

*a n i n s t a n t h e l p b o o k f o r t e e n s*

the

# self-esteem workbook for teens

activities to  
help you build  
confidence and  
achieve your goals

**\* stop** putting  
yourself down

**\* accept** who  
you are

**\* leave**  
insecurity  
behind

LISA M. SCHAB, LCSW



“This is a brilliant, inspiring book that teaches and guides teens to navigate their inner world, as well as the world they live in. In a masterful piece, Schab has encompassed all aspects of teenagers’ experience: body, mind, spirit, and relationships. The workbook format offers results-oriented lessons for a lifetime of healthy self-esteem. I highly recommend this book to anyone who has a teenager or has ever been one.”

—**Susan Schwass, LCSW**, private practitioner working with teens and their families for thirty-five years

“*The Self-Esteem Workbook for Teens* actively engages students in a gentle self-exploration of the ways both internal and external factors influence their self-perceptions and wellbeing. The workbook is set up with a logical flow that provides information, engages the student in thoughtful self-analysis, and offers reflection on one’s individual strengths and positive attributes. Additionally, the workbook guides students in changing behaviors and thought processes detrimental to their wellbeing. The scenarios in the book provide relatable, real-life situations of which the adolescent can easily make sense.”

—**Wendy Merryman, PhD**, counselor in the Central Dauphin School District, working to promote positive personal, social, emotional, and academic growth of students in individual, small-group, and classroom settings

“This book offers teenagers empathetic, honest, and clear ways to challenge self-esteem and build self-insight. It touches on everything from society’s external, often overbearing mixed messages, which teenagers encounter daily, to deep, personal internal conflicts and family dynamics. The numerous, unique activities offer teens a safe and positive space to change their thoughts and actions, ultimately helping them to have more successful relationships and high school careers.”

—**Nicole Brown, MAAT, LPC, CYI**, The Child, Adolescent, and Family Recovery Center and the Child, Adolescent, and Family Development Center

“Lisa Schab’s workbook on self-esteem for teens is replete with commonsense exercises and instructions that are all informed by current research and developmental theory. Each of the ‘Know This’ prefaces illustrate Schab’s practical wisdom and advanced clinical skills as a psychotherapist and professional whose knowledge-sets span the emotions, minds, and behaviors of both teens and their families.”

—**Randolph Lucente, PhD**, professor of adolescent psychology at Loyola University Chicago’s School of Social Work

“*The Self-Esteem Workbook for Teens* provides a comprehensive, usable format of step-by-step progression toward a healthy self-concept, the foundation of effective learning. Lisa Schab has developed a program designed to encourage self-reflection, self-awareness, perseverance, and the importance of taking action to improve the situation. Throughout, teens are counseled to pay attention to and act upon the urgings of the authentic self—an incredibly valuable life skill. The workbook could easily be used by either individuals or groups.”

—**Nancy Hanrahan, MA, NCC**, school counselor at St. Joseph School, Libertyville, IL

“Adolescence is often a bewildering time when self-esteem gets battered. Teens regularly second-guess themselves and worry about their self-worth, leading them to engage in self-destructive behaviors. This workbook gives readers practical, creative, and empowering tools to not only explore their identity but build self-confidence and make smart, healthy decisions. It also helps teens become critical consumers, discover their passions, navigate peer pressure, and become more compassionate toward themselves and others. It’s truly a must-read for any teen!”

—**Margarita Tartakovsky, MS**, associate editor at psychcentral.com

“This workbook encompasses all aspects of a teen’s journey to a higher self-esteem.”

—**Tracey Engdahl**, juvenile corrections counselor

# the self-esteem workbook for teens

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activities to help you  
build confidence and  
achieve your goals

LISA M. SCHAB, LCSW

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# to parents and helping professionals

The purpose of this book is to help teens—both those at risk and those simply traveling through an average adolescence—to develop or enhance a state of healthy self-esteem. This condition of healthy self-esteem is understood as a positive regard for oneself, including an understanding and acceptance of one's weaknesses, a celebration of one's strengths, and a realistic conviction regarding one's equality to others. Teens with healthy self-esteem are able to know and accept themselves, practice compassion for both self and others, act with integrity and self-discipline, and use healthy coping skills, both cognitively and behaviorally, to meet life challenges. They are convinced of their unconditional worth despite changing external circumstances, and they also are convinced of and respect the worth of others.

