

THE SIX PILLARS OF SELF-ESTEEM



NATHANIEL
BRANDEN

ALSO BY NATHANIEL BRANDEN

HONORING THE SELF HOW TO RAISE YOUR SELF-ESTEEM

Available from Bantam Books

THE SIX Pillars OF SELF-ESTEEM

THE SIX Pillars OF SELF-ESTEEM

Nathaniel Branden

© 2011 Nathaniel Branden. All rights reserved.

Contents

[Copyright](#)

[Introduction](#)

PART I SELF-ESTEEM: BASIC PRINCIPLES

[1 Self-Esteem: The Immune System of Consciousness](#)

[2 The Meaning of Self-Esteem](#)

[3 The Face of Self-Esteem](#)

[4 The Illusion of Self-Esteem](#)

PART II INTERNAL SOURCES OF SELF-ESTEEM

[5 The Focus on Action](#)

[6 The Practice of Living Consciously](#)

[7 The Practice of Self-Acceptance](#)

[8 The Practice of Self-Responsibility](#)

[9 The Practice of Self-Assertiveness](#)

[10 The Practice of Living Purposefully.](#)

[11 The Practice of Personal Integrity.](#)

[12 The Philosophy of Self-Esteem](#)

PART III EXTERNAL INFLUENCES: SELF

AND OTHERS

[13 Nurturing a Child's Self-Esteem](#)

[14 Self-Esteem in the Schools](#)

[15 Self-Esteem and Work](#)

[16 Self-Esteem and Psychotherapy.](#)

[17 Self-Esteem and Culture](#)

[18 Conclusion: The Seventh Pillar of Self-Esteem](#)

[APPENDIX A: Critique of Other Definitions of Self-Esteem](#)

[APPENDIX B: A Sentence-Completion Exercise for Building Self-Esteem](#)

[APPENDIX C: Recommendations for Further Study.](#)

[References](#)

[Acknowledgments](#)

To Devers Branden

Introduction

My purpose in this book is to identify, in greater depth and

comprehensiveness than in my previous writings, the most important factors on which self-esteem depends. If self-esteem is the health of the mind, then few subjects are of comparable urgency.

The turbulence of our times demands strong selves with a clear sense of identity, competence, and worth. With a breakdown of cultural consensus, an absence of worthy role models, little in the public arena to inspire our allegiance, and disorientingly rapid change a permanent feature of our lives, it is a dangerous moment in history not to know who we are or not to trust ourselves. The stability we cannot find in the world we must create within our own persons. To face life with low self-esteem is to be at a severe disadvantage. These considerations are part of my motivation in writing this book.

In essence, the book consists of my answers to four questions: What is self-esteem? Why is self-esteem important? What can we do to raise the level of our self-esteem? What role do others play in influencing our self-esteem?

Self-esteem is shaped by both internal and external factors. By “internal” I mean factors residing within, or generated by, the individual—ideas or beliefs, practices or behaviors. By “external” I mean factors in the environment: messages verbally or nonverbally transmitted, or experiences

evoked, by parents, teachers, “significant others,” organizations, and culture. I examine self-esteem from the inside and the outside: What is the contribution of the individual to his or her self-esteem and what is the contribution of other people? To the best of my knowledge, no investigation of this scope has been attempted before.

When I published *The Psychology of Self-Esteem* in 1969, I told myself I had said everything I could say on this subject. In 1970, realizing that there were “a few more issues” I needed to address, I wrote *Breaking Free*. Then, in 1972, “to fill in a few more gaps,” I wrote *The Disowned Self*. After that, I told myself I was absolutely and totally finished with self-esteem and went on to write on other subjects. A decade or so passed, and I began to think about how much more I had personally experienced and learned about self-esteem since my first work, so I decided to write “one last book” about it; *Honoring the Self* was published in 1983. A couple of years later I thought it would be useful to write an action-oriented guide for individuals who wanted to work on their own self-esteem— *How to Raise Your Self-Esteem*, published in 1986. Surely I had finally finished with this subject, I told myself. But during this same period, “the self-esteem movement” exploded across the country; everyone was talking about self-esteem; books were written, lectures and conferences were given—and I

was not enthusiastic about the quality of what was being presented to people. I found myself in some rather heated discussions with colleagues. While some of what was offered on self-esteem was excellent, I thought that a good deal was not. I realized how many issues I had not yet addressed, how many questions I needed to consider that I had not considered before, and how much I had carried in my head but never actually said or written. Above all, I saw the necessity of going far beyond my earlier work in spelling out the factors that create and sustain high or healthy self-esteem. (I use “high” and “healthy” interchangeably.) Once again, I found myself drawn back to examine new aspects of this inexhaustibly rich field of study, and to think my way down to deeper levels of understanding of what is, for me, the single most important psychological subject in the world.

I understood that what had begun so many years before as an interest, or even a fascination, had become a mission.

Speculating on the roots of this passion, I go back to my teenage years, to the time when emerging autonomy collided with pressure to conform. It is not easy to write objectively about that period, and I do not wish to suggest an arrogance I did not and do not feel. The truth is, as an adolescent I had an inarticulate but sacred sense of mission about my life. I had the

conviction that nothing mattered more than retaining the ability to see the world through my own eyes. I thought that that was how everyone should feel. This perspective has never changed. I was acutely conscious of the pressures to “adapt” and to absorb the values of the “tribe”—family, community, and culture. It seemed to me that what was asked was the surrender of my judgment and also my conviction that my life and what I made of it was of the highest possible value. I saw my contemporaries surrendering and losing their fire—and, sometimes in painful, lonely bewilderment, I wanted to understand why. Why was growing up equated with giving up? If my overriding drive since childhood was for understanding, another desire, hardly less intense, was forming but not yet fully conscious: the desire to communicate my understanding to the world; above all, to communicate my vision of life. It was years before I realized that, at the deepest level, I experienced myself as a teacher—a teacher of *values*. Underneath all my work, the core idea I wanted to teach was: *Your life is important. Honor it. Fight for your highest possibilities.*

I had my own struggles with self-esteem, and I give examples of them in this book. The full context is given in my memoir, *Judgment Day*. I shall not pretend that everything I know about self-esteem I learned from psychotherapy clients. Some of the most important things I learned came

from thinking about my own mistakes and from noticing what I did that lowered or raised my own self-esteem. I write, in part, as a teacher to myself.

