

Developing Self-Esteem in Teens and Young Adults

By Rebecca Farnell, MC RCC

Introduction- Setting the stage

Hi, my name is Rebecca. I am a Registered Clinical Counsellor in Beautiful British Columbia, Canada. I was asked to talk about ways to develop self-esteem in teens and young adults with ASD and other neurodiversity. This is something that I am really passionate about. I wanted the information that I am sharing to be useful and not just some professional lingo, so I imagined us having a conversation together. What would I want to share? What is important for you to know? The language that I have used is causal because I think it is important to understand what you are reading and for it to be practical. I hope you can picture us sitting over a coffee (or whatever drink you prefer) or going for a walk or whatever way you feel most comfortable, taking and sharing together.



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You are so much more than simply a name, or a diagnosis. You are a person. You might have heard the expression that there is no one else in the world like you and it is true. You have your own interests; you have certain likes and dislikes. You have specific skills and abilities. You have your own personality, sense of humour and way of being.

Guess what? It is okay to like yourself. Now, I know this might sound ridiculous, stupid, or perhaps even impossible. But You Matter. However, far too often, you might not believe this.



When we speak about self-esteem and self-confidence, it is important to take some time to ask yourself important questions. Most likely you have heard of the words self-esteem or self-confidence. But what exactly do they mean? And more importantly, what is the difference and why are they so important?

Let's start with Self-esteem. Self-esteem refers to how you feel about yourself. The word "esteem" means to think favorably or highly of something. The idea of self-esteem is the notion that you think highly of yourself if you have 'good' self-esteem, and you think low of yourself if you have 'poor' self-esteem. Self-esteem is your overall sense of worth or value, basically, how much you like yourself.

Self Confidence is the belief in yourself, in your abilities and powers. You might be good at art, playing an instrument, beating a certain level in a video game, or understanding the bus route. This is something you do well at, you are confident in your abilities to do certain things. Your self-confidence might be high in some areas and lower in others. This is completely natural.

As your self-confidence increases, your overall self-esteem increases too.



So why is self-esteem important? This is a great question and one that probably has lots of different answers. It may even be a question you have asked yourself.

The better you feel about yourself, the easier it is to engage with yourself and others. This toolkit will explore some of the ways to increase self-esteem in different areas of your life.

It is important to remember that how you view yourself affects so many areas of your life:

- Your relationships- as you are more confident, you can engage easier with others, share your opinion, and ask for what you need.
- Your physical health- our physical health and our self-esteem are connected, when we are taking care of ourselves physically our overall self-esteem is greater too.
- Your emotional health- You are so much more than your thoughts! However, our thoughts greatly affect our overall well-being.

We will go through these areas (and more) in greater detail in the toolkit.



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As with many things in life, there are many different factors that can affect your self-esteem:

- Age- typically the older you get; your self-confidence increases as you gain more skills and learn more about yourself. When you are younger, often people have lower self-confidence as they are still learning and growing.
- Disability- having a disability can be challenging as there can be many different obstacles that are placed in your way. This can negatively impact the way you think and feel about yourself.

- Family- Without a doubt your family shapes your life. If your family is supportive and caring, that helps with your self-esteem. However, many people do not have safety in their family, and this negatively affects their self-esteem.
- Physical abilities- Let's face it. You cannot do everything. Some people are athletic. Others are creative. Some are great with numbers. Others have incredible memories. Too often comparing yourself to other people and their abilities can rob you of recognizing your own abilities.
- Illness/sickness- Some people have conditions that limit their abilities. This can affect their self-esteem greatly.
- Life experiences- every person has different experiences that have shaped their life either negatively or positively. Examples include: moving to a new city or a new school, parents' divorce, bullying, friendship challenges and work conflicts.

Holistic Approach- You are made up of many parts

You are a complex human being. Made up of many parts. All these parts play a role in how you interact in the world and with yourself.

You might be confident in one area but not as confident in another. Or you might lack confidence in all these areas. It is important to try and build confidence in all these areas as they make up the parts of who you are.

Who am I- You are many parts:

1. Physically- Your physical body. What the world sees when they look at you.
2. Mentally- Your Mind-Your thoughts. How you think of yourself and different situations
3. Emotionally- Your heart-Your feelings. How you interpret situations.
4. Socially/Relationally- Your relationships- How you interact with the world.

Physically: taking care of your body



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For better or for worse, your body is the first thing that people see when they interact with you. So, it is important to take care of your body.

