

From Doubt to Empowerment: Rebuilding Self-Esteem and Embracing Personal Growth

Self-esteem refers to a person's overall sense of their value or worth. It determines how much a person appreciates, likes, approves of, or prizes themselves. Individuals with high self-esteem (HSE), or an overall liking for themselves, are widely reported to be linked with all kinds of positive outcomes, such as academic achievement, interpersonal success, and happiness. In contrast, science has established a causal link between low self-esteem (LSE) and a whole range of negative outcomes. Depression, substance abuse, antisocial behavior, rejection by peers, low academic achievement, eating disorders, early sexual activity, and suicidal attempts are the most common. Being a girl, belonging to a family with low socioeconomic status, and having a low parental education level are factors that further increase one's risk of these negative outcomes. The sharp global increase in negative behaviors should leave no doubt about the dwindling self-esteem that engulfs humanity, especially the youth. This alone should drive concern, in particular for parents, to understand the underlying issues and how to overcome them and protect ourselves and our children from falling into LSE.

Contextualizing self-esteem:

The most critical aspect of understanding self-esteem is that it is not an agnostic subject devoid of values with a universal approach. It is not like $1 + 1 = 2$ or the laws of motion or water boiling at 100 degrees Celsius, which are universal principles independent of any value system.

Self-esteem is deeply connected to values. How one sees their own worth or what one considers happiness or success is built upon a viewpoint and criteria that we each use to measure things. For some, happiness is wealth, even if it involves exploiting others; success is beating others, even if by cheating; and self-worth is being in control, even if by suppressing others.

In this context, self-esteem is measured within a secular framework – so it is measured based on personal perception and benefit – and here lies the serious problem, the danger, and the consequences we have mentioned above. Self-esteem is driven and measured by societal expectations and standards such as physical attributes, wealth, and status – thereby promoting traits such as narcissism, immorality, arrogance, and exploitation. Consider people who do not live up to the beauty standards set by their respective societies, whether in terms of height, complexion, or features. How are they viewed? Consider the millions of people who are differently abled. What about those who are fighting debilitating or fatal illnesses? How are they frowned upon? What about those who are innately not academically bright (though they have talents in other fields)? How are they looked at? How people, families, and societies ridicule such people's 'lack' of contribution and worth, targeting such people's self-esteem.

Anyone who has not won the genetic lottery is clearly at a loss in a worldly sense – and remember, the secular framework only focuses on the life we live in this world. Any amount of 'motivation' for those people without changing the fundamental construct of the equation is not going to help them in any real way. I deliberately use the word 'equation' here because if we consider the prominent secular view, i.e., the life of this world only (i.e., the Afterlife is irrelevant), the right-hand side of the equation below is essentially zero:

$$\text{Lifespan} + \text{Pleasures} - \text{Losses} = 0$$

This gives undue importance and a dangerously high focus to life in this world, and any real or perceived sense of deprivation will definitely take a heavy toll on mental health. Perhaps, a large portion of suicides, depression, and anxiety can be explained by this equation. So, the concept of self-esteem in a Western context might be of value for the 'successful' few who see themselves and are seen by others as entitled, but it cannot uplift society as a whole because worth has been invariably attached to physical attributes like beauty and belongings. This is the disease of secular values.

Self-esteem in the Islamic context:

Self-esteem is a central component of Islamic teachings. Islamic texts, whether Qur'an or Hadith, are full of reminders to individuals of their high value. Allah (swt) proclaims in Surah At-Teen that: ﴿لَقَدْ خَلَقْنَا الْإِنْسَانَ فِي أَحْسَنِ تَقْوِيمٍ﴾ **"We have certainly created the human in the best of forms"**. [95:4]

Similarly, any kind of hopelessness or despair is strongly discouraged in Islam. Not only that, but we are also taught what real loss (khusr) is. It is not connected to physical losses but to our actions and decisions, which go against the teachings of Islam. The focus is on the inputs and not on the outcomes, which we understand to be in Allah's hands. Be it our skin tone, health, or provisions (rizq), we know this is the domain of Allah (swt), and there is no point in breaking our heads over these. So, outcomes can be seen as a measure of progress but not as the basis of judgment, as we understand that it's possible that someone is giving their best, but Allah (swt) is testing that person. Therefore, we, as Muslims, have the eternal Hereafter (Aakhirah) on the right-hand side of the equation as well. This means any hardship that wasn't the result of our agency reminds us of the reward we will get in the Hereafter if we face it with perseverance (sabr).