The activities in this book are designed to help adolescents explore, understand, and value their authentic and unique selves and to teach them skills that will enable them to mature and move down their own paths with confidence, integrity, and peace.

There has been some thought that addressing self-esteem with teens may create problems related to obsessive self-focus, a sense of entitlement and superiority, overinflated ego, and a sore lack of real-world coping skills. I believe that these are characteristics not of *healthy* self-esteem, but rather the lack of it. The goal of this book is to help develop emotionally healthy people who can contribute balance, cooperation, and stability to their world—people who can work together with their fellow human beings to make positive contributions to the state of our existence.

The roller coaster of physical, emotional, and cognitive transformation that drives adolescence creates fertile ground for self-doubt and insecurity and presents the perfect time to nurture this issue while the teen is so intensely desirous of self-worth.

Thank you for your dedication to the teens in your life.

Lisa M. Schab, LCSW



# introduction

Dear Reader,

Welcome to the first page of an important journey—the journey to yourself. In this book you will find activities that help you get to know who you are, understand how you came to be that person, and explore who you still want to become. You will be presented with the concept of self-worth and asked to believe that you have just as much worth as any other person on this planet.

Some of the activities will help you understand what outside factors affect your thoughts, feelings, and behaviors. Others will help you explore who you are at your core—the authentic you—before you are influenced by anyone or anything else.

You will learn ways to stay true to your authentic self, even when faced with outside pressures. You will acquire a significant number of tools to help you make your way through your life successfully, realizing positive outcomes through the thoughts you think and the choices you make.

An underlying premise of this book is: *You are okay just the way you are.* This is a basic tenet of healthy self-esteem: that we accept ourselves unconditionally—weaknesses, strengths, everything—no matter what. Some activities will help you work on this concept. Others will help you identify and focus on your “positives” so you have something to celebrate on the days when it’s hard to believe that you really are okay.

Accepting every part of ourselves doesn’t mean we don’t try to improve or grow. You will also find activities that teach you how to gain inner strength, handle challenges better, and achieve your goals. Reading and repeating the affirmations at the end of each activity will help the concepts become reality for you.

My hope is that you will learn to understand, accept, and embrace the truth of your inherent value as a living being. Because when you actually comprehend your equality to all other beings, you can open yourself to your own love and acceptance. And that is the foundation of healthy self-esteem.

Whatever you are feeling right now, know that you have the courage to begin this amazing journey. Be open to the adventure. I wish you the very best.

Lisa M. Schab, LCSW



# what healthy self-esteem means

1

## know this

Having healthy self-esteem means you have a strong sense of self-worth. You understand and accept your weaknesses, and you appreciate and celebrate your strengths. When you have healthy self-esteem, you recognize the inborn value of all people, including yourself.

*When Kati was younger, she thought everyone else was better than her—more attractive, more popular, more talented, and smarter. She felt like she never measured up, like she just wasn't good enough.*

*One day she saw her neighbor Tom practicing karate. Kati had always looked up to Tom; he could talk to anyone and always seemed at ease. She watched how peaceful and focused he was as he moved, and how strong he seemed, both physically and mentally.*

*"You are so smart and cool and confident," Kati told Tom. "I've always wished I could be like you. I get upset, I make mistakes, I say dumb things."*

*Tom put his arm around Kati and smiled. "Everyone gets upset, makes mistakes, and says dumb things sometimes. Everyone has fears and faults and insecurities—you just may not see them from the outside. Did you know I was so shy in grade school that I cried every morning before I got on the bus? And that I practice karate to manage anxiety?"*

*"But I thought you were so together!" Kati said.*

*"I'm human, just like you," Tom said. "You're just overly focused on your own imperfections and others' strengths, and you're basing your self-worth on that. We all come into this world the same, Kati. When you realize how equal everyone is, you'll feel better about yourself. Accept yourself and everyone else—we're all valuable, no matter what."*

## try this

People with healthy self-esteem are certain enough of all people's value that they can admit their faults without feeling ashamed and celebrate their strengths without putting others down.

For each of the following conversations, and check the reply you think illustrates the healthiest self-esteem:

"Congratulations on winning the freestyle swim relay!"

- "Thanks, it feels good. And you won the diving competition—that's great!"
- "I don't know why I won. I don't have good form."
- "Yeah, I made those other swimmers look like tadpoles!"

"I hear Patrick broke up with you. How are you feeling?"