It would be foolish for me to declare that I have now written my final report on “the psychology of self-esteem.” But this book does feel like the climax of all the work that preceded it.

I first lectured on self-esteem and its impact on love, work, and the struggle for happiness in the late 1950s and published my first articles on the subject in the 1960s. The challenge then was to gain public understanding of its importance. “Self-esteem” was not yet an expression in widespread use. Today, the danger may be that the idea has become fashionable. It is on everyone’s tongue, which is not to say that it is better understood. Yet if we are unclear about its precise meaning and about the specific factors its successful attainment depends on—if we are careless in our thinking, or succumb to the oversimplifications and sugar-coatings of pop psychology—then the subject will suffer a fate worse than being ignored. It will become trivialized. That is why, in Part I, we begin our inquiry into the sources of self-esteem with an examination of what self-esteem is and is not.

When I first began struggling with questions concerning self-esteem forty years ago, I saw the subject as providing invaluable clues to

understanding motivation. It was 1954. I was twenty-four years of age, studying psychology at New York University, and with a small psychotherapy practice. Reflecting on the stories I heard from clients, I looked for a common denominator, and I was struck by the fact that whatever the person's particular complaint, there was always a deeper issue: a sense of inadequacy, of not being "enough," a feeling of guilt or shame or inferiority, a clear lack of self-acceptance, self-trust, and self-love. In other words, a problem of self-esteem.

In his early writings Sigmund Freud suggested that neurotic symptoms could be understood either as direct expressions of anxiety or else as defenses against anxiety, which seemed to me to be a hypothesis of great profundity. Now I began to wonder if the complaints or symptoms I encountered could be understood either as direct expressions of inadequate self-esteem (for example, feelings of worthlessness, or extreme passivity, or a sense of futility) or else as defenses against inadequate self-esteem (for example, grandiose bragging and boasting, compulsive sexual "acting-out," or overcontrolling social behavior). I continue to find this idea compelling. Where Freud thought in terms of *ego defense mechanisms*, strategies to avoid the threat to the ego's equilibrium represented by anxiety, today I think in terms of *self-esteem defense mechanisms*, strategies to defend

against any kind of threat, from any quarter, internal or external, to self-esteem (or one's pretense at it). In other words, all the famous "defenses" that Freud identified can be understood as efforts to protect self-esteem.

When I went to the library in search of information about self-esteem, almost none was to be found. The indexes of books on psychology did not contain the term. Eventually I found a few brief mentions, such as in William James, but nothing that seemed sufficiently fundamental or that brought the clarity I was seeking. Freud suggested that low "self-regard" was caused by a child's discovery that he or she could not have sexual intercourse with Mother or Father, which resulted in the helpless feeling, "I can do nothing." I did not find this persuasive or illuminating as an explanation. Alfred Adler suggested that everyone starts out with feelings of inferiority caused, first, by bringing some physical liability or "organ inferiority" into the world, and second, by the fact that everyone else (that is, grown-ups or older siblings) is bigger and stronger. In other words, our misfortune is that we are not born as perfectly formed mature adults. I did not find this helpful, either. A few psychoanalysts wrote about self-esteem, but in terms I found remote from my understanding of the idea, so that it was almost as if they were studying another subject. (Only much later could I see some connection between aspects of that work and my own.) I

struggled to clarify and expand my understanding chiefly by reflecting on what I observed while working with people.

As the issue of self-esteem came more clearly into focus for me, I saw that it is a profound and powerful human need, essential to healthy adaptiveness, that is, to optimal functioning and self-fulfillment. To the extent that the need is frustrated, we suffer and are thwarted in our development.

Apart from disturbances whose roots are biological, I cannot think of a single psychological problem—from anxiety and depression, to underachievement at school or at work, to fear of intimacy, happiness, or success, to alcohol or drug abuse, to spouse battering or child molestation, to co-dependency and sexual disorders, to passivity and chronic aimlessness, to suicide and crimes of violence—that is not traceable, at least in part, to the problem of deficient self-esteem. Of all the judgments we pass in life, none is as important as the one we pass on ourselves.

I recall discussing the issue with colleagues during the 1960s. No one debated the subject's importance. No one denied that if ways could be found to raise the level of a person's self-esteem, any number of positive consequences would follow. "But how do you raise an adult's self-esteem?" was a question I heard more than once, with a note of skepticism that it

could be done. As was evident from their writings, the issue—and the challenge—were largely ignored.

Pioneering family therapist Virginia Satir talked of the importance of self-esteem, but she was not a theoretician of the subject and said little about its dynamics except in a limited family context. Carl Rogers, another great pioneer in psychotherapy, focused essentially on only one aspect of self-esteem—self-acceptance—and we shall see that while the two are intimately related, they are not identical in meaning.

Still, awareness of the importance of the topic was growing, and during the seventies and eighties, an increasing number of articles appeared in professional journals, aimed chiefly at establishing correlations between self-esteem and some aspect of behavior. However, there was no general theory of self-esteem nor even an agreed-on definition of the term. Different writers meant different things by “self-esteem.” Consequently they often measured different phenomena. Sometimes one set of findings seemed to invalidate another. The field was a Tower of Babel. Today there is still no widely shared definition of self-esteem.

In the 1980s, the idea of self-esteem caught fire. After a quiet buildup over decades, more and more people began talking about its importance to human well-being. Educators in particular began thinking about the

relevance of self-esteem to success or failure at school. We have a National Council for Self-Esteem, with chapters opening in more and more cities. Almost every week somewhere in the country we have conferences in which discussions of self-esteem figure prominently.

