

## Improving Self-Esteem

### Module 2

# How Low Self-Esteem Develops

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## Introduction

In Module 1, we said that people with low self-esteem hold deep-seated, basic, negative beliefs about themselves and the kind of person they are. These beliefs are often taken as facts or truths about their identity. In this module, we will explore how these beliefs about the self develop.

## Facts & Opinions

Before we do that, let's discuss the difference between facts and truths, and opinions.

The dictionary definition of *fact* is "a piece of information presented as having objective reality." This means that a fact has evidence that says it is real – there is no doubt about it. An *opinion* is "a view, judgment, or appraisal formed in the mind about a particular matter." An opinion is how someone perceives something, and this view may be unique to them. Let's have a few examples to better illustrate the difference between facts and opinions.

"I have green eyes" is a *fact*. "I like blue eyes" is an *opinion*. Why? Because someone else might say, "I like hazel eyes." "I am a mother," "I have a car," "I live in Perth, Western Australia" are facts. These statements can be checked and verified. "Having heaps of money is really important," "Job satisfaction is about doing as little as I can get away with," "There is nothing wrong with combining drugs and alcohol," are *opinions*. Facts cannot be challenged, but opinions can be biased, inaccurate, mistaken, and unhelpful.

Our ideas of ourselves, the judgements that we make of, and the value we place on, ourselves as people are *opinions*, not facts. However, we often take these opinions as truth or facts and thus, believe in them very strongly. Therein lies the problem! So, where do these beliefs and opinions of ourselves come from? How did we develop these beliefs about ourselves?

## Early Life Experiences

Beliefs about ourselves are learned as a result of the experiences we have had in our lives, especially our early life experiences. Often, the beliefs we have about ourselves are conclusions we arrive at based on what has happened in our lives. This means that at some point in time, it made sense to have those beliefs. Down the track, we'll explore whether or not such beliefs are helpful in the present, but first, let's discuss how we develop our beliefs about ourselves.

We learn things in different ways. We may learn from direct experiences, the media, observing what other people do, and listening to what people say. This will continue throughout our lives but beliefs about ourselves are often (though not always) developed earlier in life. This means that our experiences in our childhood, family of origin, the society we lived in, schools we went to, and with our peers have influenced our thoughts and beliefs about all sorts of things, including ourselves. If we have arrived at very negative thoughts and beliefs about ourselves, it is likely that we have encountered a variety of negative experiences that might have contributed to this. We will now talk about what some of these negative experiences might be.



### *Punishment, Neglect, or Abuse*

How we were treated earlier in life affects the way we see ourselves and who we are. If children are mistreated, punished frequently in an extreme or unpredictable manner, neglected, abandoned, or abused, these experiences can leave some emotional and psychological scars. It is not surprising, then, that a person who has had these sorts of experiences in their earlier life can come to believe very negative things about themselves.

## *Difficulty in Meeting Parents' Standards*

Experiencing less extreme punishment or constantly being criticised can also have a negative effect. If your parents, carers, and family members often focused on your weaknesses and mistakes and rarely acknowledged your positive qualities or successes (perhaps saying things such as “You could have done better,” or “That’s not good enough”), or if they frequently teased you, made fun of you, and put you down, you might also come to believe some negative things about yourself.

## *Not Fitting In at Home or at School*

Some people may have experienced being the ‘odd one out’ at home or at school. They might have been less intelligent than their siblings at home or had different interests, talents or skills to others in the family (such as being artistic, musical, sporty or love mathematics, science, arts). Although they might not have been criticised for their different interests or abilities, these might not have been acknowledged. At the same time, the activities or achievements of their siblings or peers might have been praised or celebrated. As such, they might come to believe thoughts such as “I’m weird,” “I’m odd,” or “I’m inferior.”

