

Dr. Benzion Sorotzkin, Psy.D.
Clinical Psychologist
Brooklyn, NY
www.DrSorotzkin.com
bensort@aol.com

IS SELF-ESTEEM SYNONYMOUS WITH *GAAVAH*?

In a March 2011 issue of *Hamodia Magazine*, a writer who described himself as a "Yeshiva high school teacher and life coach" wrote an article titled "The Self-Esteem Mirage." In this article, the author states: "The self-esteem movement is exactly the opposite of everything the *mussar* masters teach." He cites from Rav Shlomo Wolbe's writings as evidence for this assertion. And, in fact, in one of his published letters, Rav Wolbe makes a strong negative statement about the emphasis modern psychology puts on self-confidence.¹ He writes: "Every other day *bochurim* complain to me that they have no confidence () and I respond, Where does it say in the Torah that you need to have confidence in yourself: and is it even a good thing? In *seforim* it only speaks of the need for confidence () in *Hashem*."² This seems to be quite conclusive!

Refutation

Yet, in a letter to the editor a few weeks later Rabbi Dovid Nussbaum and Rabbi Eliezer Wolbe from the *Bais Hamussar* in *Yerushalayim* [established by Rav Shlomo Wolbe] responded with the following comments:

1 The article "The Self-Esteem Mirage" falls into the category of misconstruing Rav Wolbe's stance on self-esteem. On countless occasions, he spoke publicly about the importance of building up one's confidence, developing a positive self-image, and instilling self-esteem in our children. Rav Wolbe cited many sources in *Chazal*, building a solid base for this very important foundation of *chinuch*.

¹ Self-confidence and self-esteem are often used interchangeably. Technically, self esteem is a more general concept of the value you see yourself having. "Am I worthwhile human being?" Confidence, on the other hand, is more specific - it's the belief that you can succeed at something. You can be confident about one area of your life, while lacking confidence about another area. They are, however, clearly related. In his book reviewing the research on self-esteem, (Self-Esteem and Positive Psychology: Research, Theory, and Practice. 4th ed. New York: Springer, 2013), Christopher Mruk combines both concepts, asserting that authentic self-esteem involves both feeling competent and feeling worthy.

² ספר אגרות וכתבים (רבי שלמה וולבה, 'כל יום ב' וה' באים אלי בחורים ומתאווננים שאין להם "בטחון עצמי" (self confidence): ואני שואל אותם: איפה זה כתוב בתורה שצריכים בטחון עצמי, וכי זה דבר טוב? בספרים מצאתי רק בטחון בהשי"ת. [inferiority complex] " ()

Basing the claim in this article on Rav Wolbe's teaching caused much anguish to his *talmidim* and family, who knew and repeatedly heard his views on the matter [*Hamodia Magazine*, April 6, 2011].

How do we understand this apparent discrepancy between Rav Wobe's letter criticizing the contemporary emphasis on self-confidence and his family and *talmidim's* insistence (including many supporting citations from his *seforim*) that "on countless occasions, [Rav Wolbe] spoke publicly about the importance of building up one's confidence, developing a positive self-image, and instilling self-esteem in our children"?

The Academic Debate Over the Importance of Self-Esteem

What does science say about the importance of self-esteem? It depends who (and when) you ask. In a scholarly review of the research on self-esteem in a 2007 issue of *American Psychologist*, Swann and his colleagues⁹ recall the wave of enthusiasm within the lay community for the concept of self-esteem. It was claimed - without much supporting evidence - that improved self-esteem was a cure for much that ails us in the realm of education and mental health. Academic failure, anti-social behavior, juvenile delinquency, and a wide variety of emotional disorders were attributed to poor self-esteem.

More recently, researchers have expressed disillusionment with this long assumed importance of self-esteem since most studies did not find much of a connection. These skeptics included Roy Baumeister, a prominent social psychologist and a former proponent of the self-esteem movement. One of the turning points in the exaggerated and sweeping claims made for the importance of self-esteem as a panacea for all of society's ills was the research findings (by Baumeister and others) that juvenile delinquents and criminals actually have very high self-esteem. Baumeister et al. concluded that "efforts to boost people's self-esteem are of little value in fostering academic achievement or preventing undesirable behavior."¹⁰

Exaggerated claims and exaggerated devaluation

Swann et al. assert that the highly exaggerated claims for the value of self-esteem has led to an exaggerated devaluation of its importance. Rather than making broad claims of the 'magical' powers of self-esteem, research points to more nuanced and sophisticated predictive statements regarding the value of self-esteem. One example they point to is the importance of assessing the strength of the person's self-view. A strongly held self-view will likely have a more positive impact than a tenuous one. Even with strongly held beliefs one has to distinguish "true certainty in beliefs from 'compensatory confidence,' with the latter actually reflecting a lack of certainty in the attitude."¹¹

⁹ Swann, W. B. Jr., Chang-Schneider, C., & McClarty, K. L. (2007). Do people's self-views matter? Self-concept and self-esteem in everyday life. *American Psychologist*, 62, 84-94

¹⁰ Quoted by Swann et al. p. 84.

