

# Self-Esteem:

**The Belief that One is a Valuable  
Contributor to a Meaningful Universe**

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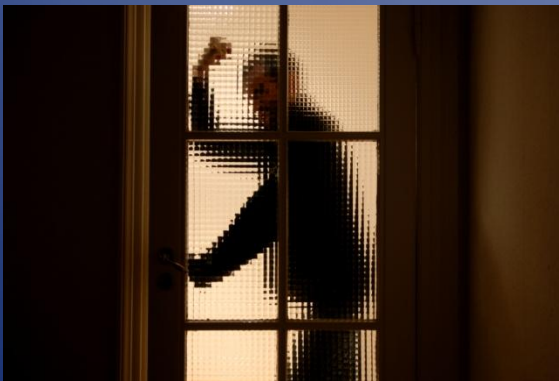
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# Self-esteem is the most common construct in psychological discourse.



It is also one of the most controversial in that some people claim that self-esteem is vitally important for psychological and interpersonal well-being, while others insist that self-esteem is unimportant OR is associated with increased violence and social insensitivity.

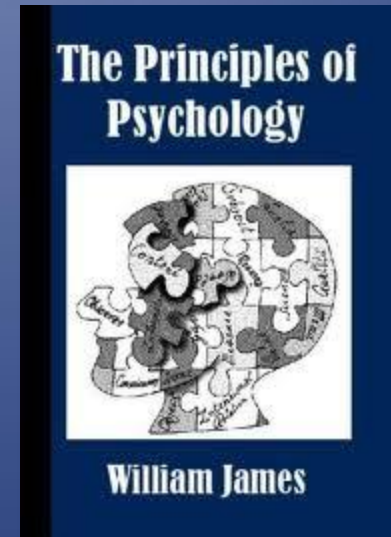
# Poll #1

How important is self-esteem  
in your opinion?

- Very important, essential to one's well-being
  - Somewhat important
- Not at all important or actually destructive



In *The Principles of Psychology*, published in 1890, William James identified self-esteem as a fundamental human need, no less essential for survival than emotions such as anger and fear.





*Life...is arduous, difficult, a perpetual struggle. It calls for gigantic courage and strength. More than anything, perhaps, creatures of illusion as we are, it calls for confidence in oneself. Without self-confidence we are as babes in the cradle.*

Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own*  
(1929)

- Roy Baumeister: "It seems possible that high self-esteem brings about happiness, but no research has shown this outcome. Any correlation between the two is just that, a correlation."
- According to Baumeister, high self-esteem does NOT improve performance, and is associated with poorer interpersonal relationships and increased violence and aggression.







**Steven Pinker:** “Perhaps the most extraordinary popular delusion about violence in the past quarter-century is that it is caused by low self-esteem....Violence is a problem not of too little self-esteem but of too much...

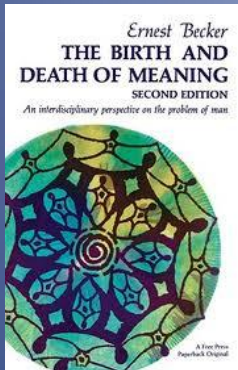


## Poll #2

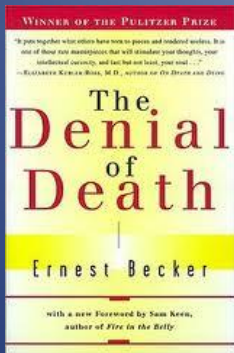
Have you read any books by Ernest Becker?

- *The Birth and Death of Meaning* (1962/1971)
- *The Denial of Death* (1973)
- *Escape from Evil* (1975)
- I'm familiar with Becker, but I haven't read his books.
- I haven't heard of him.

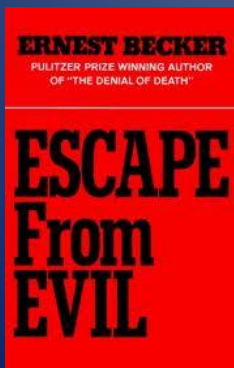
# Ernest Becker (1924-1974)



- *The Birth and Death of Meaning* (1962/1971)



- *The Denial of Death* (1973)



- *Escape from Evil* (1975)

*...the seemingly trite words “self-esteem” are at the very core of human adaptation. They do not represent an extra self-indulgence, or a mere vanity, but a matter of life and death. The qualitative feeling of self-value is the basic predicate for human action...Unlike the baboon who gluts himself only on food, **man nourishes himself mostly on self-esteem.***

Ernest Becker, *The Birth and Death of Meaning*

- (1971)

# What is self-esteem?

Human beings are uniquely self-conscious: “I am and I know that I am.” This in turn raises basic questions:

Who am I?



