



Your Employee and Family Assistance Program is a support service that can help you take the first step toward change.

## Talking to teens about self-image and esteem



Healthy self-esteem is an important factor in good mental and physical health. It affects how we view ourselves, our abilities, appearance, beliefs, behaviours, feelings and most importantly, our overall worth. When our self-esteem is low, we place little value on our talents and strengths and focus more on what we perceive as our faults and weaknesses, and that can hold us back from reaching our full potential. However, too much self-esteem can be equally destructive, resulting in self-serving attitudes and actions, lack of empathy for others and anger and bullying when thwarted. Healthy self-esteem is when our image of ourselves remains *balanced*. In other words, we have a good opinion of ourselves and our abilities

but recognize our flaws.

### Teens and self-esteem

Adolescence is a time of enormous physical and mental changes. One of the most significant, and unseen, changes is with the frontal lobes of the brain — the seat of decision-making, empathy, judgment, insight, and impulse control. We're well into our 20s before this part of our brain is fully developed. As a result, healthy self-esteem is important during the teen years, helping kids tackle challenges, act independently, take pride in their accomplishments and manage strong emotions. That's not always easy in today's digital world.

### The role of social media

Having supportive friends is central to our feelings of self-worth and social media allows even the shyest individuals to connect with people around the world at any time, in any place. We all feel good when our posts receive several "likes," positive comments or sympathetic responses. However, social media can also have a negative effect on how we feel about ourselves. Constant postings of other people's professional successes, holidays, nights out, and family events can make us feel lonely, insecure, and inadequate.

For young people, there's also the growing issue of online shaming and cyberbullying. Bullying through social media sites is mostly but not exclusively, experienced by school age children and youth and it can have devastating consequences on both their physical and psychological health. According to recent U.S. statistics, more half of adolescents have been bullied online, and one in three have received threats online. Less than 50 percent do not tell their parents when cyberbullying occurs. Healthy self-esteem helps teens keep things in perspective and focus on what's important in their lives.

### How to help teens develop healthy self-esteem

Developing healthy self-esteem begins early. If children have strong relationships with their parents, siblings, friends and others in their community and generally receive positive feedback, they're more likely to enter their teen years with the confidence to make good choices and overcome setbacks.

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Here are some suggestions to help you build your child's self-esteem:

- **Set standards of behaviour.** Don't allow criticism that involves shaming or ridiculing from your child or anyone involved in his or her life. Some people may not realize they're doing this, insisting they're "teasing" or "joking," but ridicule can severely damage self-esteem.
- **Encourage your teens not to compare themselves to others.** Remind them that other people's lives might appear to be better than theirs but the reality is that they too have problems – they just don't mention them.
- **Encourage positivity.** Psychologists have found that negative self-talk – "I'm such a loser," "I hate how I look" – is often at the root of depression and anxiety. Encourage positive self-talk. For example, "I did my best and I'm proud of myself," or "I'm short – and fabulous!"
- **Foster problem-solving.** We can help teens improve their ability to overcome obstacles and make wise decisions. When confronted with a problem, ask them questions that pinpoint how they feel about a situation and what may need to be changed. Then brainstorm possible solutions and suggest alternatives.
- **Involve teens in family decisions.** Adolescents like nothing better than to be treated as adults and showing them you value their input can be valuable in bolstering their self-esteem.
- **Encourage their passions.** Everybody is good at something. For teens that can be a sport, a musical instrument or academics. Even interests that may seem frivolous to adults can provide opportunities for teens to feel good about themselves.
- **Encourage volunteering.** Many teens find self-worth by helping make a difference in their community.

And finally, let your teen know that everyone needs help from time to time. If they don't want to discuss their feelings with you, encourage them to speak with a counsellor through their school or your Employee and Family Assistance Program.