

Chapter 1



A Good Investment

Take a moment to think about who you are. What kinds of things come to mind? Are they positive, negative, neutral, or a combination of the three? If you have low self-esteem, maybe your mind jumped right to your imperfections, inadequacies, and mistakes. Maybe you thought of a few things you like about yourself but immediately questioned if they're good enough. Or maybe you're not even really sure who you are or what you bring to the table. What if instead you thought of yourself the same way you think of someone you admire and respect? You might be thinking, *I'd have to change a lot about myself for that to ever happen*. Well, this book isn't going to help you with that. That's because self-esteem has nothing to do with who you are and everything to do with who you *think* you are. You don't need to change anything about yourself as a person to build your self-esteem; you *do* need to change your mind about yourself, though.

As a psychotherapist, I've made self-esteem my primary specialization because I recognize that self-esteem has an enormous impact on our mental health and overall well-being. Nathaniel Branden, a pioneering expert on self-esteem, described it as "the immune system of consciousness,"¹ which highlights exactly why it's so important. Our immune system's job is to protect us from bacteria, viruses, toxins, and other threats. Even though our immune system isn't perfect and can't guarantee we won't be harmed by these threats, it does a pretty good job at making us more resilient to them. And if we become infected with a virus, our immune system helps us fight it off and return to health.

Our self-esteem functions in a similar way, except the threats aren't viruses and germs. They're anxiety, depression, stress, and other types of mental and emotional distress. Our self-esteem helps to protect us from these things, even if it's not completely bulletproof.

Of course, even though our immune system helps fight off illness, that doesn't mean we never need medical care; similarly, our self-esteem helps us face challenges with confidence, but sometimes we need a little more support than self-esteem alone can offer. Nevertheless, self-esteem plays an important role in helping our minds function properly, and building your self-esteem will surely boost your mind's immune system.

How to Read This Book

This book demands engagement. Simply reading this book without practicing what you learn won't get you very far; you'll only see results if you engage with the content. Each chapter ends with a self-compassion exercise designed to help you practice the concepts and approaches covered in the chapter. Think about them as opportunities to change the way you think about yourself, bit by bit.

Unlike with that mystery novel you just can't put down, I'll actually encourage you to put this book down several times. This is to ensure you take the time to really immerse yourself in the content. Simply imagining yourself completing the self-compassion exercises without actually putting the techniques you learn into practice won't give you the outcome you're looking for. Nothing you'll read in this book will make you like yourself—it's what you *do* with what's in this book that will make the difference.

You may feel excited about the prospect of having a stronger self-esteem and want to rush through the content as quickly as you can, but I encourage you to take your time. This isn't a race to the finish line. Self-esteem can't be rushed anyway; your thoughts about yourself are deep-rooted and won't change quickly. Why rush through the book if your self-esteem can't be rushed? This is the start of a lifelong process of fostering a healthy self-image, not a mission with a finite objective.

Key Terms

Before you start with the hands-on work, let's lay some groundwork by defining a few key terms I refer to throughout this book: *self-concept*, *self-esteem*, *self-worth*, and *self-compassion*. At first, this might seem like a frivolous attempt to split hairs. You might want to skip ahead, but I urge you not to. These terms are interconnected and often get confused for each other. So let's make sure we're on the same page about what these concepts mean.

Believe it or not, psychologists and therapists can't seem to come to a consensus on the definition of *self-esteem*. Definitions vary slightly from source to source. Self-esteem experts have their own slightly unique definition, which shapes their approach to understanding and building it. For you to get the most out of this book (or any book on self-esteem), it's important to understand the nuances between these related concepts.

Self-Concept

Your self-concept is simply your perception of yourself: a description, not an evaluation. It's the answer to the question "Who am I?" For example, a piece of your self-concept might be that you're funny and that you have a procrastination habit. It includes both your strengths and your struggles, but it doesn't get into how you *feel* about these factors. Your self-esteem is where your opinion comes in. Think of your self-concept like a mirror. Instead of reflecting your physical appearance, your self-concept reflects your mind's image of who you are. It represents your awareness of all your personal qualities. If the reflection is fair and realistic, then your self-concept tends to be accurate.

A harsh and relentless inner critic can warp your perception of yourself, reflecting back a distorted and unappealing image, like a fun-house mirror. It minimizes your strengths and allows them to be overshadowed by your limitations. Instead of thinking of yourself as funny, you might think of yourself as *kind of funny, but not as funny as your best friend*, or you might even downplay that characteristic so much that you overlook it entirely. And instead of thinking of yourself as having a procrastination habit, you might think of yourself as *incompetent, lazy, or totally incapable of getting anything done*.