- "Couldn't be better. I was planning to dump him anyway. He was dragging me down."
- "I figured it would happen. No one sticks with me once they get to know me."
- "I was pretty sad for a while, but I'm better now."

"Excuse me, but I think you're in the wrong seat. Could you check your ticket?"

- "Oh, sorry! I always mess things up!"
- "Excuse me, but I was here first. Why don't you find an empty seat?"
- "You're right; I apologize. I'm supposed to be in the row behind."

"Hey, that's my sweater. You didn't ask if you could borrow it!"

- "Sorry. You weren't home, but I should have asked you first."
- "Quit whining. It looks better on me anyway."
- "I don't know what I was thinking. It doesn't even look good on me. I'll give you one of mine to make up for it."

## now try this

Name someone you know who appears to be “perfect.”

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List some of that person’s imperfections or challenges.

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Describe yourself from a perspective of unhealthy self-esteem, ignoring your strengths, emphasizing your imperfections, and thinking that others are better than you.

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Describe yourself from a perspective of healthy self-esteem, recognizing your strengths, accepting your imperfections, and knowing that all people have equal value.

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## today’s affirmation

No matter what our strengths or weaknesses, we all have value, including me.

# 2 your story

## know this

Everyone has a story, and everyone's story is important. It doesn't matter who your friends are, where you go to school, what your grades are, or whether your life is what you want it to be. Your story is yours alone.

You all are who you are today as a result of everything that has happened to you. Every event of your lives, every person you've met, every experience you've had has helped contribute to who we are right at this moment.

Each person's story is unique. Even if we live in the same town, go to the same school, or are in the same family, we have each traveled a unique path to arrive at this place, reading this book, at this very moment.

Knowing your story is a place to start knowing yourself. Your story is your history. Exploring it helps you understand how you came to be who you are. Telling your story allows you to honor it, and to honor and respect yourself. You deserve that, even if you don't believe it right now.

Your unique story carries information about what has happened to you. It also carries feelings, both positive and negative. Telling your story is a way to explore, recognize, and honor your life. It gives you a chance to start becoming comfortable looking inside yourself and seeing who you are.

# try this

On a separate sheet of paper, make a list of significant memories from your life; for example, starting or changing schools, meeting or losing a friend, the birth of a sibling, achievements or losses, weddings or divorces, travels, and happy or difficult times. Next to each event, write the age you were when it occurred.

Write a zero at the left end of the horizontal line below. Write your current age at the right end. Transfer the items from your list to this timeline, placing each according to when it occurred. Write the age you were next to each event. If you are noting a positive memory, write it above the line. If you are noting a negative memory, write it below the line. If all your information doesn't fit, create your timeline on a separate piece of paper.

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When you are done, look back at your timeline. Describe any observations or feelings you have.

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## now try this

Now tell your story in actual story form. (Do this on other paper or at the keyboard so you have as much space as you need.) This is not an English assignment; there are no rules for composition, spelling, or grammar. Just let your story flow in whatever way it comes. You might begin with “Once upon a time ...”; “I was born on ...”; or “My earliest memory is ....”

You might simply provide details about the life events on your timeline, or you could include more information about your birth; your family members; your different homes, schools, teachers, or other influential people; friends; vacations; or anything else that is part of your history. Your story can be as long or short as you like.

When you are done, read your story aloud to someone you trust. Describe what it felt like to write and share your personal life story.

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## today's affirmation

My personal story is unique and important, and so am I.

## know this

It doesn't matter who you are, where you have been, or what path you have taken. It doesn't matter what you have done or not done, said or not said, thought or not thought. Today, right now, you have positive qualities. Discovering them, acknowledging them, and embracing them are steps toward healthy self-esteem.

*Maya's life seemed to get worse every day. Her classes were too hard this year; she couldn't keep up. Her best friend rarely talked to her anymore; she felt lonely. Her brother had won yet another award; she would never be as talented as he was. And last week she had been caught shoplifting some makeup. The store manager didn't press charges because he knew her family, but he did call her parents to tell them. Maya felt like such a loser, like she didn't fit in anywhere.*

*When her dad knocked on her bedroom door that day, Maya cringed. Here comes a lecture, she thought. And I'll be grounded for life. But Maya's dad didn't ground her. He said that he was worried. He said that Maya was really hard on herself, and that he often heard her put herself down. Maya's dad told her she deserved to celebrate all the wonderful things about herself instead of always focusing on the things she didn't like.*

*"But there is nothing good about me," said Maya. "All I do is mess up over and over again."*

*"If that's what you want to believe, you'll never be happy," her dad said. "Do you ever think about what a good artist you are or how much your mom and I love you? About your friends who have stuck by you since grade school? About why the Meyers ask you to babysit so often or how helpful you are to Mom when she has to work weekends? You have wonderful, positive qualities, Maya. You just don't see them because you're so busy focusing on what you don't like about yourself."*

## try this

Describe a time when you may have felt like Maya did. What was going on in your life?

