

## **The Insatiable Quest for Self-Worth**

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What is optimal self-esteem? According to Kernis (this volume), optimal self-esteem is best thought of as an individual difference variable--something that some people have and others do not. Ironically, even framing the issue of optimal self-esteem in this way creates a sense of competition and scarcity, threatening the self-esteem of those who are deemed not to have optimal self-esteem. Is your self-esteem more optimal than mine? How can I get optimal self-esteem for my children? Viewing optimal self-esteem in this way can trigger an anxious and self-centered focus on getting something for the self.

In contrast, inspired by the distinction between having and doing personality (Cantor, 1990), we suggest that it is more useful to think of optimal self-esteem in terms of momentary pursuit of goals, specifically whether our current thoughts and behavior serve a higher-order goal of maintaining, protecting, or enhancing self-esteem. We argue that self-regulation guided by higher-order self-esteem goals interferes with satisfaction of our fundamental human needs for competence, relatedness, and autonomy (Deci &

Ryan, 2000). Paradoxically, from this perspective self-esteem is optimal when we are not pursuing it, not trying to get it, protect it, or increase it—when it is not on the radar screen or the ultimate goal of our current activity. This perspective leads us to ask how we can shift from pursuing self-esteem to pursuing goals that are more likely to lead to the satisfaction of our fundamental human needs, and what we can do to support ourselves and others to make this shift.

In our view, it is misguided to make achieving high self-esteem, or even optimal self-esteem, the ultimate goal. We see self-esteem as a means, not an end. There may be some minimum level of self-esteem that is required to have enough confidence in ourselves to achieve our goals, to believe that we have a chance to make them happen. Beyond that minimum, increasing the level of self-esteem people have does not seem to increase the chances that they will achieve their goals (Baumeister, 1998; Dawes, 1994).

### **The Costs of Pursuing Self-Esteem**

This pursuit of self-esteem comes at a high price (Crocker, in press-b). The price may be difficult to see, because in the short term there are significant emotional benefits to the pursuit of self-esteem—when we are successful, we feel worthy, which leads to positive affect and a sense that we are safe, secure, and superior. As terror management theory argues, self-esteem is a great anxiety reliever (Solomon, Greenberg, & Pyszczynski, 1991). But the “high” or feeling of safety that accompanies a boost in self-esteem is short-lived (Crocker, Sommers, & Luhtanen, in press). Consequently, the pursuit of self-esteem becomes a never-ending quest. When we take a long-term and more global perspective, the costs of pursuing self-esteem are clear.

When the superordinate goal is proving one’s worth by achieving success or avoiding diagnostic failure in domains in which self-worth is contingent, difficulty in accomplishing subordinate goals (e.g., getting good grades or making a scientific contribution) raises fears of becoming a failure, a worthless nothing (Crocker & Wolfe, 2001). Driven by these fears, people will go to many lengths to succeed, including arguing, scheming, and cheating (Covington, 1984; Covington, 2000; Dweck, 2000). Confronted with difficulty, the main goal becomes avoiding failure that is diagnostic. Consequently, people will protect self-esteem by finding excuses for failure, self-handicapping, blaming others, or dismissing the importance of the task, even if these strategies decrease the chances of accomplishing subordinate goals (Covington, 1984; Covington, 2000; Crocker & Park, in press). For example, college students

whose self-worth is based on their academic performance experience more time pressure, struggle to meet their own and others’ academic standards, and report more conflicts with professors and teaching assistants, but do not get higher grades (controlling for SAT and ACT scores) than students who score relatively low in this contingency (Crocker & Luhtanen, 2002).

Consequently, one major cost of pursuing self-esteem is learning (Crocker & Park, in press). When our goal is self-esteem, we are focused on what we are now, not what we need to become. And because we want to feel worthy, we are not realistic about our strengths and weaknesses, where we need to improve, what we have accomplished and what we still need to accomplish; instead, we cling to positive illusions about the self (Taylor & Brown, 1988). When our goal is to succeed or avoid diagnostic failure to protect self-esteem, we do not learn from mistakes, criticism, or feedback. We focus on performance rather than learning (Dweck, 2000). We direct our efforts to ensuring that, should failure occur, blame will be placed somewhere other than our lack of ability (Blaine & Crocker, 1993; Crocker & Park, in press). Consequently, when maintaining, protecting, and enhancing self-esteem is the superordinate goal, people avoid focusing on their own responsibility for their outcomes, and avoid looking carefully at what they could have done differently to achieve a better outcome. Defense of self-esteem draws attention away from realistic appraisals of the areas in which we need to improve.

