CONCEPTS OF SELF-AWARENESS

“Once you see a child’s self-image begin to improve, you will see significant gains in achievement areas, but even more importantly, you will see a child who is beginning to enjoy life more.”

—Wayne Dyer
SELF-AWARENESS
Emotional Well-Being, Self-Esteem, and Self-Actualization

Background
Adolescence is typically a time of great stress and strain on the body, mind, and emotions. G. Stanley Hall referred to the period of adolescence as a time of “sturm und drang” or storm and stress (LeFrançois, 1996). This is explained by the fact that adolescents experience more life-changing external and internal factors and situations than pre-adolescents (Mullis, et al., 1993). The flood of hormones through the body and the internal changes that are experienced during this period are a major contribution to stress. Some of the external changes, which can happen at any age, could be family related, sickness, death, divorce, or trouble with the law. Some of the other changes that occur during this period can be labeled as school-based, such as trouble with grades, breaking up with a girlfriend or boyfriend, or being cut from a sports team. Overall, there is more of a daily connection to negative events during the period of adolescence than during the periods of pre-adolescence (LeFrançois, 1996). Adolescents begin to “break free” from their parents to find their own identities and in some cases that break creates a loss of childhood reality, or the protective nature of childhood.

However, it is important to note that the theory of “Sturm und Drang” has been seen in a different light due to the research of Buchanan, Eccles, and Becker. They reexamined the work of G. Stanley Hall and found the supposition that adolescence is a time of stress and strain because of the flood of hormones to be untrue. Buchanan, et al., also assert that adolescents are not victims of hormones but rather fall victim to non-biological, external events just as other-aged individuals. They contend that adolescents are not victims of raging hormones but are individuals that find themselves to be content, happy, and full of vigor (Buchanan, et al., 1992).

LeFrançois (1996) offers definitions for significant self-awareness terms:
- **Self-esteem** is the positive or negative way an individual views himself or herself. It also entails the desire to be held in high esteem by others.
- **Self-concept** is the concept that an individual has of himself or herself. Notions of self are often linked to an individual’s beliefs about how others perceive them.
- **Self-actualization** is the process or act of becoming oneself, developing one’s potential, achieving an awareness of one’s identity, and fulfilling oneself.

Striving for a Sound Foundation: Emotional Well-Being
To deal with the forms of stress and overall life changes created by the onset of adolescence, individuals must have a strong grasp of their own emotional well-being. Emotional well-being can be defined as “one’s ability to relate to other people, feel comfortable with self, cope with disappointments and stress, solve problems, celebrate successes, and make decisions” (Page & Page, 1992). Emotional well-being is built upon the foundation of a positive and healthy self-esteem. Self-esteem can be viewed as an evaluative component of self-image. Self-esteem is the positive or negative manner in which people judge themselves. It is also the degree to which an individual sees himself or herself as competent, belonging, and worthwhile to society. About self-esteem, Branden says the following:

Apart from problems that are biological in origin, I cannot think of a single psychological difficulty—from anxiety and depression, to fear of intimacy or of
success, to alcohol or drug abuse, to underachievement at school or at work, to spouse battering or child molestation, to sexual dysfunctions or emotional immaturity, to suicide or crimes of violence—that is not traceable to poor self-esteem. Of all of the judgments we pass, none is as important as the one we pass on ourselves. Positive self-esteem is a cardinal requirement of a fulfilling life (Page & Page, 1992).

Self-esteem is the foundation for emotional well-being. There are activities and more information in this section to assist the mentor in helping her mentee build self-esteem and address problems caused by low self-esteem. Self-esteem is also the source of many ills a person can perpetrate against himself/herself or others. It is the one of the most fragile of human elements. It is important for mentors to observe their mentees’ self-esteem, to talk to them about how they feel about themselves, and to help them find a way to see their own self-worth.

Below are some of the characteristics of emotional well-being.

Characteristics of Emotional Well-Being

- I feel comfortable with myself.
- I am not overwhelmed by my emotions.
- I can take life’s disappointments.
- I can accept my shortcomings.
- I have self-respect. I can laugh at myself.
- I feel good about the relationships I hold with other people.
- I am able to give love and to consider the feelings of others.
- I respect the differences I find in other people.
- I feel a sense of responsibility to others.
- I am able to meet the demands of my life.
- I welcome new experiences and new ideas.
- I set realistic goals for myself.
- I am able to think for myself and make my own decisions.
- I put my best effort into everything that I do.

