HOW TO CULTIVATE POSITIVE SELF IMAGE

*“Self-image is how*you*perceive yourself. It is a number of self-impressions that have built up over time… These self-images can be very positive, giving a person confidence in their thoughts and actions, or negative, making a person doubtful of their capabilities and ideas.”*

The three elements of a person’s self-image are:

1. The way a person perceives or thinks of him/herself.
2. The way a person interprets others’ perceptions (or what he thinks others think) of him/herself.
3. The way a person would like to be (his ideal self).

The six dimensions of a person’s self-image are:

1. Physical dimension: how a person evaluates his or her appearance
2. Psychological dimension: how a person evaluates his or her personality
3. Intellectual dimension: how a person evaluates his or her intelligence
4. Skills dimension: how a person evaluates his or her social and technical skills
5. Moral dimension: how a person evaluates his or her values and principles
6. Sexual dimension: how a person feels he or she fits into society’s masculine/feminine norms (Oltmann, 2014)

These elements and dimensions offer a framework through which to view self-image, but remember that this is not a known and widely accepted framework; rather, it is one possible way of thinking about self-image.

**10 Examples of Positive and Negative Self-Image**

It’s pretty easy to distinguish between positive and negative self-image.

A positive self-image is having a good view of yourself; for example:

* Seeing yourself as an attractive and desirable person.
* Having an image of yourself as a smart and intelligent person.
* Seeing a happy, healthy person when you look in the mirror.
* Believing that you are at least somewhat close to your ideal version of yourself.
* Thinking that others perceive you as all of the above as well as yourself.

On the other hand, negative self-image is the flipside of the above; it looks like:

* Seeing yourself as unattractive and undesirable.
* Having an image of yourself as a stupid or unintelligent person.
* Seeing an unhappy, unhealthy person when you look in the mirror.
* Believing that you are nowhere near your ideal version of yourself.
* Thinking that others perceive you as all of the above as well as yourself.

**The Importance of a Positive Self-Image**

**Distorted Self-Image and Self-Image Disorder**

Having a distorted self-image means that you have a view of yourself that is not based in reality. We all have slight variations and detachments from reality—maybe we think we’re a bit thinner or heavier than we really are, for example—but when your self-image is greatly detached from reality, it can cause serious emotional and psychological problems.

In fact, there is a disorder that centers on this distortion; it’s called Body Dysmorphic Disorder (BDD). Here’s a description of BDD from the Anxiety and Depression Association of America:

*“BDD is a body-image disorder characterized by persistent and intrusive preoccupations with an imagined or slight defect in one’s appearance.”*

We all have things we don’t love about ourselves or things we wish we could change, and we might even occasionally exaggerate our flaws, but people with BDD are stuck in a much more negative and dramatic state of mind when it comes to their perceived flaw(s).

The ADAA goes on to say: “People with BDD can dislike any part of their body, although they often find fault with their hair, skin, nose, chest, or stomach. In reality, a perceived defect may be only a slight imperfection or nonexistent.”

Some of the coping behaviors that point to a diagnosis of BDD include:

* Camouflaging (with body position, clothing, makeup, hair, hats, etc.)
* Comparing body part to others’ appearance
* Seeking surgery
* Checking in a mirror
* Avoiding mirrors
* Skin picking
* Excessive grooming
* Excessive exercise
* Changing clothes excessively (ADAA, n.d.)

**Unstable Self-Image (+ Symptoms)**

If the problem is more of an unstable self-image than an excessively negative and narrowly focused one, similar to BDD, the individual may be suffering from a different issue: Borderline Personality Disorder (BPD).

People with BPD often experience a profound lack of self-image and self-concept. They may feel like they don’t know who they are, and their perception of their own identity may vary widely over time. They might even have trouble seeing their past self, present self, and future self as the same person.

This is known as identity disturbance: a “*markedly and persistently unstable self-image or sense of self*” (Salters-Pedneault, 2018). It involves your personality, thoughts and feelings, and demeanor changing according to the context. Everyone does this to some extent, but people with BPD often find themselves exhibiting major shifts in identity.