The interest in self-esteem is not confined to the United States. It is becoming worldwide. In the summer of 1990 I had the privilege of delivering, near Oslo, Norway, the opening keynote address at the First International Conference on Self-Esteem. Educators, psychologists, and psychotherapists from the United States, Great Britain, and various countries in Europe, including the Soviet Union, streamed into Norway to attend lectures, seminars, and workshops devoted to discussions of the applications of self-esteem psychology to personal development, school systems, social problems, and business organizations. Notwithstanding the differences among participants in background, culture, primary focus of interest, and understanding of what precisely “self-esteem” meant, the atmosphere was charged with excitement and the conviction that self-esteem was an idea whose historical moment had arrived. Growing out of the Oslo conference, we now have an International Council on Self-Esteem, with more and more countries being represented.

In the former Soviet Union a small but growing group of thinkers is

keenly aware of the importance of self-esteem to the transitions their country is attempting to achieve. Commenting on the urgent need for education in self-esteem, a visiting Russian scholar remarked to me, “Not only are our people without any tradition of entrepreneurship, but our managers have absolutely no grasp of the idea of personal responsibility and accountability that the average American manager takes for granted. And you know what a gigantic problem passivity and envy is here. The psychological changes we need may be even more formidable than the political or economic changes.”

Throughout the world there is an awakening to the fact that, just as a human being cannot hope to realize his or her potential without healthy self-esteem, neither can a society whose members do not respect themselves, do not value their persons, do not trust their minds.

But with all of these developments, what precisely self-esteem *is*—and what specifically its attainment depends on— *remain the great questions*.

At one conference, when I stated that the practice of living consciously was essential to healthy self-esteem, one woman demanded angrily, “Why are you trying to impose your white, middle-class values on the rest of the world?” (This left me wondering who the class of humanity was for whom living consciously was *not* important to psychological well-being.) When I

spoke of personal integrity as vital to the protection of a positive self-concept, and the betrayal of integrity as psychologically harmful, no one volunteered agreement or wanted that idea recorded in our report. They preferred to focus only on how *others* might wound one's feelings of worth, not how one might inflict the wound oneself. This attitude is typical of those who believe one's self-esteem is primarily determined by other people. I will not deny that experiences such as these, and the feelings they ignite, have intensified my desire to write this book.

In working with self-esteem, we need to be aware of two dangers. One is that of oversimplifying what healthy self-esteem requires, and thereby of catering to people's hunger for quick fixes and effortless solutions. The other is that of surrendering to a kind of fatalism or determinism that assumes, in effect, that individuals "either have good self-esteem or they haven't," that everyone's destiny is set (forever?) by the first few years of life, and there's not much to be done about it (except perhaps years or decades of psychotherapy). Both views encourage passivity; both obstruct our vision of what is possible.

My experience is that most people underestimate their power to change and grow. They believe implicitly that yesterday's pattern must be tomorrow's. They do not see choices that—objectively—do exist. They

rarely appreciate how much they can do on their own behalf if genuine growth and higher self-esteem are their goals and if they are willing to take responsibility for their own lives. The belief that they are powerless becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy.

This book, ultimately, is a call to action. It is, I now realize, an amplification in psychological terms of the battle cry of my youth: A self is to be actualized and celebrated—not aborted and renounced. This book is addressed to all men and women who wish to participate actively in the process of their evolution—as well as to psychologists, parents, teachers, and those responsible for the culture of organizations. It is a book about what is possible.

PART I

Self-Esteem: Basic Principles

1

Self-Esteem: The Immune System of

Consciousness

There are realities we cannot avoid. One of them is the importance of self-esteem.

Regardless of what we do or do not admit, we cannot be indifferent to our self-evaluation. However, we can run from this knowledge if it makes

us uncomfortable. We can shrug it off, evade it, declare that we are only interested in “practical” matters, and escape into baseball or the evening news or the financial pages or a shopping spree or a sexual adventure or a drink.

Yet self-esteem is a fundamental human need. Its impact requires neither our understanding nor our consent. It works its way within us with or without our knowledge. We are free to seek to grasp the dynamics of self-esteem or to remain unconscious of them, but in the latter case we remain a mystery to ourselves and endure the consequences.

Let us look at the role of self-esteem in our lives.

A Preliminary Definition

By “self-esteem” I mean much more than that innate sense of self-worth that presumably is our human birthright—that spark that psychotherapists and teachers seek to fan in those they work with. That spark is only the anteroom to self-esteem.

Self-esteem, fully realized, is the experience that we are appropriate to life and to the requirements of life. More specifically, self-esteem is:

1. confidence in our ability to think, confidence in our ability to cope with the basic challenges of life; and
2. confidence in our right to be successful and happy, the feeling of

being worthy, deserving, entitled to assert our needs and wants, achieve our values, and enjoy the fruits of our efforts.

Later I will refine and condense this definition.

I do not share the belief that self-esteem is a gift we have only to claim (by reciting affirmations, perhaps). On the contrary, its possession over time represents an achievement. The goal of this book is to examine the nature and roots of that achievement.

The Basic Pattern

To trust one's mind and to know that one is worthy of happiness is the essence of self-esteem.

The power of this conviction about oneself lies in the fact that it is more than a judgment or a feeling. It is a motivator. It inspires behavior.

In turn, it is directly affected by how we act. Causation flows in both directions. There is a continuous feedback loop between our actions in the world and our self-esteem. The level of our self-esteem influences how we act, and how we act influences the level of our self-esteem.

To trust one's mind and to know that one is worthy of happiness is the essence of self-esteem.

If I trust my mind and judgment, I am more likely to operate as a thinking being. Exercising my ability to think, bringing appropriate

awareness to my activities, my life works better. This reinforces trust in my mind. If I distrust my mind, I am more likely to be mentally passive, to bring less awareness than I need to my activities, and less persistence in the face of difficulties. When my actions lead to disappointing or painful results, I feel justified in distrusting my mind.

With high self-esteem, I am more likely to persist in the face of difficulties. With low self-esteem, I am more likely to give up or go through the motions of trying without really giving my best. Research shows that high-self-esteem subjects will persist at a task significantly longer than low-self-esteem [subjects.1](#) If I persevere, the likelihood is that I will succeed more often than I fail. If I don't, the likelihood is that I will fail more often than I succeed. Either way, my view of myself will be reinforced.

