

Why Do We Hang On To Low Self-esteem?

Abridged from

Breaking the Spell – The Key to Recovering Self-esteem

(PSAvalon 2005)

“The concept of confidence feels strange – I’ve had none since I was little. Recently I’ve begun to say what I think at work and colleagues have been shocked and tell me, “That’s the most we’ve ever heard you say”.

Those of us with low self-esteem long for the day when we will finally feel good enough about ourselves, when we will no longer be plagued with the negative thoughts and attitudes that make us believe we are pathetic and worthless. We long to feel loved, wanted, supported and approved of and yet if others try to give us the things we long for we often reject them out of hand. We do not want to listen and object vehemently to any kind of positive affirmation. It seems crazy for us to reject the very thing we are so desperate for, yet this craziness is typical of low self-esteem.

Some of us have a deep-rooted resistance to acquiring a positive self-image and we have many subtle and obvious ways of sabotaging our attempts to change. We reject the attentions of the very people who could nurture and cherish us, dismissing their love and pushing them away in favour of those who criticise and misuse us. We plan to use daily affirmations to boost ourselves then mysteriously forget to do them. We resolve to clear up our clutter but somehow cannot quite bring ourselves to do it. We decide to start a creative project but suddenly cannot be bothered and lose interest. We decide to take positive action, like exercise or joining a group, but cannot find the time to fit it in. We read all the right books, but they make little difference. It is as if having self-esteem threatens our survival.

It is amazing how that saboteur can creep up, even when you thought it was gone. As I re-read this chapter to a friend I realised it provoked the reactions I just described. While I sat writing, that old saboteur was busy scrambling my ability to understand what I was saying and I kept thinking "what a load of meaningless rubbish! Who's going to read this anyway?" For a while I believed it; until my friend said, "Your book makes perfect sense to me", then I realised what had been happening. The fact that it took me six months to start writing this chapter, having written several others, speaks for itself.

Fear of Change

Any change to our identity, even a positive change, can feel threatening. Who will we become, how will we function, how will we cope, if we change? Even a destructive self-image is familiar, it is all we have known, and in its own way has kept us alive until now. We have developed all kinds of reference points and coping strategies around this identity of low self-esteem. If we change will they apply any more? We have got used to hiding ourselves behind dowdy clothes, behind food, behind drugs or alcohol. We have got used to deferring to others, to making do with the left-overs of life. We have become habituated to our own negativity, self-pity, frustration, resentment and blame. We have become attached to our fantasies of longing for love, for success, for the “someday my prince will come” syndrome.

If we really agree to change, we may experience the loss of all of this. For some of us low self-esteem has served an important purpose, it has allowed us to hide and protect ourselves against exposure to criticism or attack.

It has kept us invisible and isolated, but it has also kept us safe from having to stand up to those we fear, or whose power seems too great for us to challenge. It has helped us avoid taking responsibility for making changes, for breaking away from unhealthy relationships, work or surroundings.

We surround ourselves with people and activities that make our low self-image tolerable and indeed help to perpetuate it. If we were to mix with people who are confident and successful, it might only sharpen the contrast with our own state. I remember how I used to seek others who also had problems with self-esteem, somehow I felt less uncomfortable with them. If I was with successful, confident people I felt worse about myself and envious of them, I would secretly try to find fault with them and their values, in order to feel better about myself. When I mixed with those who lacked confidence, I knew they would tolerate my depression and sympathise to a degree that others would not. They, in turn, could offload their negativity on me and we would have long telephone conversations sharing our lot. Through listening to their problems and their inability to change things I could feel better about myself and my own state of stuckness. I am grateful because I know there are times that I could not have coped without that support, but there was also the element of feeding each other's negativity. These friends did not challenge me; we had an investment in each other staying as we were.

It may be that low self-esteem is a family culture where confidence and assertion are seen as taboo. Perhaps being the one with low self-esteem is the habitual role we have played in our family, or in our intimate relationship. If we change we would be breaking the family mould; we may risk losing our relationships with those people who have an investment in us staying as we are. We may finally have to leave the unsatisfactory job we are doing, because however poorly paid and however much it undermines our confidence, it feels comfortable to our low self-esteem identity. We may have to consider giving up the unhealthy lifestyle and habits we have used to comfort ourselves; smoking, drugs, alcohol. We might have to write that book we talked about writing for so long. Changing our sense of esteem can mean tackling all sorts of issues that we have put off and dealing with the consequences. So however we bitch and complain about having low self-esteem we can have a big investment in staying put.

It is important to honour and respect our fears, and fearing change does not make us a pathetic wimp, it only makes us human. We need to understand what our investment is and how low self-esteem has served a purpose for us. We also need to decide whether or not we are ready to give it up. If it is very deep-rooted we will need to do it slowly, a step at a time, healing our fears one by one and replacing them with more positive ways of dealing with life.