It’s easy to see how these issues lead to instability in self-image; if we’re not at least *mostly* the same all the time, then who are we?

The symptoms that are associated with an unstable self-image and BPD in general include:

* Having an unstable or dysfunctional self-image or a distorted sense of self (how one feels about one’s self)
* Difficulty feeling [**empathy**](https://positivepsychology.com/kindness-activities-empathy-worksheets/) for others
* Feelings of isolation, boredom, and emptiness
* A persistent fear of abandonment and rejection, including extreme emotional reactions to real and even perceived abandonment
* History of unstable relationships that can change drastically from intense love and idealization to intense hate
* Intense, highly changeable moods that can last for several days or for just a few hours
* Strong feelings of anxiety, worry, and depression
* Impulsive, risky, self-destructive and dangerous behaviors, including reckless driving, drug or alcohol abuse, and having unsafe sex
* Hostility
* Unstable career plans, goals, and aspirations (Cagliostro, 2018).

**Low Self-Image and Depression**

As you might expect, low self-image can also be a driving factor and/or a product of depression. When we feel bad about ourselves, it’s natural that our perception of ourselves can suffer. Similarly, when our self-image takes a hit, it follows that we start to feel pretty bad about ourselves and our lives.

An effective depression treatment will likely include some work on building and maintaining a better self-image and, since they’re so closely related, that better self-image can also reinforce the treatment and help you feel happier and healthier.

Having a positive self-image is the foundation for being truly happy in life. But positive self-image goes far beyond what you see in the mirror everyday. It’s having a positive view of your entire self, from your thoughts and feelings to actions and capabilities.

We’re all going to be challenged, both personally and professionally. You may even find yourself in compromising positions that make you question your values or second-guess who you are. That’s when having a positive self-image matters most. It’s what helps us avoid getting crushed by rejection and motivates us to keep pushing for our dreams.

Whether your self-image has taken a beating and you’re looking to regain your inner strength or you’re as positive as can be, it never hurts to check in with yourself for a tune-up. Here are 10 rules people with positive self-image always follow:

**Give yourself credit.**

While it sounds simple enough, how often have you attributed something you achieved to luck or being in the right place at the right time? People with a strong self-image attribute their accomplishments to their own hard work and efforts.

**Be present.**

People with positive self-image are present and in the moment. They don’t focus on regrets, nor do they spend time longing for a future.

Keep it real.

If you’re at all prone to dramatizing, you’ll appreciate this. People with positive self-image don’t over-exaggerate. They generally see things as they are without catastrophizing them and have an ability to remain levelheaded when things get complicated.

Don’t dwell on things.

It can be hard to do, especially if you’re really disappointed about the outcome of a major event. But people with a good self-image don’t have time to dwell on negative outcomes. Instead, they look for ways they can learn from the experience and figure out how to improve for next time

Stay in control of your emotions.

This doesn’t mean that people with positive self-image aren’t emotional. Not at all. What it does mean is that they aren’t ruled by them. Their relationships with others aren’t at the mercy of their moods.

Let go.

Grudges and harboring negative feelings doesn’t serve them in any way. They’re skilled at [letting go](http://www.lifehack.org/articles/communication/7-ways-let-the-past-and-live-happy-life.html) of negativity and making room for more positivity in their lives.

Don’t worry about the Joneses.

They don’t compare themselves to others. They are happy to be on their path, wherever that may be.

Be kind to yourself.

I’m not talking about getting a massage, though [self-care is important](https://www.forbes.com/sites/payout/2017/09/19/practicing-self-care-is-important-10-easy-habits-to-get-you-started/#20f6d7a8283a). But people with good self-image don’t beat themselves up over things that are out of their control.

Know that perfection is an illusion.

We’re all striving to better ourselves in various ways, but if we have unrealistic [goals](https://www.atriumstaff.com/goal-setting-for-success/), we’re in for a lot of disappointment.

Take time to be grateful for what you have.

Practicing gratitude can immediately lighten your mood and improve your outlook on life. Daily practice can have lasting effects on your self-image

#### 1. Gratitude Journal: Three Good Things

Encouraging your teenager to build a positive worldview and be more grateful for the things around him or her is also a great way to encourage their positive self-image.

