no matter what I wear (and God knows I try on everything in my wardrobe), I know I am going to go out there and people are going to take one look at me and feel repulsed. Nobody will sit next to me on the subway. Why should they? I don't fit in this small-minded world, I'm too "fuggly."

There is a tradition dating back to when women were men's possessions that a woman's worth is judged by her appearance. The closer she resembles the current ideal of beauty, the more she is valued. The traditional echoes in the self-effacing and conforming conventions that many of our mothers and grandmothers modeled for us, the cultural stereotypes that "the boys" judged us by. And most visibly of all, in the manipulations of the fashion, cosmetics and advertising industries, supported by the media, hawking "Youth" and "Beauty" as the indispensable commodities that make a woman worthwhile.

Measuring up?

Fashion makes a clear statement about what size and shape is acceptable: Models are size 4, mainstream dress sizes generally go up to a size 12. Size 14 and up are "over" sizes.

Women in North America are competent, strong and able, most of them work hard at jobs and at home and in the volunteer sector. More than half of them are a size 14 or larger.

The average adult woman is 5'4" and weighs 148 pounds. What is the message that this woman gets? "You're 'over' sized. You don't measure up, but if you focus your life on transforming yourself into society's ideal, with the body of a pubescent boy, you may turn out all right."

And then come the \$40 billion-dollar-a-year diet and weight-loss people: "Hire us, we'll fix you."

Meanwhile, the other half of womankind looks the other way, thinking, "There but for the grace of God go I!" And if they don't, we think that's what they're thinking, because we've internalized the idea that we don't measure up.

Add to that everything else that puts us down, that makes us feel insecure: memories of childhood rebuffs, romantic rejections, career and social setbacks, pin-ups and put-downs, all bound up with those unrealistic expectations. Inevitably we have moments of feeling loathsome, unworthy. "Fuggly." Not every day. Not necessarily every week or month. But then we unexpectedly meet our reflection in a shop window ("Who is that?"). Or a mis-sized dress ("It says it's a size umpty-ump, and it's miles too small!"). Or an empty seat beside us in a crowded bus ("Everybody hates my body!"). Or even ordinary mood swings. Anything. And the wave of self-loathing can be too much to bear.

And yet, we know how beautiful we can be. We know that when our mind tells us we look terrific, something happens, shifts, and people notice how great we look. Our appearance is influenced by our thoughts. We know that we can change our thinking. Our thoughts belong to us, not to the people who would...belittle us. Yes, we know it, but at a level that is often hard to reach. Beauty is far from an absolute, our attractiveness to others depends a lot on who we are deep down, and our perception and feelings about that essential person.

Changing perceptions

"Yes, but," I hear a strident little voice say, "We filter the world through our minds and our past experiences, and come out ugly."

"Yes, but," I reply, "We are in charge of that perception. We can change how we see and judge ourselves. And come out...our own lovely selves."

That is an amazing truth. Nothing anybody says can make us ugly if we don't believe it. And when we change how we feel we look, others tend to see us that way too. In fact, the only thing we can change is ourselves. Society may change as a result, but it starts inside ourselves. Realizing this can give us the inner strength to do the work and find our beauty.

“Work? What kind of work? Sounds more like a miracle to me.” I heard that. Of course, those of us who have dieted our way through life know that when something sounds too good to be true, it usually is. No, it’s no miracle. Facing our demons, society’s demons, is work. Hard work. With remarkable results.

Helping ourselves, building ourselves

How to begin the work? However feels right for you. Some of us start the work by reviewing the strategies we have created for coping with setbacks, with situations that hurt and demean us. Some of those strategies worked when we chose them, but have outlived their usefulness—like talking back rationally to the strident voice in our mind. Others are as effective as they ever were—like wailing or holding our breath when we feel stressed and want attention.

The constructive strategies can be tapped and fortified. As for the destructive ones, they can be recognized, seen for what they are, accepted, and often they can be flipped around and make to work constructively. For example, changing breath holding to deep breathing in stressful situations. Our friends will have developed other strategies—we can share, learn, and apply them.

Another place to start is with our talents and skills. Ask yourself, “What am I good for?” I may be good at being happy, helping people, finishing jobs, inventing words, daydreaming. Sometimes it’s hard to think of our talents, but then we can ask someone close to us for help. List them. Apply them. Do what we do well, because a task successfully accomplished is a great builder of self-esteem. The task can be anything, from washing a window ‘till it’s invisible, to writing a poem, or shovelling a driveway, to reassessing your life goal . . .

And what about the moments when we forget that we ever felt capable, competent, worthy? How do we recognize that we deserve to feel that way again, by virtue of being human? That everyone deserves respect, acceptance and room to grow?

