

Self-esteem : psychological & practical guide

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1 : Introduction

Self-esteem has become a buzzword in a world where individuals are expected to craft their own identities.

Social media, personal development, technological promises: everything seems to encourage us to focus on ourselves, to correct and improve ourselves. But changing “poor” self-confidence for “better” self-confidence does not change the underlying logic.

The problem is not the amount of confidence but the place occupied by the self. As long as we remain preoccupied with measuring ourselves, we are not truly experiencing what we are doing.

This movement responds to a promise of unlimited enjoyment.

Technology and science lead us to believe that we can do without effort and even without encountering others.

We talk about “autonomy” or “freedom,” but often it is a retreat: a world where we could exist alone, in a bubble where everything is calculated. The rise of artificial intelligence is a sign of this: it offers an “other” without a real Other, a partner who neither resists nor surprises.

Yet being alone is not the problem. We can experience moments of real solitude while remaining connected to the world.

What isolates us is symbolic solitude: when we no longer find interest in anything outside ourselves, when we go round in circles in self-love or self-hatred.

The challenge is not to “love oneself more” but to reopen the relationship to what transcends one's personal image.

This guide proposes leaving the narrow field of narcissism behind to rediscover the tension of desire, that is, a way of living

that relies on the world, others, and creation rather than on the inner mirror.

In everyday life, self-concern takes discreet but persistent forms. We watch ourselves talk and constantly check our place in the world. At first glance, this control seems useful: it reassures us and gives us the impression of being in control of our actions.

In reality, it creates a distance from what we are experiencing. While we observe ourselves, we no longer inhabit what we say or do. It is as if every action must first pass through the filter of an inner mirror.

This mirror does not come from nowhere. It is constructed from childhood, through the images and words that others deposit in us. It pushes us to seek an imaginary perfection: to be flawless, to be “proper,” to finally be recognized. We compare ourselves, we adjust our behavior, we wait for approval.

This mechanism may give us brief satisfaction, but above all, it instills a deep-seated anxiety: the fear of falling from our pedestal or of not measuring up.

Our era amplifies this tendency. Social media turns every moment into a stage for evaluation. Digital tools, by promising an ever-smoother life, perpetuate the belief that we can escape all resistance, and therefore all real contact.

The overabundance of images and stimuli fills the space, but often leaves a feeling of emptiness, as if nothing really touched us.

This emptiness is not simply a lack of occupation. It arises when life becomes a continuous spectacle in which we contemplate ourselves instead of experiencing ourselves.

We distract ourselves without pause, but we no longer allow

ourselves to be touched. Even strong emotions risk being nothing more than additional images in the flow.

Breaking this cycle does not mean strengthening ourselves through greater self-control. Rather, it means shifting our attention: leaving behind our obsession with ourselves to rediscover our presence in the world. It is not a question of rejecting real solitude, but of reconnecting with what, in reality, transcends our self-image.

Symbolic loneliness is overcome when we discover an interest in things, people, and works that do not merely reflect ourselves.

This engagement can take modest forms: an exchange, creative work, a gesture offered to another. It is these experiences, uncalculated for the effect they produce, that restore depth to reality.

They reintroduce the tension of desire, that movement toward something that cannot be controlled in advance.

The path proposed in this guide is therefore less a recipe than a shift: moving from measuring oneself to a way of inhabiting the world, where one discovers oneself by acting, speaking, and encountering others.

This shift is not simply a technique for performing better. It involves a transformation of our relationship with ourselves and others. The goal is no longer to build solid self-esteem, but to make life more vibrant and open.

This means accepting uncertainty, the unexpected, everything that is beyond our control.

Rediscovering the tension of desire means allowing ourselves to be surprised by what happens. It could be a project, an encounter, an intellectual or artistic discovery.

In these moments, we no longer calculate our worth: we are driven by what fascinates us. The world ceases to be a mere backdrop or a stock of images; it becomes a field of real experiences once again.

By opening with this introduction, the guide invites us to think about self-esteem in a different way. Rather than perpetuating narcissism by “repairing” it, it suggests breaking free from it.

The rest of the book explores how the mirage of the self is constructed, how it traps us, and how we can detach ourselves from it to rediscover our true presence.

2 : The mirage of the self

Since childhood, we learn to watch ourselves act. The expected smile, compliment, or reprimand instills an inner spectator.