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Person after person can point out your positive qualities, but no one can make you believe. Deciding what you will focus on about yourself is your choice. Describe how you feel when you focus on things you don't like about yourself.

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Describe how you feel when you focus on things you do like about yourself.

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Sometimes our brains play tricks and try to tell us that our positives aren't real or that someone who gives us a compliment is lying. Does this ever happen to you? If so, give an example.

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Think about deciding which of your thoughts you will choose to believe. Would you consider changing from focusing on the things you don't like about yourself to the things you do like? Tell why or why not.

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## now try this

Positives aren't all about what you win or achieve. They are also about what you attempt, what you think, and who you are. Just reading this book is a positive. It means you are willing to try something new. It means you have hope and courage and are open to change.

Circle any of the following positives that are true about you.

good listener

loyal

honest

kind to animals

talented at a sport

reliable

good sense of humor

hardworking

smart

patient

kind to people

good friend

sincere

loving

brave

clean

responsible

talented at a hobby

Give examples of each of the positives you circled; for example, if you circled "patient," describe a specific time when you expressed patience, or tell about the circumstances when you usually notice yourself acting with patience.

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Ask three or more people what they would name as your positives and record their answers below.

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## today's affirmation

I recognize and accept my positive qualities.

# 4 brain chemical messages

## know this

The way you feel about yourself has partly to do with your brain's physical makeup. The way different parts of your brain work, along with the amount and activity of your brain chemicals, are factors initially inherited from your ancestors, just like your height and your hair color.

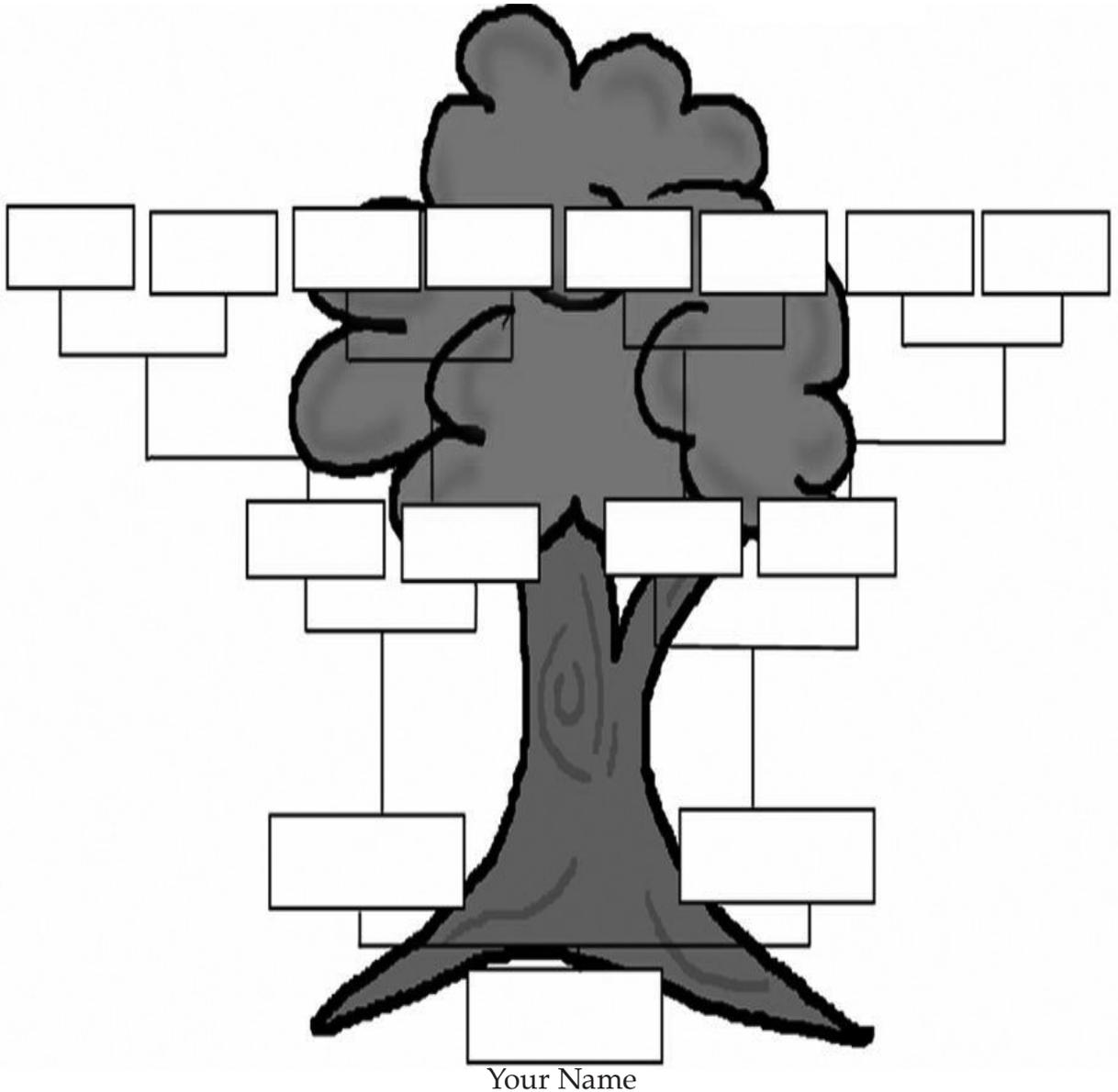
Our brains are amazing and complex organs. They are the computer centers of our bodies. They regulate and maintain everything our bodies do, including influencing our self-esteem.