Importance of Hygiene- how I present to the world.

Even if you don't feel like, it is so important to make sure you look and smell clean. This can be very complicated and often might take a lot of effort, however, it is important to find a hygiene routine that works for you that includes showering and or bathing plus keeping your teeth clean.

Your body is the way you move around in the world. It is important to take good care of it. As we have mentioned before, each person is unique, so each person has different things that they enjoy. When it comes to your body, you do not need to be going to the gym 5 times a week, unless this is something you enjoy. It is more important to find a way to keep healthy and engage in physical fitness. Here are a few ideas:

- Join a sports team
- Try a yoga class
- Go swimming
- Try Zumba
- Go for a run



Exercise has so many incredible health benefits:

- it helps lower stress
- it helps you get a better sleep
- it makes your heart healthier
- it boosts your brain power

To increase your self-esteem and confidence, it is important to keep your body strong and healthy. Let's face it, sometimes you might not want to move your body and come up with many excuses, however, sticking to a routine is important. Find a time in the day that works best for you. Perhaps listen to music or a podcast as you exercise or ask a friend or family member to be your accountability buddy and ask them to exercise with you.

By taking care of yourself, you are showing yourself that you are worthy of being taken care of. You are reminding yourself that you matter and taking care of yourself is an important step to do that.

When it comes to taking care of ourselves, often people use the term "self-care." For some people it might look like treating yourself to some pampering, maybe getting your nails done, new clothes or a bath. Or enjoying a yummy treat or watching a movie or tv show you enjoy. While it is so important to partake in things you enjoy, it is also important to do the seemingly mundane and boring tasks too.

This might look like:

- Getting a good night sleep
- Taking your medication
- Brushing your teeth
- Having a shower
- Drinking water
- Doing your laundry
- Keeping up with your dishes
- Eating nutritious food

Self-Care is about taking care of yourself, even when it is hard. When you take care of yourself, you feel better about yourself. You are reminded that you are worth being taken care of.

It is important to note that many folks with autism and neuro diversity, might have struggles with different sensory issues. We live in a world full of sights, smells, and sounds. It might be really overwhelming at times. Unfortunately, many places are not accommodating to differences, so often you might need to help make yourself more comfortable.

Some ideas could look like:

Wearing headphones in loud spaces

Asking for lights to be dimmed or wearing sunglasses

Finding clothes that you feel comfortable wearing

Steps to try to understand and increase self-confidence physically



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Remember that you present yourself to the world with your body. It is really important to take the time to take care of your body, when we take care of your body, you begin to feel better about yourself.

- Start SLOW! When it comes to exercise or moving your body, be realistic. If you have not done any exercise for a long time, you are not going to be successful in trying to work out 5 days a week. Start small. Get into the habit.
- Think about one new self-care practice and try it for 1 month. If you can, tell someone about it and ask them to check in with you about it, we are better together!

- Remind yourself...often! When you are adding something new to your routine, it will take time and you might forget. Write yourself a note and put it somewhere you will see it. Or use your phone and set a reminder for yourself.

Mentally: taking care of your mind.

Your mind is important. Really important. Just like you need to keep your body strong and healthy. You need to keep your mind healthy and strong. Your mind is the brains of the operation...literally. Learning about all the inner workings of the brain is out of the scope of this toolkit, instead, this section will speak more about your thoughts and how to take care of your mind.

You have many thoughts going through your mind, perhaps you might be thinking about something you did years ago. Or you might be thinking about what to eat for dinner. Sometimes we have thoughts that are not so helpful and downright negative. Your thoughts are incredibly powerful BUT, it is vitally important to remember: DO NOT BELIEVE EVERYTHING YOU THINK!

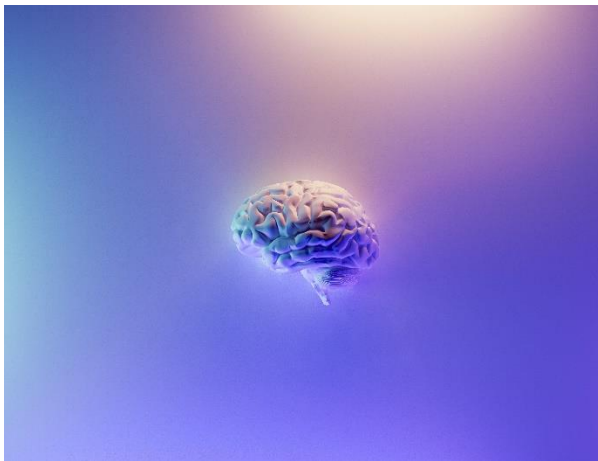


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Just because you think it, does NOT mean it is true. Especially when it comes to feeling about yourself, do NOT believe everything you think. You are most likely NOT the best judge of what is true and not true about yourself. Often your thoughts about yourself are too harsh or not accurate.

