

*This module is part of the*  
**OVERCOMING LOW SELF-ESTEEM  
SELF-HELP PROGRAMME**

A 3-part programme based on  
Cognitive Behavioural Techniques

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**ROBINSON**  
London

# Introduction: How to Use this Workbook

This is a self-help course for dealing with low self-esteem. It has two aims:

- 1** To help you develop a better understanding of the problem
- 2** To teach you the practical skills you will need in order to change

## How the course works

The *Overcoming Low Self-Esteem Self-Help Course* will help you understand how low self-esteem develops and what keeps it going, and then to make changes in your life so that you begin to feel more confident and more kindly and accepting towards yourself.

These workbooks are designed to help you work, either by yourself or with your healthcare practitioner, to overcome low self-esteem. With plenty of questionnaires, charts, worksheets and practical exercises, the three parts together make up a structured course.

**Part One** explains:

- What low self-esteem is
- How low self-esteem affects people
- How negative experiences affect people
- What keeps low self-esteem going

**Part Two** explains:

- How to recognize and deal with anxious predictions
- How to recognize and question self-critical thoughts
- How to identify your positive qualities
- How to gain a balanced view of yourself and start enjoying life

**Part Three** explains:

- What Rules for Living are
- How to change your Rules for Living
- How to recognize and change your central belief about yourself
- How to draft and fine-tune an Action Plan for the future

## **How long will the course take?**

Each workbook will take at least two or three weeks to work through – but do not worry if you feel that you need to give each one extra time. Some things can be understood and changed quite quickly, but others take longer. You will know when you are ready to move on to the next workbook. Completing the entire course could take only two to three months, but this will depend on how quickly you wish to work. Take your time, and go at the pace that suits you best.

## **Getting the most from the course**

Here are some tips to help you get the most from the workbooks:

- These workbooks are not priceless antiques – they are practical tools. So feel free not only to write on the worksheets and charts, but also to underline and highlight things, and to write comments and questions in the margins. By the time you have finished with a workbook, it should look well and truly used.
- You will also find lots of space in the main text. This is for you to write down your thoughts and ideas, and your responses to the questions.
- Keep an open mind and be willing to experiment with new ideas and skills. These workbooks will sometimes ask you to think about painful issues. However, if low self-esteem is distressing you and restricting your life, it really is worth making the effort to overcome it. The rewards will be substantial.
- Be prepared to invest time in doing the practical exercises – set aside 20 to 30 minutes each day if you can.
- Try to answer all the questions and do the exercises, even if you have to come back to some of them later. There may be times when you get stuck and can't think

how to take things forward. If this happens, don't get angry with yourself or give up. Just put the workbook aside and come back to it later, when you are feeling more relaxed.

- You may find it helpful to work through the workbooks with a friend. Two heads are often better than one. And you may be able to encourage each other to persist, even when one of you is finding it hard.
- Use the Thoughts and Reflections section at the back of the workbook to write down anything you read that has been particularly helpful to you.
- Re-read the workbook. You may get more out of it once you've had a chance to think about some of the ideas and put them into practice for a little while.
- Each workbook builds on what has already been covered. So what you learn when working with one will help you when you come to the next. It's quite possible simply to dip into different ones as you please, but you may get most out of the series if you follow them through systematically, step by step.

### A note of caution

These workbooks will not help everyone who has low self-esteem. If you find that focusing on self-esteem is actually making you feel worse instead of better, or if your negative beliefs about yourself are so strong that you cannot even begin to use the ideas and practical skills described, you may be suffering from clinical depression. The recognized signs of clinical depression include:

- Constantly feeling sad, down, depressed or empty
- General lack of interest in what's going on around you
- A big increase or decrease in your appetite and weight
- A marked change in your sleep patterns
- Noticeable speeding up or slowing down in your movements and how you go about things
- Feeling of being tired and low in energy
- An intense sense of guilt or worthlessness
- Difficulty in concentrating and making decisions
- A desire to hurt yourself or a feeling that you might be better off dead

If you have had five or more of these symptoms (including low mood or loss of interest) for two weeks or more, you should seek professional help from a doctor, counsellor or psychotherapist. There is nothing shameful about seeking this sort of professional help – any more than there is anything shameful about taking your car to a garage if it is not working as it should, or going to see a lawyer if you have legal problems. It simply means taking your journey towards self-knowledge and self-acceptance with the help of a friendly guide, rather than striking out alone.