Lifespan + Blessings + Tests = Akhirah (Jannah or Jahannum)

Humans are superior to Jinn for the reason that we have free will. The use of this free will by any mature (baligh) and sane (aaqil) individual is the decisive factor determining whether the person ends up in Jannah or Jahannum. So, what separates us from either eternal bliss or eternal torment are our choices, not anything else we might be very proud of, like lineage, beauty, belongings, etc. With this clarity, what should be valued? Those attributes we had absolutely no control over, or those choices that will determine our eternal fate? It is clearly the latter. Hence, we Muslims truly believe in making the most of the cards we are dealt while maintaining high self-esteem. The certain belief in the Akhirah is of critical importance in enabling us to do so. This translates into individuals, families, and a society that strive to succeed but do not belittle or ridicule those who are incapable or struggle to achieve. It creates individuals, families, and a society that strive for worldly success but are not pressured to achieve it at the expense of the well-being of themselves or others.

Rasoolallah's (saw) example:

Like all other aspects of life, Rasoolallah (saw) has also guided us in matters of self-esteem with his perfect example. There are many incidents that show how he would never belittle anyone, never let any opportunity for appreciation and praise escape, and direct his companions' attention to the real value rather than the superficial one. On one occasion, when the Sahaba (ra) laughed at Abdullah bin Masud (ra) for his weakness and small legs, he (saw) sternly asked them what they were laughing at. Upon their reply, he (saw) said, «وَالَّذِي نَفْسِي بِيَدِهِ لَهُمَا أَثْقَلُ فِي الْمِيزَانِ مِنْ أَحَدٍ» **"By the one in whose hand is my soul, they will both be heavier on the Scale than the mountain of Uhud."** (Musnad Ahmad). Similarly, the bedouin companion Zahir bin Hizam (ra) was loved by the Prophet (saw) despite his unpleasant appearance. When he once lamented to the Prophet (saw), "O Messenger of Allah, by Allah you will find me to be a poor sell (i.e. I'll be of no value)". The Prophet (saw)

said: "But with Allah you are priceless". Anas bin Malik (ra) narrated the whole story as follows: ، وكان النبي صلى الله عليه وسلم يحبه وكان دميما ، فأتاه النبي صلى الله عليه وسلم يوما وهو يبيع متاعه ، فاحتضنه من خلفه وهو لا يبصره ، فقال : أرسلني ! من هذا ؟ فالتفت فعرف النبي صلى الله عليه وسلم ، فجعل لا يألو ما ألزق ظهره بصدر النبي صلى الله عليه وسلم حين عرفه ، وجعل النبي صلى الله عليه وسلم يقول : من يشتري العبد ، فقال : يا رسول الله ! إذا والله تجدني كاسدا ، فقال النبي صلى الله عليه وسلم : لكن عند الله لست (Musnad Ahmad) بكاسد ، أو قال : لكن عند الله أنت غال

Another inspiring story reported in Tafseer ibn Kathir is that of the Companion Julaybib (ra), whose lineage is unknown. His name means 'deformed' due to his appearance, and his contemporaries described him as extremely short, extremely poor, and extremely repulsive (*damim*). The Prophet (ﷺ) married him to a noble girl from the Ansaar. While he got martyred in an expedition with the Prophet, (ﷺ) he stood over his dead body and said, "He killed seven and then was killed. This (man) is of me and I am of him." (Sahih Muslim)

