

Increasing Self-Esteem



by Dr. Patrick Cohn

Many athletes often wrongly determine their self-worth by how successful they feel about their career. Here is the problem: when an athlete performs well or feels successful, they can feel good about themselves.

But the opposite is also true: despair and low self-esteem results when this athlete does not perform well or view themselves as a failure. Self-esteem is a core issue as it affects every aspect of your life, not just sport.

Athletes are especially vulnerable to this problem of attaching self-esteem to one's performance, because you are judged by how you look and how well you perform. One of the problems is that society today sends signals that you must achieve in your career to feel worthy as a person - this is a trap that many athletes fall into. In addition, if you are a perfectionist, it doesn't help your self-esteem because you have such high expectation and are always so critical and hard on yourself.

If you fall into this trap, your emotions and how you feel about yourself are heavily influenced by the perceptions of your performance, which can naturally vary from day to day. Thus, one day you feel good about yourself and the next day it erodes due to what you think is a poor performance or practice.

What is self-esteem? Self-esteem is the regard you hold for yourself. All of you have a concept of your person (self-concept). If you like your self-concept (who you think you are), then you have self-esteem. Self-confidence is different. Self-confidence is the belief in your ability to perform a task, it is not a judgment. You can have self-confidence, but not self-esteem, and vice versa. Optimally, you want both high self-confidence in your abilities and self-regard.

Self-esteem should be based on who you are as a person instead of how well you can perform, or how high you go in a career. If you feel like you struggle with self-esteem, have hope. Here are some other ideas about gaining self-esteem:

Assume the Role

When you are practicing or competing, you are in the role of an athlete. You want to be into that role fully when practicing or competing, but when you leave the field, it is time to switch roles into your other parts of your life and let go of all the judgements. Don't superimpose the role of a athlete (or how well you can perform) into other areas of your life.

True Friends

People, who are your true friends and family members, love you for who you are as a person first. They don't judge you based on your performance or change their view of you because of how well you can perform. If they do, they are not your true friends. They like you for what you bring to a relationship as a person, not as an athlete.

Stop the Comparisons

You do yourself harm by making comparisons to other people who you think are better or more talented than you. This only serves to hurt your self-esteem and confidence because you put others on a pedestal and criticize your faults. Everyone is unique. Think about how well you did compared to your last performance instead of making comparisons to others.

Accept Your Body Image

I know many athletes who worry about their body not being the perfect type. No one can be perfect or has the perfect body. Some people are born with more hand-eye coordination, stamina, or balance, but that's what makes you unique. Accepting your body image is the first step to gaining self-esteem. Make the best of what you have by focusing on your strengths and capabilities as an athlete.

Balance in Life

If your life is sport, you are at a greater risk for self-esteem problems because you have "all your eggs in one basket" and can't separate the different roles in your life. Strive to find a balance in your life with your family, school, friends, and other career aspirations. This will help take the pressure off your performance and allow your self-esteem to grow.

Be Your Own Best Coach

You are your own worst critic and your best friend wrapped into one. We are often harder on ourselves than we are on our best friends. What would you say to a best friend they are feeling down? Can you at least be supportive of yourself? Always give yourself words of encouragement and reward after a performance or practice. Pretend you have the most positive coach on your shoulder giving you words of encouragement.