The worksheet is split into seven sections, one per day of the week, and each day has three prompts for good things your teen can write about.

For example, Day 1 has:

* One good thing that happened to me today…
* Something good that I saw someone do…
* Today I had fun when…

Day 2 gives these prompts:

* Something I accomplished today…
* Something funny that happened today…
* Someone I was thankful for today…

Help your teen be a bit more positive and a bit more grateful by having them fill out this worksheet for one week. Their newfound gratitude will help them see the good in themselves, in those around them, and the world in general.

View the [**Gratitude Journal worksheet**](https://www.therapistaid.com/worksheets/gratitude-journal-three-good-things.pdf) from Therapist Aid.

#### 2. Strengths Exploration

Discovering strengths is a sure way to boost your self-image, especially for teens who may not have as much experience and self-knowledge as you do.

Encourage them to use this worksheet to figure out some of their own strengths.

At the top, the worksheet shares this important point: “Those who know their strengths and use them frequently tend to have more success in several areas. They feel happier, have better self-esteem, and are more likely to accomplish their goals.”

Next, it instructs the user to circle their strengths from the big list below, adding some in the blank spaces if necessary.

The strengths listed include things like:

* Wisdom
* Fairness
* Ambition
* Common Sense
* Creativity
* Cooperation
* Assertiveness
* Forgiveness
* Spirituality
* Adventurousness

Once they have their strengths circled, there are three further pages to the worksheet that they can use to help them figure out where they have used their strengths and where they can use them in the future.

First, they will explore their strengths in Relationships, then in a Profession (school counts here), and then in Personal Fulfillment.

For each section, they will respond to these three prompts:

1. List the strengths you possess that help you in your relationships/in your profession/achieve personal fulfillment.
2. Describe a specific time your strengths were able to help you in a relationship/your profession/with personal fulfillment.
3. Describe two new ways you could use your strengths in relationships/in your professional life/for personal fulfillment.

Completing this worksheet will help your teen discover their strengths, gain some self-knowledge, and plan for the future – all activities that can boost their self-image.

View [**the worksheet**](https://www.therapistaid.com/worksheets/strengths-exploration.pdf) and download it for your teenager.

#### 3. Life Story

This worksheet is also a great way to help your teen develop greater awareness of what makes them who they are and encourage them to think about what they value.

The opening of the worksheet highlights why this exercise can be so helpful: “Writing a story about your life can help you find meaning and value in your experiences. It will allow you to organize your thoughts and use them to grow.”

This three-page worksheet begins with the past. The instructions are to write the story of your past, and “be sure to describe challenges you’ve overcome, and the personal strengths that allowed you to do so.”

Next, the present. The worksheet instructs you to describe your current self and your current life. Consider how you are different from your past self and what your current strengths and challenges are.

Finally, you will move on to the future. For this section, you will write about your ideal future. Be sure to think about how your life will be different in the future from what it is now, and how you will be different in the future from your current self.

[**Print this worksheet**](https://www.therapistaid.com/worksheets/life-story.pdf) out for your teen.

#### 4. Core Beliefs

This handy resource will help your teen figure out what thoughts and assumptions lie at his or her core, and help them decide whether to embrace them or work on replacing them with better thoughts and assumptions.

The beginning of the worksheet explains:

*“Everyone looks at the world differently. Two people can have the same experience, yet have very different interpretations of what happened.****Core beliefs****are the deeply held beliefs that influence how we interpret our experiences.”*

Next, the worksheet describes what a core belief is and how it can color our perceptions of the world and ourselves. It lists some common examples of harmful core beliefs, including:

* I’m unlovable
* I’m stupid
* I’m boring
* I’m not good enough
* I’m ugly
* I’m worthless
* I’m a bad person
* I’m abnormal
* I’m undeserving

Finally, the worksheet queries the reader: What is one of your negative core beliefs?

Once you write down a negative core belief you have about yourself, you can write down three pieces of evidence that cast doubt on your negative core belief—or are outright contrary to it.

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