

*Self-Esteem, Relationships, and Physical Health*

It's commonly believed that self-esteem, the evaluation of one's own worth as a human being, is very important. But how important is it, really?

As with so many things, it depends. On the one hand, higher levels of self-esteem are associated with happiness and life satisfaction, and who doesn't want those things? On the other hand, the self-help industry's obsession with self-esteem - a search of online book retailer amazon.com reveals over 110,000 books on the subject - definitely overstates its value. Research finds no consistent relationships between self-esteem and important life outcomes such as academic success, occupational success, popularity, being married, or having children. Nor is it associated with avoiding negative behaviors such as smoking, drinking, or using drugs.

How about a more specific question: Does self-esteem affect physical health? Recently, a Canadian research team found that it does, but that it probably does so indirectly. They found that low self-esteem, as measured by a carefully constructed and widely used questionnaire, predicted health problems in the college students they studied. During the semester, these students were more likely to miss class due to illness, or require a visit to the doctor, if their self-esteem was low. But why? The evidence suggests that the students' self-esteem had its most direct impact not on their health, but on their social relationships, such that when a student's self-esteem was low, he or she was much more likely to report having problems with friends. In turn, it seems it was this interpersonal stress and loss of social support, resulting from low self-esteem, which impacted students' health and led to illness.

As is always the case in science, a single study, even a very good one, is never enough to convince us of something outright. This finding will need to be replicated by independent researchers if we're to be certain that self-esteem affects physical health by first affecting relationships. But what if independent researchers do confirm that causal chain - what then? One exciting possibility is that psychologists could develop cost-saving preventive health interventions that protect or raise self-esteem in vulnerable persons.

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