As you can see, your self-concept is subjective. It's not a reflection of who you are, just who you *think* you are. That means you might not see yourself

exactly the same way your friends, family, or coworkers see you. Often the reason people struggle with their self-esteem is because their self-concept is warped. With the right tools, you can modify how you perceive yourself without changing a single thing about who you are as a person. My hope is that after finishing this book, your self-concept will look a lot different than it does now, even though you will have stayed exactly the same.

Self-Concept:

- Your subjective description of yourself
- Value-neutral (not “good” or “bad”)

Self-Esteem

Self-esteem is your personal opinion of yourself, usually determined by how good, likable, and capable you think you are. Unlike your self-concept, your self-esteem is a value judgment. It's your interpretation of your self-concept. This book will help you rethink that interpretation, but it won't change your self-esteem on its own. Addressing self-esteem directly would be like me trying to convince you to *like* the warped reflection you see when you look in the mirror. That will never happen!

What this book can do is help you flatten that mirror so that you can assess your goodness, likability, and capability based on what's really there—not based on the self-criticisms that distort your perception of yourself. It's easier to evaluate yourself when your self-concept is fair and realistic. A flat mirror allows you to see your weaknesses and limitations for what they are. It's not about ignoring your weaknesses in favor of your strengths or constructing an illusion of perfection. In fact, people with healthy self-esteem generally have no problem acknowledging their shortcomings—because they're not threatened by them.

A seemingly intuitive approach to improving your self-esteem is to improve *yourself*. You might think that refining your strengths and overcoming your weaknesses will make you like yourself more. People take this approach quite often, but they usually don't get the results they were hoping for. That's because self-improvement doesn't change the thought patterns that caused you to develop low self-esteem in the first place. If you try to change yourself without flattening your fun-house mirror first (your warped self-concept), you'll struggle to approve of the still-distorted image you continue to see. That's why

the primary goal of this book is to help you flatten your fun-house mirror so you can see yourself as you are.

I know, simply changing the mirror and nothing else isn't a guarantee you'll end up liking yourself. After all, what if you still don't like what you see after you've flattened the mirror? I'll address that in chapter 11, which is about accepting yourself in spite of your limitations. Regardless of the possibility that flattening your mirror won't be quite enough, it has to at least be part of the process. Personal growth won't lead to improved self-esteem when the methods you use to evaluate yourself are unfair. You need to work on that part first, and that's exactly what this book will teach you how to do.

To build your self-esteem, you need to learn how to acknowledge your limitations without allowing them to threaten you. If this sounds impossible, I'm willing to bet you already do it in some regard. Think about your best friend. You love and value them, and you see them in a positive way. Although you're aware of their weaknesses, and you've witnessed them make some (or several) mistakes, you don't let those things overshadow any of their positive qualities. They're still your friend who you hold in high regard, despite their imperfections. This is what self-esteem looks like. It's not about seeing yourself as faultless; it's about taking stock of all factors fairly, seeing yourself for who you are, and being satisfied instead of overly judgmental.

Self-Esteem:

- Your subjective interpretation of your self-concept (how it makes you feel)
- Your perception of how good, likable, and capable you are

Self-Worth

Your self-worth represents your ability to recognize and honor your innate human value. Your worth is innate and inalienable; it exists whether you can see it right now or not. Therefore, your self-worth isn't a measure of *how worthy you think you are* but whether you're willing to *accept* your innate worth as it is.

A common myth about self-worth is that you can improve it the same way you improve your self-esteem—by changing the way you think about yourself. Instead, it's about recognizing that you're worthy simply because you exist, not because of who you are or what you've done. You don't have to be special to be worthy. You don't have to earn your worth either. Your worth is tied to your humanity. It exists because you exist. Even with a warped fun-house mirror, you can (and should) still recognize that the image reflected back at you is a human being. And that human being has innate value.

Self-worth isn't the same as self-importance. You can't compare your innate worth to someone else's. Don't be afraid that recognizing your worth will make you self-centered or arrogant. If you can recognize that your own worth is innate and unearned, then you can recognize the same for others.

Self-esteem and *self-worth* are often used interchangeably, but it's important to understand how they're different. Self-esteem is based on hundreds of ever-changing factors, while self-worth is based on only one thing: your connection to your innate worth (and your innate worth doesn't change). The problem with using *self-esteem* and *self-worth* interchangeably is that it gives mistakes and self-criticism the power to make you feel worthless. And when you feel unworthy, it's hard to grant yourself the compassion you need because you question whether you even deserve it.

Self-Worth:

- Your ability to recognize your innate human value
- Can't be earned, only accepted

Self-Compassion

As the name suggests, *self-compassion* refers to both acts and feelings of compassion toward yourself. When you're self-compassionate, you are fair, gentle, kind, and understanding toward yourself, *even after you've failed at something*. Sometimes self-compassion gets misrepresented or is portrayed in ways that turn a lot of people off. For that reason, let's be clear about what self-compassion is *not*.