¹¹ Swann et al. p. 86. See also later from Rav Dessler on *gaavah* as a compensation for an inferiority complex.

Regarding the purported evidence of high self-esteem among criminals, Swann et al. again decry the lack of nuanced distinctions in these studies which often "equate the self-protective statements of narcissists with those of people with true high self-esteem... [C]onflating narcissism and true self-esteem is profoundly problematic for the same reason that it is problematic to mistake for a friend an enemy who is merely masquerading as a friend."¹²

Impact of improving self-esteem and why some programs don't work

Swann et al. insist that, contrary to the critics, there is ample evidence that boosting self-esteem improve test scores, reduce school disciplinary reports, and reduce use of drugs and alcohol. There is also "the well-documented finding that low self-esteem predicts subsequent depression." They suggest that the alleged lack of evidence of a positive impact of programs to boost self-esteem may reflect the simplistic nature of some of these programs. They relate how one satirist had a character gazing into a mirror and reciting, "I'm good enough, I'm smart enough, and gash darn it, people like me." "Instead of focusing on people's momentary self-esteem," they report, "the effective programs emphasize procedures that are also designed to alter the raw materials that provide a basis for healthy, sustainable self-esteem."¹³ These programs "involve changing the behaviors and situations that feed into people's self-views rather than the self-views per se." Still, "just as it is not enough to change self-views only, so too is it not enough to change people's behaviors and life circumstances only" without focusing on facilitating the change in self-esteem as well.¹⁴

Alfie Kohn

More recently, Alfie Kohn passionately defended the value of self-esteem, with ample documentation from the research literature.¹⁵ He echoes many of the points made by Swann et al. citing more recent research. He cites studies that found "poorer mental and physical health, worse economic prospects, and higher levels of criminal behavior during adulthood" among adolescents with low self-esteem.¹⁶ People with high self-esteem "are apt to be more satisfied with life, less depressed, and more optimistic." They are also "more likely to persist at a task even when it's difficult... [while being] more likely to recognize when persistence would be futile," and are more resilient "so that the experience of failure isn't as discouraging."¹⁷

¹² Swann et al. p. 87.

¹³ Swann et al. p. 90.

¹⁴ Swann et al. p. 91.

¹⁵ Kohn, A. (2014). *The Myth of the Spoiled Child*. (Chapter 6, "The Attack on Self-Esteem.," pp. 119-139).

¹⁶ Kohn p. 122.

¹⁷ Kohn pp. 122-123.

Global vs. specific self-esteem

When it comes to assessing if self-esteem promotes higher achievement, Kohn acknowledges that the correlation "isn't all that impressive" but that's because many of these studies focus "on the capacity of global measures of self-esteem to predict specific outcomes ... but when you look at how children view their capability in a specific field, that **does** predict performance."

Is self-esteem the cause or the result of achievement?

Kohn refutes the critics who claim that "self-esteem isn't the cause of achievement: it's the result"¹⁸ while acknowledging that "gains in academic achievement that are facilitated by self-esteem... may further enhance feelings of self-worth, thus setting the stage for additional achievement in school."¹⁹

Regarding the question: Do programs to boost children's self-esteem actually work? Kohn cites recent research that school based interventions can make a difference: "provided that (a) the focus is on improving the way children view their aptitude in specific areas, (b) the measure of success matches the focus rather than looking at global self esteem, and (c) the program isn't ridiculous." Some of the simplistic and outlandish efforts to boost self-esteem were sometimes used to discredit all efforts to enhance children's self-esteem.²⁰

"The Dark Side of High Self-Esteem"

A turning point in the history of the self-esteem movement was Roy Baumeister's 1996 article subtitled "The Dark Side of High Self-Esteem" which to this day is cited by critics of self-esteem. Kohn criticizes Baumeister's "dubious reasoning" where he, for example, uses "high self-esteem" and "egotism" interchangeably. "Since many violent people are egotistical, Baumeister claimed, there must be a risk when self-esteem reaches a certain level." Likewise, asserts Kohn, Baumeister "assumed we should take people's sweeping self-congratulatory statements about themselves - 'I'm the greatest/smartest/strongest!' - at face value. Anyone who brags about how amazing he is must have very high self-esteem." This is unconvincing to anyone who can differentiate between "genuinely positive self-regard and arrogant self-satisfaction." Kohn cites research that clearly shows that "genuine self-esteem and narcissistic self-aggrandizement are distinct constructs."

