

THE SELF-ESTEEM MOVEMENT: THE SELLING OF AN ILLUSION

THE FOUR MOVED TOGETHER IN A PACK. STEPS SYNCHRONIZED, pace slow, hunting as they prowled through the food court. The youngest boy, age 12 or so, wore his baseball cap low over his face, hiding blemishes from his imaginary audience. The older boy, hair closely shaved on the sides with purple tips on top, found reasons to stick his pierced tongue out. Gold earrings shone from his ears and eyebrow. One girl, in front of the others, shuffled backward, chatting and laughing. Her low-cut halter-top exposed a blue butterfly tattooed between her breasts. The other girl flipped her wavy black hair and giggled.

We approached them, clipboards in hand. Dr. Smith held up her hand to get their attention and asked if they had a few minutes of time in return for some mall coupons. The girls agreed and convinced the boys to do the same. We had five questions:

1. Do you feel good about yourself?
2. What's important to you?
3. What are your life goals?
4. What values are important to you?
5. How are you doing in school?

Nicole, the girl with the tattoo, spoke first. When asked how she felt about herself, she told us she thought she was just great. Nicole said she was very popular, but that maybe she could lose a couple of pounds. The most important things in her life were her friends and having enough money to buy clothes. She had to think about her goals for a few moments. Nicole related that she wanted to have a lot of money, but didn't care much about how she got it.

Like other young people we've interviewed, Nicole seemed confused by the question regarding values. She asked us what we meant. We clarified by telling her values mean standards you live by, your sense of morality, how you decide what is right and wrong, and how you relate to others. Nicole said she tries not to hurt other people except when they get in her way. She couldn't elaborate. Finally, regarding school, she informed us she was doing fine. We asked what fine meant; what grade point average had she accumulated? Nicole didn't really know, but thought she got mostly B's and C's.

Fifteen-year-old Adam, the one with the purple hair, volunteered to answer our questions next. He declared himself a "bad dude," which he clearly intended as a positive self-description. Adam said nothing was especially important to him. His goals? He grinned and said he just wanted to get by, kick back, and smoke bud (marijuana). When we asked him about values, his face exuded a flat, hollow expression. He told us values don't mean anything to him and school was a total drag. He planned on dropping out and getting his GED.

Jason, the 12-year-old wearing the baseball cap, looked down at his sneakers and told us he felt okay about himself. He couldn't say what he found important, just hadn't thought about it. When we pressed him, Jason said he liked to watch TV a lot—he guessed that was important—and he liked his video games. He planned on designing video games for a living someday. He responded to our question about values by stating that he wanted to make a lot of money. Of course, he found school boring, but he usually passed his classes. We then asked Jason if he had any experience with computers other than playing games. He said he'd surfed the Web a little and sent friends messages. Mostly, he liked playing games.

Jocelyn, the one with wavy black hair, spoke last. She too seemed to feel pretty good about herself but worried about her weight. She said having a good time with her friends was the most important thing to her. She'd thought about college but didn't know what she wanted to study. Jocelyn valued friendship more than anything else. Her grades in school had gone up and down at times, but she remembered doing very well in grade school.

We've posed these questions to many teenagers. Some provided us with thoughtful, reflective answers, describing substantive goals, along with a realistic appraisal about what it takes to achieve them. These kids voiced concerns beyond a narrow focus on their own lives. They expressed interest in such things as politics, the environment, and spirituality. But too many of the kids' responses, like those of the teens in the mall, seemed disturbingly shallow, reflecting a preoccupation with oneself and with superficial gratifications.

Collectively, the young people we have talked to felt quite good about themselves. They certainly seemed to possess high self-esteem. Self-doubt and feelings of inadequacy did not plague them. If they expressed dissatisfaction, it usually had something to do with their appearance. For girls, weight issues came up frequently; boys either said very little or denied having self-doubts. Most of our respondents pointed to their peer group, family, or money as the important things in their lives. A few spelled out specifics like their cars, video games, or CD collections. Their goals ranged from none to generic success to becoming an Internet entrepreneur, a doctor, a lawyer, and even "the richest person in the world." All too often, the loftier goals seemed out of reach, given their school performance.

By far, the most difficult question for all of the kids concerned values. Most seemed puzzled by the term and asked for clarification. When we explained that values were the morals they lived by, the rules of right and wrong, and standards that dictate how to treat other people, they still struggled.

When asked about his values, one bright, well-educated 14-year-old replied, "I just try to stay out of trouble." Another told us she valued the time she spent with her friends. Even many of the more thoughtful kids we talked with had trouble being specific when asked about values. A few spoke in clichés, such as "Live by the golden rule," "Be true to yourself," or "Do your best." Others articulated values related to personal achievement. For example, one related, "There's no doubting yourself," and another, "You can do whatever you set out to do." Rare indeed was the adolescent who spoke of grand or altruistic ideals, such as contributing to the good of the world, dedicating a portion of their lives to a higher power, or simply helping others. Fundamentally, the kids we've talked to seem concerned, first and foremost, with themselves.