Self-compassion is NOT the opposite of self-discipline.

Self-compassion is NOT a “get-out-of-jail-free card” when you’ve done something wrong.

Self-compassion is NOT selfish entitlement.

Self-compassion is NOT disregarding the needs and feelings of others.

Self-compassion is NOT mushy-gushy feelings of self-love.

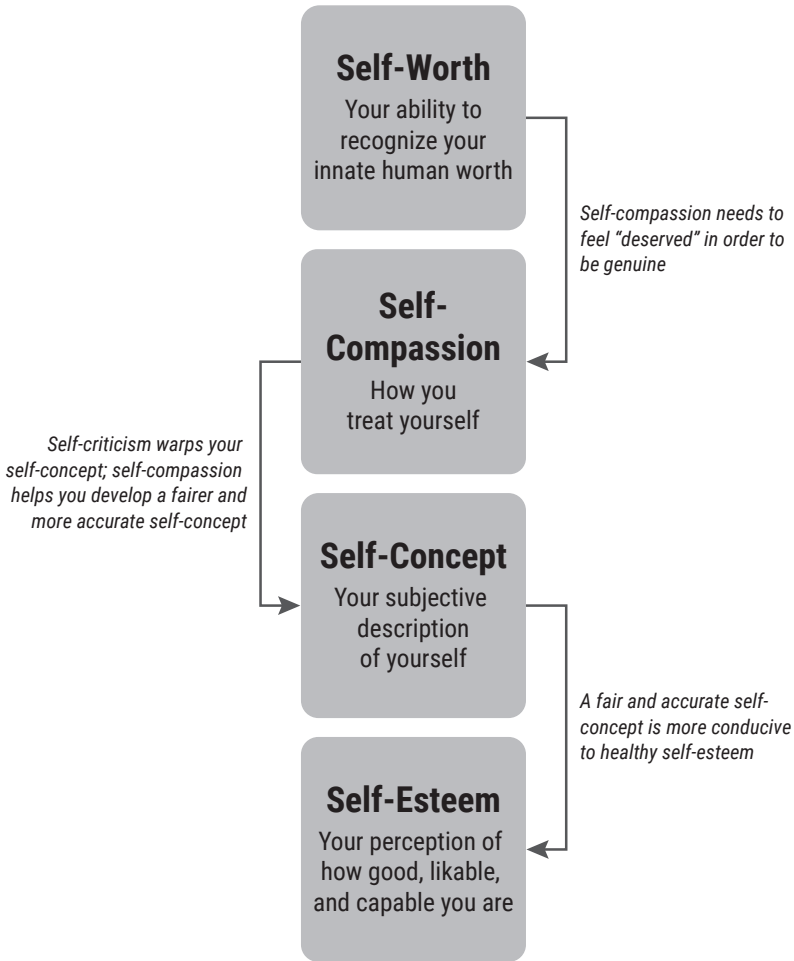
Self-compassion is NOT just for spiritual people.

This book will help you harmonize self-compassion with self-discipline, accountability, humility, and respect for others. These are not mutually exclusive concepts.

Self-compassion has to be built on a foundation of unconditional self-worth. This book will encourage you to be kinder to yourself, but you have to believe that you deserve that kindness first. You *will not* and *cannot* give yourself any more compassion than you think you deserve. Any attempt at self-compassion will feel empty if it doesn’t feel deserved. Building genuine self-esteem involves extending self-compassion, and to do that, you have to believe you’re worthy of that compassion. That’s where we’ll start.

Self-Compassion

- How you treat yourself
- Has to feel “deserved” in order to be genuine



Why Is Self-Worth So Important?

Even though this book is primarily about building a strong self-esteem, it's impossible to do that if we don't include self-worth in the process. Without unconditional self-worth, you won't believe you deserve the self-compassion it takes to flatten your fun-house mirror. There's just no other way to go about it.

Aside from unconditional self-worth being a necessary step in the process of building your self-esteem, self-worth is a crucial element of overall well-being. To understand the difference self-worth can make in your life, compare your life with and without it. First, think about what your life would be like if

you could accept your innate worth without objection. You'd believe that you deserve happiness, so you'd freely seek out things that make you happy. When you're disrespected, you'd never doubt that you deserve better, so you'd reject the mistreatment. You wouldn't be afraid to accept love because you'd know you're worthy of it. Your connection to your innate human value would make your life meaningful and joyful.

Now think about what your life would be like if you denied your innate worth every chance you got. You would think of yourself as completely and totally valueless. Without a shred of self-worth, you'd have no motivation to seek out the things that add value to your life. You wouldn't pursue happiness, respect, or love because you wouldn't believe you're worthy of them. You'd only pursue what you think you deserve (which isn't much).