Kohn reports that "Baumeister himself appeared to back-pedal a few years after publishing his much-quoted 'dark side' article." In a 2003 essay Baumeister "acknowledged that high self-esteem comes in different forms [and] that many people with high self-esteem aren't aggressive or narcissistic..." But by then "his first paper had already done its damage."²¹

¹⁸ Kohn p. 123.

¹⁹ Kohn p. 124.

²⁰ Kohn p. 124.

²¹ Kohn pp. 125-126.

In summary, there is ample evidence that low self-esteem is detrimental from both an emotional well-being and achievement perspectives and that high self-esteem makes a significant contribution to emotional well-being and levels of functioning. There is also significant evidence that sensibly designed programs can be effective in enhancing children's and adolescent's self-esteem.

The backlash against the self-esteem movement, according to both Swann et al. and Kohn, was fueled by (a) simplistic and superficial programs to boost self-esteem, (b) expecting positive self-esteem to improve performance even in areas not related to the domain of the positive self-regard, and, (c) equating the compensatory arrogance of the narcissist with genuinely positive self regard.

Feeling unique vs. feeling superior

This last point is something I had long noted in my clinical practice. Those who need to compensate for low self-esteem by striving for, or fantasizing about, success rarely have ordinary success in mind. Rather they are driven to strive for, or imagine themselves, achieving amazing and glorious success. Similarly, those who live in dire poverty dream of winning millions in a lottery and not of getting a decent paying job. It seems that "compensation" for shame experiences (often associated with low self-esteem) needs to be intense and grand enough to wipe out the shame.

Someone who grew up with adequate self-esteem may be content with moderate success (even while striving for more) without feeling a need to be superior to others. He experiences his "specialness" by appreciating his uniqueness. Those who grew up feeling inferior, in contrast, are not content with success or uniqueness, they need to feel superior.

I was pleased to see that Kohn quotes a similar idea from Morris Rosenberg, one of the pioneers in the study of self-esteem: "With self-esteem we are asking whether the individual considers himself adequate - a person of worth - not whether he considers himself superior to others."²² In my experience, this is what distinguishes healthy self-esteem from compensatory grandiosity.

Ideological rather than scientific objections to "unearned" self-esteem

Kohn asserts that the major underlying factor driving the critics of self-esteem is their objection to children feeling good about themselves "for no reason" (as one critic put it) or "just for being." He quotes Baumeister as insisting that self-esteem should be "a reward rather than an entitlement." Another objection was expressed by another critic (Twenge) quoted by Kohn who lamented that: "If a child feels great about himself even when he does nothing, why do anything? Self-esteem without basis encourages laziness..."

²² Kohn p. 126.

After reviewing the literature: Kohn insists that "there's absolutely no evidence to support the depressing premise that for things to get done, we need the anxious energy of perpetual self-doubt. In reality, someone who has a core of faith in his or her own efficacy and an underlying conviction that he or she is a good person is no more likely than other people - and probably a good deal less likely - to opt for stagnation. As a rule, it's hard to stop happy, satisfied people from trying to learn or from trying to do a job of which they can be proud."²³

Causes of unstable self-esteem

Kohn also cites recent research suggesting that **stability** of self-esteem is even more important than the **level** of self-esteem. He quotes one group of researchers who stated, "individuals with fragile high self-esteem are willing to go to great lengths to defend their positive, yet vulnerable, feelings of self-worth. They often overreact to perceived threats to their self-worth by becoming angry and either criticizing or attacking the source of the threat."²⁴

What makes self-esteem unstable, is when it is conditional, and especially when it hinges on outdoing others. Kohn asserts that conditional self-esteem probably "results from having been esteemed conditionally by others. When children feel as though they must fulfill certain conditions to be loved by their parents - a feeling typically evoked by the use of psychological control - it's not easy for them to accept themselves unconditionally."²⁵ And everything goes downhill from there."

Does the Torah value self-esteem?

We can find many Torah sources for the importance of positive self-esteem - in addition to the sources mentioned in the letter from the heads of the *Bais Hamussar* cited in the beginning of the article (e.g., "On countless occasions, [Rav Wolbe] spoke publicly about the importance of building up one's confidence, developing a positive self-image, and instilling self-esteem in our children.")

- Rav Chaim Volozhin writes in the *Nefesh Hachaim* that the *yetzer horah* tries to entrap a person by convincing him that the Torah that he learned and mitzvos that he kept have no value [and thus he also has no value].²⁶

²³ Kohn pp. 130-131.

²⁴ Kohn p. 133.

²⁵ Kohn p. 136. I have found that conditional **acceptance and respect** is usually more of a problem than conditional **love**. This point, that children need their parent's and teacher's respect and appreciation more than their love, was [] "... - also made in the name of the Chazon Ish.