Now, you might wonder whether this isn't a normal state of affairs. Haven't young people always focused primarily on themselves? Perhaps, but we contend that teens have never demonstrated as much self-focus as they do today. Survey data from a variety of sources indicate a relatively recent shift in values toward greater preoccupation with oneself and with material gratification. To take one example, psychologist David Myers reviewed data that demonstrated dramatic changes in college students' values between 1970 and 1998. These data reveal a rise in materialism and a precipitous drop in a desire to find meaning in life.¹ The University of California at Los Angeles asks college freshmen about their interests and values every year. Over 250,000 freshmen at more than 450 colleges admit to more boredom at school and less interest in social and political affairs than any other class in a generation.

A recent survey of 33,534 younger teens reflected this self-preoccupation and lack of interest in finding meaning. When asked what they considered the biggest issues facing teens today, the number one response was "whether or not to have sex," and the second most frequent response was "popularity." The combined responses of "drugs," "violence in schools," and "grades" received fewer votes than "whether or not to have sex." Teens expressed no concern for issues such as global warming, poverty, the environment, war, or politics.

On the other hand, teens today appear to have more self-confidence and self-esteem than ever before. For example, when asked to rate their abilities in academics, leadership, intellectual pursuits, writing, and public speaking, college freshmen expressed confidence levels more than 50% higher than levels reported in 1971. The experiences of today's youth contrast sharply in this respect to those of most of their parents, for whom adolescence was a time of tremendous personal growth accompanied by self-doubt, awkwardness, social discomfort, and painful introspection. This, at least, might seem like a cause for celebration. Why would we want our children to feel as badly as many of us did?

So maybe we can forgive a little academic, social, and political apathy, materialism, shallowness, and self-centeredness if it means that our kids are at least happier and emotionally healthier. Yet, depression, rarely diagnosed in children prior to 1960, has flourished among our youth. A recent study found 9% of children suffering from depression in a sample of 3,000 12- to 14-year-olds. Psychologist Martin Seligman reviewed the literature and concluded that children born after the baby boom of the 1950s and 1960s "were suffering from depression roughly ten times the rate of people born in the first third of this century." In fact, the National Institute of Mental Health has estimated that more than 1.5 million Americans under the age of 15 suffer from serious depression. Of even greater concern, the suicide rate among our nation's youth soared 155% from 1962 to 1996. About a fifth of all high school students seriously contemplated suicide in 1998. In fact, suicide has become the third leading cause of death for teenagers. Our youth certainly don't appear to be getting any happier.

Well, perhaps our kids aren't getting happier, but what about other areas of psychological adjustment? Not great either. Today, the prevalence of child psychopathology—that is, serious emotional or behavioral disorder—is estimated at 15%. One study found that the number of impaired children nearly doubled over the 13-year period from 1976 to 1989. These children showed greater sullenness and stubbornness. They were more likely to lie, cheat, and destroy property. Furthermore, since the 1950s anxiety in children has shown dramatic increases. In recent years, average children report more symptoms of anxiety than children who were actual psychiatric inpatients in 1957. And since anxiety often predates depression, these findings suggest that depression levels will continue their alarming rise. In addition, the incidence of two potentially deadly forms of eating disorders, anorexia and bulimia, has risen substantially over the years.

So maybe they aren't so happy or well-adjusted, but one might assume they've learned more. After all, technology allows us to communicate across the globe in seconds. We routinely access the libraries of the world sitting at our computers. Former president Clinton made a goal of giving Internet access to every school in America. At least our children must have benefited from advances in technology at the schools.

Of course they have. In fact, you may have read in the newspaper that SAT scores of our students have increased in recent years. From 1990 to 2000, verbal test scores eked out a 5-point gain, while math scores rose 13 points. However, the full story reveals that verbal scores on the SAT decreased an astonishing 49 points between 1960 and 2000. Math scores decreased 7 points in that time. Total test scores dropped by 56 points.

It is possible that some of this decrease could be chalked up to greater numbers of high school students, especially those of diverse ethnicity, taking the test over the years. More students of differing abilities started applying to colleges, which may have lowered scores a bit. However, the College Board, administrators of the SAT, reports that although the proportion of minorities taking the test continues to rise every year, over the past 10 years, most ethnic groups' scores have risen significantly. Furthermore, if decreased scores since the 1960s were simply due to larger percentages of students taking the test, one would expect to see at least the same, if not higher, top scores. Yet, that's not what happened during the time period in which SAT scores dropped the most. In 1966, 33,200 students received a score of 700 or above on the SAT verbal test. In 1983, although more took the test, only 11,638 achieved scores of 700 or better.