حَدَّثَنَا إِسْحَاقُ بْنُ عُمَرَ بْنِ سَلَيْطٍ، حَدَّثَنَا حَمَّادُ بْنُ سَلَمَةَ، عَنْ ثَابِتٍ، عَنْ كِنَانَةَ، بْنِ نُعَيْمٍ عَنْ أَبِي بَرزَةَ، أَنَّ النَّبِيَّ صَلَّى اللَّهُ عَلَيْهِ وَسَلَّمَ كَانَ فِي مَعْرَى لَهُ فَأَقَاءَ اللَّهُ عَلَيْهِ فَقَالَ لِأَصْحَابِهِ " هَلْ تَفْقِدُونَ مِنْ أَحَدٍ " . قَالُوا نَعَمْ فُلَانًا وَفُلَانًا وَفُلَانًا . ثُمَّ قَالَ " هَلْ تَفْقِدُونَ مِنْ أَحَدٍ " . قَالُوا نَعَمْ فُلَانًا وَفُلَانًا وَفُلَانًا . ثُمَّ قَالَ " هَلْ تَفْقِدُونَ مِنْ أَحَدٍ " . قَالُوا لَا . قَالَ " لَكِنِّي أَفْقِدُ جُلَيْبِيًّا فَاطْلُبُوهُ " . فَطَلَبَ فِي الْقَتْلِ فَوَجَدُوهُ إِلَى جَنْبِ سَبْعَةٍ قَدْ قَتَلَهُمْ ثُمَّ قَتَلُوهُ فَأَتَى النَّبِيَّ صَلَّى اللَّهُ عَلَيْهِ وَسَلَّمَ فَوَقَفَ عَلَيْهِ فَقَالَ " قَتَلْتُ سَبْعَةً ثُمَّ قَتَلْتَهُ هَذَا مِنِّي وَأَنَا مِنْهُ هَذَا مِنِّي وَأَنَا مِنْهُ " . قَالَ فَوَضَعَهُ عَلَى سَاعِدَيْهِ لَيْسَ لَهُ إِلَّا سَاعِدَا النَّبِيِّ صَلَّى اللَّهُ عَلَيْهِ وَسَلَّمَ قَالَ فُحْوِرَ لَهُ وَوَضِعَ فِي قَبْرِهِ . وَلَمْ يَذْكُرْ غَسْلًا

The above examples clearly show how the Prophet (saw) attached value, not with physical attributes such as beauty, rather intentions, beliefs, and actions.

Iqbal's notion of *Khuddi*:

'Khuddi' is a central concept in Allama Iqbal's philosophy and poetry, and it is intricately connected to self-esteem. In his philosophy, Khuddi refers to the concept of the individual self, which encompasses one's unique identity, consciousness, and free will. It is the core of one's being and the source of one's actions and decisions. Therefore, he emphasized through his poetry that individuals must cultivate a positive self-image and self-respect to realize their full potential and contribute to society's betterment.

خودی کو کر بلند اتنا کہ ہر تقدیر سے پہلے

خدا بندے سے خود پوچھے بتا تیری رضا کیا ہے

Recognizing LSE:

It can be difficult to identify low self-esteem in children because they might not have the vocabulary or cognitive awareness to express their emotions in an accurate way. However, there are some indications of low self-esteem that parents, teachers, and others can watch out for. Here are a few illustrations:

- **Negative self-talk:** Kids with low self-esteem might be overly critical of themselves and use words like "I'm useless" or "I'm no good at anything" to describe themselves.
- **Refusing to take responsibility:** Children with low self-esteem may shy away from taking chances or trying new things out of concern that they will fail and face criticism.
- **Social withdrawal:** Children who have low self-esteem may avoid social situations or have trouble making friends because they think they are unworthy of acceptance.
- **Perfectionism:** Ironically, kids with low self-esteem may have excessively high standards for themselves and berate their own performance, which can cause frustration and a sense of inadequacy.
- **Lack of confidence and self-doubt:** Children with low self-esteem may lack confidence in their abilities, struggle to make decisions, and have difficulty standing up for themselves or their loved ones.