Call it a leap of faith. When I was at my lowest ebb, I found stepping stones and jumping-off places to make that leap in some unexpected places: the admiring look of my child, the example of a role model, the recollection of a past love, or even something as simple and self-nurturing as a bubble bath. Or talking with like-minded women, or on the pages of *Radiance* magazine. Knowing that I wasn’t alone, knowing that others were feeling what I was feeling, and railing against what was destroying me—and finding ways to defeat it—any and all of those, at one time or another, have given me the strength to do the work.

Curiously, my first step was to quit smoking. It gave me a sense of control over my life. I used an audiotape to do it. It helped me to go to sleep, but then I got bored with the tape, and bought another one in the local drug store. It was a cheap, mass produced self-confidence tape, not a very good one, a man repeatedly chanting glib affirmations that only remotely applied to me, but amazingly, it worked. It was another tiny stepping stone to push off from, towards self-acceptance

As my sense of self began to trickle back, I took a course for women in small business. They asked what kind of business I was considering. I shrugged and said, “I don’t know. Say, something to help large women find affirmation and self-acceptance.” The course made me think, and work, and gave me another push towards self-appreciation. After it was over, the business went on a back burner. Doing it was too risky. I still didn’t deserve to succeed. Yet.

I found other strategies. Telling the critical inner voices to stop! Logically examining some of the put-downs and dispelling their power. Keeping a journal. Confiding in a friend. Talking to my mirror. Developing snappy comebacks to the inner and outer voices.

A few setbacks arose. Working at a very stressful job, I suffered burnout. For a while, I chose therapy. That was another boost. Then I found a better job. I found the strength to turn my back on a bad relationship.

I started making my own audiotapes, aimed at helping with specific problems. They helped me, and friends saw that difference in me and wanted some too. My new job gave me new prestige, and besides, it paid twice as much as the old one. Then I took a leave of absence to start the business I had planned.

Getting there

Sounds quick and easy, when you say it really fast, doesn’t it? Well, it wasn’t. And isn’t. Nine years up from the bottom, much of it a struggle. But the rewards keep dribbling in too. Most of the time, my sense of self was improving. Still is, to this day. I’ve been asked if I’m “there” yet.

There? If “there” means never feeling weak, never feeling out of place or rejected or put down, I wonder if we are ever “there?” But if “there” is knowing enough to never say never, and recognizing that being human is as perfect as we get—then it becomes clear that “there” is a process rather than a goal, and that I am “there.”

As a part of that process, I’m running my business now, holding seminars and making audiotapes for women who realize that they sometimes have problems with their images

of themselves, their bodies and their worth. I named it YOU*NIQUE, because it is our uniqueness, not our dress size, that is the source of our worth.

I'm doing it for me as much as I am for the women who come to me looking for support and encouragement. Their response and growth is food for my growth, affirming my own intrinsic value. My sense of self blossoms as I help others to find ways of bolstering their own self-worth. I help them to develop bootstraps strong enough to pull themselves up by.

Some useful strategies for self-esteem

Self-Hypnosis or relaxation response: A way to open our subconscious minds to some of the other strategies below.

Affirmations: Positive statements that speak to our subconscious and counter negative messages.

Visual imagery: Vivid sensory images of one's self in affirming and constructive situations; mental rehearsal.

Exercise: In moderation, regular physical activity that we enjoy will produce neurochemicals that make us feel good.

Spirituality: Addressing our own spirituality, the source of love and creativity in the universe, for acceptance and affirmation.

Lucid dreaming: We learn to recognize when we are dreaming, and guide the dream to rehearse success and self-love.

Meditation: A method related to self-hypnosis and relaxation response, to clear our minds of destructive, critical chatter.

Journal: Putting our thoughts down on paper, non-critically, non-judgmentally—amazing some of the things that emerge.

Humour: Laughter, like pleasurable exercise, is a natural healer, and does wonderful things for us too.

Self-help and support groups: Remarkably helpful in truly embracing the fact that we're not alone in our fears and insecurities.

Audiotapes: These can incorporate a number of the other strategies above, and can be a relatively effortless way of applying them.

Change mode: Do something drastically different. If I'm largely logical and rational, I'd try art; if I'm an artist, I'd take a science course.

Mentor: Find someone we respect and admire (alive or dead or fictional), learn as much as we can about what she or he did that was extraordinary, and develop ways in which we can do the same.

Stop! When the "tape" in our heads comes up with its nonsense, learn to stop it cold with mental words like stop! or bunk!

Therapy: In extreme cases of low self-esteem, often with depression or burnout, we may need a professional therapist to help guide us back.

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