



# Self Esteem and Relationships

Leichhardt Women's Community  
Health Centre Inc.

## What is self-esteem?

Self-esteem is a way of thinking, feeling and acting that implies levels of **acceptance, respect, trust and belief in yourself.**

**Acceptance** means that you can live comfortably with your personal strengths and weaknesses (recognising that it's impossible and stressful to try to be "perfect" and to always please others). We can acknowledge things we'd like to work on without putting ourselves down.

### Respect

means that you value yourself as a unique human being with a right to your own feelings, needs, opinions and ideas.

### Self-trust

is what you have when you trust your feelings (sometimes referred to as "gut feelings"), senses and intelligence to give you the information you need to respond and act in the world. You have a sense of inner stability about who you are despite the changes and challenges in your life.

### Belief in Yourself

is when you feel you deserve to have the good things in life (including people who accept and respect you). You have confidence that you can fulfil your personal needs and goals and that you are lovable and capable.

### Self-esteem has it's ups and downs

No one can be expected to have a high level of self-esteem all the time but our basic sense of being a worthwhile human being is not usually severely lessened by what happens to us in life. Like the sun which is always shining but sometimes we don't feel it because of the clouds, our worth is always there but sometimes we don't feel it because of life experiences.

*In a supportive environment and with healthier relationships we can regain our sense of self worth.*



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# Living with abuse ... the effects ...

Living in an abusive relationship can slowly but surely decrease and damage our self-esteem and sense of identity. While physical violence is very damaging, it is often the long-term emotional effects from abuse that can make it so difficult to leave an abusive relationship.

Abusive partners may use what has been compared to a "brainwashing" process which convinces their partners that they are hopeless and that they could not possibly survive without them. Women can believe that they are completely dependent on the abuser.

Living in a tense and fearful way has many negative effects not only for whom the abuse is directed but also on those who witness the abuse or live in the same house.

Some of the effects most widely reported for women include:

- \* low self-esteem
- \* social isolation (avoiding family, friends, neighbours, other people generally)
- \* mental and physical exhaustion
- \* higher rates of health problems (eg. twice as many miscarriages and other pregnancy and delivery problems, higher rates of headaches, stomach pain and other pain where no specific cause is found).
- \* higher rates of emotional health problems such as anxiety, depression and a suicide rate that is five times the average rate
- \* nine times more likely to abuse drugs such as tranquillizers
- \* higher rates of alcoholism
- \* high rates of sleep disturbance (which makes it difficult to function well or cope with life)

## False beliefs often associated with living in abusive relationships ...

*"It's my fault" or "I made it happen"...* Women who live with continued criticism, tension and fear often come to believe that they are somehow responsible for the abuse. Support groups and education groups can help women realise that their perceptions about themselves have become distorted as a result of the abuse. To abuse or hurt someone involves a choice by the abuser.

**Alternative beliefs are:**

***"I let other people take responsibility for their own behaviour."***

***"No one deserves to be hurt or abused."***

*"I'll stay for the sake of the children"* Support groups assist women to examine whether staying in an abusive relationship is in the best interests of the children.

**Alternative beliefs include: *"My children will benefit from living in a more supportive and non-abusive environment", and "When I look after and care for myself my children will benefit".***

*"If I ask for help, it shows I am weak and can't cope"* Support and education groups assist women to recognise the courage it takes to admit there is a problem and to deal with it.

**An alternative belief is: *"It requires courage and strength to ask for help."***

## Effects on Children...

Abusive behaviour can have a traumatic and long-lasting effect on children.

A potential effect, particularly for male children, of witnessing the abuse of their mother is that they are at a higher risk of abusing other people themselves. For females, it sends a strong message that this is how women are treated and they and as a result they may be more likely to accept abusive treatment in their own relationships.

Other effects on children may include-

### Emotional effects...

- Low self-esteem

- Difficulty in forming effective and stable relationships with other people

- Difficulty trusting other people

- Denial of feelings and avoidance of conflict

### Behavioural effects...

- Learning difficulties

- Aggressive or withdrawn behaviour

- Taking on more responsibility than is usual (more mature for their age)

- Returning to earlier stages of development (immature for their age)

### Social effects...

- Fewer interests, fewer social activities

### Physical effects...

- Ill defined complaints such as headaches, stomach pain, asthma ...

- Nightmares, night terrors

- May lose appetite or may eat too much

- Increased risk of drug and alcohol abuse



## Rediscovering strengths and skills ...

It is a credit to the inner strength, courage and compassion of women living in abusive relationships that they are still able to look after the physical and emotional needs of others including their children, extended family, friends and even their pets.

Women's remarkable strength very often means that they work inside and outside the home, juggling responsibility for many different things and organising their lives as best they can, and often all under extremely difficult circumstances.

Support groups and specific services can be very helpful in assisting women to see and acknowledge their strengths and qualities and to help re-establish a higher level of self-esteem.



## Where to go for help...



*The first, positive step anyone in an abusive relationship can take is to simply recognise the need to look after themselves. Feed yourself with nutritious food, try to get a little exercise each day (at least 30 minutes), try to sleep well, and, perhaps most of all ... get help in the way of advice and support.*

**Leichhardt Women's Community Health Centre (see contact details below)** – assessment & referral counselling, general practitioners, naturopaths, acupuncturists and an extensive group program (eg. self-esteem, meditation, yoga...). Services are mainly provided for women who are experiencing disadvantage.

**Sydney Women's Counselling Centre** – T:(02) 9718 1955— free confidential counselling and groups for women.

**NSW Women Partners of Bisexual Men Service**— T:(02) 9560 3011—State-wide service providing counselling and groups for women with a bisexual/gay male partner. Based at Leichhardt Women's Community Health Centre.

**Department of Community Services Domestic Violence Counselling and Advice Line** T: 1800 65 64 63

**Domestic Violence Group for Women** – Leichhardt & Annandale area T: (02) 9560 7788

**Domestic Violence Advocacy Service** -T:1800 810 784, (02) 8745 6999, TTY: 1800 626 267 [www.dvas.org.au](http://www.dvas.org.au)  
-free and confidential legal service for women in NSW who are experiencing domestic violence.

**Telephone Interpreter Service:** T: 131 450

**In the case of immediate danger, call '000' and ask for the police**



### Sources:

Patricia Evans, Verbal Abuse Survivors Speak Out: On Relationship and Recovery Adams Media Corp 1993

Mulroney-Jane, Steps of Change: A training resource for community based work with women in violent relationships Family Support Services of NSW 1994

Bourne-Edmund, The Anxiety and Phobia workbook New Harbinger 1990.

## Leichhardt Women's Community Health Centre

A non-profit women's health centre, operated for women by women and funded by the NSW Government to provide a range of wholistic health services to women experiencing disadvantage. The centre's safe, supportive environment helps women make their own informed decisions.

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