

Self-Esteem Messages

Step-by-Step Instructions:

1. Brainstorm with the group what self-esteem and self-worth mean. At some point in the discussion, you should talk to the group about the link between feeling lovable and having positive self-esteem.
2. Discuss with the class how they believe self-esteem is developed. Ask if we are just born with it. The answer is almost always no. You can then ask how we get it and how someone can develop either positive or negative self-esteem.
3. Write the word “Messages” on the board/flip chart. Discuss with the group all the ways we communicate with others. Emphasize that words are not the total picture. As an example, ask how a child’s self-esteem might be affected if his/her parents never speak harshly but also never spend any time with him/her.
4. Distribute “paper dolls” and pens/pencils.
5. Reassure participants that what they are going to do may be intense, but nobody will be forced to share what they write.
6. Ask participants to think about their own self-esteem. For the moment, ask them to pay particular attention to the things about themselves that they don’t like. On one side of the doll, ask them to write any negative messages they received about themselves in the past, including when they were a child.
7. Next ask them to write negative messages they are still getting about themselves. In addition to people they know, this can include messages from society. For example, many people receive negative messages about their body image from the media.
8. Give participants plenty of time to write and reflect. You can spend a few minutes discussing how difficult it was. Talk about how ingrained these messages can become.
9. Ask the participants to reverse their paper doll and write all the positive messages they have received. It can be helpful to encourage them to think about specific events.
10. Ask participants if, in general, it was harder to remember the positive or negative messages.

Tips for Discussion and Processing

This activity can be very moving and very intense. However, the impact is often worthwhile. Explain to the group that babies and little children have no concept of themselves in the world. For the early part of life they don’t even know that they are separate beings. They look to their parents to tell them who they are supposed to be in the world. Parents are like a mirror to children. Based, in part, on parent’s actions and reactions, children internalize who they are. Be sure to emphasize that no parents are perfect. What really matters is what is reflected most of the time. For couples, discuss how one negative statement from one’s partner can minimize self-esteem and self-worth.

Group Size: 1 to 10

Time Needed: 20 minutes or more

Goal: To gain understanding of how positive and negative feelings of self-esteem and self-worth are developed

Audience: Couples, Teens, Parents, Children, Singles

Special Considerations: This activity can be very intense; you may need to wait until the group members have bonded with one another. With children and teens or in groups that may be more vulnerable, you may not want to have the group get personal; instead ask them to write “in general” some of the negative messages that they receive.

Resources Needed:

- ✓ One “paper doll” for each member of the class and one pen/pencil per person; white board or flip chart