Something that is really helpful to learn about when it comes to your thoughts is understanding *Cognitive Distortions* and what ones are the most common for you. Basically, cognitive distortions are distorted, blurred or inaccurate thoughts; something you might believe is true, but really it is not. They are irrational thoughts that often can negatively affect your emotions. (See the next section on Emotions for more information on the connection between our thoughts and our emotions).



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Here are some examples of *Cognitive Distortions*. As you read through the list, see what ones you seem to gravitate towards. Typically, there are some that folks tend to go towards more than others.

- Catastrophizing- Thinking the very worst-case scenario
Example: If I miss the bus, then I will be late for work and get fired.
- Overgeneralization- Making broad statements from a single event.
Example: I was awkward speaking to that person at the store. I am ALWAYS awkward.
- All-or-nothing thinking- Thinking in absolutes, like “always”, “never”, “every”
Example: I NEVER do a good job at *anything*.
- Jumping to Conclusions by “Mind Reading”- Interpreting the thoughts and actions of someone else without ALL the facts/information
Example: That person is looking at me, she must hate me.
- Jumping to Conclusions by Fortune Telling- the expectation that something will turn out badly without all the facts/information.
Example: I am not going to pass my test tomorrow, even though I studied really hard.
- Emotional Reasoning- the assumption that your feelings/thoughts reflect how things really are.
Example: I think/feel like a bad friend, so I must be a bad friend.
- Disqualifying the Positive- seeing only the negative in a situation and ignoring the positive.

Example: I got 3 questions wrong. I am stupid. (Even though you got 17 questions right.)

- Should Statements- the belief that things should be a certain way.
Example: I SHOULD always be friendly.

A Side Note:

Often folks ASSUME many things. They think they know what will happen without having all the facts, without proof. You might think things will go a certain way or a certain event will happen. It is a mistake to assume that what you think is always true.

Before you assume something either about someone else, a situation, or even yourself, make sure you gather all the information.

Cognitive Distortions can also be called *Stinkin' Thinkin'*, just like the previous section spoke about the importance of not stinking and keeping your body clean, our thoughts can sometimes stink too. It is important to change Stinkin' thinkin' into Bloomin' Beliefs.

What you think about matters.
The thoughts you believe have power.



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We all have beliefs about our own abilities and potential. These beliefs are part of our *Mindset*. Our mindset shapes our everyday lives, helping us interpret our experiences, examine our thoughts, and contribute to our future.

A fantastic way to cultivate Bloomin' Beliefs is to have a growth mindset instead of a fixed mindset.

Dr. Carol Dweck (Dweck, 2007) identified two different types of mindsets.

1. A Fixed mindset is the belief that your intelligence and abilities cannot be altered in a meaningful way. So, what happens is when mistakes happen, they are seen as failure instead of a chance to GROW and LEARN. A fixed mindset in a picture looks like someone with their arms crossed saying “Nope. No. Not going to try that”
2. A Growth mindset happens when you believe your intelligence and abilities *can be* improved upon with effort and the right strategies.

Having a growth mindset is one that takes on challenges, embraces learning and sees failure as not the end but instead as an opportunity to learn and growth.

Here’s the catch: Although a growth mindset can seem scary and full of risks and unknowns, a growth mindset is strongly linked to greater happiness and achievement in life. A growth mindset mantra is saying “This is hard. And I can do hard things.”

Steps to try to understand and increase self-confidence mentally

1. Read through the list of *Cognitive Distortions* (also known as *Stinkin’ Thinkin’*).
 - Pick 3 cognitive distortions that you’ve noticed that you sometimes you think.
 - Think about some examples in your own life.
 - For each distortion, try to come up with a more positive way to think about the thought.

Reframing is a powerful way to look at a situation in a different, more positive way. Look at the cognitive distortion list and practice reframing and changing some of the examples into a more positive thought.

2. Get a journal and write down some strong powerful thoughts to help you remember what is true. Here are some examples:

I can do hard things.