Simply put, you just can't thrive without self-worth—it's a cornerstone of psychological well-being. In fact, low self-worth is a core feature of depression,² and research shows that a strong sense of self-worth can enhance a person's ability to cope with stress and hardship.³ When you recognize your innate worth, you're able to approach life's challenges with less fear of failure, rejection, or shame. So if you want to work on your self-esteem, you can't ignore your self-worth. In fact, that's exactly where you need to start.

You're Worth Investing In

You're probably reading this book because your self-esteem is low and you want to change that. You want to learn how to see yourself in a more positive light and stop criticizing yourself so much. Sounds great, right? A common misconception about building self-esteem is that it's a feel-good process. Of course, parts of it do feel really good. But there are undoubtedly parts that will challenge you and even make you feel uncomfortable. That's because what building your self-esteem really boils down to is change, and change is hard. Keep in mind, the goal isn't to change *you* but to change how *you think* about yourself. Regardless, mental change is still change, and it's still challenging.

Take a minute to think about why you chose to spend your time and money on this book. Your answer is probably something along the lines of "I want to feel better about myself." But consider what that means. Improving your self-esteem will require some precious resources—time, energy, effort, and perseverance. I refer to them as investments. Now, I'm a therapist, not an investment banker, so I know next to nothing about investing. But what I do know is that nobody ever invests in anything they see no value in. That would

be a foolish investment! So why did you choose to invest your time and money in this book? Could it be that you've decided (probably subconsciously) that you're worth investing in?

I hope you can recognize that the act of reading this book is evidence that something deep inside you recognizes your innate worth. How does that realization make you feel? Many of my clients have described it like a punch in the gut. It may feel like a hard-hitting place to begin, but there's a reason for that. Before you start working on rethinking yourself, you need to break down a paradox that's easy to get trapped in. It's the idea that you have to earn your self-worth through some sort of defining trait or accomplishment.

"If I just lost 15 pounds, I'd feel more worthy."

"If I got a promotion, I'd feel more worthy."

"If I had more friends, I'd feel more worthy."

These are statements I hear all the time. When someone expresses a sentiment like these, it's usually because they don't buy the idea that their worth is innate and inalienable. But there are a few fundamental problems that arise from attempting to earn your self-worth. The first and most obvious problem is that these kinds of statements place conditions on your innate human value. They give your changing circumstances the power to make you feel worthless. And basing your human value on dynamic factors like your weight, salary, or popularity is profoundly unfair. It subjects your self-worth to never-ending volatility, which is detrimental to your well-being. It also reinforces the belief that you're not a whole person until you find some sort of missing piece to fill.

But there's an even bigger problem here. Aside from being completely demoralizing, believing you have to earn your worth is also a trap. First of all, personal change requires effort. And it's really difficult to put effort into such an endeavor if you don't believe you're worth the effort. Making that change will be next to impossible without a sense of innate worth to give you reason to pursue it.

There are only two possible outcomes to this approach:

- You'll never be able to make the change you think you need to earn your self-worth, and as a result, you'll internalize a sense of failure that will sink you deeper into worthlessness.

- Even if you're somehow able to achieve that change, you won't allow yourself to accept it as "good enough," because you never felt deserving of it in the first place.

Either way, you won't end up finding what you were looking for. Self-worth will elude you every single time you try to earn it. The only way to "find" your self-worth is to recognize that your innate worth already exists, no matter where you are in life.

At first, the notion that human worth is innate and universal might seem to go against everything you were taught. But thinking of human worth as something you can measure and compare comes with a lot of baggage. Many of the worst atrocities in history occurred because one group of people thought they were more innately valuable than another group of people. And thinking of yourself as less valuable than those around you is incredibly self-destructive. It's dangerous and frankly impossible to calculate something as complex as a human being's value. Instead, the only sensible approach to self-worth is to recognize that your worth already exists, no matter where you are in life.

It may take some time, but it's important that you separate your innate human value from your individual attributes. Your value cannot be measured by your wealth, popularity, ability, appearance, or any other factor. So before you start the work of building your self-esteem, you need to accept this statement: "I'm worth investing in." You wouldn't be reading this book if you didn't already at least partially believe it.

"I'm worth investing in."

If you're not able to say this statement with at least a little conviction, don't continue just yet. Give it a day or two to work itself out in your brain, then come back. You don't need to say it into a mirror, and you don't need to conjure up any warm, fuzzy feelings. The statement just needs to make sense to you logically. If you want to improve your self-esteem, you must be willing to invest in yourself, and you won't do that if you don't think you're worth the investment. Before you move on to the hard work ahead, you need to believe there's a reason for it.

The most logical reason is simply that *you're worth investing in*.

Now let's get started.

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