If I respect myself and require that others deal with me respectfully, I send out signals and behave in ways that increase the likelihood that others will respond appropriately. When they do, I am reinforced and confirmed in my initial belief. If I lack self-respect and consequently accept discourtesy, abuse, or exploitation from others as natural, I unconsciously transmit this, and some people will treat me at my self-estimate. When this happens, and I submit to it, my self-respect deteriorates still more.

The value of self-esteem lies not merely in the fact that it allows us to

feel better but that it allows us to *live* better—to respond to challenges and opportunities more resourcefully and more appropriately.

The Impact of Self-Esteem: General

Observations

The level of our self-esteem has profound consequences for every aspect of our existence: how we operate in the workplace, how we deal with people, how high we are likely to rise, how much we are likely to achieve—and, in the personal realm, with whom we are likely to fall in love, how we interact with our spouse, children, and friends, what level of personal happiness we attain.

There are positive correlations between healthy self-esteem and a variety of other traits that bear directly on our capacity for achievement and for happiness. Healthy self-esteem correlates with rationality, realism, intuitiveness, creativity, independence, flexibility, ability to manage change, willingness to admit (and correct) mistakes, benevolence, and cooperativeness. Poor self-esteem correlates with irrationality, blindness to reality, rigidity, fear of the new and unfamiliar, inappropriate conformity or inappropriate rebelliousness, defensiveness,

overcompliant

or

overcontrolling behavior, and fear of or hostility toward others. We shall see that there is a logic to these correlations. The implications for survival, adaptiveness, and personal fulfillment are obvious. Self-esteem is life supporting and life enhancing.

High self-esteem seeks the challenge and stimulation of worthwhile and demanding goals. Reaching such goals nurtures good self-esteem. Low self-esteem seeks the safety of the familiar and undemanding. Confining oneself to the familiar and undemanding serves to weaken self-esteem.

The more solid our self-esteem, the better equipped we are to cope with troubles that arise in our personal lives or in our careers; the quicker we are to pick ourselves up after a fall; the more energy we have to begin anew.

(An extraordinarily high number of successful entrepreneurs have two or more bankruptcies in their past; failure did not stop them.)

The higher our self-esteem, the more ambitious we tend to be, not necessarily in a career or financial sense, but in terms of what we hope to experience in life—emotionally, intellectually, creatively, spiritually. The lower our self-esteem, the less we aspire to and the less we are likely to achieve. Either path tends to be self-reinforcing and self-perpetuating.

The higher our self-esteem, the stronger the drive to express ourselves, reflecting the sense of richness within. The lower our self-esteem, the more urgent the need to “prove” ourselves—or to forget ourselves by living mechanically and unconsciously.

The higher our self-esteem, the more open, honest, and appropriate our communications are likely to be, because we believe our thoughts have value and therefore we welcome rather than fear clarity. The lower our self-esteem, the more muddy, evasive, and inappropriate our communications are likely to be, because of uncertainty about our own thoughts and feelings and/or anxiety about the listener’s response.

The higher our self-esteem, the more disposed we are to form nourishing rather than toxic relationships. The reason is that like is drawn to like, health is attracted to health. Vitality and expansiveness in others are naturally more appealing to persons of good self-esteem than are emptiness and dependency.

An important principle of human relationships is that we tend to feel most comfortable, most “at home,” with persons whose self-esteem level resembles our own. Opposites may attract about some issues, but not about this one. High-self-esteem individuals tend to be drawn to high-self-esteem individuals. We do not see a passionate love affair, for example, between

persons at opposite ends of the self-esteem continuum—just as we are not likely to see a passionate romance between intelligence and stupidity. (I am not saying we might never see a “one-night stand,” but that is another matter. Note I am speaking of passionate love, not a brief infatuation or sexual episode, which can operate by a different set of dynamics.) Medium-self-esteem individuals are typically attracted to medium-self-esteem individuals. Low self-esteem seeks low self-esteem in others—not consciously, to be sure, but by the logic of that which leads us to feel we have encountered a “soul mate.” The most disastrous relationships are those between persons who think poorly of themselves; the union of two abysses does not produce a height.

We tend to feel most comfortable, most “at home,” with persons whose self-esteem level resembles our own.

The healthier our self-esteem, the more inclined we are to treat others with respect, benevolence, goodwill, and fairness—since we do not tend to perceive them as a threat, and since self-respect is the foundation of respect for others. With healthy self-esteem, we are not quick to interpret relationships in malevolent, adversarial terms. We do not approach encounters with automatic expectations of rejection, humiliation, treachery, or betrayal. Contrary to the belief that an individualistic orientation inclines

one to antisocial behavior, research shows that a well-developed sense of personal value and autonomy correlates significantly with kindness, generosity, social cooperation, and a spirit of mutual aid, as is confirmed, for instance, in A. S. Waterman's comprehensive review of the research in *The Psychology of Individualism*.

And finally, research discloses that high self-esteem is one of the best predictors of personal happiness, as is discussed in D. G. Meyers' *The Pursuit of Happiness*. Logically enough, low self-esteem correlates with unhappiness.

Love

It is not difficult to see the importance of self-esteem to success in the arena of intimate relationships. There is no greater barrier to romantic happiness than the fear that I am undeserving of love and that my destiny is to be hurt. Such fears give birth to self-fulfilling prophecies.

If I enjoy a fundamental sense of efficacy and worth, and experience myself as lovable, then I have a foundation for appreciating and loving others. The relationship of love feels natural; benevolence and caring feel natural. I have something to give; I am not trapped in feelings of deficiency; I have a kind of emotional "surplus" that I can channel into loving. And happiness does not make me anxious. Confidence in my competence and

worth, and in your ability to see and appreciate it, also gives birth to self-fulfilling prophecies.

There is no greater barrier to romantic happiness than the fear that I am undeserving of love and that my destiny is to be hurt.

But if I lack respect for and enjoyment of who I am, I have very little to give—except *my unfilled needs*. In my emotional impoverishment, I tend to see other people essentially as sources of approval or disapproval. I do not appreciate them for who they are in their own right. I see only what they can or cannot do for me. I am not looking for people whom I can admire and with whom I can share the excitement and adventure of life. I am looking for people who will not condemn me—and perhaps will be impressed by my persona, the face I present to the world. My ability to love remains undeveloped. This is one of the reasons why attempts at relationships so often fail—not because the vision of passionate or romantic love is intrinsically irrational, but because the self-esteem needed to support it is absent.