Well, so they aren't happier, better adjusted, or smarter. But at least crime has gone down. We've all read about significant reductions in juvenile arrest rates in the past few years. In fact, from 1994 to 1999, the Violent Crime Index juvenile arrest rate declined by 36%, leaving it just 4% over the level in 1988. However, the surgeon general surveyed juveniles and found that they are engaged in violent acts at the highest rate since records have been kept. The surgeon general also contends that arrest rates have declined merely because fewer youths are carrying weapons and, therefore, are less likely to attract police attention. Furthermore, the decreases in arrest rates may have also been partially due to the fact that we've locked so many kids in jail. Never before have such numbers of young people been incarcerated. On October 29, 1997, 125,805 American teenagers lived in jail, which represents more than a 50% increase since 1983. And consider that overall, from 1965 to 1998, the number of serious crimes—murder, rape, robbery, and aggravated assault—committed by juveniles soared 114%.

And we're experiencing violence of a kind never seen before. Privileged children from high-income, intact families have amassed arsenals of weapons and mercilessly killed their classmates. Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold, the teen killers who murdered 15 people and injured more than 40 others at Columbine High School in April 1999, left behind videotapes depicting their schemes and philosophies. They spoke of being superior, more evolved, and above human.

What happened? During an era in which our youth experienced deteriorations in moral values, personal adjustment, mental health, and educational achievement, the human genome project unraveled many secrets of health, disease, and life itself. Nanotechnology soon promises the development of tiny machines that can clean out human arteries like miniature plumbers. Agricultural advances are producing disease-resistant plants with a higher yield and greater nutritional value. We've even re-engineered some fruits and vegetables to produce their own natural insecticides. In time, these developments may finally feed the world's hungry. It seems the impossible has become possible.

How could we have accomplished so much in the areas of science, technology, and medicine while the souls of our youth withered? Did we so focus on innovations that we neglected to nurture the character of our children? Did we fail to care to such an extent that we created hollow children, who are self-centered and morally vapid?

No, not at all. We cared a lot. So much so that during the past 40 years or more, we virtually went to war on the problems experienced by our children. During this era of meteoric technological progress, we devoted massive efforts to improving psychological adjustment and well-being. The science of psychology attempted to eliminate depression and anxiety while increasing personal satisfaction. We worked to reduce teenage pregnancy, drug addiction, divorce, suicide, and eating disorders. Educators fought academic mediocrity and worked to increase standards. Society struggled to decrease crime, from minor shoplifting to murder. We also enlisted an army of mental health professionals to accomplish these goals. The ranks of this force swelled to well over 500,000 psychologists, social workers, psychiatrists, counselors, psychotherapists, lay counselors, and various other magicians in the United States alone.

The Self-Esteem War

The amassed armies of mental health professionals searched for the enemy of adjustment and well-being in many quarters. They looked at poverty, abuse, biology, oppression, and distorted thinking. However, these armies converged on one target above all others: low self-esteem. The campaign against low self-esteem, which is also known as the self-esteem movement, has spanned close to half a century.

Professionals in the field of mental health attributed depression, suicide, drug abuse, alcoholism, teenage pregnancy, poverty, school failure, abuse, delinquency, and violence to low self-esteem. The professionals indicted low self-esteem for all of these crimes and found it guilty beyond a reasonable doubt. They then accumulated an arsenal of weapons for combating low self-esteem and recruited teachers and parents to aid in the fight. Educators and authors rewrote textbooks, curriculums, and parenting manuals in order to boost children's self-esteem.

Yet, the war waged by the self-esteem movement has been lost. The statistics cited a moment ago on young people's emotional health, academic achievement, and violence leave no doubt that the self-esteem movement has utterly failed to ease our social concerns. How did the idea that improving self-esteem could redress most of our social ills come about? Fifty years ago, self-esteem was a rather obscure idea. Today, it occupies center stage in child-rearing practices, social sciences, education, and mental health. In spite of failing to fulfill any of its promises, it remains revered by many social scientists and mental health professions as the panacea for a host of maladies. In fact, self-esteem has become a societal mantra. In the words of Professor William Damon:

Teachers, clinicians, and guidance counselors everywhere speak first and foremost about the primary importance of self-esteem. They see a lack of self-esteem at the root of every problem and an increase in self-esteem as the hope for every recovery. Many professionals believe self-esteem to be the key engine of both intellectual and personality growth.

Truly, the self-esteem movement has permeated our society. You are a rare parent, educator, or professional if the idea of self-esteem has not penetrated your thinking and attitudes, altering in subtle or dramatic ways your approach to raising, teaching, or working with children. Self-esteem has achieved the status of an unquestioned value. High self-esteem is good, and we must promote it in our children. Low self-esteem is bad, and we must prevent our kids from experiencing the horrors associated with it.