(Page & Page, 1992)

These characteristics are a picture of emotional health. Most people would not score perfectly if rated against this list. It is important for mentors to explain to their mentees that most everyone struggles in some way at some time with their self-esteem. The next section will give the components of self-esteem and how to adjust and improve them.
Self-Esteem: The Parts to the Whole
The components of self-esteem vary depending on the source. The following explanation is easily understood.

- **The Self-Image.** How we see ourselves.
- **The Ideal-Self.** How we want to be.
- **The Pygmalion-Self.** How we perceive that others see us.

(Page & Page, 1992)

A sense of competency, worthiness, and belonging is formed by a combination of these three elements. The foundations of self-esteem are created early in childhood. For instance, if an individual’s interactions with parents and others were for the most part positive (mutually caring, happy, and sound relationships), the individual’s self-esteem would likely be high. However, if parental and other primary interactions were mainly negative, an individual’s self-esteem could be lacking.

It is important for mentors to be able to recognize the signs and behaviors of high and low self-esteem. For example, academics can deliver a damaging blow to a student’s self-esteem. As early as age 5, students begin to realize that perhaps they are not as “smart” as some of the others in the class. This realization hurts their self-esteem and begins to cause changes in their everyday classroom behavior in relating to subject matter, teachers, and peers. It is advisable for a mentor to talk to their mentee’s teachers to get an informed opinion from people who observe the student daily and also to understand how the mentee acts and reacts to classroom settings (Page & Page, 1992). The following chart will also help mentors as they work with mentees in the academic setting.
### Behaviors Commonly Seen in Students with High Self-Esteem

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Behavior</th>
<th>Behavior</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Active, curious about surroundings; makes wide variety of contacts.</td>
<td>1. Mildly passive, tends to avoid new experiences, has limited contacts.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Makes friends easily, talks and laughs; gets in trouble now and then.</td>
<td>2. Shy, bashful, quiet, and withdrawn.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Has a sense of humor, is a good sport, can laugh at themselves.</td>
<td>3. Tends to be overly serious, hypersensitive; afraid to be laughed at.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Asks questions, defines problems, willingly does his part in planning for solutions and carrying out plans.</td>
<td>4. Avoids getting to the problem, grumbles that what is wanted is not clear, plans in terms of wishful thinking.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Willing to take risks in a classroom. Contributes to discussions and is able to stand up for what they think.</td>
<td>5. Unsure, backs down easily, frequently asks others: “Do you think this is right?” “What do you think?”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Takes modest pride in own contributions; is not overbearing, and does not cheat.</td>
<td>6. Aggressively asserts own ability and contributions, finds it difficult to share; undermines others when possible.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Works and plays well with others. Cooperates easily and naturally.</td>
<td>7. Overly competitive, finds it difficult to share. Undermines others when possible.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Usually happy, confident; does not whine for what cannot be had.</td>
<td>8. Usually gloomy and fearful, worries as a matter of course, complains a lot.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(Page & Page, 1992)

For adolescents, self-esteem is fragile and is easily wounded outside the academic realm as well. Physical attractiveness has a powerful impact on self-esteem during the adolescent years. During this period, rapid changes occur in the body’s appearance, form, and size. With the development of sexual hormones, adolescents become fixated on the appearance of their bodies and the bodies of others. Concurrently with these massive changes, adolescents are moving away from their families and toward their own peers. Peer pressures and conformities are intense and adolescents are not very tolerant of differences, shortcomings, or aberrations. Another strain is the pressures imposed by media and society. Today, children and adults are bombarded with what the “perfect guy” or “perfect girl” is supposed to look like. It is difficult for many students to grasp the idea that not everyone in the world can look as though they stepped off the set of “Baywatch.” It is especially difficult for adolescents to realize that everyone has their own size and shape and that is all right.
The effects of early and late maturation in adolescence can have self-esteem implications. For instance, if a male matures early, he probably will be better adjusted, more confident, more popular, and have an advantage in heterosexual relationships (Crockett & Petersen, 1987). As a group, males that mature slower exhibit behavior that is more restless, more driven to gain attention, and less confident (Crockett & Petersen, 1987). However, early maturing females tend to develop lower self-confidence and self-esteem. The early developing female often dates earlier and engages in more unacceptable behavior such as drinking, skipping school, and sexual activity (Dubas & Petersen, 1993). Early maturing females are heavier than those who develop later and thus worry about their weight more and often develop lasting eating problems (Brooks-Gunn, 1988).

Many problems can arise from feelings related to perceived deficiencies and low self-esteem. A person, male or female, might, for instance, be quite average in build but view themselves as obese. They may try to develop a “perfect” body type and in some cases, eating disorders develop.