This self-image, nourished by external views, becomes a kind of double that we constantly seek to perfect. We think we can thus achieve a reassuring unity, as if life had to coincide with an ideal image.

Modern discourse reinforces this logic. Advertising, social media, coaching—all repeat that there is something missing in us that must be filled. “Are you not enough? We will make you complete, successful, satisfied.” But what they present as a solution touches on the very heart of what makes us human: lack.

For desire arises precisely from what is not given in advance. To erase this lack is also to extinguish the force that drives us to create, to love, to seek.

Artificial intelligence takes this promise to a new level. It offers itself as a mirror that is always available: an Other that does not resist, that always responds, that seems to fulfill our expectations. A world without the unexpected, without effort, without risk.

But this mirror is empty. It reflects our words without leaving any real trace. In a world of constant overstimulation and entertainment, nothing shocks, surprises, or engages us anymore.

The self we want to protect or improve is therefore not a solid foundation, but a fragile construct. Clinging to this image is tantamount to cutting ourselves off from the living dynamic of desire.

Understanding this mirage is the first step in breaking out of the cycle of endlessly seeking to complete ourselves.

This imaginary double does not merely reflect our actions. It dictates expectations: always be consistent, successful, and kind. We fear that a mistake, a wrong word, or a failure will crack the image we have patiently constructed. This fear pushes us to filter every movement, to the point of speaking and acting according to an internal audience rather than the real present.

Technology accentuates this theater. Social media transforms everyday life into a showcase, where every action can be measured, commented on, and archived. AI adds an extra layer: it allows us to converse, create, and plan without ever encountering the resistance of a real Other.

Everything seems possible, but the relationship remains a closed circuit. This apparent comfort promotes a world where nothing hurts or upsets, where desire is dulled.

Yet desire is not a flaw to be corrected. It is the very mark of being alive. Wanting to fill the void is to misunderstand its function.

The void opens up a space for invention and connection. It is what makes an encounter precious, what drives us to learn, to love, to create. A life reduced to maintaining one's self-image deprives itself of this movement. In seeking perfect unity, we lose the surprise and depth that give relief to existence.

When everything is reduced to concern for one's image, one's relationship with the world withers. We no longer listen to understand, but to verify that we are right. We no longer create to explore, but to be seen.

The vitality of our actions is lost in the calculation of the expected effect. Thus, even moments of pleasure become sterile: they serve to maintain a facade rather than to nourish an experience.

The mirage of the self promises security, but it isolates.

Being alone in the symbolic sense does not mean lacking concrete company, it means living in a world reduced to one's own reflection. One can be surrounded and yet locked in, because interest constantly turns to the same question: "What is my image worth?"

Breaking out of this circle is not about strengthening self-esteem through new methods. It means shifting our attention away from this inner mirror. Accepting lack as an opening, recognizing that the value of a life is not measured by the unity of an image but by the quality of connections, creations, and impulses.

Only by ceasing to watch ourselves act can we truly act. Only by making room for the Other can desire regain its strength.

Recognizing the mirage of the self does not mean fleeing from introspection, but changing one's focus. Instead of seeking to complete oneself, it is a matter of making oneself available to what happens.

Lack is no longer a flaw to be filled, but an opening. It is what allows us to encounter the unexpected, to love without guarantees, to create without a pre-established plan.

From this perspective, artificial intelligence takes on particular significance. It reflects the words we give it, but does not carry the weight of a presence. It can help, inform, and accompany, but it cannot replace real dialogue where we risk something of ourselves.

To shut ourselves in it is to confuse living exchange with empty resonance. Our fascination with these mirrors without an Other reveals our temptation to eliminate the very uncertainty that makes a relationship so rich.

In conclusion to this chapter, criticism of narcissism is not aimed at simple vanity. It questions a structure in which the subject deprives themselves of the world in order to maintain a perfect image.

To rediscover the tension of desire is to accept not being one, not being able to predict everything, and being affected by things that do not depend on oneself.

3 : Narcissism and false autonomy

Many say they fear failure or punishment. But this fear masks a more radical anxiety: that of impunity. For if nothing punishes, nothing guarantees the framework that protects us from desire.

The worst-case scenario—being judged, being punished—is secretly reassuring. It maintains the idea of an Other who watches over us, who scolds us, who sets limits. Without this Other, the subject discovers that they can do whatever they want, even wrong, and that none of it matters.