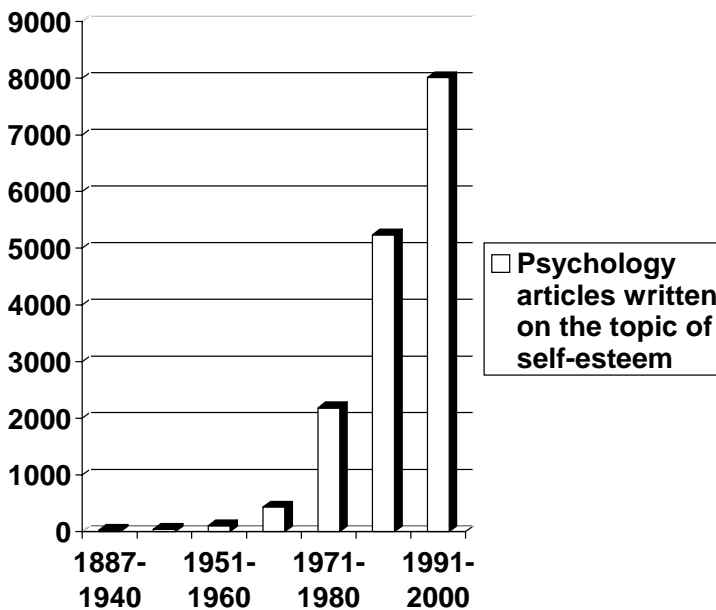
Just about all of us bought this message. It seemed so convincing at the time. At the least, most of us assumed that raising self-esteem couldn't do any harm and it just might help a lot.

Yet the evidence suggests that raising self-esteem as a cure for all that ails us is simply a myth—and one that, we will argue, has not only failed to deliver on its promises but had serious negative consequences. It is time to wean ourselves from our attachment to the myth of self-esteem and seek out a better alternative, one that promotes the kinds of values and healthy social and emotional adjustment we want for our children.

Disabusing ourselves of the illusions promoted by the self-esteem movement won't be easy. Let's begin by exploring how the movement came to have such a grip on our thinking about children despite the lack of scientific evidence supporting its claims.

The Seeds of the Self-Esteem Movement

The interest in self-esteem took several decades to reach its current crescendo. We investigated the evolution of this interest by accessing a database available on the Internet. PsychInfo contains abstracts and titles of most articles written in psychology since 1887. We found only 26 articles containing the keyword “self-esteem” between the years 1887 and 1940, with all of these appearing after 1928. As you can see in Figure 1, it wasn't until the 1960s that interest began to pick up steam. The decades that followed witnessed an explosion of academic interest in the concept of self-esteem. Clearly, self-esteem has become a staple of psychological research. Where did the concept come from, and how has it achieved such exalted status?



The first psychologist to cite the term “self-esteem” was the eminent and highly influential William James, who wrote about it in 1890. Although James himself devoted relatively little attention to the concept of self-esteem, his remarks planted seeds—seeds that took over 50 years to germinate.

During the 1940s, humanistic psychologist Abraham Maslow contributed to the interest in self-esteem by investigating the relationship between self-esteem and women's sexuality. In his early work, Maslow also related self-esteem to marital happiness and frequency and type of orgasm. Later, Maslow provided more fertilizer for the seedlings of the self-esteem movement by developing his concept of self-actualization. He believed that self-actualized people have reached the highest possible level of human development—they have fulfilled their potential. Compared to people who have not achieved this level of development, they have higher values and display greater autonomy, personal growth, and capacity for love. Sadly, he believed, most people never reach this level. He contended that brilliant artists and scientists achieved self-actualization more often than others. However, he thought most of us could achieve self-actualization if it weren't for inhibitions imposed by society. Thus, he called for schools to create conditions that favor spontaneity and unbridled expression of the self. Self-actualization evolved into the ultimate goal pursued by many followers of the self-esteem movement.

Alfred Adler, a contemporary of Sigmund Freud, also focused on the self. He believed people possess a self-concept based on their early life experiences. People struggle to live up to a self-ideal. Adler believed that the root of neurosis lies in the attempt to overcome feelings of inferiority that people develop because of earlier life experiences. Adler believed that this attempt often overshoots the mark and leads to feelings of superiority over others.

Adler's ideas provided some of the first hints of the problems that might arise from an emphasis on self-esteem alone. He essentially recognized that an overabundant focus on the self could lead to emotional problems. In fact, he declared, "All neurosis is vanity." Thus, Adler realized that positive or negative self-views involve a neurotic preoccupation with how one compares to others.

