# 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.

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