



## 10 Strategies for Building Self-Esteem

Eating disorders are very good at destroying a person's self-esteem and sense of self-worth. For this reason, we have listed some strategies to help you re-build it. While some may work for you, others might not, as each individual is different. We encourage you to give them a go, and do what works for you.

### 1. Affirmations

The key to using affirmations is to make sure they are realistic and believable for you. Saying things like "I am the best" or "I am a winner" may be unsustainable, as it is impossible for any of us to be the best or a "winner" all of the time. If you feel worthless, then it's even more important to have affirmations that meet you where you're at. Affirmations are positive statements that remind us that we are okay. Some examples of positive-but-realistic statements include:

- Recovery is achievable for me
- I will practice being disloyal to dysfunction and loyal to functionality
- I have the right to be heard and understood, believed and supported

What affirmations might be helpful for you? You may wish to write each of your affirmations on a small card and keep them in your wallet to review regularly, or blue-tack them next to the bathroom mirror.

### 2. Act as if

This is a variant of "fake-it-till-you-make-it" and can be quite challenging. It's hard to smile and act as if everything's okay when all you really want to do is crawl into a hole and die. Having to constantly battle that negative voice in your head can mean it does not take much to leave you feeling depressed and overwhelmed. It may seem easier to just withdraw from all situations to be left alone in your misery. The problem is that, while hiding from the world may protect you from having to deal with disappointment, rejection, failure and well, people in general, it also guarantees you that nothing will get better. Forcing yourself to get into routine, to get out of the house and to *do things*, will boost your chances of improving your mood. After all, things can't go horribly wrong all of the time.

### 3. Be willing to challenge the 'Eating Disorder Voice'

Ah, that dreaded inner dialogue... perhaps it tells you you're "inherently defective," "a waste of space," that nothing you do will ever be "good enough." Sound familiar? Challenging the inner critic

can be scary, as the idea of not criticising ourselves can bring about images of couch potato-ism and the fear of hundreds of added kilos to current body weight. Your interpretation of 'letting go' may spark a reaction in you like "oh no!! I can't do that, I'll end up a slob with no self-control!!"

The tricky thing about being self-critical is that there probably was a stage in your life when that inner critic was helpful. If you didn't perform well on a school task, for example, your inner critic may have kicked in and said "You should have prepared more for this.. that way you wouldn't have forgotten half your recitation!" and the next time you had that task, you remembered the criticism, made sure you prepared properly and performed well. In this light, it makes sense that ignoring that inner critic may seem crazy – after all, if it helped you become a higher achiever and you have relied on it for years, why not now?

The problem with eating disorders is that your inner critic has essentially morphed into Godzilla.



It has a perverted idea of good and bad (ie following certain food rules = good, anything that breaks them, or anything in your life that goes less than perfectly = bad). It becomes dominating, frequently chastising you for any little thing that goes wrong. The hardest part is accepting that at this stage in your life, your inner critic is not on your side – in fact, it may be the very thing fuelling your eating disorder. By now I am sure you have thoroughly researched the effects of your inner critic – and what have you found? It doesn't help. If it did, you wouldn't be reading this page.

The irony is that, letting go a little, may be the very thing that will allow you to recover- and eventually, be a high (but healthy) achiever. Instead of being disappointed for not being the best in the things that are important to you (which is impossible for anyone to sustain), aim to become an optimist [<http://bit.ly/ijlnpF>]. Your willingness to challenge the inner critic will be a crucial part of your recovery. You may find the following resources helpful, but ultimately this work is best done in collaboration with your therapist. [<http://bit.ly/gL5ynm>, <http://bit.ly/fhGzqy>]

#### **4. Be willing to take risks**

One of the things about eating disorders is that they simplify our lives. Lose weight = bad day, gain weight = good day. All of life's problems boil down to the number on the scale. Essentially, we get to 'opt out' of life – to avoid failure, disappointment, rejection... and conveniently, when things don't go the way we want them to (say, getting a B- instead of an A), we can say to ourselves "meh, if I was well this wouldn't have happened." It can be extraordinarily difficult to try and insert ourselves

back into 'real life' when we already feel like we have a fragile sense of self to begin with. But part of recovery means taking these risks – learning to deal with distressing emotions that accompany negative events and experiences. If you never risk putting yourself out there, you will never learn to live the life you want. Getting your foot out the door is probably the hardest part. We also have some resources to help you deal with challenging emotions [<http://bit.ly/fhGzqy>, <http://bit.ly/gL5ynm>, <http://bit.ly/fz17ES>, <http://bit.ly/fRRDU3>]. This may be scary stuff for you, and if so, maybe it's something to work on with the support of your therapist.

### **5. Be willing to challenge negative coping strategies**

Every time you restrict, binge, or purge in response to a negative experience, you make it easier to rely on these behaviours to cope in future. This is because our brains are 'plastic' – meaning they are able to be shaped through environmental experience. The more you pair one experience with another, the stronger the two become associated. This explains why a gambler might feel triggered whenever she hears the noise from the pokies. Similarly, if you frequently purge in response to distress, then it becomes harder to break out of that pattern of coping; the notion of purging becomes increasingly automatic, so that eventually even with the smallest amount of distress is met with a seemingly automated response to immediately purge, instead of considering other non-destructive coping methods.

