# What is Self-Image, How Do We Improve it?

Self-image is yet another of the “self” concepts essential to understand in positive psychology.

Although related to the others, it is a distinct concept that has its own place and its own importance.

If you’re not sure what self-image is, you’ve come to the right place! Read on to learn more about what it is, how it differs from other self-concepts like self-esteem, why it is so important in human psychology, and what we can do when it’s negative or unhealthy.

## What is the Meaning of Self-Image?

As you might imagine, self-image is related to what you see when you look in a mirror—however, it goes much deeper than that. Self-image refers to how we see ourselves on a more global level, both internally and externally.

[Random House Dictionary](https://www.dictionary.com/browse/self-image?s=t) defines self-image as “the idea, conception, or mental image one has of oneself.”

The Mountain State Centers for Independent Living explains further:

*“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.”*

What you see when you look in the mirror and how you picture yourself in your head is your self-image.

As one of many “self” concepts, it’s closely related to a few others.

### Self-Image vs. Self-Concept

Self-image and [self-concept](https://positivepsychology.com/self-concept/) are strongly associated, but they’re not quite the same thing.

Self-concept is a more overarching construct than self-image; it involves how you see yourself, how you think about yourself, and how you feel about yourself. In a sense, self-image is one of the components that make up self-concept (McLeod, 2008).

### Self-Image vs. Self-Esteem

Similarly, self-image has a lot to do with [self-esteem](https://positivepsychology.com/self-esteem/). After all, how we see ourselves is a big contributing factor to how we feel about ourselves.

However, self-esteem goes deeper than self-image. Self-esteem is the overall sense of respect for ourselves and involves how favorably (or unfavorably) we feel about ourselves.

Having a negative self-image can certainly influence self-esteem, and having low self-esteem is likely to be accompanied by a negative self-image, but they are at least somewhat independent “self” aspects.

### How Identity is Related

Identity is also a closely related concept but is also a larger and more comprehensive one than self-image. Identity is our overall idea of who we are. As self-concept and self-esteem expert Roy Baumeister puts it:

*“The term ‘identity’ refers to the definitions that are created for and superimposed on the self”*

### The Elements and Dimensions of Self-Image

Although there is no widely agreed-upon framework for the aspects of self-image, there are some proposed types and dimensions. These come from Suzaan Oltmann, an independent distributor at one of South Africa’s FET Colleges.

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

Having a self-image that is distorted or simply untrue, is harmful. Let’s discuss the importance of having an accurate and positive reflection of oneself.

### 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.

## How to Address and Change Self-Image Issues: 8 Exercises to Increase Self-Image

As with most changes in the way we think and feel, there is no quick-fix to improving self-image; however, the good news is that there are things you can do! Try the exercises below to give yourself a boost in self-image.

### Troll Travels – Who Am I? Worksheet

One of the best ways to work on your self-image is to gain some self-knowledge; use this worksheet to learn more about you!

It is broken into two parts:

1. Ask yourself “Who am I?”
2. Go on a journey with your new self-knowledge

In Part 1, you are instructed to write down everything that makes you who you are—the good, the bad, and everything in between. As a hint, you should definitely write down the bad ones too, because you’ll need them in Part 2!

Now, on to the journey – imagine that on this journey, you will cross three bridges. At each bridge, Trevor the Troll is waiting to exact his toll – 30% of your qualities!

That’s right, every time you cross a bridge you will have to give him nearly a third of your qualities. This is why writing down so many negative ones comes in handy: now you can dump them!

Once you reach the end of your journey, you will only have 10% of your qualities left. These are your most valued and most important qualities, and the ones that you should nurture and exercise.

Through this short exercise, you will get a better idea of who you are and what your qualities are—both good and bad—and you will learn which qualities you value most. With this information in hand, you can build a more positive self-image.

[Click here](https://tools.thecoachingtoolscompany.com/wp-content/uploads/2012/03/Troll-Travels-Who-am-I-Self-Discovery-Exercise_u_P1-500.jpg) to see this worksheet. To expand on this exercise and see more exercises like it, check out The Coaching Tools Company’s [Self-Discovery Toolkit](https://www.thecoachingtoolscompany.com/products/self-discovery-tools-value-pack/).