Don’t believe everything you think.

I am strong.

I am capable.

I am able.

It is okay to make mistakes.

I can try again.



Emotionally: taking care of your heart

You are made up of many different parts. Your body is how you present to the world. Your mind is full of thoughts and insights. Truth be told, your feelings are also housed in your brain, however, often feelings are connected closely with your heart. How you feel internally reflects on your self-esteem.

So, what are feelings? Feelings are an emotional state or reaction. They are a cue to help interpret a situation and give you clues on how you are interpreting a situation.

Often feelings involve a physical response as well. Think about when you feel anxious, what happens in your body? Perhaps your heart starts beating quickly, your face might get flushed, your stomach might get upset and you might even need to go to the bathroom. Our feelings are manifested physically to help you understand what you need.

Many folks put feelings into 2 categories GOOD feelings and BAD feelings. It is important to get away from categorizing them this way. Now, there are definitely feelings that are *more enjoyable* as well as some feelings that are *less enjoyable*. However, ALL feelings are important. Most folks appreciate the feelings of excitement, happiness, love, and contentment rather than sadness, fear, anger, or nervousness. And yet, *feelings are for feeling*. You have to feel them. It is important to feel your feelings in order to know what you need and how you can help yourself.

Savor the enjoyable feelings. The sheer delight of joy. The warm and fuzzy of love. The tingles of excitement and anticipation. The sigh of contentment. Relish the awe, wonder, amazement, happiness, and pure bliss. Acknowledge a job well done and call it good. Take pride when you receive a compliment. Far too often, folks dismiss enjoyable feelings thinking they are not worthy of feelings such as these. This is a lie. ALL feelings are for feeling. Go ahead, allow yourself to feel the “good stuff” too.

Feelings are indicators.



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Like a check of the engine light in a car, or a growl of a stomach, your feelings can be seen as a sign that you might need to check what is happening and look for some solutions.

Here are some examples:

If you are feeling sad, perhaps you need some comfort. What would that look like for you?

If you are feeling lonely, maybe you need some social connections. What could that be for you?

If you are feeling scared, you may need some assurance of safety. How can you get that for yourself?

If you are feeling nervous, you might need some calm. Where are you going to find this?

A sidenote on Anger. Anger can sometimes be a very complicated feeling. But also, anger is super important. As previous stated, feelings are indicators, so when you feel angry, it is important to acknowledge the feeling. You are allowed to feel angry. There are many circumstances that validate feeling angry. That being said, when you are angry, you are responsible for your actions and your words.



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Think about an iceberg, you can see the part above the water, but there is so much under the water. The same can be said about anger. A situation happens and you react with anger. There might be yelling, clenched fists, red face and narrowed eyes, these are all the visual cues. BUT, what is happening underneath, perhaps there is fear, embarrassment, disappointment, loss and/or loneliness. Often, it seems *easier* to be angry than to sit with more uncomfortable and vulnerable feelings. However, when you take some time to try and understand what is underneath the anger you might discover clues about what is really happening and find ways to figure out what you need.



Let's face it, it is not enjoyable or even fun to sit with uncomfortable feelings. And far too often instead of feeling the feelings, people tend to numb their feelings.

This could look like:

- Eating too much
- Drinking too much
- Legal or illegal drugs

- Binge watching shows on TV/streaming services
- Hours playing video games
- Mindless scrolling social media

It must be noted that most things (barring illegal activities) are acceptable in MODERATION and clear limits. However, when you find yourself trying to numb your feelings instead of feeling them, this could signal a concern. Perhaps it is important to ask yourself some questions: What feeling am I trying to ignore? What feelings don't I want to feel?

Side Note on Self Harm-

A type of numbing might include self-harm. This could look like cutting your skin, picking at your skin, hitting your head or purposefully hurting your body. When things seem too much, self-harm often is seen as a release. While there might be sensation of release in the short term, self-harm is not a long-term solution. It is vital to find better, healthier ways of coping.

It is important to note that there are helpful and non-helpful ways to cope with your feelings. Coping in non-helpful ways can be harmful and potentially destructive. There are also helpful ways to cope with difficult feelings.

