

# ENHANCING SELF-IMAGE

Virgil Warren, PhD

## INTRODUCTION

Guide verse: *"I say . . . to every person among you not to think of yourself more highly than he ought to think"* (Romans **12:3**).

Two observations: not think more highly + ought to think

### Terminology

self-esteem	self-identity	inner security
self-image	self-worth	psychological strength
self-concept	self-acceptance	how we feel about ourselves

The problem most applies to:

young people  
those who have failed significantly in their own eyes

## I. HOW TO TELL WHAT WE THINK OF OURSELVES

### A. How compelled we feel to get attention

1. People who have to be the boss or they will not participate are weak people. They are afraid to be associated with things that are less than ideal for fear that it will be an occasion for other people to evaluate them as secondary people.

(Attention-getting behavior and defensive behavior are the two prominent kinds of weakness behavior.)

2. The showoff
3. The clinger
4. Tellers and the people you cannot tell anything: They feel that it is weakness to listen because it implies that they have something to learn.
5. Always talking about themselves and their problems

### B. How hard we try to defend ourselves

1. How much it bothers us to be wrong
2. Whether we argue a point to the death

### C. How easily we get offended

If we “take things personally,” it shows that we suppose people do things we do not like as ways of demonstrating their dislike for us. Supposing their dislike for us comes from the impulse to believe that people see us as second level in quality; when there is no overt activity on their part that communicates that notion, the notion originates in us as an indication of our self-evaluation.

### D. How easily we get discouraged

1. “Quitters,” not just lazy people, throw up their hands in despair. Characteristically doing so indicates a lack of confidence to succeed or to win the respect of other people involved in the enterprise.

2. People that are not “finishers” may differ from “quitters,” because they have the gut feeling that it will not matter even if they do get it done.

### E. How easily we can compliment others

We who criticize a lot, find fault, put everything down do it because the smaller we can make other people and their work look, the less difference exists between those activities and the quality of what we can do.

### F. How much time we spend thinking about ourselves

### G. How other people sense we feel about ourselves

PROBLEM: It is hard to know whether we are exceptional because we cannot easily tell how other people feel.

## II. HOW SELF-IMAGE IS FORMED

primarily

### A. By feedback from other people—how they . . .

A good self-image stems primarily from acceptance by other people, especially our “significant others”: parents, spouse, siblings, peers, God.

“I” tend to think of myself as what I think you think I am.

#### 1. Respond to us

What they are willing to do for us

How much time they are willing to take with us

#### 2. Initiate activity with us

whether they seek us out or ask our opinion

whether they initiate conversation with us  
 whether they invite us into their lives (with special information; note  
 pattern of information flow in a group of people; who is more likely to  
 be “in the know”?)

### 3. Focus on us

look us in the eye (rather than a sideways glance)  
 face us when they talk to us

secondarily

- B. By our ability level
- C. By our physical appearance
- D. By the possessions we have

(really it is our  
perception  
 of items B-E)

- E. By our accomplishments

Who we are is the sum total of our capacities and associations (apperceptive mass).

We Christians often have no better self-image than people in the world. Our faith is  
 not working for us, at least in this area.

## III. HOW TO DEVELOP A HEALTHY SELF-IMAGE

Basic elements in the disposal: being (what we are made of)  
 action (what we do)  
 relationship (how we connect with other people  
 and things)

### A. Remembering that we are created in the image of God BEING

We are not animals or complex electro-chemical processes.  
 Self-image comes from the One who made us in his image.

### B. Doing something ACTION

We cannot have good self-image without taking initiative. We will not feel good  
 about ourselves as long as we depend on other people to prod us into activity. We will not  
 feel like we are in charge of anything if we are not even in charge of ourselves.

active vs. passive

action vs. feelings

Taking the initiative vs. being told or manipulated

Living by goals and values, not just by feelings and impressions.

Base self-esteem on matters that we can affect rather than on genetic and environmental factors we cannot. Not everybody is created equal in hereditary abilities and environmental opportunities. Such factors cannot be a legitimate basis for self-esteem. But action is something that we control.

C. Replace law with grace.

ACTION

works *vs.* faith  
perfection *vs.* growth  
earning *vs.* receiving

We cannot expect to have a good self-image as long as we hold up perfection as our standard. No one can live up to that. Here is the most important implication of the “good news” for the psychological dimension of human experience: we do not have to be perfect.

D. Convert competition to caring.

ACTION/RELATIONSHIP

As long as we tie self-worth to being better than others, we are doomed to feel bad about ourselves. Success in the competition can provide good self-image for only a minority of people, and then only for a limited time until our declining years bring deterioration to the flesh-based skills and abilities involved.

Instead of feeling good about ourselves for succeeding in competition, we do better to get our sense of worth from the grateful response of people we have given ourselves to in love. Self-worth based on self-giving has no limitations as to who can use it to enhance self-worth. Self-giving for others elevates other people and subsequently elevates us; competing with them implies a put-down, which they resent; competition ends up creating the adverse effect for self-esteem. Knowledge puffs up; love builds up (1 Corinthians 8:1).

E. Change from a material to a spiritual orientation.

RELATIONSHIP

Measuring ourselves by God’s way of measuring us  
Giving up flesh-based evaluations  
Not basing self-worth on non-germane matters

F. Diversifying investments increases the likelihood of something coming through for us.

Variety is the spice of life.  
It helps avoid that locked-in feeling.  
Not putting all our eggs in one basket.  
Doing something new once in a while has a liberating effect.

G. Living interpersonally (Keeping ourselves around good people.)

RELATIONSHIP

1. vs. materially
2. vs. individually

The image of God equals the interpersonal capacity.

vs. passively: Only the other person is acting.

vs. competitively: It is self-centered and manipulative.

vs. works: Earning the result means that only I am operating; consequently, I am not buying into the resources of others to help success and thus good self-image.

spiritually: “spirit” means non-material reality, and in Christianity that includes interpersonal reality.

## SUMMARY

Good self-image comes from accentuating matters distinctive to persons, interpersonal capacity, and interpersonal relationship. Out of good self-image springs psychological strength, emotional control, strength of will, and a host of healthy habits.

Self-esteem comes largely from the feedback other people give us.

The important thing is the significant others.

1. We need to choose whose opinion is important to us.
2. We need to choose whose fellowship we share to provide occasions for self-esteem.
3. We need to help other people with their self-image because in so doing, we foster a similar response toward us (“*more blessed to give than to receive*”). People tend to respond in kind.

christir.org