

Glynn Harrison examines the impact of the self-esteem movement

EGO TRIP:

HOW SELF-ESTEEM IDEOLOGY INVADED OUR LIVES AND TOOK OVER YOUR WORLD

key points

- Every day millions of people kick-start their day with self-affirming statements.
- Careful evaluations of the effectiveness of interventions to promote self-esteem have repeatedly turned up negative findings.
- The answer to putting ourselves down isn't to boost ourselves up. It is to assert who we are in Christ, and then to live imaginatively, assertively and creatively out of that reality.

You're special!' 'I am perfect in every way'; 'I'm a loveable person'; 'I'm powerful, I'm strong'; 'Hey, to God, I'm big stuff!'

Every day millions of people kick-start their day with self-affirming statements like these. One study found that over 50% of respondents 'frequently' use them; only 3% said that they 'never' use them.¹

50 years ago, if somebody complained about feeling down or protested that nobody liked them and that they were 'no good', a friend would offer advice along these lines:

'Don't get stuck in your own problems. Maybe you need to stop thinking about yourself so much. Instead of being a "here-I-am" person, try being a "there-you-are" person! Try to make new friends and explore some new interests. You'll never get anywhere by contemplating your own navel!'

Today the same friend would offer radically different advice:

'Hey, you need to believe in yourself more! Stop thinking so much about other people's problems. Forget about other people's expectations. Discover who you are. Be yourself. Learn to like yourself. Build up your self-esteem.'

The success of the self-esteem movement

All of this bears witness to the staggering success of the 60-year-old self-esteem movement. What started out as a simple idea loaded with good intentions – to help people crushed by criticism to stop beating themselves up in negativity – grew to become an all-purpose cure-all that now slips down as easily as a

spoonful of grandma's home-made tonic.

Following its birth in the heyday of the 1960s sexual revolution, the self-esteem movement made its smartest moves when, in the 1980s, it transitioned from offering a cure to promising prevention. With pledges of extravagant benefits in drug-misuse, teenage pregnancy, social responsibility and educational outcomes, a new breed of 'therapeutic educators' made impressive in-roads into the educational establishment. As a result, competition was discouraged in our schools and learning to fail well became a forgotten art. Now, regardless of achievement or character, everybody was 'special' (not just to those who loved them) and 'all must have prizes'.

Because of the supposed fragility and vulnerability of a child's self-esteem, parents tried to inoculate their kids against it as well: 'You're incredible!'; 'Danger, Princess on Board!'; 'What have we here, a Mozart in the making or what?!' Churches are not immune from this trend either. I saw a church strap-line recently that went 'you're incredible: we're here to celebrate you!' In this upside-down world of self-esteem it's not the sin of pride that we take into the confessional, but the transgression of 'not liking myself enough'.

What happened to bring this about? How did the self-esteem movement gain such a foothold in our lives?

The big fix

First, as we have seen, the self-esteem movement made bold and sweeping promises about its supposed benefits. True, making consistently negative

self-judgments about oneself is linked with a range of adversities such as poor mental health, educational underperformance, gang behaviour and teenage pregnancies. But correlation does not mean causation. And even if low self-esteem could be isolated as a robust causal factor, we can't simply conclude that 'boosting' ourselves will be the solution. If that were the case, then truly we would have stumbled across the holy grail of human happiness and wellbeing.

Second, the movement promised us *significance*. Since the beginning of time, human beings have puzzled over where we figure in the grand scheme of things and what we are 'worth'. Self-esteem ideology grips our imagination because it engages with this, the deepest and most profound problem of our lives, and tells us it can fix it. 'You're special!' 'You *just* need to believe in yourself...'

Third, with the arrival of the sexual revolution and individualism of the 1960s, the movement forged a powerful alliance with the emerging spirit of the age. The new spirit of selfism – individualism, letting it all 'hang-out', 'being yourself' – was effectively baptised with the blessing of science. Now you could have it all, and science proved it. And so, after surfing the sexual revolution of the sixties, self-esteem ideology thrived in the new humanisms of the 1970s (Tom Wolfe's 'Me Decade') and then mutated, almost effortlessly, into the materialistic orgies of the 1980s (Gordon Gecko's 'greed is good').

Eventually, the primacy of self-admiration became the default cultural mode: if we want to love one another, first we have to learn to love ourselves – right? Who could disagree with that? And, hey, didn't Jesus even say something about loving your neighbour *as yourself*? As a result, we overdosed on self-admiration and the movement reshaped secular and Christian cultures alike.

The big con?

But does it work? Careful evaluations² of the effectiveness of interventions to promote self-esteem have repeatedly turned up negative findings. There is little robust evidence that simplistic boosterism (as I prefer to call it) produces the benefits promised. And more worryingly, researchers have begun to uncover evidence that it may do more harm than good.

Take some research carried out at the University of Waterloo in Ontario³ as one example. For several weeks a group of subjects were taught to repeat, and then to 'focus positively', on a range of commonly used upbeat self-statements such as 'I'm a loveable person'. A few months later, when the researchers compared the emotional responses of subjects with those in control groups, they found that participants who had low self-esteem at the start actually felt worse by the end of the study. The authors concluded that repeating positive self-statements might marginally benefit some people (those who already have good mental health), but 'backfire for the very people who need them most.' Why? Because, it's hard to believe your own propaganda.

Other researchers⁴ now suggest that the pursuit

of self-esteem leads to a treadmill of self-monitoring and accentuates chronic comparison-making with other people. Thus, we tend to thrive when the reviews are good but get snagged in disappointment or denial when they are bad. The result is more depression, difficulties with showing empathy to others, and erosion of confidence.

Boosterism's veneer of 'science' cannot sidestep the larger philosophical questions that stand behind it, either. The self-esteem movement spun the fantasy that questions of worth and value can somehow be uncoupled from questions of meaning and purpose. But despite the veneer of psychology, the core philosophical problem remains: how can the self be deemed 'worthy' simply because it asserts it to be so? On what basis? When you don't know what you are for, it can be hard to believe your own propaganda about what you are *worth*. And why should you?

The gospel and self-esteem

In contrast to the imperatives of boosterism, the gospel insists that we deal in reality and truth. It confronts the idolatry of self and refuses to conspire with our ego-absorption. It shows us how, when the pursuit of self-worth and self-fulfilment becomes the organising principle of mental life, we not only fall short of the glory of God, we fall short of being fully human too.

Instead, the gospel insists that before we can know what we are worth we must know what we are for and who we are. In the first chapter of John's Gospel, therefore, the God who speaks in the person of Jesus Christ also *speaks our identity to us*. No longer stranded in lonely dialogue with ourselves, abandoned to make ourselves up as best we can, the Father who spoke us into being now speaks of us, and esteems us, as his image-bearing children. And this – our identity in Christ as God's children – lays the foundations for personal growth and becomes the lynchpin of change.

Of course, the old habits of staking our identity on our achievements and on our performance die slowly and reluctantly. Many of us face a long, hard journey battling entrenched shame and self-condemnation, and a stubborn desire to prove our worth.

But as we grow in the imaginative task of inhabiting our grace-drenched 'right' (as the apostle John puts it) to become children of God, slowly, erratically, we come to know the true extent of our worth. And so the answer to putting ourselves down isn't to boost ourselves up. It is to assert who we are in Christ, and then to live imaginatively, assertively and creatively out of that reality.

And so, as self-esteem ideology slowly sinks under the weight of the evidence accumulating against it, we can have confidence that for those stuck on the lonely treadmill of self-validation, the gospel really is good news.

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The gospel... confronts the idolatry of self and refuses to conspire with our ego-absorption

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