A second major cost of pursuing self-esteem is the ability to forge mutually supportive relationships with

others (Crocker & Park, in press). Pursuing self-esteem requires self-focus, which interferes with awareness of and responsiveness to others' needs (Carver & Scheier, 1998). In seeking self-esteem we not only need to be competent, right, or good—we need to be more competent than others, right “over” them, or more good than they are (Brown, 1986; Taylor & Brown, 1988). Life becomes a zero-sum game, with things that bolster my self-worth coming at the expense of your self-worth, and vice versa. In pursuing self-esteem, we want to be admired by others, yet they become a danger to us. It is not surprising, then, that people engaged in the pursuit of self-esteem respond to self-threats with avoidance, distancing, and withdrawal, or with blame, excuses, anger, antagonism, and aggression (Crocker & Park, in press). All of these responses take a tremendous toll on meaningful, authentic, and supportive connections with others (Pyszczynski, Greenberg, & Goldenberg, in press). When our superordinate goal is demonstrating our worth or value as a person, we become isolated and disconnected from others.

A third cost of pursuing self-esteem is self-regulation. When our actions have the higher-order goal of maintaining, protecting, or enhancing self-esteem, we are quickly and easily diverted from the subordinate goal, whether it is making a scientific contribution or helping another person, into goals concerning our own self-esteem. Rather than welcoming critiques of our work as opportunities for learning, we see them as threats to our worth or value, and focus our energy on counter-arguing them, rather than using them as leverage to make our work better. When attempts to help others are rebuffed, we focus on blaming the other

person rather than looking at how our help could have been more effective, or more responsive to the other's needs. Seeking self-esteem becomes a diversion from addressing the real issues in our lives. It diverts us from asking, “Where do I need to improve so I can better accomplish the goals that reflect my core values?”

The ultimate long-term cost of the pursuit of self-esteem is the damage it does to the satisfaction of the fundamental human needs for true (rather than illusory) competence, relatedness, and autonomy (Deci & Ryan, 2000). When self-esteem is the superordinate goal, we prefer the illusion of competence, and current success over learning from failure. We prefer being better than others to being nonperfect but mutually supportive of them. We prefer feeling worthy to learning how we can better accomplish goals that emanate from our core self. The cost of all of this is isolation and disconnection from others, limitations to our ability to learn and grow from our experience, and being diverted from pursuing goals that reflect our core values.

### **Implications for Optimal Self-Esteem and Authenticity**

In this view, optimal self-esteem is paradoxically achieved when we are not pursuing self-esteem—when our goals emanate from our inner values, are larger than the self, and do not have the superordinate goal of self-worth. The features of nonoptimal self-esteem identified by Kernis are, I argue, a consequence of pursuing self-esteem, not an inevitable consequence of the type of self-esteem one has. Defensiveness is a common response to actual or perceived threats in domains of

contingency—when self-esteem is the superordinate goal, we vigorously defend our self-views in these domains because our worth as a person is at stake (Crocker & Park, in press). Instability of self-esteem is the result of experiencing successes and failures we cannot successfully defend against when the superordinate goal is being a person of worth (Crocker et al., in press). And discrepancies between explicit and implicit self-esteem may also result from the pursuit of contingent self-esteem. The causes of discrepancies between implicit and explicit self-esteem are not well understood, but research shows that implicit attitudes are shaped by exposure to associations in the environment, whether or not we endorse or believe in the accuracy of those associations (Karpinski & Hilton, 2001). When people are engaged in the pursuit of self-esteem, they may frequently consider the possibility of being worthless if they do not satisfy their contingencies of self-worth. For example, a student whose self-worth is based on academic performance may think a lot about the possibility of failure (and consequently being worthless) to motivate herself to study (Norem & Cantor, 1986). Even if she successfully maintains a straight-A average, the frequency of these thoughts may lead such a student to nonconsciously associate the self with failure and worthlessness.