In the 1940s and 1950s, Carl Rogers also celebrated the self in his development of client-centered therapy. He agreed with Maslow that self-actualization represents the ultimate goal for everyone. Rogers believed that one of the ways a person can reach a self-actualized state is through unconditional positive regard from a therapist. Just what does unconditional positive regard mean? It means that no matter what a client says or does, the therapist responds with kindness, empathy, and compassion. Presumably, if a client lies, cheats, or steals, the route to overcoming these impulses is to be found through warmth and acceptance on the part of the therapist. In all fairness, we doubt Rogers would go that far. And some of his ideas about empathy, genuineness, and positive regard do have merit; many studies show, for example, that psychotherapy works better when the therapeutic relationship includes empathy.

Over the years, however, Rogers's client-centered therapy has not enjoyed much empirical support (support derived from controlled scientific studies) for its effectiveness as compared to many other types of psychotherapies. However, that lack of support did not dampen the enthusiasm for Rogers's ideas in the field of education. Rogers virtually equated education with therapy. He exhorted teachers to provide unconditional positive regard for every student. He wrote that schools need to free students of inhibitions and constraints. Learning, he said, comes from within. Curriculums should conform to the dictates of students' needs. Content is secondary to freedom and creativity. Teachers should give authority to students in deference to their need for attaining self-actualization. He felt schools should be "a place where students would come to prize themselves, would develop self-confidence, and self-esteem." Many educators responded deliriously to Rogers's prescriptions.

A number of psychologists also responded with enthusiasm to the writings of Rogers, and to Maslow and Adler as well. Editors of psychology journals devoted increased journal space to investigating the relationship of self-esteem to a dizzying array of subjects. In order to study self-esteem, psychologists developed tests or measurements of the attribute, which, in turn, provided additional fuel for the study of self-esteem. Some of these measures were surprisingly simple, consisting of as few as 10 items, to which people indicated how much they agreed on a five-point scale. Nevertheless, these rather superficial tests had the effect of turning self-esteem from a concept to a reality.

Once someone develops a measure for a concept, it becomes “reified”—that is, it changes from a mere idea into something that can be measured; and if it can be measured, it must therefore exist. And the more people measure and study it, the more important it must be. Due to the development of these scales, the number of studies and the range of their topics burgeoned. For example, articles looked at how self-esteem might affect a person’s susceptibility to persuasion, how self-esteem might affect memory, and how it relates to ethnocentrism, gossiping behavior, social class, alcoholism, cigarette smoking, stress, modesty, and even factors leading one to assume the life of a hippie. Scientists also implicated low self-esteem as the cause of hostility and delinquency. Later, self-esteem provided reasons for why children cheat at games, why students fail to achieve in school, how males feel about women’s liberation, and what causes women to be assertive. One treatise actually declared low self-esteem responsible for homosexual foot fetishes!

This proliferation of studies ultimately elevated self-esteem to the status of a panacea for a host of societal ills. The scientific community’s zeal soon spread into the popular press. In 1952, Norman Vincent Peale introduced his smash hit, *The Power of Positive Thinking*, with “BELIEVE IN YOURSELF. Have faith in your abilities! It is appalling to realize the number of pathetic people who are hampered and made miserable by the malady popularly called the inferiority complex. But you need not suffer from this trouble.”

Peale preached that financial success and happiness would come simply from thinking highly of yourself and your abilities, using positive thoughts to cancel out negative thoughts, and mindlessly repeating affirmations and visualizations. His promises of achieving a better life by simply thinking positive thoughts held great allure, as attested to by the over five million eager purchasers of his book. The breathtaking triumph of *The Power of Positive Thinking* foreshadowed the wholesale trafficking of self-esteem starting in the 1960s.

SELF-ESTEEM BLOSSOMS: THE SELF-ESTEEM TRAFFICKERS

By the 1960s, the stage was set for an onslaught of self-esteem promoters, authors, and gurus. Sociologist John Hewitt has described this collage of professionals, pseudo-professionals, and laypersons as “self-esteem entrepreneurs.” Indeed, marketers of the self-esteem movement managed to find audiences in business, churches, corporations, farms, hospitals, homes, and schools. The promoters promised a cornucopia of benefits, including academic achievement, happiness, good health, increased sales and profits, friendship, popularity, mental health, tranquility, satisfaction, resilience, the ability to overcome almost any obstacle, and even love. To peddle their message, the self-esteem entrepreneurs have exploited every imaginable venue: television and radio shows, videotapes, audiotapes, workshops, weekend seminars, popular magazines, infomercials, books, individual therapy, and group therapy. Society has become saturated with the notion of a nirvana of self-love, as reflected in these current book titles:

- *I Love Me!*
- *We’re All Special*

- Love Yourself First
- The Ultimate Miracle: You!
- Be Full of Yourself: The Journey from Self Criticism to Self Celebration
- The Complete Idiot's Guide to Enhancing Self-Esteem
- Affirm Yourself Day by Day: Seed Thoughts for Loving Yourself
- ABC I Like Me
- Ten Days to Self-Esteem

