



who's that GIRL?

Have you lost sight of yourself or lost all confidence in your ability? Fiona Hoban takes a look at the vicious circle of low self-esteem

Illustration: Rachel Corcoran

Do you ever feel like you've lost your va-va-voom? A sense of flat-lining? A client said to me once: "It's not that there's anything wrong with me, but there's nothing right with me either."

This is often a sign that self-esteem has taken a bit of a drop. Self-esteem isn't an inherited trait or something that appears overnight. It develops over weeks, months and years of experiences that cause children and adults to gain or lose confidence. There's a contradiction at the heart of self-esteem. On the one hand it is largely others that shape our sense of worth (think back to your parents, teachers, etc) and yet it is widely recognised that healthy self-esteem comes from within. It's not something other people bestow upon you, or a prize you earn after you've done enough things to prove to the world that you're worthy. Indeed, if your self-esteem is overly dependent on proving yourself to the world, you may end up with quite a lot of achievements but will probably have very little ability to enjoy them. It is often cited that our achievements only give a fleeting boost to our confidence. After that, we feel insecure again and need another fix or boost.

If we notice that our self-esteem, whether high or low, is constantly fluctuating, it is probably a sign that we are overly dependent on others' judgement of us. Just think about the contestants on the talent shows and cookery programmes. Sometimes it looks like they have no idea of their own worth or value; it depends almost entirely on being given the green light from the judges.

Eckhart Tolle in his book *Stillness Speaks* tells a story about a monk who had been practising his faith for many years. Finally he came to the stage where he felt he had reached enlightenment. Then one day this monk heard that a very senior and holy man would be coming to meet him. He felt honoured. When he got to meet this holy man, the monk noticed that the palms of his hands were sweaty. He knew that he was not as enlightened as he thought he was. He went back to his monastery to practise his faith some more. His sense of worth fluctuated in the presence of a holy man which revealed his lack of intrinsic self-worth. His sweaty palms said it all.

A lack of intrinsic self-worth or self-esteem can be a vicious circle and self-fulfilling prophecy. The lower your self-esteem, the less you believe in yourself. The less you believe in yourself, the worse you will do in various day-to-day life situations, which in turn will re-enforce your low self-esteem.

So if your self-esteem has taken a bit of a knock, how then to rebuild it? One of the cornerstones in building self-esteem is self-acceptance. Self-acceptance means that you're aware of your personality traits and quirks, and your strengths and weaknesses, and are fine with the overall package they add up to. This doesn't mean that we are complacent and have no desire to change or improve. Quite the opposite. Nathaniel Branden said: "To be self-accepting does not mean to be without a desire to change, improve or evolve. The truth is that self-acceptance is a precondition of change."

Of course, to be content with ourselves (warts and all) flies in the face of many modern cultural messages we receive. These messages are often the taken-for-granted values about what it means to be a worthwhile person. The problem is many of these messages are inaccurate and harmful because they suggest that there's something wrong with anyone who doesn't fit into a very demanding mould. There's an undoubted pressure on us to "have it all" simply because we're "worth it". Our sense of intrinsic worth can be lowered if we feel we don't measure up to such unrealistic criteria.

Theodore Roosevelt said: "Comparison is the thief of joy."

We need to be careful of the yardstick. It can represent an unrealistic notion of perfection and is often used to beat ourselves up with. It's far healthier to ditch the notion of perfection and be content with being perfectly imperfect. And get your va-va-voom back. ✨