Low Self-esteem as a survival strategy

Low Self-esteem may have played an important part in our survival, for some of us the perception that we are bad is developed as a childhood defence against feelings of powerlessness and abandonment. We can experience abandonment for a variety of reasons: our parent was busy and did not come every time we cried or were hungry; we were separated from our parents at a young age in hospital, or at boarding school. Perhaps the separation was permanent through loss, divorce or adoption. Perhaps a parent was emotionally unavailable because they were caught up with their own needs, or their own dysfunction, or perhaps they were just not emotionally expressive. Abuse is also a form of abandonment, both on the part of the perpetrator and also those who failed to protect the child by disbelief and denial.

We can be abandoned emotionally as well as physically, either way it threatens our survival. Inside we experience the terror of the void, and a feeling that we do not exist. This is especially true if the abandonment is experienced before we had time to form a separate sense of our own identity.

Furthermore we feel powerless in our abandonment, powerless to make others love and hold us. The emotional experience of abandonment is a painful combination of feeling powerless and alone; a combination most human beings will go to great lengths to avoid feeling. To a child, the idea of a parent, however negative, is preferable to no parent at all. No parent means total abandonment and rings a huge alarm bell to our instinctive mind, it tells us we will not survive.

We have to find ways to live with and to cope with the conflict between our need for a parent and the pain of what is happening to us. We convince ourselves that the abusive parent really meant well and we idealise them in order to protect ourselves against the knowledge and the fear of physical abandonment. We enter into this denial also to preserve our ability to love. It allows us to stay in touch with the idea and the experience of love and goodness, even if misdirected. This is how we begin to create the habit of idealising and romanticising relationships with people who misuse us.

Low self-esteem is another way in which we try to cope with this dilemma, and paradoxically it gives us a feeling of control over events. It eases our feelings of powerlessness. As children we tell ourselves it must be our fault that things go wrong, or that our parents don't love us the way we need them to. It must be because we are bad, or unlovable that they went away. In this way we give ourselves the illusion that we had control over their love for us and we have an outlet for our frustration and anger. We can take it out on ourselves and punish ourselves, because it is easier and safer than punishing others. If we were to express our anger we may justifiably fear retaliation. We may imagine that our anger would destroy them. Somehow the notion that we were responsible is preferable to the reality that we were powerless to influence events or make people love us. In this way low self-esteem becomes a form of defence.

When as adults we attempt to heal those past wounds, ironically it is the recognition that we were powerless which helps to set us free. We were powerless over events and other people's behaviour; it was nothing to do with us at all. There is nothing we could have done, but now we are free, we can make choices for ourselves.

Low self-esteem is a great cover, you get to fail, to be unwanted, invisible; it gives you a reason to give up trying. You can blame your childhood, traumatic events, your addiction, smoking, depression or illness. But all this is a smoke screen that conceals the kind of deep-seated ambivalence I have described. It is a kind of spell with which we hypnotise ourselves and it powerfully binds our will into a state of passivity, a sense of paralysis and lack of commitment. We think we are committed to life when in fact we are not.

Honouring our Resistance

In order to change this we need to recognise our resistance and that we have an investment in continuing the way we are. Resistance is an important survival strategy and we need recognise its value. We need to be able to resist that which threatens our survival, or our integrity as individuals; we need to be able to say No. However, the circumstances in which silent resistance, or inertia, was our only option, may no longer apply. As one client said, "I'm thirty-five and I make my own choices now!" In addition, we have acquired other experiences and resources that we can draw on. We need to understand just how our resistance has been trying to protect us. We may find that our resistance has now become self-destructive, but when we

originally enlisted its support, it was the best option. Resistance is like a loyal soldier we set up to guard our psyche many moons ago then forgetting who gave them their instructions, we now blame them for getting in our way.

I often tell the story of the instances of individual Japanese soldiers who survived alone on remote tiny islands in the Pacific up to twenty years after the Second World War. Soldiers who were sole survivors of their platoons, but who loyally continued to perform their duties. They would raise the flag and patrol the island day after day. It seems bizarre to imagine such loyalty and hard to imagine what it might be like on that day when a boat finally appeared and they were told that the War was over. Not only were they told that the War was over, but that it had been over many years ago. I ask my clients to try to imagine what it would be like to return to a country that had changed utterly, to a society and to a family of people no longer recognisable. What would it be like to adjust to such a change? I tell them that the Japanese value loyalty and that those soldiers were not laughed at, but were rewarded with medals for their sense of duty and then retired very, very gently.

The story is a strange and memorable one, and yet each of us has one of those loyal soldiers inside us. If we just try to get rid of them they will resist, because that is their nature and that is what we told them to do. The way to deal with them is to understand just how they have been trying to serve us and to thank them for their efforts. Then gently but firmly, we have to let them know that the War is over, that we are now in charge and that their duties have now changed. We can then find new and more appropriate ways to protect ourselves, because we all need protection. Maybe a castle that keeps everyone out, and keeps us isolated, can be transformed into a warm comforting coat that allows us to move and to get closer to people, as in one person's example. It is possible to change if we just take the time to understand what it is that we really need.

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