

The Myth of Self-Esteem

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In his book *The Myth of Self-Esteem* (2005) American psychologist Albert Ellis (1913-) discusses on the different ways in which human self-esteem is defined in different kinds of psychological and philosophical traditions. Albert Ellis is a well-known figure in the field of clinical psychology and the father of so-called “cognitive therapies”. At the age of ninety-two he is still working with his clients. In the last decade Ellis has been a controversial man who has greatly divided people’s opinions with his outspokenness. Nowadays his thoughts on human behaviour are widely known in the field of mainstream therapy. The American Psychological Association has reckoned Ellis to be second-most-influential psychotherapist of the twentieth century.

I will contrast and compare two views on self-esteem, mainly referring to Albert Ellis’ recent book. The first view is to understand self-esteem as a conditional state and the second view is to understand it as an unconditional state.

What is self-esteem?

Albert Ellis starts his introduction to the book by asking: “Is self-esteem a sickness?” Then, he states that self-esteem is probably the greatest emotional disturbance known to the human race, if we understand self-esteem in the way in which it is usually defined. Because of our conditional self-worth, Ellis is rumoured to have said a number of times that: "All humans are out of their fucking minds – every single one of them ".

When talking about conditional self-esteem, Ellis refers to Nathaniel Branden who became a guru of self-esteem in 1969 by publishing a book called *The Psychology of Self-Esteem: A New Concept of Man’s Psychological Nature*. Branden stated that self-esteem is always a positive concept and it is not possible to have too much self-esteem. He divided the concept of self-esteem into two different evaluations (1) how well a person deals with challenges in his/her life (self-efficacy) and (2) how one sees his/her own worth as a person (self-worth). At the time, Branden’s view on self-esteem was more related to achievements and a constant push for excellence. We could say that from Branden’s point of view, self-esteem is something to be earned. However, along the years, Branden’s personal views have changed in a softer direction and he has talked also about pseudo-self-esteem, which relies mainly to external sources than to a person’s inner views.

According to the definitions, we can summarize that self-esteem is made up of a person's ratings on himself. This could mean rating your successes or accomplishments. When you achieve success, you say something like "I am a good person" and when you face setbacks, you say "I failed, and I am a bad person". Secondly, the level of self-esteem is often thought to be related to how well you succeed in relating to other people. When you win other people's approval, your self-esteem is high and when you get rejected, your self-esteem is low.

Albert Ellis takes a radical view by saying that we should forget all the above. With good reason we could ask, should we believe what Ellis is saying and take a new view on self-esteem? What would be the gains and losses of accepting the new view? Should self-esteem be related to our achievements in everyday life at all?

Self-esteem as a conditional and unconditional state

Firstly, we should note that there are some advantages in having conditional self-esteem (CSE). When you have performed well, you feel good because of your achievement. For example, you could perform well in your studies, work or relationships. When doing so, you feel that you are a highly capable individual and perhaps in some situations, you could feel superior to everybody else. Therefore, when self-esteem is viewed to be something that we earn, we can conclude that if we perform better we will feel our self-esteem to be on a high level. Usually, feeling better is supposed to cause us to perform even better and so forth. It definitely can lead to good accomplishments in studies or work when you are trying to push yourself to excellence.

On the other hand, Albert Ellis concludes that the conditional view on self-esteem leads people into trouble pretty fast because as fallible humans we can't help regularly failing in our work and at our relations to others. So if you make your worth as a person depend on your achievements or approval from others, your feeling of self-worth will *always* be momentary and inconsistent. Conditional self-esteem could lead you to depression and self-blame in situations when you make mistakes and slash your feelings of superiority or grandiosity. Of course, this is not the case in the highly unlikely situation when a person really is perfect. For fallible humans, Ellis proposes that a solution is to consciously choose to always have an unconditional self-acceptance (USA). He states that people should divide their actions from what they are. Thus, if you're behaving badly it doesn't mean that you are a bad person. According to Ellis, people should make a clear distinction between their

actions and their feeling of self-worth by taking the attitude that says, “I’ll *never rate myself*, I’ll *only rate my performances, deeds and acts*”. In contrast to conditional self-acceptance, unconditional self-acceptance means that you are always good because you are alive and you can decide by yourself to keep this view. In his book, Ellis offers numerous philosophical viewpoints about why we should see ourselves as good rather than bad. Reasons are directed at those, perhaps depressed but intellectual, people who don’t believe that every human being has an essential positive value simply for being human.

While conditional self-acceptance requires constant striving to be better, unconditional self-acceptance doesn’t require anything more than acceptance. According to the unconditional view, you are liable to make mistakes and you don’t have to damn yourself because of your errors. Unlike unconditional acceptance, conditional self-acceptance is more likely to lead to increased stress, aggression and even to substance abuse because you have to be always better or at least keep your level up. This easily leads to thoughts that if you don’t maintain your performance at a high level, you are fundamentally damned. This kind of outcome is not much fun because people who feel damned usually do damned things.

Conditional self-acceptance differs from unconditional in how you relate to other people. If your self-acceptance is highly conditional, you want other people to always think of you as a nice person or someone to appreciate. It takes a lot of energy and soul selling to always try to get as much approval as possible. In addition, it is good to remember the unfortunately truth that wise and honest persons are not always liked by others, often they are forced to drink poison, to be shot or crucified. On the other hand, from the view of unconditional self-acceptance, we can state that it is a good thing to act morally and nicely but your self-worth never depends on that. We can conclude that a person’s self is more than his acts and his acts can never wholly define his self.

Whereas unconditional acceptance does not depend on one’s traits, conditional acceptance could lead to overfocusing on one’s good traits. If you see your acts narrowly as acts of good and define yourself as “holier than thou”, you are likely to forget that sometimes the consequences can be dramatically destructive when a person neglects his or her dark side. In contrast, it is easier to realistically accept and get a grip on your selfish motives when you unconditionally accept yourself. Only after confessing that also these not-so-noble feelings are real, you can possibly get a hold of them.

The road less travelled

Albert Ellis' therapeutic method (Rational Emotive Behavior Therapy, REBT) focuses on people's beliefs and in how beliefs change our emotions. Along with Stoic philosopher Epictetus, Ellis states that it is not external events that cause emotional reactions; it is always our beliefs about those events. Regarding the concept of self-esteem, which could be seen from a conditional or unconditional point of view, Ellis states that humans should decide to accept themselves unconditionally and not to be concerned about what they accomplish or what others think about them. Of course, this is easily said but hard to do.

Cognitive therapies are often criticized as too rational and unconcerned with the emotional side of humans. The same critique is valid in evaluating Ellis' views on self-esteem. Ellis asks us to be rational and just decide to accept ourselves unconditionally and completely. Personally, I would say that our natural and culturally learned emotional reactions are hard obstacles. One could ask, how demanding is it to be utterly rational and is being rational the ultimate goal of life overall? However, if one is willing to lessen the emotional suffering or instability in his or her life, cognitive methods can be very worthwhile.

The road less travelled to unconditional self-acceptance is probably a life long journey. Ellis himself is optimistic by saying that if one decides to work hard on attaining an unconditional view of self-worth, it is really attainable. In his book, he suggests some detailed cognitive, emotional, behavioural methods to use. In my opinion, perhaps the paradoxical insight that we are all incomplete in accepting ourselves wholly could bring us a little closer to the goal of whole and unconditional acceptance of ourselves. Therefore, let's keep practising and try to do it without the need to be perfect.

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