What is the meaning of my life?

What value does it have?



## Poll # 3

Do you find yourself asking these questions?

- Yes, often
- Yes, once in a while
- Rarely

Self-esteem is the perception that one is *a person of value in a world of meaning*. The primary function of self-esteem is to buffer anxiety in general and about death in particular.



## Poll # 4

Do you think the society you live in provides many opportunities for people to feel this way about themselves?

- Yes, many
  - Yes, for some people
- Only for a few “special” individuals
  - No, not many



Self-esteem acquires  
its anxiety-buffering  
properties in the  
context of  
socialization.

# According to this view:

- \* The need for self-esteem is universal.
- \* However, self-esteem is ultimately a cultural construction because the standards of value by which people judge themselves are derived from adhering to social standards.
- \* Consequently, the same affectation that might garner tremendous self-regard in one cultural context may have disastrous effects in another.



# Evidence that self-esteem buffers anxiety and reduces violence

- \*The effects of elevated self-esteem on vulnerability-denying distortions.



- \*The effects of elevated self-esteem on anxiety and physiological arousal in response to threat.



- \*The effects of elevated self-esteem on worldview defense in response to mortality salience.



\*The effects of threats to self-esteem on death-thought accessibility.



\*Low self-esteem is related to aggression, antisocial behavior, and delinquency: longitudinal study



# ABSTRACT—

The present research explored the controversial link between global self-esteem and externalizing problems such as aggression, antisocial behavior, and delinquency. In three studies, we found a robust relation between low self-esteem and externalizing problems.

This relation held for measures of self-esteem and externalizing problems based on self-report, teachers' ratings, and parents' ratings, and for participants from different nationalities (United States and New Zealand) and age groups (adolescents and college students).

Moreover, this relation held...after controlling for potential confounding variables such as supportive parenting, parent-child and peer relationships, achievement-test scores, socioeconomic status, and IQ. In addition, the effect of self-esteem on aggression was independent of narcissism, an important finding given recent claims **that individuals who are narcissistic, not low in self-esteem, are aggressive.** Discussion focuses on clarifying the relations among self-esteem, narcissism, and externalizing problems.

# BIG POINT:

Those who claim that high self-esteem is problematic and associated with increased aggression are either willfully (Baumeister) or unwittingly (Pinker) confusing and conflating self-esteem with narcissism.



# Narcissism vs. Genuine Self-Esteem

Karen Horney, Neurosis and Human Growth (1950)

- \* arrogance vs. humility
- \* reactions to constructive criticism
- \* receptivity to new experiences



## Poll # 5

What are your reactions to constructive criticism?

- Always interested in improving myself
- Depends who is giving the criticism
  - Somewhat defensive
  - Feel attacked and argue back

If you have to maintain self-esteem by pulling down the standing of others, you are extraordinarily unfortunate in a variety of ways. Since you have to protect your feeling of personal worth by noting how unworthy everybody around you is, you are not provided with any data that are convincing evidence of your having personal worth, so it gradually evolves into "I am not as bad as the other swine." To be the best of swine, when it would be nice to be a [person], is not a particularly good way of furthering anything except security operations.

Harry Stack Sullivan



# Self-Esteem & Society

Why is America is a petri dish of psychopathology?

# Poll # 6

What are the opportunities to gain self-esteem in your culture?

- Being thin
- Being rich
- Being young
- Being goodhearted and compassionate
  - Working hard

# Thank you!

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# Recommended Resources

## Books:

Denial of Death  
In the Wake of 9/11:  
The Psychology of Terror

## Films:

Flight From Death: The Quest for Immortality

## Websites:

Ernest Becker Foundation -  
<http://www.ernestbecker.org/>







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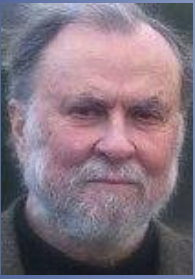


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