## *Difficulty in Meeting Peer Group Standards*

During late childhood and adolescence, our experiences with our peers and people around our age can also influence how we see ourselves. This is a time when physical appearance may be very important to the young person. Together with messages conveyed by the media, an overweight, plump, or ‘well-built’ young person who has not had many positive experiences with their peers can come to believe “I am fat and ugly,” “I’m unattractive,” or “I’m unlikeable.” Young people who have had other problems with their appearance, such as problem skin, can also come away with negative beliefs about themselves if they have been teased or ridiculed for this by their peers.

## *Being on the receiving end of other people’s stress or distress*

Sometimes, when families experience stressful or distressing life events, parents may need to give their attention to dealing with the problems that have occurred. As such, parents may not be able to give much attention to their child or children. It is also possible that parents or carers in such circumstances become frustrated, angry, anxious, or depressed and respond negatively towards their children or become role models of unhelpful behaviour.

## *Your Family’s Place in Society*

How we view ourselves is not only influenced by how we are treated as individuals but also how our family or group is viewed and treated by others in society. If your family or the group that you belonged to was seen to be different, less socially acceptable, or was on the receiving end of prejudice or hostility, these experiences can also influence how you see yourself.

## *An Absence of Positives*

The absence of positive experiences in our lives can also affect our self-esteem. It might be that you did not receive enough attention, praise, encouragement, warmth, or affection. It could be that your basic needs were just adequately met but no more was given. Some parents or carers may have been emotionally distant, not physically affectionate, spending a lot of time working (perhaps to meet the needs of the family) or pursuing their own interests and had very little time with their children. These experiences might influence how people view themselves especially if they compare their experiences with their peers who might have had more positive experiences.

What early experiences did you have that might have contributed to the way you view, and feel about, yourself? Take a bit of time to jot down a brief description of those experiences.

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### *Late Onset*

Most of the time, the roots or beginnings of low self-esteem can be found in the experiences people have had in their childhood or adolescence. However, people with healthy self-esteem can also find their self-confidence being dented and chipped away at if they encounter negative experiences later in life. A person can come to develop low self-esteem if they have experiences such as being bullied or intimidated at work, being in an abusive relationship, experiencing prolonged financial hardship, continuous stressful life events, traumatic events, or life-altering illnesses or injuries.

Have you had any recent stressful life experiences that have negatively affected how you view yourself?

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## **How the Past affects the Present: Negative Core Beliefs**

We have explored and discussed how different sorts of experiences can influence and shape how we view, and feel about, ourselves. Often, these are experiences that have occurred earlier in our lives. So, if these experiences happened long ago, why is it that we still see ourselves in a negative light today? After all, haven't we had adult experiences that are quite different from the ones we had as children? Yet, we might still hear, in our minds, what our parents or other people had said to us years and years ago. We might hear ourselves saying things like "This is not good enough," "You could have done better," "You are so stupid."

Why we continue to experience low self-esteem today, even when our current circumstances are different from those of our past, is a result of our negative core beliefs. Negative core beliefs are the conclusions about ourselves we have arrived at when we were children or adolescents, likely as a result of the negative experiences we have had. For example, a child who was constantly punished and criticised may come to believe "I am worthless," or "I am bad." These thoughts are what we call *negative core beliefs*. To a child or young person, these beliefs seem to make sense during those experiences because they are probably unable to explore other explanations for what is happening to them. These negative core beliefs are thoughts that are usually deep seated, firmly held, and strongly ingrained in our minds. They are evaluations of ourselves and our worth or value as a person. These beliefs say, "This is the kind of person I am."

Here are some other examples of negative core beliefs:

- “I am stupid.”
- “I’m not good enough.”
- “I’m not important.”
- “I’m unlovable.”
- “I’m fat and ugly.”
- “I’m unacceptable.”
- “I’m good for nothing.”
- “I am evil.”

## Protecting Ourselves: Rules & Assumptions

When we strongly believe these negative statements about ourselves, it is not surprising that we feel very bad about ourselves and experience strong negative emotions. While we were experiencing negative situations and coming to these negative conclusions about ourselves, the human survival instinct was also in operation. To ensure our survival and to keep on functioning, we begin to develop assumptions, rules, and guidelines for how we live our lives that help protect our self-esteem. They aim to guard and defend us from the truth of our negative core beliefs.