## SECTION 1: What is Low Self-Esteem?

This section will help you to understand:

- what low self-esteem is
- whether you have low self-esteem
- how we develop beliefs about ourselves
- how low self-esteem affects a person
- how low self-esteem affects our lives
- how low self-esteem is linked to other problems
- how the impact of low self-esteem varies

### What is low self-esteem?

Self-esteem refers to the overall beliefs or opinions we have about ourselves, and the value we place on ourselves as people. A person with low self-esteem will have generally negative self-beliefs.

Look at the following statements and write 'N' next to the ones that sound negative.

- a 'I am comfortable with myself as I am.' \_\_\_\_\_
- b 'I'm useless.' \_\_\_\_\_
- c 'Nothing I do matters.' \_\_\_\_\_
- d 'I'm a good person.' \_\_\_\_\_
- e 'The things I do are worthwhile.' \_\_\_\_\_
- f 'I'm worthless.' \_\_\_\_\_
- g 'I am weak and inferior to other people.' \_\_\_\_\_
- h 'I appreciate and respect myself.' \_\_\_\_\_
- i 'I'm important to the people around me.' \_\_\_\_\_

## 2 WHAT IS LOW SELF-ESTEEM?

j 'I dislike myself.' \_\_\_\_\_

k 'No one cares about me.' \_\_\_\_\_

Do any of the negative statements sound familiar? Perhaps you have had some of these feelings yourself? To find out more, work through the next exercise.

### Do I have low self-esteem?

Take a look at the ten statements below. Put a tick next to each question in the column that best reflects how you feel about yourself. Be honest – there are no right or wrong answers, simply tell the truth about how you see yourself.

	Yes, definitely	Yes, mostly	Yes, sometimes	No, mostly	No, not at all
My experience in life has taught me to value and appreciate myself					
I have a good opinion of myself					
I treat myself well and look after myself properly					
I like myself					
I give as much weight to my qualities, skills, assets and strengths as I do to my weaknesses and flaws					
I feel good about myself					
I feel I am entitled to other people's attention and time					
I believe I am entitled to the good things in life					
My expectations of myself are no more rigid or exacting than my expectations of other people					
I am kind and encouraging towards myself, rather than self-critical					

If your answers to these statements are not mainly ‘Yes, definitely’, then this book could be useful to you. If you’re troubled by self-doubt, if your thoughts about yourself are often unkind and critical, or if you have difficulty in feeling that you have any true worth or that you deserve happiness, these are signs that your self-esteem is low. And low self-esteem may be having a painful and damaging effect on your life.

## How does low self-esteem affect a person?

Negative beliefs about ourselves can be expressed in many ways (such as how we look and behave) and it’s useful to learn how to recognize these outward signs.

If you think you have low self-esteem, you could consider yourself at this point. But you may find it more helpful to start by thinking about someone you know who you consider has low self-esteem. This is because, when we try to look at ourselves, it is often difficult to get a clear view – we are too close to the problem.

Think about the person you have chosen. Remember in as much detail as you can a recent time when you met. You may find it helpful to think of more than one person so a blank worksheet has been provided at the back of the book for you to use.

- 1 What did you talk about?** (Did he or she express a lot of self-criticism, self-blame or self-doubt?)

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- 2 How did the person behave?** (Did he or she sit hunched over, looking down? Did he or she speak in a hushed voice, or avoid making eye contact? Did you have the feeling he or she was putting on a front – working hard to appear cheerful, for example, or being the life and soul of the party instead of relaxing and being natural?)

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#### 4 WHAT IS LOW SELF-ESTEEM?