Nathaniel Branden, from Beverly Hills, California, stands out among those who have made a very good living preaching the self-esteem sermon. Many consider Branden the most influential contemporary writer about the topic of self-esteem. His career began in the late '60s and has spanned more than 30 years. He has stayed quite busy, writing 20 books in all, with titles such as *How to Raise Your Self-Esteem*, *Nathaniel Branden's Self-Esteem Every Day*, *The Power of Self-Esteem*, *The Psychology of High Self-Esteem*, *Self-Esteem at Work*, *The Six Pillars of Self-Esteem*, *A Woman's Self-Esteem*, and *Honoring the Self*. He's also recorded audio versions of many of his books and created original tapes, such as *Strengthen Your Ego* and *Succeeding Through Inner Strength*. In addition to writing, he consults with corporations throughout the world and, not surprisingly, serves as the executive director of the Branden Institute for Self-Esteem.

In 1969 Branden wrote, "I cannot think of a single psychological problem—from anxiety and depression to fear of intimacy or success, to spouse battery, or child molestation—that is not traceable to the problem of poor self-esteem" (emphasis added). This statement exemplifies the breathtaking audacity of the self-esteem movement, invoking a single, simplistic, global construct as the primary cause of most human maladies. Of course, sound bites sell. Deliver a hopeful message in an easily understood package and people flock to hear it, buy it, and digest it. And it doesn't hurt if you make a few references to the "scientific" literature. Branden, like almost all of the self-esteem traffickers, cites scientific findings to support and sell his products. After all, people have learned to believe in science. Whether the science being cited is solid or contains conceptual cracks down to its foundation is not something most people are in a position to judge.

A case example from one of his books illustrates Branden's version of honoring the self. He wrote about a man, married for 30 years, who had an affair. The man came to Branden for advice. He was passionate about his new love and indifferent to his wife. However, he felt that his wife was a good woman who had been loyal to him for 30 years. She was the mother of his three children and had never done anything reproachable. Branden asked the man to imagine that he had only six months to live. What would he do? The man replied that he would leave his wife and live with the other woman. A year later, Branden lamented the fact that the man had remained with his wife. "I have never been able to escape the conviction that had he a higher level of self-esteem, a greater conviction of his own lovability and of his right to be happy, the story would have ended differently."

Nowhere did Branden discuss how the man might have considered improving his marriage or the value of keeping a family together. The clear message: If you are at all unhappy and you think well of yourself, leave forthwith; don't give it another thought. How far Branden will go in treating self-esteem as a be-all (and cure-all) is demonstrated by the advice he has given to women who suffer from sexual inhibitions. Branden suggested the following remedy: "Sometimes, working with a woman who is dissociated from her own body, and, more specifically, blocked in the pelvic area, I will ask her to perform bump-and-grind movements while saying aloud, over and over again, 'I am a good girl.'" We'd like to see the scientific data supporting this therapeutic technique.

Self-Esteem as a Cure-All: Science or Snake Oil?

The self-esteem movement has flourished in spite of the lack of scientific data to support it. This point is best demonstrated by what happened when advocates of higher self-esteem looked for the evidence that would support their nostrums.

In 1984, California legislator John Vasconcellos introduced legislation—eventually passed and signed by the governor—funding the California Task Force on Self-Esteem. The legislature approved a budget of \$735,000 and directed the task force to compile research on the relation of self-esteem to crime and violence, alcohol and drug abuse, teenage pregnancy, child abuse, chronic welfare dependency, and educational failure. Next, they were to find out how self-esteem is developed, damaged, or enhanced. The extraordinarily high hopes that by now were associated with self-esteem resonate in the words of Vasconcellos, who compared this work to unlocking the secret of the atom and exploring the mysteries of outer space. Said Vasconcellos, “Developing self-esteem and responsibility—a potential ‘vaccine’ against the social problems we face—may be the most compelling of human ventures.”

The task force hired academic experts to validate the belief that self-esteem stands out as a primary cause of most social problems. Their findings appeared in *The Social Importance of Self-Esteem*, published by the University of California Press in 1989. In fact, most of the findings suggest that a quite different title would have been more appropriate—*The Social Unimportance of Self-Esteem*. The introductory chapter concluded, “One of the disappointing aspects of every chapter in this volume . . . is how low the associations between self-esteem and its consequences are in research to date. . . . The news most consistently reported . . . is that the associations between self-esteem and its expected consequences are mixed, insignificant, or absent.”

Not only was the association between social problems and self-esteem weak, but the vast majority of the research utilized correlational statistics only, a practice that seriously limits the conclusions that can be drawn from the findings. Briefly, correlations describe observed relationships between two or more things under study, called variables. If two variables are positively correlated, then high levels of one tend to be associated with high levels of the other. To take a simple example, you’d probably find a positive correlation between people’s height and the size of their feet. In general—though you might find lots of exceptions—taller people have bigger feet, and shorter people have smaller feet. By the same token, if you took a large sample of people and looked at number of cigarettes smoked and the incidence of lung cancer, you would likely see that the more cigarettes smoked, the more cases of lung cancer. Thus, a positive correlation, or relationship, exists between cigarette smoking and lung cancer. Again, though, there are exceptions; not all heavy smokers get lung cancer, and not all people with lung cancer smoke.