We might develop rules such as:

- “I must be the best at everything.”
- “I must never make any mistakes.”
- “I must never show any emotion in public.”
- “I must always do the right thing.”

We might also develop assumptions such as:

- “If I ask for something I need, I will be put down.”
- “No matter what I do, it will never be good enough.”
- “If I can’t control my food intake, I will never be able to control anything in my life.”

Rules and assumptions can also be combined, for example:

- “I must do everything I can to gain others’ approval because if I am criticised in any way, it means I am not acceptable.”
- “I won’t try anything unless I know that I can do it perfectly, because if I can’t, it means I’m a total failure.”
- “I have to always be slim and dress well, or else I will never be accepted.”

What sorts of rules and assumptions for living might you have to help you feel better about yourself? Take a few minutes to jot these down.

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## **Rules & Assumptions Guide Behaviour**

The result of having these rules and assumptions is that they will guide your behaviour. What you do on a day-to-day basis is largely determined by what rules for living you have. Makes sense, doesn't it? So, depending on your rules, you will try very hard to do everything perfectly, avoid getting too close to people, restrict your food intake and exercise vigorously to stay slim, do what it takes to please people, avoid doing anything too challenging, avoid doing things you've never done before ... and the list can go on.

Can you see how having such rules and assumptions for living might help you protect your self-esteem? What happens if one of your rules for living is "I must never make any mistakes?" The effect is that this rule will guide your behaviour, making you become very careful about your work, checking your work many times so it is likely that you don't make many mistakes, if at all. This means that you are less likely to be criticised and so your self-esteem is protected.

Take a few minutes to jot down how your rules and assumptions might influence your behaviour. What do you do to try to live up to your rules or standards and assumptions for living?

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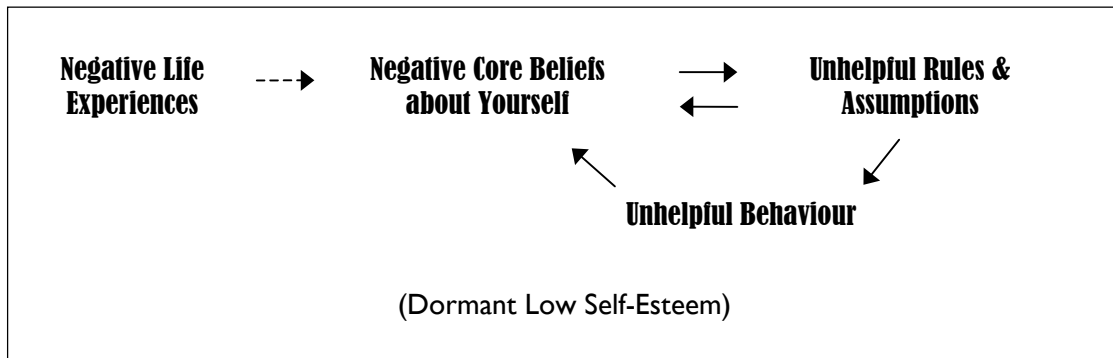
What this means is that you can feel fairly good about yourself if you are able to meet these rules for living or live up to the standards you have set for yourself. For example, if you are able to always maintain your body shape and weight, you will feel okay about yourself. As long as you never make any mistakes, always gain your friends', colleagues', or bosses' approval, always get extremely good results at school or university, you can maintain an adequate level of self-esteem. However, there is a disadvantage to having these rules and assumptions. You can run yourself ragged by trying to live up to all the rules. Basically, you are putting yourself under a lot of pressure so that you manage your self-esteem and don't feel bad about yourself.



Actually, while things might seem to be going well on the surface, the negative core beliefs are still there. This is because the negative core beliefs have not been removed. In fact, they are still there because they have been protected by your rules and assumptions and your behaviour. This is why these rules and assumptions and your behaviour cannot really be considered to be helpful – because they serve to keep the negative core beliefs alive, as it were. At this point in time, if you have been able to live up to your rules, you may be feeling fine, but the low self-esteem lies dormant.