- 3 What sort of mood was the person in?** (For example, did he or she seem shy, sad, anxious, ashamed, frustrated or angry?)

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- 4 How was the person's body state?** (For example, did he or she seem tired or tense?)

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This exercise shows how low self-esteem (negative beliefs about the self) can affect thinking, behaviour, emotions and body sensations. Now that you have got an idea of what to look out for, imagine observing yourself in the same way. What would be the signs of low self-esteem in *your* case?

**Thoughts:**

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**Behaviour:**

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**Emotions:**


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**Body state:**


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**How does low self-esteem affect our lives?**

Just as low self-esteem is reflected in many aspects of a person, so it has an impact on many areas of life.

Tick the statements below that most closely match the way you feel.

**Work**

- ☐ **a** 'I work late nearly every night, but I still don't get half the things done I need to.'
- ☐ **b** 'My parents are disappointed that I haven't done better.'
- ☐ **c** 'I put in as much as I have to do for my work and no more. I sometimes think I could do something more demanding, but I'm a bit worried about having to learn new skills.'

## 6 WHAT IS LOW SELF-ESTEEM?

- ☐ **d** 'I thought about applying for a new job but I know I probably won't get it, so I'm better off staying where I am.'

### Personal relationships

- ☐ **a** 'If someone criticizes something I do, I always feel terrible.'
- ☐ **b** 'I'm not very good in a group of people – I can't think what to say and often blush or stammer when I start to speak.'
- ☐ **c** 'I sometimes find myself apologizing for something that wasn't actually my fault.'
- ☐ **d** 'I usually drink too much at social events. If I didn't, I'd probably just stand in a corner feeling shy and awkward.'

### Self-care

- ☐ **a** 'I know I ought to take time off work when I'm sick, but I worry that I'll let my workmates down.'
- ☐ **b** 'My hair's a mess and I could do with some new clothes.'
- ☐ **c** 'I smoke a lot, especially when I'm stressed out or a bit down.'
- ☐ **d** 'People tell me I obsess about the way I look but I'm worried about not being as attractive as possible all the time.'

### Leisure activities

- ☐ **a** 'I know I ought to do more exercise but I don't dare join my local gym because everyone else there is really fit.'
- ☐ **b** 'I'd like to join an art class but I don't have any talent so I'd just make a fool of myself.'
- ☐ **c** 'I'd love to have a facial or a massage but I'd feel guilty about spending money on myself.'

- ☐ **d** 'I find it hard to sit down and relax – there's always something that needs doing in the house.'

Now let's look at your answers and see how low self-esteem may be affecting your life.

### Work

If you ticked **a** or **b** you may be a real perfectionist and relentlessly work yourself hard. Nothing is good enough. You may not give yourself credit for your achievements or believe that good results come from your own skill and abilities.

If you ticked **c** or **d** you may have a pattern of avoiding challenges for fear of failing. People with low self-esteem often perform below their potential.

### Personal relationships

If you ticked **a** you may be oversensitive to criticism and disapproval.

If you ticked **b** you may suffer from extreme self-consciousness, which may stop you expressing yourself. It could even make you want to back away from social situations altogether.

If you ticked **c** you may be so eager to please that you always put others first, no matter what the cost to yourself.

If you ticked **d** you may try to appear lively and confident but, underneath, you worry that if you don't behave in this way people will find you boring and won't want to know you.

### Self-care

If you ticked **a**, **b** or **c** then you may not take proper care of yourself because you don't feel that you deserve to be looked after.

If you ticked **d** you may spend hours perfecting every detail of how you look, convinced that this is the only way to be attractive to other people.

### Leisure activities

If you ticked **a** or **b** you may avoid any leisure activity in which there is a risk of being judged.

If you ticked **c** or **d** you may have an underlying belief that you do not deserve rewards, treats or any time to relax and enjoy yourself.