This absolute freedom is dizzying: it opens up a void that many prefer not to imagine.

It is to avoid this void that we develop fantasies of failure. We talk about a “lack of confidence” and multiply scenarios where everything goes wrong. In reality, it is not a question of not being able to, but of not wanting to.

Desire, normally unstoppable, seems to be stalled because it is suspended by an Other who is supposed to forbid it. We wait for an external force to decide, authorize, punish, instead of taking risks.

The decisive step is to go all the way with what we already perceive. Rather than remaining in the middle ground – “I would like to, but I can't” – we need to recognize: “I don't want to.”

This recognition shifts the question: it is no longer a matter of repairing self-esteem but of reawakening desire. The process is more important than the result. From this perspective, whether or not “it works” has no fixed meaning. Desire is nourished by trials, detours, and mistakes.

It is even fortunate that it does not fixate on a single object: this preserves the freedom to create, interpret, and start again.

Desire is not a straight path to a well-defined object. It moves, renews itself, feeds on what it encounters. That is why the success or failure of a project never reveals its ultimate value.

When we accept this principle, we stop measuring our lives solely by results. We can fail without judging ourselves as failures, start over without seeking imaginary perfection.

This change seems simple, but it clashes with a deep-rooted habit: wanting someone else to guarantee the validity of our choices.

As long as this guarantor remains hypothetical, desire remains suspended. Scenarios of punishment, anticipations of humiliation or rejection are ways of maintaining this figure.

They give the impression of an orderly world where every action is judged. In reality, they reflect the difficulty of inhabiting a freedom where nothing is predetermined.

To regain possession of this freedom is to refuse to delegate one's vital movement to an imaginary authority. It is also to accept that desire involves a degree of error, that “it doesn't work” by its very nature. What becomes important then is the journey: surprise, creation, interpretation.

Each attempt, even if imperfect, revives momentum rather than ending it. From this perspective, failure ceases to be an end and becomes a stage in the invention of oneself.

This shift also changes the way we understand self-esteem. If we accept that desire is by nature unfinished, the question is no longer about being “good enough” but about being available.

We stop monitoring our image and start listening to what calls us, even if it is uncertain. The void that used to frighten us becomes a zone of possibilities.

This perspective frees us from the false autonomy sold by today's culture. The modern promise—to become complete, self-sufficient, satiated—denies the creative function of lack. It offers a world where we could live without depending on anything, where every desire would have a user manual.

But a desire that “works” like a machine is no longer a desire: it is reduced to a need, and therefore already dead.

Renouncing the ideal of a perfectly unified self, on the contrary, opens up a stronger presence. We can love, work, and invent without fear of failure, because the challenge is not to prove ourselves but to commit ourselves. Each act counts not by the grade it deserves, but by the life it sets in motion. Thus, esteem ceases to be an evaluation and becomes a living relationship with what is happening.

Escaping narcissism therefore does not require superhuman strength, but a different relationship with the world. It is about daring to do the unexpected: an unplanned conversation, a creation that deviates from the plan, a decision that does not seek approval.

These gestures break the cycle of waiting for permission to act.

In this context, even technological tools can take on a new meaning. Artificial intelligence, for example, can serve as an instrument, but it cannot replace real-life encounters. It reflects without involving, it responds without risking.

Using it consciously means not confusing it with a presence that validates or prohibits. The true Other—that which surprises, resists, opens up new possibilities—is found elsewhere: in shared words, in the unpredictable reality.

By recognizing this, we accept that we are no longer judged by an imaginary authority. We discover that we are capable of acting without waiting for punishment or reward. The fear of impunity is transformed into openness to the unknown.

This shift concludes the critique of false autonomy: freedom is not about being self-sufficient, but about exposing ourselves to the world and its surprises.

4 : Rediscovering the tension of desire

If lack is no longer a flaw to be repaired but a strength to be embraced, the question becomes: how can we live with it on a daily basis? Rediscovering the tension of desire begins with recognizing that life does not have to “work” according to a plan.

Desire is experienced in openness, not in the certainty of results. This idea overturns the reflexes of a culture obsessed with performance and security.

A first step is to take an interest in surprise. Surprise cannot be manufactured, it is encountered. It arises in an unexpected word, an artistic discovery, a decision that does not respond to a calculation of image.

These moments reveal a freedom that does not depend on any authorization.