Part of the recovery process may involve talking through existing emotionally-charged problems. The benefit of this may assist in reducing the urge to engage in the eating disorder behaviours, as processing existing problems can help to reduce negative emotions in the first place. At the same time, recovery will also require a willingness to try other ways to deal with negative emotion, and other ways to fulfil the functions that your eating disorder is currently fulfilling. The following handouts may be useful [<http://bit.ly/fz17ES>, <http://bit.ly/fRRDU3>, <http://bit.ly/fhGzqy> ], especially if used in conjunction with an eating disorder specialist.

### **6. Make choices and actions that are in tune with your core values**

The best way to develop self-esteem is by doing things you can be proud of, and making choices that are aligned with your core values. This will take time. Why is it important to make choices in tune with our values? Well, every time we do something that clashes with our most fundamental beliefs, we create 'cognitive dissonance.' If a teenager believes stealing is wrong, but then steals something out of a desire to 'fit in,' chances are he isn't going to feel very good about himself for a while. Either he will stop stealing (in accordance to his values), or he will continue stealing, having manipulated his values so his behaviour is justified (ie "I'm only stealing from big corporations anyway, they're rich and wealth is currently unequally distributed, so if anything I am a kind-of Robin Hood!")

A person who feels good about herself is not likely to put up with something that causes harm to her very being. She certainly wouldn't be purging or trying to starve herself. In the same vein, how can we ever expect to feel good about ourselves, if every day we are punishing ourselves (and our bodies) by listening to the inner critic's put-downs, even denying ourselves the most basic human right- the right to eat? Every time we engage in self-destructive behaviour, we are reminding ourselves we are unworthy – and especially unworthy of love. Building self-esteem will require us to do what we need to, and to live according to our values, in all aspects of our lives.

You may like to write down a list of your core values. If you're not sure what they are, think of 3 people you admire (and not for the way they look) – write down what are the characteristics you admire about them. Once you know what your values are, you can start making decisions that assist you in living more congruently with them.

### **7. Set aside a designated time you don't have to be perfect: the 3 month experiment**

If you find it really hard allowing yourself to make mistakes, this may be tapping into a deeply embedded belief system that tells you any mistakes you make will set you up for a lifetime's worth of failures. If you are scared to make a mistake because that inner critic might lash out at you, you may try just giving yourself 3 months to not be perfect. This way you can take a gentle approach to recovery – and to experiment with what feels right/wrong, and at the same time, you will be learning that you can in fact, deal with mistakes. Give yourself 3 months to try out different strategies for recovery – allow yourself to make mistakes. If you happen to unintentionally offend someone, let someone down, not perform well on an important task, give yourself permission to not beat yourself up about it for 3 months. After all, you already know that beating yourself up doesn't help – so why not give something different a go?

### **8. Look after your body**

As explained in point 6, it's important to live according to our values in every aspect of our lives. When it comes to our bodies, it is very important to challenge ourselves to perform even the most fundamental aspects of health. When everything feels like it is unravelling, this is especially the time to check how you're going in each of the following areas:

*Sleep* – how much sleep are you getting each night? Sleep deprivation is significantly linked to mental illness; giving yourself at least 6 hours of sleep each night is essential.

*Exercise\** – getting approximately 20 minutes of moderate exercise a day is important – even a brisk walk will do. Exercise is a great way of increasing endorphins and other 'feel-good' chemicals in the brain. Just be cautious not to over-do it.

*Food* – Recovery may require that you go through a 'mechanical eating' phase. Challenging yourself to have 3 main meals and 3 healthy snacks per day is likely to prevent binge-eating and keep you well-fuelled. You may want to consider a meal plan with an eating disorder specialist or dietitian who understands your condition.

*Alcohol* – many people with mental illness use alcohol as a way of relieving stress and self-medicating. Unfortunately, while the alcohol may make you feel better initially, in the long-run it is really just helping you to avoid problems, which will still be there tomorrow and build up the longer they are ignored. Try to keep your alcohol intake to a minimum. Stay off non-prescribed, mood-altering drugs.

*Build Mastery* – try to do one thing each day to make yourself feel competent and in control.

### **9. Change your expectations**

When we have been sick for a long time, we can often start to wish everything could just get better overnight. If only we could snap our fingers and be like "everybody else." The reality is that recovery

takes time. The recovery period is different for everyone, as each person has arrived at their eating disorder through a different pathway. There is no “magic formula” – it is literally a process of “building” and can take months or years. It is normal to relapse and have minor hiccups along the way. It may be helpful to think of the recovery process as a matter of ‘two steps forward, one step back.’ We are reminded of the phrase “Rome was not built in a day.” Even Thomas Edison, the man who invented the electric light bulb, once said “I have not failed. I have merely found 10,000 ways that won’t work” and “Many of life’s failures are people who did not realise how close they were to success when they gave up.” Don’t give up. If your expectations are unreasonable (ie too high), change them. Recovery is about continuing to put one foot in front of the other.

#### **10. Celebrate your successes**

If you do something well, take the time to acknowledge and celebrate it. Try to balance your negative thinking by purposefully adding positive experiences to your life, regardless of how much you may think you don’t ‘deserve’ them. If you previously avoided socialising with people, and then challenged yourself and interacted with someone, acknowledge that event. That took guts. Give yourself credit no matter how small your achievement may seem at this point in time.

**\*Please note that any exercise undertaken must be in adherence to your doctor’s recommendations for you. This advice stands, *regardless* of what weight you are currently at.**