We have all heard the observation, “If you do not love yourself, you will be unable to love others.” Less well understood is the other half of the story. If I do not feel lovable, it is very difficult to believe that anyone else loves me. If I do not accept myself, how can I accept your love for me? Your

warmth and devotion are confusing: it confounds my self-concept, since I “know” I am not lovable. Your feeling for me cannot possibly be real, reliable, or lasting. If I do not feel lovable, your love for me becomes an effort to fill a sieve, and eventually the effort is likely to exhaust you. Even if I consciously disown my feelings of being unlovable, even if I insist that I am “wonderful,” the poor self-concept remains deep within to undermine my attempts at relationships. Unwittingly I become a saboteur of love.

I attempt love but the foundation of inner security is not there. Instead there is the secret fear that I am destined only for pain. So I pick someone who inevitably will reject or abandon me. (In the beginning I pretend I do not know this, so the drama can be played out.) Or, if I pick someone with whom happiness might be possible, I subvert the relationship by demanding excessive reassurances, by venting irrational possessiveness, by making catastrophes of small frictions, by seeking to control through subservience or domination, by finding ways to reject my partner before my partner can reject me.

A few vignettes will convey how poor self-esteem shows up in the area of the intimately personal:

“Why do I always fall for Mr. Wrong?” a woman in therapy asks me.

Her father abandoned the family when she was seven, and on more than one occasion her mother had screamed at her, “If you weren’t so much trouble, maybe your father wouldn’t have left us!” As an adult, she “knows” that her fate is to be abandoned. She “knows” that she does not deserve love. Yet she longs for a relationship with a man. The conflict is resolved by selecting men—often married—who clearly do not care for her in a way that would sustain her for any length of time. She is proving that her tragic sense of life is justified.

When we “know” we are doomed, we behave in ways to make reality conform to our “knowledge.” We are anxious when there is dissonance between our “knowledge” and the perceivable facts. Since our “knowledge” is not to be doubted or questioned, it is the facts that have to be altered: hence self-sabotage.

A man falls in love, the woman returns his feeling, and they marry. But nothing she can do is ever enough to make him feel loved for longer than a moment; he is insatiable. However, she is so committed to him that she perseveres. When at last she convinces him that she really loves him and he is no longer able to doubt it, he begins to wonder whether he set his standards too low. He wonders whether she is really good enough for him. Eventually he leaves her, falls in love with another woman, and

the dance begins again.

Everyone knows the famous Groucho Marx joke that he would never join a club that would have him for a member. That is exactly the idea by which some low-self-esteem people operate their love life. If you love me, obviously you are not good enough for me. Only someone who will reject me is an acceptable object of my devotion.

A woman feels compelled to tell her husband, who adores her, all the ways in which other women are superior to her. When he does not agree, she ridicules him. The more passionately he worships her, the more cruelly she demeans him. Finally she exhausts him, and he walks out of their marriage. She is hurt and astonished. How could she have so misjudged him? she wonders. Soon she tells herself, “I always knew no one could ever truly love me.” She always felt she was unlovable and now she has proved it.

The tragedy of many people’s lives is that, given a choice between being “right” and having an opportunity to be happy, they invariably choose being “right.” That is the one ultimate satisfaction they allow themselves.

A man “knows” that it is not his destiny to be happy. He feels he does not deserve to be. (And besides, his happiness might wound his parents, who have never known any happiness of their own.) But when he finds a

woman he admires and who attracts him, and she responds, he is happy. For a while, he forgets that romantic fulfillment is not his “story,” not his “life script.” Surrendering to his joy, he temporarily forgets that it does violence to his self-concept and thus makes him feel out of alignment with “reality.” Eventually, however, the joy triggers anxiety, as it would have to for one who feels misaligned with the way things *really* are. To reduce his anxiety, he must reduce his joy. So, guided unconsciously by the deepest logic of his self-concept, he begins to destroy the relationship.

Once again we observe the basic pattern of self-destruction: If I “know” my fate is to be unhappy, I must not allow reality to confuse me with happiness. It is not I who must adjust to reality, but reality that must adjust to me and to my “knowledge” of the way things are and are meant to be. Note that it is not always necessary to destroy the relationship entirely, as in the vignettes above. It may be acceptable that the relationship continue, *providing I am not happy*. I may engage in a project called *struggling to be happy* or *working on our relationship*. I may read books on the subject, participate in seminars, attend lectures, or enter psychotherapy with the announced aim of being happy *in the future*. But not now; not today. The possibility of happiness in the present is too terrifyingly

immediate.

What is required for many of us, paradoxical though it may sound, is the courage to tolerate happiness without self-sabotage.

“Happiness anxiety” is very common. Happiness can activate internal voices saying I don’t deserve this, or it will never last, or I’m riding for a fall, or I’m killing my mother or father by being happier than they ever were, or life is not like this, or people will be envious and hate me, or happiness is only an illusion, or nobody else is happy so why should I be? What is required for many of us, paradoxical though it may sound, is the courage to *tolerate* happiness without self-sabotage until such time as we lose the fear of it and realize that it will not destroy us (and need not disappear). One day at a time, I will tell clients; see if you can get through today without doing anything to undermine or subvert your good feelings—and if you “fall off the wagon,” don’t despair, pull yourself back and recommit yourself to happiness. Such perseverance is self-esteem building. Further, we need to confront those destructive voices, not run from them; engage them in inner dialogue; challenge them to give their reasons; patiently answer and refute their nonsense—dealing with them as one might deal with real people; and distinguish them from the voice of our adult self.

The Workplace

Next, consider workplace examples of behavior inspired by poor self-esteem:

A man receives a promotion in his company and is swallowed by panic at the thought of not possibly being able to master the new challenges and responsibilities. “I’m an impostor! I don’t belong here!” he tells himself. Feeling in advance that he is doomed, he is not motivated to give his best. Unconsciously he begins a process of self-sabotage: coming to meetings underprepared, being harsh with staff one minute and placating and solicitous the next, clowning at inappropriate moments, ignoring signals of dissatisfaction from his boss. Predictably, he is fired. “I knew it was too good to be true,” he tells himself.

