Understanding low self-esteem

How a harsh view of yourself is formed, and how it keeps itself going.

Self-esteem is the overall opinion you have of yourself. Low self-esteem means that opinion is harsh and negative: "I am not good enough", "I am unlikeable", "I am a failure". It feels like a fact. It is actually a conclusion, drawn a long time ago, from experiences that were often not your doing.

Early experiences	Criticism, neglect, bullying, being compared, being the odd one out, too little praise or warmth
↓	
The bottom line	The verdict on myself. "I am not good enough."
↓	
Rules for living	Ways to get by in spite of it. "I must never fail." "I must keep everyone happy."
↓	
Trigger	A situation where a rule is broken or might be
↓	
Anxious predictions and self-criticism	"I will mess this up." "Typical. I am useless."
↓	
The bottom line seems confirmed	Low mood, avoidance, and more evidence for the verdict

How it keeps going

- **Biased attention.** You notice everything that fits the verdict and overlook what does not.
- **Biased interpretation.** You put successes down to luck and treat failures as proof.
- **Avoidance and safety behaviours.** If you never take the risk, you never find out you could have managed.
- **Self-criticism.** Constant criticism lowers your mood and confidence, as it would for anyone.

How it changes

1. Catching and questioning anxious predictions, then testing them.
2. Answering self-criticism with something fairer.
3. Noticing and recording good qualities and things that go right.
4. Loosening the rules.
5. Building a new bottom line, based on all the evidence.

> **Note**
> The bottom line is an opinion. It was formed by a child or young person with limited information, and it can be revised.

Based on the cognitive model of low self-esteem developed by Melanie Fennell.

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My self-esteem map

Where my view of myself came from, and what keeps it in place.

Name _____ Date _____

Experiences that shaped how I see myself

What happened, and what was missing?

↓

My bottom line

"I am..."

↓

My rules for living

"I must...", "If I..., then..."

↓

Situations that set it off

When is the bottom line triggered?

↓

What I do and say to myself then

Predictions, self-criticism, avoiding

What does living by this bottom line cost me?

If I saw a child being treated the way I treat myself, what would I think?

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