

Understanding Worthlessness and Self-Esteem

Adapted from the research of Dr. Meg Robertson (2025)

What Are We Talking About?

Self-esteem refers to how positively or negatively you evaluate your overall worth. Worthlessness is a more extreme, painful feeling of having no value. These two are opposite ends of the self-worth spectrum, but they often overlap in mental health.

Key Definitions

- Self-Esteem: General evaluation of one's own value or worth.
- Worthlessness: Acute, distressing feeling of having no value; often seen in depression.

Worthlessness vs. Self-Esteem

- Self-esteem can be stable or fluctuate, and ranges from high to low.
- Worthlessness is more intense, usually episodic, and tied to mental illness (e.g., depression).



What the Science Says

- Low self-esteem increases risk for depression and anxiety (Orth & Robins, 2013).
- Worthlessness is a diagnostic marker for clinical depression (APA, 2013).
- Repeated worthlessness can erode long-term self-esteem; low self-esteem makes people vulnerable to worthlessness.



How Culture Affects Self-Worth

- Media, stigma, and social comparisons shape self-esteem.
- People in marginalized groups often internalize messages of unworthiness.
- Social media can both help and hurt: meaningful connections can help, but passive scrolling may harm self-esteem.

What Helps?

- CBT helps reframe negative self-beliefs.



- Compassion-Focused Therapy helps reduce shame and build inner kindness.
- Strong therapeutic relationships model care and promote positive self-regard.
- Social support, inclusive environments, and cultural validation are key.

Final Takeaways

- Everyone feels low sometimes—but persistent worthlessness is serious and treatable.
- Building healthy, stable self-esteem helps protect against psychological distress.
- Therapy, community, and compassion are powerful tools for restoring self-worth.

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