If I die by my own hand, at least I am still in control; I spare myself the anxiety of waiting for destruction from some unknown source. The anxiety of feeling out of control is unbearable; I must end it any way I can.

A manager reads a superb idea proposed by a subordinate, feels a sinking sense of humiliation that the idea did not occur to her, imagines being overtaken and surpassed by the subordinate—and begins plotting to bury the proposal.

This kind of destructive envy is a product of an impoverished sense of self. Your achievement threatens to expose my emptiness; the world will

see—worse still, *I* will see—how insignificant I am. Generosity toward the achievements of others is emblematic of self-esteem.

A man meets his new boss—and is dismayed and angered because the boss is a woman. He feels wounded and diminished in his masculinity. He fantasizes degrading her sexually—“putting her in her place.” His feeling of being threatened shows up as sullen and subtly uncooperative behavior.

It would be hard to name a more certain sign of poor self-esteem than the need to perceive some other group as inferior. A man whose notion of “power” is stuck at the level of “sexual domination” is a man frightened of women, frightened of ability or self-assurance, frightened of *life*.

It would be hard to name a more certain sign of poor self-esteem than the need to perceive some other group as inferior.

The head of a research and development lab is informed that the firm has brought in a brilliant scientist from another company. He immediately translates this to mean that his superiors are dissatisfied with his work, in spite of much evidence to the contrary. He imagines his authority and status slipping away. He imagines the new man eventually being appointed head of the department. In a fit of blind rebelliousness, he allows his work to deteriorate. When his lapses are

gently pointed out to him, he lashes out defensively—and quits.

When our illusion of self-esteem rests on the fragile support of never being challenged, when our insecurity finds evidence of rejection where no rejection exists, then it is only a matter of time until our inner bomb explodes. The form of the explosion is self-destructive behavior—and the fact that one may have an extraordinary intelligence is no protection.

Brilliant people with low self-esteem act against their interests every day.

An auditor from an independent accounting firm meets with the CEO of the client organization. He knows he needs to tell this man some news he will not want to hear. Unconsciously he fantasizes being in the presence of his intimidating father—and stutters and stammers and does not communicate one third of what he had intended. His hunger for this CEO's approval, or the wish to avoid his disapproval, over-whelms his professional judgment. Later, after putting into his written report all the things he should have said to the CEO in person before the report was released, when remedial action might still have been possible, he sits in his office, trembling with anxiety, anticipating the CEO's reaction.

When we are moved primarily by fear, sooner or later we precipitate the very calamity we dread. If we fear condemnation, we behave in ways that ultimately elicit disapproval. If we fear anger, eventually we make people

angry.

A woman who is new to the marketing department of her firm gets what she believes is a brilliant idea. She imagines putting it on paper, marshaling arguments to support it, working toward getting it to the person with authority to act. Then an inner voice whispers, “Who are you to have good ideas? Don’t make yourself conspicuous. Do you want people to laugh at you?” She imagines the angry face of her mother, who had always been jealous of her intelligence; the wounded face of her father, who had been threatened by it. Within a few days she can barely remember what the idea was.

When we doubt our minds, we tend to discount its products. If we fear intellectual self-assertiveness, perhaps associating it with loss of love, we mute our intelligence. We dread being visible; so we make ourselves invisible, then suffer because no one sees us.

He is a boss who always has to be right. He takes pleasure in emphasizing his superiority. In encounters with staff, he cannot hear a suggestion without the urge to “massage it into something better,” something that “puts my stamp on it.” “Why aren’t my people more innovative?” he likes to say. “Why can’t they be more creative?” But he also likes to say, “There’s only one king of the jungle” or, in more

restrained moments, “But someone has to lead the organization.” With a pretense at regret he will sometimes declare, “I can’t help it—I have a big ego.” The truth is, he has a small one, but his energies are invested in never knowing that.

Once again we note that poor self-esteem can show up as lack of generosity toward the contributions of others or a tendency to fear their ability—and, in the case of a leader or manager, an inability to elicit their best from people.

The point of such stories is certainly not to condemn or ridicule those who suffer from poor self-esteem but to alert us to the power of self-esteem in influencing our responses. Problems such as I am describing can all be reversed. But the first step is to appreciate the dynamics involved.

Self-Fulfilling Prophecies

Self-esteem creates a set of implicit expectations about what is possible and appropriate to us. These expectations tend to generate the actions that turn them into realities. And the realities confirm and strengthen the original beliefs. Self-esteem—high or low—tends to be a generator of self-fulfilling prophecies.

Such expectations may exist in the mind as subconscious or semiconscious visions of our future. Educational psychologist E. Paul

Torrance, commenting on the accumulating scientific evidence that our implicit assumptions about the future powerfully affect motivation, writes, “In fact, a person’s image of the future may be a better predictor of future attainment than his past performances.” [2](#) What we make an effort to learn and what we achieve is based, at least in part, on what we think is possible and appropriate to us.

Self-esteem—high or low—tends to be a generator of self-fulfilling prophecies.

While an inadequate self-esteem can severely limit an individual’s aspirations and accomplishments, the consequences of the problem need not be so obvious. Sometimes the consequences show up in more indirect ways. The time bomb of a poor self-concept may tick silently for years while an individual, driven by a passion for success and exercising genuine ability, may rise higher and higher in his profession. Then, without real necessity, he starts cutting corners, morally or legally, in his eagerness to provide more lavish demonstrations of his mastery. Then he commits more flagrant offenses still, telling himself that he is “beyond good and evil,” as if challenging the Fates to bring him down. Only at the end, when his life and career explode in disgrace and ruin, can we see for how many years he has been moving relentlessly toward the final act of an unconscious life script

he may have begun writing at the age of three. It is not difficult to think of well-publicized figures who might fit this description.