Just like your physical health matters, your mental health matters too. Trying to understand and talk about your feelings is a vital part of your mental health. There are ways to foster positive mental health, some of which might include:

- Connecting with others
- Staying positive
- Getting physically active
- Helping others
- Getting enough sleep
- Developing coping skills
- Getting some fresh air
- Moving your body
- Fueling your body with nutritious food
- Trying something creative
- Talking to a friend
- Reaching out to a family member
- Getting professional help if you need it

However, there may be times when your mental health becomes poor, and you need help.



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What are the warning signs that you might need to talk about how you are feeling?

Here is a list of some possibilities:

- Eating or sleeping too much or too little
- Pulling away from people and usual activities
- Having low or no energy
- Feeling numb or like nothing matters
- Having unexplained aches and pains
- Feeling helpless or hopeless
- Smoking, drinking, or using drugs more than usual
- Feeling more confused, forgetful, on edge, angry, upset, worried, or scared
- Yelling or fighting with family and friends
- Experiencing severe mood swings that cause problems in relationships
- Having persistent thoughts and memories you can't get out of your head
- Hearing voices or believing things that are not true
- Thinking of harming yourself or others
- Having difficulty doing tasks like taking care of yourself, or getting to work or school

A side note about suicide-

There might come a time when your feelings seem too much, when life seems unbearable and hopeless. Sometimes this is when suicide (killing yourself) might seem like the only option. **THIS IS NOT TRUE.** Yes, sometimes there is pain, both physical and emotional, that seem too much

and ending your life might seem like the only answer. In this moment, may you know that YOU MATTER. Feelings pass. Circumstances change. There is always hope. Always.

If you have active thoughts/intentions of suicide. Please reach out to a help line, trusted friend/family member or a counsellor.

Online: <https://www.crisisservicescanada.ca/en/>

Call: 1.833.456.4566

Text: 45645

NOTE: YOU CAN CALL 911 FOR IMMEDIATE HELP OR GO TO THE EMERGENCY ROOM AT YOUR LOCAL HOSPITAL.



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Please. Please. Please remember it is okay to get help. It is good to ask for support. Often getting help to sort through and understand your feelings means speaking with a therapist. Let's face it, going to counselling might seem really daunting and yet, it can be very helpful and important for your well-being.

When looking for a counsellor, it is imperative to find the RIGHT fit. With counselling, it is NOT a 'one size fits all' model. You are encouraged to try different counsellors until you find someone with whom you feel comfortable.

An analogy that could be used is ice cream. Now, many people like ice cream. But they are not all fond of all the different flavours. Each person has their preferred flavour. Similarly, when looking for a counsellor, you need to find your "flavour".

Counselling is an investment in effort, time and money. It may cost money, although subsidized resources may be found. Counselling can be so important and life changing. It creates a place to talk about difficult things in a safe space with a trusted person.

It might seem daunting to know where to start to look for a counsellor. A good place to start might be www.psychologytoday.com. This website allows you to look for counsellors in your area and you can ask for specifics' areas of specialties and expertise. You could also search the resources in your community on the AIDE Canada website (www.aidecanada.ca).



Steps to try to understand and increase self-confidence emotionally

1. You need to take care of your mental health. It is vital to your overall health and directly impacts your self-confidence. You need to talk about your feelings. Find a friend or trusted other to share with. Ask a trusted person to be your mentor. Find a 'cheerleader' – a truly supportive person. You are not meant to do life alone.

2. If needed, begin the process of finding a counsellor. Counselling may be hard or uncomfortable. But it will be worth it.

3. Please remember that regardless of diagnosis or neurodiversity, **everyone struggles at various points in their life**. You are not alone. It is okay not to be okay. And there is hope that things can be better. Find something that brings you glimpses of joy and happiness to help when the difficult feelings seem too much.

Socially/Relationally- taking care of yourself with others

Regardless of if you want to believe it or not, we are meant for connection and belonging. We need people in our life to help support and encourage. Yet it is people who can cause deep pain, hurt and frustration.

It is close friends and family who provide some of your foundational thoughts and feelings regarding your abilities and beliefs about yourself.

a. Family



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Everyone has a family or others in their lives. Some folks live with their family. Others live on their own or with others. There is no doubt about the role that one's family can play in their early development and growth. No two families look the same. Every family have their own ways of being with each other. Some of these ways can be helpful, others might frustrate, and some might even be hurtful.

It is important to try and understand your family dynamics and how that affects your self-esteem. Often folks tend to play a role in their family of origin. This role might have served you when you were younger, yet, as you get older, this might not be helping you anymore.