## How is low self-esteem linked to other problems?

Low self-esteem is sometimes a **consequence** of other problems, such as:

- relationship difficulties
- financial hardship
- severe stress
- chronic pain or illness
- panic attacks

All these problems can undermine confidence and lead to loss of self-esteem. In this case, tackling the root problem may provide the most effective solution. People who learn to manage panic attacks, for example, often regain their confidence without needing to do much work on low self-esteem in its own right. If this is your situation, you may still find some useful ideas in these workbooks to help you restore your belief in yourself. It could also be worth consulting other titles in the ‘Overcoming’ series to see whether any of them address your problems directly.

Sometimes low self-esteem can be a **factor contributing to** other problems, such as:

- depression
- suicidal thoughts
- eating disorders (e.g. anorexia or binge-eating)
- extreme shyness

If the difficulties you are currently having seem to spring from an underlying sense of low self-esteem, then working on your current problems (e.g. depression or shyness) may be useful but is unlikely to produce real changes in your view of yourself. To make lasting changes, you probably need to tackle the issue of low self-esteem in its own right. In this case, you could benefit greatly from using this workbook as a guide to working on your beliefs about yourself, undermining the old negative views and building up new, more helpful perspectives.

## How does the impact of low self-esteem vary?

You may be a person who is generally self-confident but suffers from occasional moments of self-doubt in particularly challenging situations. Or you may be someone who is constantly tormented by self-criticism and finds it hard to think of anything good about yourself. Or of course you may be somewhere in between these two extremes.

Imagine how you would feel in the following situations and put a cross on the line, between 0 (calm and confident) and 10 (extremely anxious):

- 1** You are about to be interviewed for a new job.

0 \_\_\_\_\_ 5 \_\_\_\_\_ 10

- 2** You are asking someone out for a first date.

0 \_\_\_\_\_ 5 \_\_\_\_\_ 10

- 3** You have been invited to a big party where you will know only a few people.

0 \_\_\_\_\_ 5 \_\_\_\_\_ 10

- 4** You have been sold a defective product and you need to get a refund from the supplier.

0 \_\_\_\_\_ 5 \_\_\_\_\_ 10

- 5** Someone who works for your firm has been coming in late every day and you have to reprimand him or her.

0 \_\_\_\_\_ 5 \_\_\_\_\_ 10

If most of your crosses are towards the extreme left, your self-doubt is probably only triggered in certain situations and you can generally manage it without serious distress or difficulty. When you have difficulties in life, you usually see them as problems to be solved, rather than as a sign that there is something fundamentally wrong with you as a person. You have some positive views about yourself, which

balance out self-doubt triggered by challenging situations. These workbooks may have limited relevance for you, though they could still be useful in helping to fine-tune an already strong sense of self-confidence.

If most of your crosses are towards the extreme right, you may suffer from highly distressing self-doubt almost all the time. Your fears and negative beliefs about yourself may cause you to miss opportunities, avoid challenges, and follow self-destructive patterns of behaviour. You tend to see difficulties in life as being central to your true self ('This is me.' 'This is how I am.'). So it is hard to step back far enough to see things clearly, or to work systematically to change things for the better. Working through these workbooks on your own may not enable you to dislodge your negative self-beliefs. You may also need help from a professional therapist.

Most people fall somewhere between these two extremes. If you are in this middle range, these workbooks will be particularly useful. You will be aware of your low self-esteem and wish to do something about it. You will also be able to stand back from the way you habitually see yourself and search for alternative perspectives. As you work through the books, you will begin to understand how your negative opinions developed, use close self-observation to change old thinking patterns, and replace those unhelpful beliefs with a new, more kindly, respectful and accepting view of yourself.

### Summary

- 1** Self-esteem is the opinion you have of yourself, the judgements you make about yourself, and the value you place on yourself as a person.
- 2** 'Low self-esteem' means having a poor opinion of yourself, judging yourself harshly and seeing yourself as having little worth or value.
- 3** At the heart of low self-esteem lie negative beliefs about yourself. These are reflected in how you behave on a day-to-day basis, and can affect many areas of life.
- 4** Low self-esteem can be a cause or an effect of a whole range of other difficulties.
- 5** The extent to which low self-esteem disrupts daily life varies from person to person.