Self-concept is destiny. Or, more precisely, it tends to be. Our self-concept is who and what we consciously and subconsciously think we are—our physical and psychological traits, our assets and liabilities, possibilities and limitations, strengths and weaknesses. A self-concept contains or includes our level of self-esteem, but is more global. We cannot understand a person's behavior without understanding the self-concept behind it.

In less spectacular ways than in the story above, people sabotage themselves at the height of their success all the time. They do so when success clashes with their implicit beliefs about what is appropriate to them. It is frightening to be flung beyond the limits of one's idea of who one is. If a self-concept cannot accommodate a given level of success, and if the self-concept does not change, it is predictable that the person will find ways to self-sabotage.

Here are examples from my psychotherapy practice:

“I was on the verge of getting the biggest commission of my career,” an architect says, “and my anxiety shot through the roof—because this project would have lifted me to a level of fame beyond anything I could have handled. I hadn't taken a drink in three years. So I told myself it

was safe to have one drink—to celebrate. I ended up smashed, insulted the people who would have given me the assignment, lost it of course, and my partner was so enraged he quit on me. I was devastated, but I was back in ‘safe territory’ again, struggling to rise but not yet breaking through. I’m comfortable there.”

“I was determined,” says a woman who owns a small chain of boutiques, “not to be stopped by my husband or anyone else. I did not fault my husband because he earned less than I did, and I would not allow him to fault me for earning more than he did. But there was this voice inside saying I was not supposed to be this successful—no woman was. I didn’t deserve it—no woman could. I became careless. Neglected important phone calls. Became irritable with staff—and customers. And kept getting angrier and angrier with my husband, without ever naming the real issue. After a particularly bad fight with him, I was having lunch with one of our buyers, and something she said set me off, and there was this great big blowup, right there in the restaurant. I lost the account. I began making inexcusable mistakes.... Now, three years and a lot of nightmares later, I’m trying to build the business back up again.”

“I was in line for a promotion I had wanted for a long time,” says an executive. “My life was in perfect order. A good marriage; healthy kids

doing well in school. And it had been years since I'd fooled around with another woman. If there was a problem, it was only that I really wanted more money, and now I seemed all set to get it. It was anxiety that tipped me over I woke up in the middle of the night, wondering if I were having a heart attack, but the doctor said it was just anxiety. Why it came, who knows? Sometimes I feel I'm just not meant to be too happy. It feels wrong. I don't think I've ever felt I deserved it. Whatever it was, the anxiety kept building, and one day, at an office party, I came on to the wife of one of my bosses—stupidly and clumsily. It's a miracle I wasn't fired; when she told her husband, I expected to be. I didn't get the promotion, and the anxiety died down.”

What is the common element in these stories? Happiness anxiety; success anxiety. The dread and disorientation that persons with poor self-esteem experience when life goes well in ways that conflict with their deepest view of themselves and of what is appropriate to them.

Regardless of the context in which self-destructive behavior occurs, or the form it takes, the motor of such behavior is the same: poor self-esteem.

It is poor self-esteem that places us in an adversarial relationship to our well-being.

Self-Esteem as a Basic Need

If the power of self-esteem derives from the fact that it is a profound need, what precisely is a *need*?

A need is that which is required for our effective functioning. We do not merely *want* food and water, we *need* them; without them, we die.

However, we have other nutritional needs, such as for calcium, whose impact is less direct and dramatic. In some regions in Mexico the soil contains no calcium; the inhabitants of these regions do not perish outright, but their growth is stunted, they are generally debilitated, and they are prey to many diseases to which the lack of calcium makes them highly susceptible. *They are impaired in their ability to function.*

Self-esteem is a need analogous to calcium, rather than to food or water.

Lacking it to a serious degree, we do not necessarily die, but we are impaired in our ability to function.

To say that self-esteem is a need is to say:

That it makes an essential contribution to the life process.

That it is indispensable to normal and healthy development.

That it has survival value.

We should note that sometimes lack of self-esteem does eventuate in death in fairly direct ways—for example, by a drug overdose, defiantly reckless driving of an automobile, remaining with a murderously abusive

spouse, participating in gang wars, or suicide. However, for most of us the consequences of poor self-esteem are subtler, less direct, more circuitous. We may need a good deal of reflection and self-examination to appreciate how our deepest view of ourselves shows up in the ten thousand choices that add up to our destiny.

An inadequate self-esteem may reveal itself in a bad choice of mate, a marriage that brings only frustration, a career that never goes anywhere, aspirations that are somehow always sabotaged, promising ideas that die stillborn, a mysterious inability to enjoy successes, destructive eating and living habits, dreams that are never fulfilled, chronic anxiety or depression, persistently low resistance to illness, overdependence on drugs, an insatiable hunger for love and approval, children who learn nothing of self-respect or the joy of being. In brief, a life that feels like a long string of defeats, for which the only consolation, perhaps, is that sad mantra, “So who’s happy?”

When self-esteem is low, our resilience in the face of life’s adversities is diminished. We crumble before vicissitudes that a healthier sense of self could vanquish. We are far more likely to succumb to a tragic sense of our existence and to feelings of impotence. We tend to be more influenced by the desire to avoid pain than to experience joy. Negatives have more power

over us than positives. If we do not believe in ourselves—neither in our efficacy nor in our goodness—the universe is a frightening place.

High-self-esteem people can surely be knocked down by an excess of troubles, but they are quicker to pick themselves up again.

For this reason I have come to think of positive self-esteem as, in effect, *the immune system of consciousness*, providing resistance, strength, and a capacity for regeneration. Just as a healthy immune system does not guarantee that one will never become ill, but makes one less vulnerable to disease and better equipped to overcome it, so a healthy self-esteem does not guarantee that one will never suffer anxiety or depression in the face of life's difficulties, but makes one less susceptible and better equipped to cope, rebound, and transcend. High-self-esteem people can surely be knocked down by an excess of troubles, but they are quicker to pick themselves up again.