Something that is important to remember is that like you, people in your family also change. Perhaps you did not get along well with your siblings when you were younger, but as you both get older, you might find some common ground and connection.

As you get older, you might notice that your family treats you the same way they did when you were younger. This might be annoying and frustrating to you. Or your family might bring up embarrassing stories about you that you'd prefer they did not. Guess what? You are allowed to use your voice and ask your family to stop. It is alright to do this. Part of increasing your self-esteem is using your voice to tell others how you want to be treated. Many folks get rather anxious about the idea of saying how they want to be treated and this is understandable. It takes tremendous courage. This might be an area that could be spoken more about with your counsellor or a trusted friend.

b. Friends



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It has been said that friends are the family you get to choose. While we cannot choose our family of origin, we do get to choose those who you get to call your friends. Friends can be instrumental in your self-esteem. They can speak words of love and encouragement to you. They can remind you of many of your qualities and the unique things that make you *you*.

Yet, finding and keeping friends can be very challenging. As you get older, it can be more difficult to make and keep friends.

It might be helpful to look for friendships in places that you are already at for example:

- School
- Sport team
- Faith group/community
- Shared interest group
- Online community
- Work

It can be important to find friends who share similar interests to you. This might help with building connection and strengthening conversation. Now, let's face it – often meeting and talking to people at the beginning can be very awkward and that is normal. However, like with many things, the more times you do something, the easier it becomes. It might be helpful to think of some topics or questions to talk about as you begin to get to know someone.

Please remember, don't hog the conversation! When you are starting to build a friendship and hoping to build the friendship, be aware of how much you are talking. Think about tennis, both players are passing the ball back and forth. The same can be said of a conversation. When someone asks you a question, you can reply and then pass them back the conversation ball with another question.

As much as it is important to share about yourself when you are maintaining friendships, it is important to think about how much you are sharing with your friends. There could be a risk of oversharing and a friend feeling uncomfortable. It is important to check in when you are

speaking with others. Check in to see if they are comfortable. The best way to do this is to ask them, plain and simple. An important part of friendship is honesty, if you cannot be honest with your friends or if your friends cannot be honest with you, then it might be difficult to maintain the friendship.

As friendships play such a crucial role in your self-esteem, it is important to check in with yourself about how you feel when you are around a friend. Some questions to think about:

- Does this friend encourage me?
- Do I enjoy spending time with this friend?
- Does this friend build up my confidence?
- Does this friend make me feel good about myself?
- Does this friend bring down self-esteem?

If a friend is being unkind to you and you are not enjoying your time together, it is okay to stop being friends with that person. There is a saying that sometimes the truth hurts. A hard truth might include the following:

Some people are not going to like you.

You are not going to be able to connect with everyone.

Some friendships end, and this is okay.

c. Relationships



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An entire toolkit could be created to help navigate the complexities of relationships. Many of the same challenges that are found in friendships can be found in relationships. So much of your self-esteem and confidence is found in interactions with others.

We are made for connection and belonging. Often, this reality translates into a desire for a relationship. There can be a need to have your own 'special someone.' It must be stated that a relationship does NOT complete nor define you. You are complete without someone else. Yes, it is true that a relationship can add tremendous value to your life, but it is not imperative for a full life.

For those who have never dated before, perhaps you might think that your lack of a relationship is somehow a reflection of who you are as a person. This is false. Often the world tries to tell others that a person only has value and worth if they are in a relationship. But the truth is: Your self-worth is not tied up in your relationship status.

Some folks might have dated and then broke up with their significant other. There can be deep pain and hurt when a relationship ends. Often folks might feel disappointed and wonder what they could have done differently in the relationship. Sometimes there might be answers, other times there might be lingering questions.

When you experience the rejection of a breakup, it is important to be kind to yourself. Try and surround yourself with folks who love and care for you. It is vital to remind yourself of the qualities you know are true about yourself and especially remember not to believe everything you think, especially when you are feeling down due to a breakup.

A very common way for people to meet these days is online dating. There are a myriad of sites and options out there. Some folks have success navigating online dating, other find it very challenging and frustrating. It is important to check in and see what your comfort level is; it might be helpful to explore some sites with a family member or trusted friend to get gain some perspective.

Another way for folks to connect is through online gaming. While different platforms create a place for folks to meet and play together, it is so important to understand internet safety.

