

# The Importance of Self-Worth

SELF DEVELOPMENT, SELF-ESTEEM

By PsychAlive



The dictionary defines *self-worth* as “the sense of one’s own value or worth as a person.” However, there are many ways for a person to value themselves and assess their worth as a human being, and some of these are more psychologically beneficial than others. In this article, we discuss the value of true self-worth, how to build this type of self-worth and why so many of us lack a feeling of worthiness.

## Self-Worth vs. Self-Esteem

Although, self-worth is often used as a synonym for “self-esteem,” Dr. Lisa Firestone believes that self-worth should be less about measuring yourself based on external actions and more about valuing your inherent worth as a person. In other words, self-worth is about who you are, not about what you do.

## Read about *Self-Esteem vs. Narcissism*

Dr. Kristin Neff argues that there is a problem with society’s focus on high self-esteem. The problem is that this focus involves measuring oneself against others, rather than paying attention to one’s intrinsic value. “Our competitive culture tells us we need to be special and above average to feel good about ourselves, but we can’t all be above average at the same time,” says Dr. Neff. In this sense, searching for self-worth by constantly comparing ourselves to others means to always be fighting a losing battle. As Dr. Neff says, “There is always someone richer, more attractive, or successful than we are. And even when we do manage to feel self-esteem for one golden moment, we can’t hold on to it. Our sense of self-worth bounces around like a ping-pong ball, rising and falling in lock-step with our latest success or failure.”



Furthermore, studies now show that basing one’s self-worth on external factors is actually harmful to one’s mental health. One study at the University of Michigan found that college students who base their self-worth on external sources (including academic performance, appearance and approval from others) reported more stress, anger, academic problems and relationship conflicts. They also had higher levels of alcohol and drug use, as well as more symptoms of eating disorders. The same study found that students who based their self-worth on internal sources, not only felt better, they also received higher grades and were less likely to use drugs and alcohol or to develop eating disorders.

Although real accomplishments are important to acknowledge as you build your sense of self, your self-worth should also take in to account the unique qualities that make you *you*. As mindfulness expert, Dr. Donna Rockwell points out, we are all unique and that, in and of itself, gives each of us inherent value. According to Dr. Firestone, “We shouldn’t be rating ourselves, we should just be ourselves.”

## How to Build Self-Worth

The first step in building self-worth is to stop comparing yourself to others and evaluating your every move; in other words, you need to challenge your **critical inner voice**. The critical inner voice is like a nasty coach in our heads that constantly nags us with destructive thoughts towards ourselves or others. This internalized dialogue of critical thoughts or “inner voices” undermines our sense of self-worth and even leads to self-destructive or maladaptive behaviors, which make us feel even worse about ourselves. As Dr. Lisa Firestone explained in her article “[7 Reasons Most People Are Afraid of Love](#):”  
*We all have a “critical inner voice,” which acts like a cruel coach inside our heads that tells us we are worthless or undeserving of happiness. This coach is shaped from painful childhood experiences and critical attitudes we were exposed to early in life as well as feelings our parents had about themselves. While these attitudes can be hurtful, over time, they have become engrained in us. As adults, we may fail to see them as an enemy, instead accepting their destructive point of view as our own.*

However, we can **challenge the inner critic** and begin to see ourselves for who we really are, rather than taking on its negative point of view about ourselves. We can differentiate from the ways we were seen in our family of origin and begin to understand and appreciate our own feelings, thoughts, desires and values.

A true sense of self-worth can also be fostered by practicing **self-compassion**. Developed by Dr. Kristin Neff, self-compassion is the practice of treating yourself with the same kindness and compassion as you would treat a friend. This involves taking on what [Dr. Dan Siegel](#) describes as the “**COAL**” attitude, which means being Curious, Open, Accepting and Loving toward yourself and your experiences rather than being self-critical. There are three steps to practicing self-compassion:

- 1) Acknowledge and notice your suffering.
- 2) Be kind and caring in response to suffering.
- 3) Remember that imperfection is part of the human experience and something we all share.

Adding meaning to your life, by taking part in activities that you feel are important, is another great way to build self-worth. Helping others, for example, offers a huge boost to your sense of self-worth. **Generosity is good for you**, both physically and mentally, and studies now show that volunteering has a very positive affect on how people feel about themselves. Other **studies** have found that religion correlates with a higher sense of self-worth in adolescents. People find meaning in many different ways; think about the activities and interests that feel meaningful to you personally and pursue those activities to build a more positive feeling of self-worth. Researcher Dr. Jennifer Crocker suggests that you find “a goal that is bigger than the self.” As [Dr. Robert Firestone](#) says, “Investing energy in transcendent goals and activities that extend beyond one’s self interest, for example, contributing to a humanitarian cause or trying, in some way, to improve the lot of future generations, helps build self-esteem.”

Acting on principles, in ways that you respect, is another important quality to foster as you develop a higher level of self-worth. “Make a concerted effort to maintain personal integrity in your life by insisting that your actions correspond to your words,” suggests Dr. Robert Firestone. When our actions do not match our words, we are more vulnerable to attacks from our critical inner voice and less likely to respect ourselves.

By challenging your critical inner voice and stopping comparing yourself to others, you can begin to get a feeling for your own self-worth. By pursuing activities that are meaningful to you and acting in line with your own personal beliefs, you can develop your sense of yourself as a worthwhile person in the world even further.