Now, here’s the problem. For years, bands of lawyers for the tobacco companies argued that the observed correlation between smoking and cancer was not proof that smoking cigarettes causes lung cancer. They contended that other variables, such as genes or stress, might have caused both an increased tendency to smoke and an increased risk of lung cancer. And they were absolutely correct, to the extent that it’s true that a correlation alone doesn’t establish that variable x causes variable y. After all, being tall doesn’t cause you to have big feet, any more than having big feet causes you to be tall. There are other variables (such as your genes) that account for both your height and the size of your feet.

Now, at this point, we have much better evidence that smoking really does increase the chances of getting lung cancer. That evidence comes from more sophisticated research designs in which the level of intake of cigarette smoke could be manipulated in various laboratory animals. In general, establishing a causal relationship, as opposed to a mere association between variables, requires experimental research in which variables can be controlled in such a way that other possible causes can be ruled out. Thus, correlational studies certainly raised our suspicions about smoking and lung cancer, but it took experimental studies to establish scientifically that the relationship between these variables was a causal one.

To clarify with another example, suppose you read a report showing a high correlation between time spent playing video games and arrest rates for juvenile delinquency. Let's say that arrested juveniles averaged 15 hours a week of video game playing, compared to 4 hours a week for teenagers in general. You might be tempted to conclude that playing video games greatly influences the likelihood of juveniles' committing crimes. But the evidence doesn't entitle you to draw that conclusion. Perhaps excessive leisure time leads kids to play more video games and get into more mischief. Or perhaps the quality and amount of parental supervision are responsible for kids being drawn to both video games and crime. In fact, we know that teenagers who commit crimes are less likely to be involved in after-school activities such as sports teams or clubs and are less likely to have adult supervision. So, the fact that arrested teenagers play more video games may not at all be a cause of their delinquent behavior.

When someone tosses "scientific" evidence your way, keep this principle firmly in mind: Correlations are useful, but they do not prove causation. In the case of self-esteem, a variety of studies have shown a modest correlation between self-esteem and various social problems such as low achievement. So, does low self-esteem cause low achievement? Or does low achievement cause low self-esteem? Or does something else, such as poor self-control, cause both low self-esteem and low achievement? This type of correlational study simply can't answer these questions.

The paucity of data concerning the value of increasing self-esteem didn't slow down the California Task Force. Not at all. Instead, they blithely ignored the findings reported in their own book and spun off a group dedicated to the propagation of raising self-esteem in our schools, at home, and in society. The group was originally called the National Council for Self-Esteem; the directors changed the name to the National Association for Self-Esteem (NASE) in 1995. Early members included Jack Canfield (coauthor of the mega-selling Chicken Soup series who has worked prodigiously to infuse self-esteem into the schools), Gloria Steinem (feminist author), and Nathaniel Branden (self-esteem guru discussed above).

NASE now has a presence on the World Wide Web; you can visit it at www.self-esteem-nase.org. On the Web site, you'll find guides to parenting, worldwide conferences, self-esteem links, a research center, a reference center, membership information, educational programs, and a listing of local chapters. Of particular interest is the research page, which blames low self-esteem for problems of school achievement, crime and violence, teenage pregnancy, drug and alcohol abuse, teen suicide, high school dropout rates, cheating and stealing, and poor health, including cancer.

If you look closely, however, you might notice a couple of things about the references upon which these claims are based. First, the references are generally over 10 years old. Second, most come from popular books or articles in small magazines rather than scientific journals, which are refereed by experts. Of particular note, NASE neglected to cite the 1989 book commissioned by the California Task Force on Self-Esteem. It's difficult to believe that the National Association for Self-Esteem omitted the reference because it didn't know about it. After all, the task force that inspired the creation of the association commissioned the book. The more likely reason for its omission is that the book painfully fails to support the group's cause.

Criticisms of the Self-Esteem Movement

Not surprisingly, a few voices have quite recently started to question the self-esteem movement. These critics have aptly cited a number of problems that come from the indiscriminate effort to increase everyone's self-esteem as a panacea for human problems. In particular, critics have zeroed in on three issues.

First, they say the movement has separated self-esteem from actual achievement and that doing so removes incentives for accomplishments. Too often, critics say, self-esteem promoters preach that all children require praise and we should always make them feel successful, no matter what they've actually accomplished.

