

The Epidemic of Low Self-esteem - Lloyd Robertson

"What you said is not what I heard" is true more often than we realize. Everything we know is mediated by our mental processes, Since your experiences and abilities are different from mine how we hear and interpret what is heard will differ. No where is this more true than when the conversation is about our selves.

Human beings are meaning makers. We need to find reasons why things happen including why people say certain things to us. Often, if we do not have a good reason for what happens, we will create a "rationalization", which we will convince ourselves is true.

The result is that what "they" say is processed thru a series of mental filters based on our past experience and learning. If what is said contradicts our established understandings, then our choice usually is to not believe what is said.

A friend of mine once decided to tackle the problem of poor self- concept among students at a Regina high school. He had been given a "slow" class for his teaching internship and he knew that students who did not believe that they could do well, academically, most often did not try very hard. Jim, who was a social studies teacher, decided that his students would all get good marks on their first test. He reported that the students " beamed" when they received those marks. But instead of inspiring them to greater effort their production sank to zero.

Jim thought he would improve the students' academic self esteem by showing them they could get good marks. He believed that the students would then be motivated to try harder. These students, however, refused to change their established understandings about their own abilities. Instead, they decided Jim was a "soft touch" and that they did not have to work at all to "scrape by" with a pass, which is what they had always done.

Strange as it may seem, people will fight just as hard to protect a negative view of themselves as a positive one. Positive information has a hard time surviving the filters of a person with poor self-esteem. A person paying a compliment may be seen as being "sarcastic", "manipulative", or "dishonest". As a result the message does not get thru. This is one of the reasons why addictions, eating disorders, depression, conduct disorder, and other conditions that are often related to poor self esteem are so difficult to treat.

Once low self-esteem has become a core belief about ourselves then change can happen only in small steps such as recording and reviewing successes and by finding new ways to view "failure". Most often this is part of a counselling process. I have found that most of the people I have helped, as a psychologist, have been inflicted with poor self-esteem. Where has this epidemic come from?

There is one group of people who have not yet developed the ability to filter out negative messages. Young children are keen observers of what goes on around them but they are not very good at "meaning making". They tend to believe in magic and that "everything" is their fault or

"nothing" is their fault. Given enough negative messages they will be prepared to believe that they are just plain "bad" or "dumb". In a sense, they are what we tell them.

We, as parents and teachers, tend to notice children who are doing something wrong. We tend to comment on the negative and ignore the positive. We would do well to reverse the ratio. Let's find at least three positive things we can say to our children for every correction we make.