There are two main types of eating disorders: anorexia nervosa and bulimia. Anorexia nervosa is estimated to affect one of 100 females between the ages of 12 and 18 (Page & Page, 1992). Additionally, 10 of 100 females are considered mildly anorexic (Page & Page, 1992). Anorexia can be defined as “an eating disorder that is characterized by an intentional loss of a substantial amount of weight” (American Anorexia Bulimia Association, 1997). Individuals suffering from anorexia have an intense fear of gaining weight and perceive themselves to be fat even when they are often 15 percent below their normal body weight (American Anorexia Bulimia Association, 1997). The weight loss leads to drastic changes in appearance and body functions, and can be fatal (Page & Page, 1992).

**Other symptoms of anorexia include:**
- Depression, anxiety
- Distorted body image
- Cessation of menstrual period in women
- Fainting spells
- Hyperactivity
- Heart tremors
- Cold hands and feet
- Dry, brittle skin
  (American Anorexia Bulimia Association, 1997)

**Some medical consequences of anorexia include:**
- Shrunken organs
- Bone mineral loss that can lead to osteoporosis
- Low body temperature
- Low blood pressure
- Slowed metabolism and reflexes
- Irregular heartbeat that can lead to cardiac arrest
  (American Anorexia Bulimia Association, 1997)

Bulimia is another very dangerous and pervasive eating disorder. Research estimates that between 20-30 percent of college women and 6-17 percent of high school girls suffer from symptoms of bulimia (Page & Page, 1992). Bulimia is defined as an eating disorder “in which an individual engages in recurrent binging and purging” (American Anorexia Bulimia Association, 1997). Binging normally involves rapid consumption of massive amounts of food. Food binging episodes are
followed by drastic efforts to lose weight including self-induced vomiting, fasting, use of laxatives, diuretics, and compulsive exercising. The binges are brought on by intense mood changes, anger, depression, stress, or loneliness (Page & Page, 1992).

Other symptoms of bulimia include:
- Mood swings, depression, feeling out of control
- Vomiting blood
- Loss of tooth enamel, which leads to decay
- Swollen glands in the neck and face
- Dry, flaky skin
- Weakness, exhaustion
- Constipation
- Indigestion
  (American Anorexia Bulimia Association, 1997)

Some medical consequences of bulimia include:
- Dehydration
- Damage to bowels, liver, and kidneys
- Electrolyte imbalance that can lead to an irregular heartbeat or cardiac arrest
  (American Anorexia Bulimia Association, 1997)

For more information on eating disorders, please refer to the Health Issues unit of this manual.

Other Self-Esteem-Related Problems:
The issues and problems below can be closely related to self-esteem issues. Adolescents seek a feeling of belonging, of fitting in, and of peer acceptance. Many of the problems below result from adolescents (and sometimes adults) trying to fit into a certain group by behaving in a manner that is not true to their character or upbringing. Discuss these problems with other mentors and mentees.

Sexual Activity
- Teenage pregnancy
- Sexually Transmitted Diseases

Substance Abuse
- Cigarettes/nicotine
- Alcohol and illegal drugs

Gangs
- Violence/death
- Arrests/criminal record/prison

Keys to Increasing Self-Esteem:
- **Listen to Self-Talk:** Do you ever listen to those negative thoughts in your head? Replace the negative thoughts with positive thoughts. An example would be, “I can do this because I’ve studied hard for this test” or “I’m proud of myself for the way I handled that situation.”
- **Recognize Accomplishments:** Make a list of your accomplishments, no matter how small or minor they may seem to you. This will help to build a sense of self-worth.
- **Be Assertive:** Say what you mean and respect what others say. Practice clear communication.
• **Be Tolerant:** Be tolerant of others and especially of yourself. Nobody is perfect. Try not to criticize others or yourself. Do not be afraid to admit a mistake; just learn from it.

• **Build a Support System:** Spend time with people that appreciate you for who you are. Value your friends and let them value you.

**Increasing Self-Esteem**

Feelings of self-worth come from both external and internal influences. External feelings of self-worth arise from such things as appearance, group acceptance, school awards, and social recognition. The external aspects of self-esteem are largely based on personal achievement, which creates conditional self-esteem. In other words, this kind of self-esteem is solely based on a person's achievement rather than on his or her inner character qualities. Individuals who base their feelings of self-worth on external factors are more likely to have an unhealthy self-esteem (Page & Page, 1992).

Internal feelings of self-esteem come from being a unique individual, with inner character or personality qualities such as resourcefulness, sense of humor, or sense of integrity. These are considered forms of unconditional self-esteem because they are based on the individual, not on his or her achievements. Persons who base their self-esteem on internal factors (i.e., resourcefulness, responsibility, loyalty, sense of humor, or integrity) are more likely to have a healthier self-esteem (Page & Page, 1992).