Second, the critics argue that schools have emphasized self-esteem to the detriment of standards. They argue that social promotion, grade inflation, and unproductive time spent on vacuous boosting of self-esteem have led to degradation of curriculums and performance. For example, from 1988 to 2000, the percentage of college freshmen who reported "earning" A+, A, and A- grade averages when in high school climbed from 28% to 39%. It would be an awesome achievement if almost 40% of our high school students were attaining such levels of excellence. Of course, they aren't. During the same period that grades skyrocketed, a more objective measure—SAT scores—increased only marginally.

Third, critics have condemned the promotion of self-esteem for causing parental overindulgence. When parents unduly concern themselves with their children's self-esteem, it becomes difficult to discipline. Discipline involves confrontation and temporary bad feelings. Sometimes kids feel guilty when they're reprimanded for their deeds. Their self-esteem might dip for a little while. On the other hand, guilt and bad feelings may generate better behavior the next time. But many parents feel discomfort in allowing their children's self-esteem to suffer, even if briefly.

We agree in part with these arguments. Certainly, it is appropriate to be concerned about children learning to "feel good" about themselves for no good reason or about students who no longer know what "outstanding" means because everyone expects, and too often receives, an A. But it is easy to target foolishness, such as the recommended incantations of "I am special; I am beautiful" or not allowing teachers to give grades to elementary students out of fear of damaging students' self-esteem. The question is, where does the self-esteem movement fundamentally go wrong, and what should replace self-esteem in the thinking of parents, educators, and professionals who work with children? And here, we think, many critics have missed the mark by failing to fully understand the nature of self-esteem and the far more serious problem the self-esteem movement represents.

First, to criticize the self-esteem movement should not mean giving up all concern for problems that may have a connection with low self-esteem. As we'll show you, excessively high self-esteem creates greater troubles, but that doesn't mean that we should sweep significant issues of low self-esteem under the rug.

Second, the critics have a point when they say that the movement encourages us to teach children to feel good about themselves for no reason, but the obvious alternative—tying self-esteem to accomplishments—also has problems. Basing self-esteem entirely on accomplishments means that failure must induce low self-esteem—and all of us fail some of the time. Moreover, when we do succeed, the boost to our self-esteem is fleeting. As author David Mills has commented, "When people base their self-esteem on specific behaviors or accomplishments, they must constantly strive for, and perpetually achieve, new goals if their ego intoxication is to continue."

Mills's remark brings us to the heart of the issue about self-esteem. We contend that the central problem with placing excessive emphasis on developing high self-esteem is that doing so leads to increased self-absorption. This intense focus on the self lays a foundation for misery that manifests itself in more ways than many critics of the self-esteem movement have contemplated. It isn't just about decreasing educational standards or rearing overindulged children. As we will demonstrate in the coming chapters, self-absorption underlies eating disorders, distortions in body image, greed, anxiety, depression, narcissism, aggression, and violence. Self-absorption fuels disregard for others; it erodes moral development. Ironically, it can even lead to low self-esteem. This is the insidious way in which our preoccupation with self-esteem is failing our children and damaging their happiness, their emotional adjustment, and their sense of values and obligation to others.

Nobody intended to fill our kids with self-absorption and narcissism. The self-esteem movement started with a few good ideas and took them too far. People who came to maturity in the 1960s wanted to feel good, and they wanted the same for their kids. The self-esteem traffickers exploited these ideas and gradually turned them into distorted, costly prescriptions for living.

A Better Way: Acceptance

In this book we propose an alternative to the misguided and destructive quest for higher and higher self-esteem. In its place, we recommend the idea of acceptance. Acceptance can provide our children a way of learning to become self-forgetful. It shifts the emphasis from internal preoccupation to a connection with others. It allows them to thrive with much less worry about their inevitable weaknesses, mistakes, and failures. Acceptance leads to improved emotional well-being.

Before we can fully describe acceptance as an alternative to self-esteem, we need to examine more closely exactly what is wrong with the logic of the self-esteem movement, and how preoccupation with self-esteem leads to the problems we have described. As someone concerned with children, you have a right to expect a careful analysis before you are asked to dispense with an idea so apparently reasonable as the notion of self-esteem. Moreover, we believe that one reason the critics of the self-esteem movement have made so little headway is that the concept of self-esteem has become so entrenched in all of our thinking that it takes a thorough reexamination of it to root it out. Consequently, in the next chapter we will take a closer look at exactly how current thinking about self-esteem is misleading. Along the way, we will develop a fuller and more accurate conception of self-esteem, one that helps explain what we actually observe in our children. In Part Two, we will explore in detail the serious problems caused by a distorted self-esteem and the self-absorption that accompanies it.

In Part Three, we will present the acceptance alternative and its implications for parents and teachers. This, we believe, is the antidote to self-absorption and narcissism. It is the way to reclaim a generation lost to the myth of self-esteem and fill the hollow places in our children's souls with humility, values, and grace. >