That self-esteem has more to deal with resilience than with imperviousness to suffering needs be emphasized. I am reminded of an experience some years ago while writing *Honoring the Self*. For reasons that are irrelevant here, I had great difficulty in the writing of that book; while I am happy with the final result, it did not come easily. There was one week that was very bad; nothing my brain produced was right. One

afternoon my publisher dropped by for a visit. I was feeling tired, depressed, and a bit irritable. Sitting opposite him in my living room, I remarked, “This is one of those days when I ask myself whatever made me imagine I know how to write a book. Whatever made me think I know anything about self-esteem? Whatever made me think I had anything to contribute to psychology?” Just what a publisher likes to hear from his author. As I had written six books by then and been lecturing on self-esteem for many years, he was understandably dismayed. “What?” he exclaimed. “*Nathaniel Branden* has such feelings?” The expression of disorientation and astonishment on his face was comical—so much so that I burst out laughing. “Well, of course,” I answered. “The only distinction I’ll claim is that I have a sense of humor about it. And that I know these feelings will pass. And that whatever I think, say, or feel this week, I know that in the end the book will be good.”

Too Much Self-Esteem?

The question is sometimes asked, “Is it possible to have too much self-esteem?” No, it is not; no more than it is possible to have too much physical health or too powerful an immune system. Sometimes self-esteem is confused with boasting or bragging or arrogance; but such traits reflect not too much self-esteem, but too little; they reflect a lack of self-esteem.

Persons of high self-esteem are not driven to make themselves superior to others; they do not seek to prove their value by measuring themselves against a comparative standard. Their joy is in being who they are, not in being better than someone else. I recall reflecting on this issue one day while watching my dog playing in the backyard. She was running about, sniffing flowers, chasing squirrels, leaping into the air, showing great joy in being alive (from my anthropomorphic perspective). She was not thinking (I am sure) that she was *more* glad to be alive than was the dog next door. She was simply delighting in her own existence. That image captures something essential of how I understand the experience of healthy self-esteem.

People with troubled self-esteem are often uncomfortable in the presence of those with higher self-esteem and may feel resentful and declare, “They have *too much* self-esteem.” But what they are really making is a statement about themselves.

Insecure men, for instance, often feel more insecure in the presence of self-confident women. Low-self-esteem individuals often feel irritable in the presence of people who are enthusiastic about life. If one partner in a marriage whose self-esteem is deteriorating sees that the partner’s self-esteem is growing, the response is sometimes anxiety and an attempt to

sabotage the growth process.

The sad truth is, whoever is successful in this world runs the risk of being a target. People of low achievement often envy and resent people of high achievement. Those who are unhappy often envy and resent those who are happy.

And those of low self-esteem sometimes like to talk about the danger of having “too much self-esteem.”

When Nothing Is “Enough”

As I observed above, a poor self-esteem does not mean that we will necessarily be incapable of achieving any real values. Some of us may have the talent, energy, and drive to achieve a great deal, in spite of feelings of inadequacy or unworthiness—like the highly productive workaholic who is driven to prove his worth to, say, a father who predicted he would always be a loser. But it does mean that we will be less effective and less creative than we have the power to be; and it means that we will be crippled in our ability to find joy in our achievements. Nothing we do will ever feel like “enough.”

If my aim is to prove I am “enough,” the project goes on to infinity—because the battle was already lost on the day I conceded the issue was debatable.

While poor self-esteem often undercuts the capacity for real accomplishment, even among the most talented, it does not necessarily do so. *What is far more certain is that it undercuts the capacity for satisfaction.* This is a painful reality well known to many high achievers. “Why,” a brilliantly successful businessman said to me, “is the pain of my failures so much more intense and lasting than the pleasure of my successes, even though there have been so many more successes than failures? Why is happiness so fleeting and mortification so enduring?” A few minutes later he added, “In my mind I see the face of my father mocking me.” The subconscious mission of his life, he came to realize, was not to express who he was but to show his father (now deceased for over a decade) that he could amount to something.

When we have unconflicted self-esteem, joy is our motor, not fear. It is happiness that we wish to experience, not suffering that we wish to avoid. Our purpose is self-expression, not self-avoidance or self-justification. Our motive is not to “prove” our worth but to live our possibilities.

If my aim is to prove I am “enough,” the project goes on to infinity—because the battle was already lost on the day I conceded the issue was debatable. So it is always “one more” victory—one more promotion, one more sexual conquest, one more company, one more piece of jewelry, a

larger house, a more expensive car, another award—yet the void within remains unfilled.

In today's culture some frustrated people who hit this impasse announce that they have decided to pursue a “spiritual” path and renounce their egos.

This enterprise is doomed to failure. An ego, in the mature and healthy sense, is precisely what they have failed to attain. They dream of giving away what they do not possess. No one can successfully bypass the need for self-esteem.

A Word of Caution

If one error is to deny the importance of self-esteem, another is to claim too much for it. In their enthusiasm, some writers today seem to suggest that a healthy sense of self-value is all we need to assure happiness and success. The matter is more complex than that. Self-esteem is not an all-purpose panacea. Aside from the question of the external circumstances and opportunities that may exist for us, a number of internal factors clearly can have an impact—such as energy level, intelligence, and achievement drive. (Contrary to what we sometimes hear, this last is not correlated with self-esteem in any simple or direct way, in that such a drive can be powered by negative motivation as well as by positive, as, for example, when one is propelled by fear of losing love or status rather than by the joy of self-

expression.) A well-developed sense of self is a necessary condition of our well-being but not a sufficient condition. Its presence does not guarantee fulfillment, but its lack guarantees some measure of anxiety, frustration, or despair. *

Self-esteem is not a substitute for a roof over one's head or food in one's stomach, but it increases the likelihood that one will find a way to meet such needs. Self-esteem is not a substitute for the knowledge and skills one needs to operate effectively in the world, but it increases the likelihood that one will acquire them.

In Abraham Maslow's famous "hierarchy of needs," he places self-esteem "above" (that is, as coming after) core survival needs such as for food and water, and there is one obvious sense in which this is valid. At the same time, it is a misleading oversimplification. People sometimes relinquish life itself in the name of issues crucial to their self-esteem. And surely his belief that being "accepted" is a more basic need than self-esteem [must also be challenged.](#)³

Self-esteem is not a substitute for a roof over one's head or food in one's stomach, but it increases the likelihood that one will find a way to meet such needs.

The basic fact remains that self-esteem is an urgent need. It proclaims