Authenticity, in this view, is a state that results from pursuing goals that are consistent with core values and encompass more than the self. Awareness of our strengths and weaknesses, unbiased processing of self-relevant information, and acting in accord with the true self are all consequences of having superordinate goals that are consistent with core values

and larger than the self. Openness and truthfulness in close relationships is made possible when our superordinate goals do not concern our self-esteem or self-worth. It is the pursuit of self-esteem, rather than the type of self-esteem we have, that blocks us from achieving authenticity.

### **Person Characteristic or Momentary Experience**

Although people differ in the situations that trigger their pursuit of self-esteem, and also how frequently this happens, the pursuit of self-esteem is something that virtually all of us do. To be sure, some people are more frequently and consistently engaged in the pursuit of self-esteem than others. The crucial difference among people seems to be not whether they have contingencies of self-worth, but what those contingencies are. For example, almost all (96%) University of Michigan freshmen report that their self-esteem depends on their success in at least one of seven contingencies of self-worth we have measured: appearance, approval, outdoing others in competition, academic performance, love from family, virtue, or God's love (Crocker, in press-a). Some of these contingencies are activated in more situations, and consequently trigger the pursuit of self-esteem more often than others.

### **The Advantages of Focusing on the Costs of Pursuing Self-esteem**

The claim that optimal self-esteem occurs at those moments when the higher-order goal of our actions is not self-esteem, does not contradict of Kernis' analysis of optimal self-esteem; rather, it differs in emphasis and focus.

Kernis' analysis of optimal self-esteem includes both what we have (noncontingent, stable, and nondefensive self-esteem) and our goals (not having self-esteem as the "prime directive"). It should be obvious that the view I offer here is not intended as a criticism of Kernis' proposals, but more a suggestion regarding how they may be further sharpened.

There is an important advantage to viewing optimal self-esteem in terms of momentary goal pursuits, rather than individual differences. Although we have relatively little choice about having contingencies of self-worth, or self-esteem that is high both implicitly and explicitly, we each can choose whether or not we are engaged in the pursuit of self-esteem. We can consider our superordinate goal in any situation, at any moment, and shift, if we choose, from having a superordinate goal of being a person of worth to another superordinate goal that emanates from our core values. The result, paradoxically, might be more stable, noncontingent, and nondefensive self-esteem (Deci & Ryan, 1995; Kernis, in press).

It is tempting to think that we have now identified a more effective, if indirect, route to having optimal self-esteem—substituting the pursuit of self-esteem with the pursuit of goals that are larger than the self and emanate from our core values (Deci & Ryan, 1995). But if we pursue these new goals with the ultimate aim of achieving optimal self-esteem, we fall into the familiar trap of pursuing self-esteem and the high cost it entails. As soon as we encounter difficulty in pursuing these intrinsic goals, we will avoid realistically confronting our shortcomings and mistakes, and instead maneuver to maintain, protect

and enhance self-esteem, since that is our ultimate goal. Consequently, we need to be satisfied with having the minimum of self-esteem that is required to function, and say "so what?" to self-doubt, fears of failure, or suspicions of worthlessness. If our self-esteem should happen to become higher, more stable, less defensive, and less contingent as a result, that is a bonus, but it cannot be the goal.

This perspective also has the advantage of focusing attention on what we can do to encourage others to shift from superordinate goals concerned with self-worth to goals based on core values. Scarcity, competition, social comparison, and regard for others that is conditional on their performance or other extrinsic qualities all are likely to trigger the pursuit of self-esteem in those we interact with, whereas affirming the worth and value of others, valuing them unconditionally or based on their intrinsic qualities, and creating contexts in which each person is encouraged to reach his or her own next level are likely to create a feeling of safety for others, and encourage their pursuit of intrinsic goals (Covington, 1984; Deci & Ryan, 1995; Deci & Ryan, 2000; Dweck, 2000; Pyszczynski et al., in press; Steele, 1988).

### **Conclusion**

To achieve optimal self-esteem, we do not need to become a different person, lose our contingencies of self-worth, or bring our explicit and implicit self-esteem into alignment. We simply need to identify a higher-order goal in each situation, a goal that is about what we can create or contribute, that is larger than the self and consistent with our core values, and choose it. It is as simple as

that, but by no means easy. Letting go of our goal to maintain, enhance, or protect self-esteem requires that we become clear about our values and what we want to create or contribute in each situation, and it requires that we face our fears of being worthless, and act on another goal in spite of them. Although giving up the pursuit of self-esteem is not easy, it is ultimately where true connection and the possibility of real learning lie.

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