This movement is opposed to the middle ground where many people remain: they perceive what is wrong but do not want to draw conclusions from it.

They say “I can't” when they should say “I don't want to.” Admitting this point means moving from desire to expectation to action. We stop negotiating with an imaginary Other and enter into a direct relationship with the world.

Thus, experiencing the tension of desire does not mean seeking thrills for thrills' sake. It means accepting that every gesture is a test of oneself and of reality, with no guarantees. Therein lies a form of joy that depends neither on success nor failure.

Seeking surprise is not chasing thrills. It is opening oneself up

to what is not on the agenda. An unplanned conversation, an idea that pops up at work, an unexpected encounter: these events do not tick the boxes of a career plan or personal development project.

They shake up the image we had of ourselves and the world.

In these moments, lack ceases to be a threat. It becomes a call. We no longer seek to fill a void, but to make it resonate. This attitude runs counter to the dominant logic that transforms every experience into consumable and shareable content.

It rejects the reduction of life to spectacle.

It is then a question of turning to activities where the unexpected has its place: arts, research, collective engagement, gestures of solidarity. What matters is not performance but the ability of the experience to surprise and transform.

Thus, the tension of desire is maintained, not as agitation, but as openness to the event.

Rediscovering the tension of desire also involves a different way of speaking. Rather than commenting on one's life as an observer, one speaks to create something new. Speech becomes action: it does not aim to control the image but to open a path.

In a genuine conversation, we do not know what will be said. This ignorance, far from being a weakness, is the condition for encounter.

Such openness requires accepting error. It is no longer a question of always being right, but of moving forward despite uncertainty. Every failure, every misunderstanding, becomes an opportunity to rekindle desire rather than freeze it. This living relationship with speech extends into action: acting not to validate an image, but to explore reality.

As this practice takes hold, the fear of impunity fades. We no longer seek to be judged or absolved. We assume that the value of an act depends neither on reward nor punishment, but on the momentum it carries.

Ultimately, the tension of desire is not a state of permanent agitation but a lasting openness. It allows us to go through trials and successes without becoming confused with them. It makes life not a series of goals to check off, but an open movement.

In this context, the question of self-esteem takes on an entirely new meaning. It is no longer a matter of judging or correcting oneself, but of sustaining an impetus that does not run out.

The resulting confidence is not armor: it is a way of inhabiting the world without depending on the perfection of an image.

Thus, a concrete freedom emerges. We can love, create, and decide, knowing that the outcome is never guaranteed. Lack, far from being a flaw, remains the condition of this movement.

Rather than filling the void, it is a matter of recognizing it as a source of desire and meaning.

It is on this basis that the guide continues its journey: exploring how everyday practices can nourish this living relationship with the world and preserve the surprise at the very heart of existence.

5 : Practices that shift focus

After recognizing the power of longing and the dynamics of desire, we must root this understanding in our daily lives. It is not a matter of adding yet another discipline, but rather of creating situations where we stop watching ourselves act.

These practices aim to shift our attention from control to the unexpected.

The first consists of making regular space for free speech. This can take the form of a friendly exchange, a discussion group, or unplanned writing.

The important thing is that speech is not used to demonstrate or convince, but to allow unexpected associations to arise. In these moments, we are no longer spectators of ourselves: we are participating in a shared creation.

A second path is artistic creation in the broadest sense: music, drawing, gardening, inventive cooking. Here again, the value lies not in the finished object but in the process of production.

The goal is not performance but the emergence of surprising forms. This attitude makes time an ally rather than a judge.

Finally, collective engagement—associations, local projects, solidarity actions—introduces a global dimension. It forces us to deal with realities we cannot control, to listen, to negotiate.

Far from reducing freedom, this confrontation makes it concrete. It reminds us that desire is nourished by encounters with what resists and transforms.

These practices require us to suspend the logic of results.

They are not exercises in personal development but open experiences. Creation, collective action, and free speech matter because of their power to thwart repetition. They allow us to explore what we could not have imagined alone.

Another decisive step is to vary our environments. Changing location, pace, and perspective helps to break automatic habits. A walk without a destination, a trip without a strict itinerary, reading in a foreign language can trigger new associations.

What matters is not so much the activity itself as the openness to what it reveals.

Finally, paying attention to the body—movement, breathing, physical training—can become a space of presence without a mirror. It is not a question of sculpting an image but of feeling the power of a gesture, the energy of a breath.