**Building a Strong Self-Concept**

Self-concept can be defined as “the concept that an individual has of him- or herself” (LeFrançois, 1996). Abraham Maslow, a humanistic psychologist, was primarily concerned with the development of a healthy personality and creation of self-concepts. Maslow took the position that a person’s competence is directly affected by the view he takes of himself/herself. Maslow felt that humans are moved along a hierarchy of needs. He breaks the needs up into two different groups, the basic needs and the metaneeds (LeFrançois, 1996). The basic needs include physiological (food and drink), safety (both physical and mental security), belongingness and love (affiliation, acceptance, and affection), and esteem (competence, approval, and recognition) (LeFrançois, 1996). The metaneeds or growth needs are the higher-level needs on Maslow’s hierarchy. The metaneeds include such human desires as knowledge, understanding, justice, truth, beauty, and order (LeFrançois, 1996). It is important to note that Maslow’s needs are arranged hierarchically because they provide a foundation for one another. If, for instance, the physical needs are not met, the other needs are irrelevant. In other words, if a person is hungry, he/she does not crave acceptance or knowledge.

Self-actualization, the highest level in Maslow’s hierarchy, can be defined as “the process or act of becoming oneself, developing one’s potential, achieving an awareness of one’s identity, and fulfilling oneself” (LeFrançois, 1996). It is important to note that true self-actualization derives from within an individual rather than from external factors such as personal achievements. Self-actualized behavior can be illustrated by an individual who reaches out toward his/her environment with confidence and assurance. The self-actualized person interacts with the world, grasps opportunities for personal growth and fulfillment, and contributes to the lives of others. It is important to assert that only a handful of adults ever achieve self-actualization (e.g., Gandhi and Martin Luther King, Jr.). It is interesting to note that in Maslow’s hierarchy of needs the step before self-actualization is esteem.

**Activities to Help Bolster Self-Esteem and Self-Worth**

The following activities will help both the mentor and the mentee get to know themselves and each other better. One of the fundamental steps to building a strong sense of self, self-esteem, and self-
concept is to know oneself. The exercise will help in that process of getting in touch with personal desires, feeling, likes, and dislikes. Have fun!

- **Describe How I Look:** Have your mentee describe in writing each of his/her physical features in detail, beginning at the head and progressing to the feet, and then evaluate how they feel about each feature. After the first two steps are completed, have the mentee talk about how they feel about their entire body, and thus, their body image.

- **Getting to Know Me:** Have your mentee complete the following prompts. Encourage honesty and depth.
  - I hate...
  - I wish...
  - I fear...
  - I love...
  - I hope...
  - I’m embarrassed when...
  - The thing that bothers me most...
  - The thing I am most afraid of...
  - I want most to be...
  - Regarding myself, I feel...
  - I am most cheerful when...
  - My greatest interest in life is...
  - I have great respect for...
  - My hero is...
  - When I am the center of attention, I feel...
  - I feel awkward when...
  - When I am angry, I...

- **Strengths and Weaknesses**
  - **Discuss the wise man’s prayer:**
    “God grant me the strength to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference.”

- **Then discuss the following prompts.**
  - My most important strengths are...
  - My most serious handicaps are...
  - Things I can change for the better are...
  - Things I am going to have to accept are...

- **Pygmalion-Self**
  - Have your mentee complete each phrase with at least two answers with honesty and depth.
  - My closest friend truly thinks I am...
  - My classmates think I am...
  - My parents honestly think I am...
  - A stranger’s first impression of me might include...

- **Roles I Play**
  - Discuss how different people can view the same person differently. Then discuss the following prompts.
To me, I am...
To my family, I am...
To my peers, I am...
To a special friend, I am...

- **Self-Talk**
  Discuss how words can affect our emotions and thus our self-esteem. Discuss how the saying, “Sticks and stones may break my bones but words will never hurt me” does not exactly apply in real life. Ask the mentee to help you compile a list of self-put-downs and self-praise. And discuss their impact on self-esteem and self-worth.
Self-Awareness
Lesson Plan

Objectives: To help mentors understand the fundamentals of self-esteem and self-awareness and be able to apply them to the mentoring relationship.

Icebreaker:
- Discuss the wise man’s prayer (included in the activities for this section).

Lesson: The instructor will discuss:
- General background
- Significant terms of self-awareness
- Emotional well-being
- Self-esteem and its parts
- Body image and eating disorders as they relate to self-esteem
- Other problems that relate to self-esteem
- Building a positive self-esteem
- Building a strong self-esteem
- Activities to help bolster self-esteem
Bibliography