If you, as a parent or teacher, notice any of these behaviors, it may be an indication that the child is struggling with low self-esteem. In such cases, the one who needs coaching or counseling the most isn't the child but rather the parent or teacher! You are the one who needs to learn how to provide emotional support, encourage positive self-talk, and offer opportunities for the child to build their self-esteem through small positive experiences and achievements.

Causes of LSE:

It's important to understand that low self-esteem in children can be caused by various factors and is not always due to a particular person or group of people. However, the prime responsibility of raising children lies with the parents, and therefore it's imperative that they create an environment, both in-house and externally, that is conducive for the child to grow a healthy self-esteem. Some external and internal factors that can contribute to low self-esteem in children are discussed below.

- Parenting pressure: The biggest contributor is parenting style. Children who are raised in environments that are overly critical, neglectful, or lack emotional attachment and support are very prone to developing low self-esteem.

- Peer pressure and bullying: Negative social interactions with peers/siblings, such as bullying, teasing, or exclusion, can significantly impact a child's self-esteem. While peer pressure and bullying are more likely to happen within the school environment, some parents create an unnecessarily competitive relationship between siblings, which can fan the naturally occurring sibling rivalry and give rise to bullying at home. The right choice of school is a very important decision in this context. It is the parent's responsibility to beware of sending their children to any such environments where such interactions are likely to occur. Only a deep bond with your child will ensure that they share such negative experiences with you, and you can then intervene.

- Academic achievement pressure: Children who have difficulty in school or who struggle with academic performance may experience lower self-esteem. This also gets worse with parents who are harsh and have unrealistic and inflexible academic demands on their children.

- Media, social media, and societal pressure: Messages from the media and society regarding beauty standards, success, and achievement may lead to low self-esteem, particularly in young children who are still developing a sense of self. Parents need to have a strategy with regard to at what age and how much screen access children will get for which activities. Even after limiting their children's screen time, parents must still monitor the type of content they consume. Girls are especially susceptible to idealized beauty standards promoted in the media, advertising, and popular culture. These can contribute to negative body image, low self-esteem, and a variety of psychological and emotional issues that women face. Renee Engeln's book "Beauty Sick: How the Cultural Obsession with Appearance Hurts Girls and Women" goes into great detail about this phenomenon.

- Unhappy marriages or broken families: Children growing up in households with constant conflict, tension, or lack of emotional support may experience negative effects on their self-esteem. Witnessing ongoing conflicts between parents, experiencing a lack of stability or warmth in the family environment, or being exposed to unhealthy relationship dynamics can all contribute to a child's sense of insecurity, self-doubt, and lowered self-esteem.

- Negative experiences and childhood traumas: While external factors can contribute to low self-esteem, they are not always the sole cause. Negative experiences (failure or

rejection) and traumas (violence or sexual abuse) can also have an impact on children's self-esteem, especially if these experiences are not processed or resolved.

Depression, anxiety, and eating disorders are all mental health issues that can have a negative impact on a person's self-esteem, so it's always a good idea to seek professional help.

Inculcating and maintaining an HSE:

If we want to inculcate HSE in ourselves and our loved ones, the following steps will prove beneficial.

- **Strengthen the Aqeedah:** Strengthening one's Aqeedah, or belief system in Islam, can have a positive impact on self-esteem in several ways:

- **Sense of Purpose:** A strong Aqeedah provides a clear understanding of one's purpose in life, emphasizing that every individual has inherent worth and value as a creation of Allah. Recognizing this purpose and divine connection can enhance self-esteem by instilling a sense of significance and meaning in one's actions and existence.

- **Self-Acceptance:** Aqeedah teaches us that each person is uniquely created by Allah, with their own strengths, weaknesses, and life circumstances. By embracing this understanding, individuals can develop self-acceptance, appreciating themselves for who they are, rather than constantly comparing themselves to others.

- **Trust in Allah's Decree:** A strong Aqeedah encourages trust and reliance on Allah's wisdom and decree. This includes accepting life's challenges and trials as tests from Allah and believing in His plan for each individual. Trusting in Allah's guidance and having faith in His ultimate wisdom can provide comfort, resilience, and a sense of inner strength, which positively impacts self-esteem.