This physical presence connects us to the sensory world, far from the calculation of performance.

These paths do not aim for perfection. They open up situations where the subject ceases to monitor themselves, where desire finds a space to circulate and renew itself.

Decentering attention also implies a new relationship to time. Rather than piling up activities, it is a matter of allowing for moments when nothing is planned. This chosen emptiness is not idleness: it is a space for the unexpected to arise.

In these intervals, an idea, an encounter, an unexpected gesture may appear.

This availability requires giving up the illusion of total control. Surprises cannot be programmed.

We can only create the conditions for them to happen. That is why these practices are more like open frameworks than fixed rules.

They oppose the logic of narcissism, which transforms every experience into proof of value. Here, there is nothing to prove.

Success does not lie in the spectacle of a fulfilled self, but in the richness of a shared experience or an unexpected creation.

In this sense, these exercises are experiences of freedom. They remind us that desire is not a goal but a force that feeds on the unexpected and on encounters with the Other.

These practices may seem modest, but their significance is profound. They allow us to verify every day that the value of an existence does not depend on external judgment or a perfect image.

They open up a direct relationship with the world, made up of trials, surprises, and connections.

This way of living restores the creative function of lack. Instead of seeking to fill a void, we accept that it is the source of our vital energy.

Every action, every encounter, then becomes a way of nourishing this movement rather than closing it off.

Thus, the resulting confidence is not “better self-esteem.” It is a willingness to act without guarantees, to venture into the unknown. It is not a fixed state but a continuous exercise.

In conclusion to this chapter, these decentralized practices do not give us a new identity: they help us free ourselves from the obligation to have one. They invite us to live as a process, where the important thing is not to perfect ourselves but to allow ourselves to be transformed by what happens.

6 : Conclusion

This journey has followed a consistent thread: unraveling self-obsession to rediscover the power of desire. We have seen how the idea of self-esteem often traps us in a cycle of comparison and control, and how today's culture perpetuates this cycle by promising artificial completeness.

We have also explored the role of lack, not as a flaw but as a source of invention.

Throughout each chapter, the same proposal emerged: to break free from narcissism, to stop waiting for an imaginary Other to punish or authorize us, and to accept the deeper anxiety of freedom.

The real fear is not failure but the absence of punishment, the impunity that reveals that everything depends on our choice. This is where desire can regain its place as a creative force.

The daily practice of surprise, of living speech, of creation and commitment allows us to anchor this shift in concrete life. It is not a method for “success” but a way of remaining open to whatever arises.

From this perspective, loving, acting, and thinking are no longer aimed at building an image but at nurturing an open process.

This freedom does not eliminate uncertainty. It makes it livable. To live in this way is to welcome failure as a stage, surprise as a resource, and lack as the engine of a desire that is always in motion.

Far from perfecting the ego, this approach opens up a broader relationship with the world. It invites us to seek presence rather than

image, experience rather than calculation. It reminds us that the meaning of life is measured not by performance or recognition, but by the ability to remain alive in what cannot be controlled.

In this sense, “self-esteem” takes on a new meaning. It no longer refers to an internal evaluation but to a quality of relationship: the desire to move forward without guarantees, to allow oneself to be touched, to transform each encounter into an opportunity for invention.

Thus, this guide closes, not on a definitive method but on an opening. For desire has no end: it moves, transforms, and is reborn in each encounter.

Recognizing this dynamic is already a step toward a different way of living.

The technological world will continue to offer images of a complete and satisfied self. Artificial intelligence will still be able to give the illusion of an interlocutor who is always ready, an Other without risk or contradiction.

But knowing that this mirror is empty allows us to use it without losing ourselves in it.

The essential thing is to keep our attention on the real: speech, creation, shared action. This is where lack becomes power and freedom takes shape.

Rather than seeking perfection in the image, it is a question of supporting this living movement, where every step, even an uncertain one, already carries a truth.

This path does not propose to close the gap, but to embrace it as a source of vitality. There is no final result, no point where

everything is achieved. True strength lies in remaining in motion, attentive to the unexpected and open to creation.

In concluding this guide, the invitation is simple: do not seek a better image of yourself. Instead, open up the space for a renewed existence.

May every word, every gesture, every connection surprise and nourish desire. This is how self-esteem shifts: it becomes the joy of being on a journey, freed from the obligation to coincide with a perfect image.