## **Model of Low Self-Esteem: How Low Self-Esteem Begins**

As we go along, our discussions about how low self-esteem develops and what keeps it going will be put in the form of a diagram, which will tie everything together. We call all the concepts expressed in such a diagram a 'model'. We will begin with the concepts discussed in this module and then add others in as we move on to the next module. Here's the first part of the model of low self-esteem:

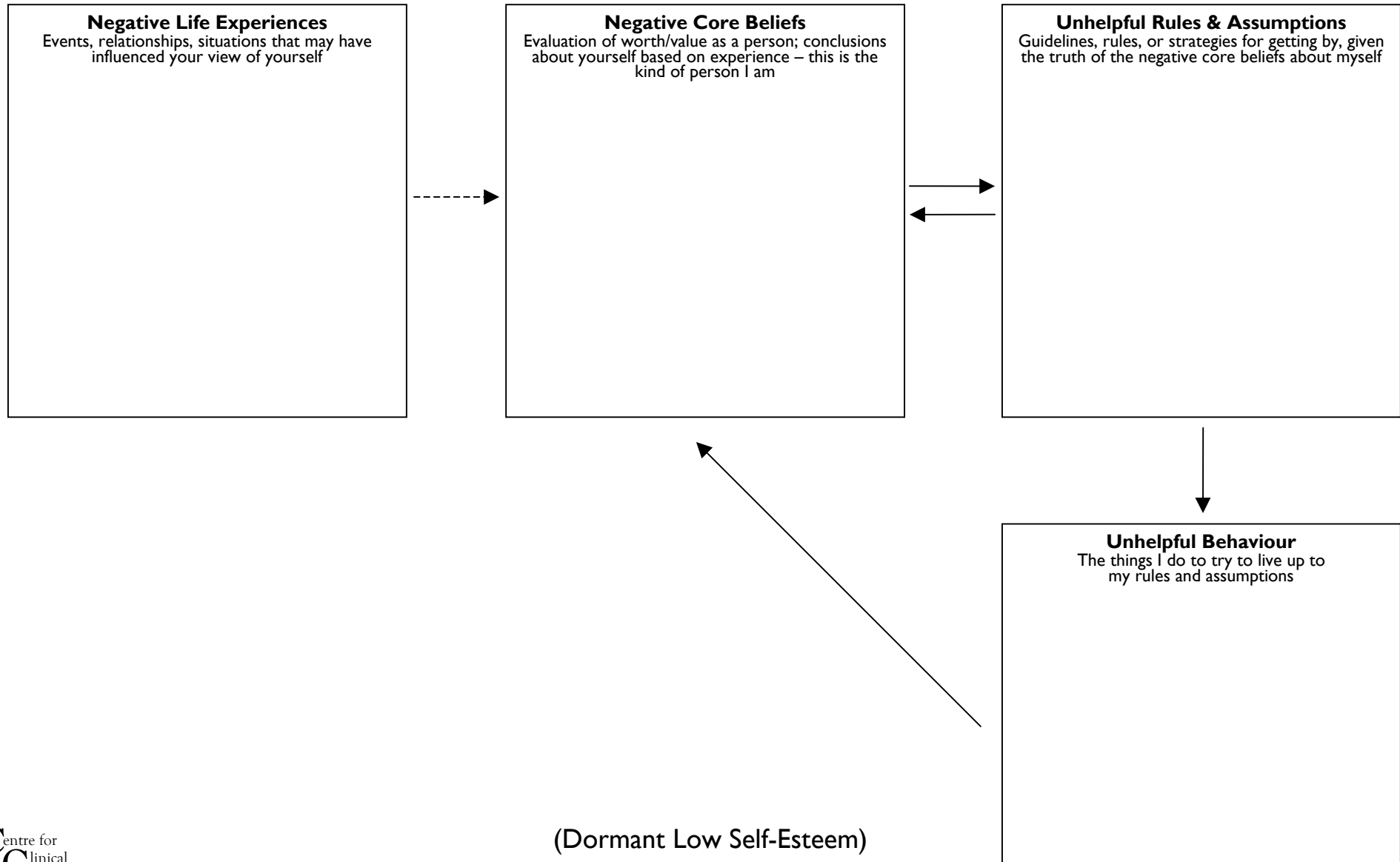


What this model depicts, is a snapshot of what has been discussed in this module. Low self-esteem might begin with our having had negative life experiences, especially during childhood and adolescence. These negative experiences can influence how we see ourselves and we can come away with some negative conclusions about ourselves, which we call *negative core beliefs*. (The dotted arrow in the diagram signifies that negative life experiences do not automatically lead to negative core beliefs – it is just that they have some influence in their development). In order to protect our self-esteem and continue to function from day-to-day, we develop *rules and assumptions* for living. These rules guide us to behave in ways that end up not being very helpful because they serve to keep our negative core beliefs intact. While we are able to stick to these rules for living, we can feel okay about ourselves, but the low self-esteem remains dormant.

On the next page is a worksheet for you to put all your notes together. The worksheet shows the model of how low self-esteem develops and includes spaces for you to write down your experiences, negative core beliefs, the unhelpful rules and assumptions that guide your life, and the things you do to try to live up to those rules and assumptions. Keep this worksheet with you as you continue working through the modules of this information package.

In the next module, we will discuss what might cause low self-esteem to 'flare up' or be activated. We will also discuss a number of things that keep low self-esteem going.

# Low Self-Esteem: How It Begins





## **Module Summary**

- It is important to remember that the judgements we make about ourselves are opinions, not facts
- Negative early life experiences may lead us to develop a negative view of ourselves. Such experiences may be:
  - Punishment, Neglect, or Abuse
  - Difficulty in Meeting Parents' Standards
  - Not Fitting In at Home or at School
  - Difficulty in Meeting Peer Group Standards
  - Being on the receiving end of other people's stress or distress
  - Your Family's Place in Society
  - An Absence of Positives
- While low self-esteem often develops in childhood or adolescence, it can also develop later in life if we encounter certain negative experiences
- Negative core beliefs are the conclusions we arrive at about ourselves, given the negative experiences we have had
- We develop rules and assumptions, to protect us from the truth of our negative core beliefs, so we can go on functioning in our lives
- The behaviour our rules and assumptions generate is unhelpful, because they keep our negative core beliefs intact
- As long as we stick to our rules and assumptions, we might feel okay in our everyday lives, but our negative core beliefs remain, and hence our low self-esteem lies dormant.



### **Coming up next ...**

In the next module, you will learn more about what keeps low self-esteem going.

## About This Module

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### BACKGROUND

The concepts and strategies in the modules have been developed from evidence based psychological practice, primarily Cognitive-Behaviour Therapy (CBT). CBT is a type of psychotherapy that is based on the theory that unhelpful negative emotions and behaviours are strongly influenced by problematic cognitions (thoughts). This can be found in the following:

Beck, A.T., Rush, A. J., Shaw, B.F., & Emery, G. (1979). *Cognitive Therapy of Depression*. New York: Guildford.

Clark, D. M. (1986). A cognitive approach to panic. *Behaviour Research and Therapy*, 24, 461-470.

Clark, D. M. & Wells, A. (1995). A cognitive model of social phobia. In R. Heimberg, M. Liebowitz, D.A. Hope and F.R. Schneier (Eds), *Social Phobia: Diagnosis, Assessment and Treatment*. New York: Guildford.

### REFERENCES

These are some of the professional references used to create the modules in this information package.

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### “IMPROVING SELF-ESTEEM”

This module forms part of:

Lim, L., Saulsman, L., & Nathan, P. (2005). *Improving Self-Esteem*. Perth, Western Australia: Centre for Clinical Interventions.

ISBN: 0-9757995-0-9

Created: July 2005