Different parts of the brain have different functions. For example, the deep limbic system sets the emotional tone of the mind. It influences our ability to see things in a positive or negative light. When the deep limbic system is working too hard, we tend to be negatively focused. This can lower self-esteem. Another part of the brain is the basal ganglia system, which affects our level of anxiety and nervousness. Excessive activity in this area can contribute to unfounded feelings of being judged or scrutinized. The prefrontal cortex regulates attention and organizational skills; the cingulate system affects flexibility and cooperation; and the temporal lobes affect memory, emotional stability, and aggression. Overly heightened or diminished activity in any area can affect our behavior and the way we feel about ourselves.

Along with the various systems, our brains also function with the help of chemicals, or neurotransmitters. The amount of these chemicals and their movement patterns affect our moods, perceptions, and behaviors. For example, the chemical serotonin contributes to feelings of well-being and happiness. Dopamine is associated with the brain's reward system and provides motivation. Norepinephrine affects our attention and focus. Excessively low or high levels of any of these neurotransmitters may increase our vulnerability to depression.

The physiology of our newborn brains is an inheritance from our parents. When we understand what we brought into the world genetically, we know more about what we are working with to create healthy self-esteem.

try this



Create a “genetic family tree” by filling in the picture with information about family members who came before you. Write the names of your parents, grandparents, and great-grandparents above if possible. Add names of aunts, uncles, and cousins if you can. Under each name, write a word or two describing the person’s basic personality traits. Use the words below, or choose your own.

## activity 4 \* brain chemical messages

Note: If you don't know enough about your relatives, you might ask other family members for input. However, you should respect the privacy of anyone who is not comfortable sharing information.

|                |             |                |               |             |
|----------------|-------------|----------------|---------------|-------------|
| anxious        | optimistic  | overbearing    | extroverted   | fearful     |
| happy-go-lucky | artistic    | quirky         | funny         | brave       |
| eccentric      | loner       | social         | aggressive    | rebellious  |
| addicted       | laid-back   | introverted    | perfectionist | passive     |
| depressed      | moody       | loud           | intellectual  | industrious |
| creative       | high-strung | high-achieving | lazy          | rigid       |
| pessimistic    | shy         | quiet          | spiritual     | adventurous |

## now try this

Looking over the picture you just created, answer these questions:

Which relatives do you think your personality is most similar to?

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Which relatives do you think your personality is least similar to?

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Which relatives do people say your personality reminds them of, and why?

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Describe any personality patterns you see in your family tree.

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Describe how you think your current self-esteem may or may not be affected by your brain chemistry.

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Based on any influence of your genetic family history, describe areas in which you may need to work to help create healthy self-esteem for yourself.