... "חזון איש" ! ".....[" רבי מיכל יהודה לפקוביץ .

(משפחה) " (50' , ") " :(' ' ' ') נפש החיים ²⁶

While you don't want your child to become a *baal gaavah*, you do want to instill self-confidence in him. So how do you mold him into a secure, self-assured person without allowing him to become arrogant?

Actually, self-confidence and *gaavah* are not one and the same. Self-confidence means having a clear understanding of who and what you are, while *gaavah* is having an inflated sense of self. The *baal gaavah* is guilty of *kochi ve'otzem yadi*. He thinks that he alone should get the credit for his accomplishments, and he thinks he is better than other people are. The self-confident person knows the value of his accomplishments, but he also acknowledges that he could not accomplish anything without the help of the *Ribono Shel Olam*. Therefore, he does not consider himself superior to other people. A self-confident person can easily slip into becoming a *baal gaavah*, but if he has the proper *emunah* and *bitachon*, he can avoid it.

If a child does not have self-confidence, you can help him by assuring him that he can do whatever it is that he is striving to do. And if he makes a mistake, it is also okay. Everyone makes mistakes at one time or another. There is no shame in failure, only in not trying. So tell him that you want him to try and that you believe he can do it. That will not make him into a *baal gaavah*. But when he is successful, you should not go on and on about how clever he is, because that will make him a *baal gaavah*. A simple *ohev* will do.

In fact, it is quite possible that people who lack self-confidence actually have a strong streak of *gaavah*. The *baal gaavah* is very worried about his *kavod*, so he is exceedingly afraid of making a mistake. Failure will humiliate him. Therefore, he has no confidence. A person without much *gaavah*, however, is not that concerned with his image. He strives for success, but he will not be devastated by failure. He can concentrate on what he needs to do with a calm determination, and that is self-confidence.

It follows, therefore, that if you want your child to be self-confident, you should work on reducing his *gaavah*, because *gaavah* is a major obstacle to confidence. The best way to do this is to impress on him that we are very limited in what we can do. If we lift our hands, it is only through the *chesed* of the *Ribono Shel Olam*. Explain to him that *kochi ve'otzem yadi* is a foolish concept.

It also follows that you should not criticize your child if he fails. Consistent criticism is surest way to break a child. He becomes frightened to do anything, because he is always afraid that he will invite criticism. And it goes without saying that even though I am saying it that you should never ridicule a child. Ridicule is a weapon against which a child has absolutely no defense. If you want to show the child what he did wrong, it would be best to wait until the next opportunity arises and show him how to handle the situation correctly before he makes mistakes (pp. 186-187).

The *mashgiach* makes it clear that if we try to help a child develop self-confidence and self-esteem by encouraging him to feel superior to others and/or to perform without mistakes,

humble? The answer, explains Rav Tzodok, is that in Hashem's eyes a person's true greatness is not measured by his spiritual achievements in a vacuum. Rather it's measured by the obstacles that he had to overcome in order to reach the level he attained. Therefore, no matter what level a person reaches he can't ever be certain that he is greater in Hashem's eyes than anyone else - even a lowly person - since that person may have had to overcome many difficult obstacles to reach his level. Moshe Rabbeinu's *anavah* was defined by not needing to feel superior to others and not by denying his accomplishments.⁴⁴

In a similar vein, Rabbi Tuvia Basser in his translation of Maharal on Pirkei Avos⁴⁵ states that: "[H]umility, a common translation for *anavah*, is] an inadequate translation of the Hebrew *anavah*. *Anavah* means that one considers other people important, while not assessing his own importance. [H]umility conveys a negative evaluation of oneself, rather than the positive evaluation of others implied by *anavah*. (Perhaps one could add that *anavah* would allow a person to appreciate his own qualities without the need to compare himself to others.)"

Summary

There is convincing research evidence that positive self-esteem (and perhaps more importantly, a stable self-esteem) is an important and necessary ingredient of emotional well-being and healthy functioning. There are also numerous Torah sources that emphasize the importance of self-esteem and self-confidence. On the other hand, attributing to self-esteem the magic ability to solve all of society's ills is a gross over exaggeration of its powers. Programs to improve student's self-esteem need to be sophisticated and well designed - focusing on the underlying factors that feed self-esteem - in order to be effective.

The concern of some researchers that self-esteem is synonymous with narcissism seems to be unfounded, the result of equating the self-protective statements of narcissists with those of people with true high self-esteem...

However, it is important that the thrust of the efforts to boost self-esteem should not be to feel superior to others. Rather, it is to appreciate one's own inherent value and

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⁴⁵ Artscroll, 1997, pg. 44 fn 1.

competence without needing to be superior or perfect.