1. Never give your personal information to others, for example, your address, bank information, etc.
2. Do not assume that people are telling you the truth.
3. Unfortunately, people can portray themselves as anyone they want to be online and in so doing, deceive and manipulate others. Be careful!

Hard truths: Many relationships end
You cannot make people like you
Trust must be earned, and it takes time.

d. Work



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A huge part of our relationships in our working years centres around employment and, in particular, those at our workplace. There are so many parts to navigate in the context of work and again, a whole toolkit could be created for this. And in fact, such toolkit exists on aidecanada.ca.

It is important to note that not having a job can greatly affect self-esteem. However, there are resources and services that are geared towards helping individuals with autism and intellectual disability gain employment. If moving right into employment seems overwhelming, perhaps some incremental steps could include:

- Seeking a volunteer opportunity
- Attending a pre-employment skills program
- Finding employment supports through government work agencies

A major part of employment is your relationships with others including:

- Your boss
- Your co workers
- Public/Customers (in some circumstances)

Your boss is your boss. They are not a friend. Some bosses can turn into friends, but not all do. It can be challenging to navigate work relationships. Something that is important to remember is to be clear about your comfort level. Be honest about what you feel comfortable telling your boss and what you are not comfortable sharing.

A note on disclosure: Disclosing your autism (or other) diagnoses is a personal choice. It is strongly encouraged to speak with trusted family members or close friends about the pros and cons of disclosure.

Your co-workers are people you work with. You can be friendly with them at work, however, that does not make them your friends. Sometimes co-workers can become friends outside of work.

Many jobs have parts that deal with the public and/or customers. Remember, customers are not your friends. You must remain professional in your interactions with them.

Sometimes there are no clear guidelines when it comes to the dos and don'ts about working relationships. This is tricky. Something that could be helpful is getting a job coach. A job coach can help you navigate some challenges around work. They can help advocate for you and ask for accommodations that could be helpful for work including decreasing your work week, decreasing work hours, and incorporating more breaks.

Hard truths: You might not be friends outside of work with your co workers
You might not like your colleagues, but you still have to be respectful to them.

Part of working is getting feedback on how you are doing at work. Often it can be difficult to hear negative feedback, however, it is important to listen when feedback is given. Negative feedback at work is not a reflection on you as a person, it is an indication on an aspect of your work that can be improved.

Steps to understand and increase self-confidence socially/relationally

1. Many friendships are started due to shared interests and values. When you are doing things that you like, look for others doing the same thing too. This could be an example of a possible friendship.

2. Continue to work on the qualities that are important to maintain positive social interactions which may include:

- kindness
- compassion
- enjoyable conversation
- humour

3. Make a list of some of the qualities that you appreciate about yourself. If you feel stuck, ask a family member or friend. Remind yourself of these qualities when you are having a difficult time.

Conclusion

You are a unique and complex person, made of many parts that affect how you feel about yourself. The goal of this toolkit was to provide practical tools to help increase your self-esteem. As you have read through the sections, it is hoped that you have found some helpful tips. In areas of potential growth, it is hoped that you will be able to hold yourself accountable to take the steps necessary to make positive change. It may be hard and at times feel overwhelming. There might even be times that you want to quit. The hope is that you can dig deep and be reminded of your great worth and have cheerleaders who are supporting you.

May the steps in the different sections of the toolkit give you tangible ways to move forward – perhaps make change and find ways to advocate for yourself, asking the questions such as ‘what do you need?’.

As you take steps to take care of yourself there will be an increase in your self-esteem, and you will feel better about yourself. It is like a circle, the more you take care of yourself acknowledging the different parts of yourself and what you need, the better you will feel, the better you feel, your self-esteem will grow and increase.

Resources-Some websites to learn more

AIDE Canada

<https://aidecanada.ca/>

Find a counsellor- Psychology Today

<https://www.psychologytoday.com/ca>

Mental Health

<https://www.anxietycanada.com/>

<https://www.canada.ca/en/public-health/topics/mental-health-wellness.html>

Growth Mindset

<https://fs.blog/carol-dweck-mindset/>

Book- Mindset: The New Psychology of Success, 2007

Self Advocates with ASD

<https://voicesofautism.pacificautismfamily.com/>

Final thoughts

This toolkit started with an introduction and the hope to have a relaxed conversation about self-esteem. If we were having a coffee together, our drinks would be cold by now, or hopefully all finished. This is the part where I would remind you of all the things that make you YOU. And I would ask you to remember that:

You matter

You count

The world needs you!