- **Seeking Allah's Approval:** Aqeedah teaches that the ultimate measure of success and worth is not based on worldly standards or the opinions of others, but on seeking Allah's pleasure and approval. By focusing on pleasing Allah rather than seeking validation from others, individuals can develop a more stable and confident sense of self-worth.

- **Forgiveness and Redemption:** Aqeedah emphasizes the concept of repentance and seeking forgiveness from Allah for one's mistakes and sins. This understanding allows individuals to acknowledge their imperfections and mistakes while having hope in Allah's mercy and forgiveness. This attitude promotes self-compassion, allowing individuals to learn from their mistakes, grow, and move forward, which positively influences self-esteem.

- **Understand nafs:** Spending time with and understanding one's nafs (self or inner self) in the context of Islam can contribute to improving self-esteem in the following ways:

- Cultivating self-awareness and realistic self-perception.

- Recognizing the innate potential and the ability for positive change.

- Developing self-discipline and overcoming negative traits.

- Nurturing spiritual growth and finding inner peace.

- Embracing forgiveness, self-compassion, and moving forward.

- **Adopt a mission in life:** Keeping yourself busy with something bigger than yourself, or at least bigger than your problems, can be a good strategy to improve your self-esteem. Be it philanthropy, learning a language, a skill, or something as trivial as gardening, it can help you take the focus away from your own weaknesses and shift it towards more positive and productive activities. Of course, the more meaningful the mission, the more effective it will

be, not only in improving your self-esteem but also in guiding you through the ups and downs of life and in seeking the pleasure of Allah.

- **Choose a good company:** Surrounding oneself with positive, supportive, and uplifting individuals can provide encouragement, validation, and a sense of belonging. Interacting with people who value and appreciate one's strengths and accomplishments can boost self-confidence and foster a more positive self-perception. Our Prophet Muhammad (saw) has emphasized the importance of one's company in multiple Ahadith. This is also an important reminder for parents, to be their kids' best friends if they earnestly want them to follow your way of life. The Prophet (saw) said: «الرَّجُلُ عَلَى دِينِ خَلِيلِهِ فَلْيَنْظُرْ أَحَدُكُمْ مَنْ يُخَالِلُ» **“A man follows the religion of his friend; so each one should consider whom he makes his friend.”** [Sunan Abi Dawud]

- **DRESS (Diet, Routine, Exercise, Sunshine and Sleep):** DRESS can play a significant role in improving self-esteem.

- **Diet:** A balanced and nutritious diet is essential for physical and mental well-being. Consuming nutrient-rich foods supports brain function, mood regulation, and overall vitality. When the body is nourished, it can positively impact mental health and self-esteem.

- **Routine:** Establishing a structured routine provides a sense of stability, control, and accomplishment. Consistent daily routines help create a sense of order, increase productivity, and instill a sense of purpose, which can contribute to improved self-esteem.

- **Exercise:** Regular physical activity releases endorphins, which are known as "feel-good" hormones. Exercise promotes stress reduction, boosts mood, increases energy levels, and enhances body image. Engaging in physical activity can improve self-esteem by fostering a positive relationship with one's body and promoting a sense of accomplishment.

- **Sunshine:** Exposure to sunlight promotes the production of vitamin D, which is linked to mood regulation. Getting regular sunlight can enhance mood, reduce feelings of depression, and improve overall well-being, thereby positively influencing self-esteem.

- **Sleep:** Sleep is related to self-esteem because getting adequate and quality sleep contributes to improved mood, cognitive function, and overall well-being, which can positively influence how individuals perceive themselves and their self-worth. Consistently experiencing restful sleep helps promote a sense of rejuvenation, increased energy levels, and a more positive outlook on life, which can enhance self-confidence and self-esteem.

By incorporating all the above elements into their daily lives, individuals can experience improved self-esteem, enhanced mental health, and an overall greater sense of well-being.

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