### List 10 Things You Love About Yourself

This is a simple exercise, but one that can be very powerful.

All you need to do is list 10 things you love about yourself! Yes, this can be harder than it seems, but actively seeking out the positive in yourself will make it much easier to see yourself in a positive light.

If you reach 10 and have more to list, keep writing them down! It won’t hurt to have extra things to love about yourself, after all.

### List 10 Skills You Possess

Building a better self-image isn’t just about loving ourselves though, it’s about building ourselves up in each of the self-image dimensions. This exercise can help you boost your self-imagine based on skills you have.

Grab a pen and a piece of paper and list 10 skills you possess. These skills can be anything you’re good at, like roller-skating, working with Excel spreadsheets, making shy people comfortable in group situations, training dogs new tricks, or painting.

Write down at least 10 skills. However, if you write down 10 skills and still have more to say—keep going!

Also, for an extra boost to your self-image, include a brief note that explains how other people have benefitted or might benefit from this skill. This will help you see it as a valuable skill, and to see yourself as a worthwhile person.

### List 5 Achievements of Which You Are Proud

Another list exercise that can help is writing down at least five things that you are proud of yourself for doing or accomplishing. These achievements can be big things, like winning a national competition, or smaller things, like acing a test.

The achievement itself doesn’t matter as much as the key point to the exercise—reminding yourself of what you are capable of and challenging yourself to rise to the occasion next time you run into an obstacle.

For extra self-image boosting, try writing a detailed account of each achievement you note.

### List 3 Occasions Where You Overcame Adversity

Now, put together a list of situations in which you overcame some kind of adversity. The adversity could be anything from institutional and systemic adversity, like a bias against your gender or racial group, to an intensely personal adversity, like your anxiety or depression.

Write down the details of each of these three occasions and use the written record to remind yourself of your strength, your resilience, and all that you are capable of.

Again, if you can think of more than 3 occasions, keep going until you run out of things to write about.

### List 5 People Who Have Helped You

We all need a little help to get by sometimes, and it doesn’t make us any less capable or valuable! In fact, depending on how you look at it, it might mean that you are even more valuable a person than you thought – if others find you worthy enough for their assistance, then there must be something great in you!

For each person, write a detailed account of how they helped you and think about the good they must see in you. Brainstorm some things that these people might have seen in you – like kindness, conscientiousness, or natural talent – and add it to your own image of yourself.

If you can think of more than 5, keep the list going until you run out of people to list!

### List 5 People Who You Have Helped

On the flipside, take a few minutes to write down 5 people who you have helped at some point. It doesn’t need to be a giant gesture, just think about all the ways you have helped others—cheering a friend up when he or she was having a bad day, giving some money to a family member who was down on his or her luck or acting as a reference for someone to help them get their dream job or move into a great new place.

Write down what happened, how you helped them, and the ways they benefitted from your help. Think about this important point: the fact that you can help others demonstrates that you are someone with value to offer others.

Add this fact to your mental catalog and your view of yourself – that you have value and you share that value with others when you lend a hand. Keep this in mind as you go forward and continue to help others.

### List 50 Things You Appreciate About Your Life

This is a big one, and perhaps the most time- and effort-intensive one as well, but it can have a profound effect on your self-esteem, your worldview, and your view of yourself.

Although [gratitude](https://positivepsychology.com/gratitude-exercises/) is a great thing to work on experiencing more often, this list goes beyond gratitude to appreciation. Appreciation involves taking the time to understand how you have benefitted from the good things that have happened to you in your life, making it easy and natural to feel grateful and positive about yourself and your life.

An important part of appreciating is to share your appreciation with others. Feel free to share that appreciation with those on your list, and commit to sharing your appreciation more often as you go forward. It will help you realize how lucky you are and how many good things you have in your life, which is an important thing to keep in mind as you build and maintain a more positive self-image.

Of course, if you can think of more than 50 things, keep listing them until you run out