

How to love yourself

A GUIDE FROM A TEENAGER WITH LOW SELF-ESTEEM

By Seta Salkhi

I'm not pretty enough. I'm fat. My grades aren't even good. I'm not going anywhere in life. No one likes me. My personality is too much. No, it's not enough. I am a burden.

The majority of adolescents struggle with a lack of self-esteem, and students at Monte Vista are no exception. In my own experience, negative thoughts can find their way into my head and leave me spiraling into a world of self-pity. Friends and family members can try to help me in identifying my self-worth, but more often than not, they just leave me back where I started.

For example, whenever I make a few consistent mistakes in volleyball, my teammates will often try to console me by saying, "You're fine, shake it off!" or "That's okay. Get the next one." However, at least in the past, I have made it a habit to go from one bad thought to the next — *I suck at volleyball, my teammates hate me on the court, I am talentless, I can't do anything right* — despite my teammates' reassuring words.

Or, in a situation that is more applicable to teenagers, I will compare my body to those of my friends and complain to them about being fat and flat. Their supportive responses are well-intentioned, but most of the time they just leave me feeling pitied.

At the same time, however, there are days that I wake up, look in the mirror and think to myself, *Damn, I look good today.*

Junior Morgan Irish, a student currently enrolled in AP Psychology, describes these conflicting moods and their definitive presence in teenage lives.

"It's such a confusing time [for teenagers] because one day you can have really high self-esteem and another day, you're knocked down a peg because you're torn between other people's opinions and your own opinions," Irish said. "Somebody can tell you that you're beautiful all day, but if you don't believe it, then what does it matter?"

However, it is not our fault that we are feeling this way. Teenagers are faced with rapid changes in their environment, such as increased pressure in school and in other activities, as well as internally, with our developing brains and spiked hormones.

"A lot of things go into teenagers having low self-esteem," said therapist Anne Case, who has a Master's in Clinical Psychology and a private

practice based in Walnut Creek. "There's societal and school pressures. Teens are learning who they are and how to be themselves in the world separate from others, their families and friends, and that's a hard thing to do."

With every teenager fighting against their own struggles with low self-esteem — whether it be in regards to looks, personality, or intelligence — it is important that they are able to healthily cope with these issues because as we grow older our lack of self-respect can translate to mental

you say to yourself are cruel and unrelenting, you have identified the issue.

Congratulations, you've completed the first step!

The next part, however, is a little trickier: Rephrase your thoughts. This requires that you be mindful of your baseless, negative thoughts when they come up and replace them with positive facts that you do know.

"In order to develop a healthy self-talk or monologue internally, you want to look at your thoughts and figure out if they are true," Case said. "If they are not true, rephrase them. Instead of saying, 'I'm going to fail this test. I am really stupid,' change your wording to a more realistic, 'I am going to pass this

class because I am working really hard at it.' Translate your negative thoughts into positive, effort-based, self-accepting thoughts."

STEP 2: FOCUS ON EFFORT & SELF-IMPROVEMENT

Part of taming our inner critic relies on shifting the focus to what we are capable of changing. Instead of having thoughts based on results (i.e. *I am so fat.*), change the focus to what you can and are doing in order to remind you that those negative thoughts are false (*I am working out everyday and eating well so that I stay healthy.*).

"Another way to build self-esteem and self-love is to focus on the efforts you make and not on the outcome," Case said. "For example, focus on how hard you worked on a project, not the grade that you got on the project. You can control the effort but not so much the outcome."

You need to give yourself room to grow by making your thoughts motivating rather than degrading. In doing so, you are switching from having a fixed mindset — a strong belief in the idea that, no matter what you do, nothing is going to change (*It is what it is.*) — to having a growth mindset — the exact opposite of a fixed mindset (*I can better myself if I work at it.*).

"It's important to love yourself because the one constant you have is you."
— Anne Case, MPsych

illness (depression and anxiety), indecisiveness, self-doubt, and poor decision-making. This can "lead to increased vulnerability to drug and alcohol abuse," according to the University of Texas at Austin.

With this in mind, I am going to ensure that you have the resources to take control of your thoughts and paint a positive self-image for yourself. Here is more of what I learned from my interviews with Case and Irish:

STEP 1: BECOME AWARE OF YOUR INNER CRITIC & REPHRASE

The most common trait people with low self-esteem share is their persistent negative thoughts, telling them that they are stupid or unloved or ugly. However, that little voice in our heads only thrives when we fail to acknowledge whether or not the things it says are true.

"One thing that teens can work on to build self-esteem is their internal monologue," Case said. "This basically means stopping and listening to what happens in your head and what you're saying to yourself, and if it is overly harsh, that can have a negative effect on your self-esteem."

If you look inward and find that the things

INNER OUTLOOK

STEP 3: WORK ON SELF-ACCEPTANCE

While you work on improving yourself, however, you need to put an extra emphasis on loving yourself and your qualities.

"One way to develop self-love or self-esteem is to find a balance between self-acceptance and self-improvement — learning how to accept who you are and, at the same time, knowing that you can do things to better yourself," Case said.

Self-acceptance doesn't mean ignoring all the things that you can fix to improve your quality of life. It means giving yourself room for error without all of the self-hate, having confidence in who you are, finding ways to give yourself more love, and doing things overall to make yourself happier with life.

"Self-acceptance is a life-time thing — there is not an endgame for that," Case said.

If you are okay with who you are as a person, the other things

(i.e. being "fat" or "ugly" or "stupid") will start to mean less. As you start to appreciate your personality traits — the things that make you *you* — how you view your external qualities changes because you will want to be kinder to a person (you) that you like and are appreciative of.

"We focus more on our physical attributes when we are not acknowledging the fact that we are uncomfortable or unhappy with our personality and who we are as people," Irish said. "If we were accepting of ourselves and genuinely happy, then we wouldn't be looking at our physical appearance so much. The physical stuff is surface level — the real problem is how we feel about ourselves as human beings."

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- Anne Case, MPsych*

STEP 4: IGNORE THE HATERS!

Your self-esteem should not be dependent on how others feel about you. If you have a high self-esteem, negative comments will not tear you down.

"People with higher self-esteem are able to assess themselves and take responsibility for themselves as well as know when something may not be their issue or their problem; it's somebody else's," Case said. "People who have higher self-esteem tend to be a little more assertive and can advocate for themselves."

Your own feelings toward yourself are what will make or break your self-esteem, independent of other people's opinions about you. You are who you are. Own it.

"It's important to love yourself because as you move through life, the one constant you have is being you," Case said. "To feel good about you and to love who you are makes your life experience a lot fuller and richer."

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