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## today's affirmation

My current self-esteem was partly shaped by biology—  
something originally beyond my control.

# 5 family messages

## know this

How you feel about yourself today has partly to do with the messages you received as a child from people in your family. The way you interpreted those messages as a child helped you feel good or bad about yourself. When you evaluate the same messages as a young adult, you can decide which you want to keep believing and which you don't.

*Dylan sat in fourth-period stress group and felt confused. Other kids had situations worse than his; it seemed they had more reason to feel stressed. He just had thoughts in his head—things he'd been told that made him feel bad about himself. But the thoughts were so loud and strong, it felt like they had the power to ruin his whole life. He felt embarrassed to bring them up to the group, so he told Ms. Chaney, the group leader, about them later.*

*"I keep hearing this voice in my head telling me I'm not good enough," he said. "It drives me crazy. No matter what I do, I always feel bad about myself."*

*"Did anyone ever actually tell you that you weren't good enough?" asked Ms. Chaney.*

*"Just my dad, when I was little. He always told me I should try to improve at soccer, try to improve my grades, try to improve my attitude, try to improve everything, I guess. And even when I did get better, he would tell me to improve more."*

*"Your current thoughts make sense then," said Ms. Chaney. "The messages we receive as children stick with us. They are especially powerful when they come from our parents or guardians, because these are the most important people in our lives. We literally depend on them for survival. Their messages are the first ideas we have about ourselves, and they go a long way toward shaping our self-image and self-esteem.*

*"Ideally, we are raised by perfectly healthy people who send us only perfectly healthy messages. In reality, however, we all are raised by human beings who are doing the best they can, but are nonetheless imperfect and at any given moment may not be capable of giving healthy love or sending positive messages. What's most important to understand is that negative messages don't reflect our true worth.*

*“As young children, we usually believe all the messages we receive without question. As a young adult, you have the ability to look at those messages more carefully and determine which are helping you create healthy self-esteem and which aren’t. You have the power to let go of any messages that aren’t serving you well.”*

## try this

Why do you think Dylan's father might have repeatedly told him to improve himself?

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How do you think this felt for Dylan?

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Do you think that Dylan's father did or didn't love him?

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To create healthier self-esteem, what could Dylan do about the continued thought that he isn't good enough?

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## now try this

Underline any of the following messages family members may have sent you, either explicitly or by implication.

"You're not trying hard enough."

"You're not good enough."

"You'll never be able to do that."

"Why can't you be more like your brother (sister)?"

"You drive me crazy."

"Why are you doing this to me?"

"When are you going to grow up?"

"Are you stupid or something?"

"It's your fault that I'm like this."

"You could have done better."

"You don't have any right to feel angry."

"How will you ever get anywhere in life?"

"Now look what you've done."

"Can't you do anything right?"

"Let's hope you grow out of that."

## activity 5 \* family messages

Write any messages you “hear in your head” that affect your self-esteem but are not listed above.

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Tell how these messages affect how you feel about yourself today.

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On a separate piece of paper, rewrite the messages you’d like to eliminate from your mind. Put them through a shredder or rip them up and throw them away. Remind yourself that you have a choice about which messages you continue to tell yourself.

### today’s affirmation

I can let go of family messages that don’t contribute to healthy self-esteem.

## know this

The way you feel about yourself today has partly to do with the messages you received as a child from the society you live in. How you interpreted these messages as a child helped you feel good or bad about yourself. As a young adult, you can decide which you want to keep believing and which you don't.

*Mr. Hannon's class was talking about social messages that pass on cultural beliefs. Kids were supposed to give examples from radio, TV, Internet, newspapers, and magazines.*

*"All I hear is ads for cars," said Max. "What's the hottest, fastest, and the best mileage."*

*"I look at magazines and TV and hear that everyone is supposed to be thin and beautiful," said Whitney. "It drives me crazy—I'll never look like those ads."*

*"Everything is about getting rich," said Jared. "There are always ads for making more money."*

*"I hear more and more ads for living 'green,'" said Lauren. "We're supposed to reduce, reuse, and recycle to save our environment."*

*"Those are all good examples," said Mr. Hannon. "The media passes on the beliefs of society. You're telling me that some things our society values are cars, beauty, money, and saving the environment."*

*"Now think about how you have personally been affected by those messages. How is your self-esteem affected if you do or don't have or do the things society says are valuable and acceptable?"*