



A 7-Day Challenge to Better Self-Esteem

Humans are wired to be competitive – but it’s rare that any of us stops to explore the nature of our competitive side or to put our ambition-driven culture in a larger context. Instead, we simply do things like compare our vacation photos to the people we follow on Instagram, or push ourselves at the gym as we watch those around us run faster and work harder.

But the reality is that our competitive nature stems from a survival mechanism. It is simply a part of the doctrine of natural selection: we want to push ourselves to do better than those around us in order to survive!

I bring all of this up because things like competition and jealousy can hurt our self-esteem – the term psychologists used to refer to one’s feelings of self-worth. This is especially true if our constant impulse to compare ourselves to others goes unchecked, if we take our feelings of inadequacy as truth rather than as what they are: *feelings*.

To start, let me ask you this: Do you ever compare yourself to others and feel like you’re not good enough? Do you ever find yourself simply believing you’re not worthy of happiness?

If so, you’re not alone. There are many causes for low self-esteem, which can include childhood loss, abuse, neglect, rejection, as well as parental overindulgence and overprotectiveness. These experiences can cause us to internalize feelings of worthlessness, guilt, shame and beyond. But the key to finding emotional freedom is recognizing that we can choose to identify with these past stories – or to merely recognize them, and then let them go.

Regardless of the specific experiences that contributed to any current self-esteem issues you’re having, there is only one true way to heal – and that is to cultivate a more positive relationship with yourself, and specifically with your inner critic.

Everyone has an inner voice. But those who suffer from low self-esteem tend to have a pathological relationship with this voice, as it judges, criticizes and blames them on a regular basis. Research has shown that one of the essential differences between individuals with low self-esteem and those with higher self-esteem is that the former group focuses on not making mistakes, while the latter are more resilient and focused on personal growth. It makes sense: if your inner critic is constantly making you feel weak, incompetent, and stupid, you will become fixated on fears of failure, rather than on learning from your experiences in the present moment.

How you think dictates how you feel, and most of us don't realize it but we can train our thoughts to let go of detrimental beliefs about ourselves that are holding us back. That's why I've created this week-long Self-Esteem Challenge.

To start the challenge, you'll need to wear an elastic band around your wrist and snap it as instructed below. You don't have to snap hard; the purpose is not punishment but simply to help you gain awareness of your pathological self-talk.

Day 1: Commit to the challenge.

Set your intention to develop a positive relationship with yourself. Write your seven-day commitment on three sticky notes and put them in places you will see. Remind yourself of your commitment at least 10 times today.

Day 2: Observe your inner critic.

In order to break any bad habit, you must first be highly aware of it – what triggers it, what exacerbates it, and so on. And since your inner voice is with you all the time, it has become very familiar – which makes this step a little bit tricky.

Today, your job will be to cultivate an acute awareness of the workings of your inner critic. Pretend that you are watching a movie, but rather than playing in the theater, this movie is playing in your mind. The star of this movie is your inner critic – that voice who likes to torment you by judging, criticizing and making up stories. Anytime you notice the critic, simply snap the elastic band.

Day 3: Challenge your inner critic.

Instead of getting hooked into the drama of your own mental movies, start challenging your inner critic. This step will help expand your perspective and clue you into the infinite alternatives for how your mind could spend its energy. Any time you notice a negative or otherwise debilitating thought, snap the elastic band and ask yourself: What if I didn't believe this thought?

Day 4: Choose better thoughts.

Thinking is an automatic process, like breathing and digesting. So, if you feel you can't control whether or not you think, you're not alone, as no one can stop thoughts. What we all can learn to do is choose the thoughts we focus on more skillfully. Every time you notice the critic today, snap the elastic band and ask yourself: Would I say this to my best friend?

If the answer is no, redirect your thoughts to something you *would* say. Treating yourself like your own best friend will positively alter your life in ways you cannot imagine.

Day 5: Practice being kind to others as you cultivate friendship with yourself.

You might be kind to others when they are in front of you, but do you gossip, blame and judge them behind their backs, or in your mind?

The truth is that kindness, toward ourselves and toward others, will flourish when we realize our fundamental connectedness. If you are treating others unkindly, even if it's in your mind, you will not be setting yourself up to be gentler with yourself.

The next time you catch the critic picking on others, snap the elastic band and say something productive about that person. You will soon start to see how more positive thoughts towards others creates a more loving internal environment for you.

Day 6: Keep yourself in check.

Your inner voice can be relentless. It is used to having all of your attention and so it will fight to keep it. As a result, the critic may become louder and stronger for a while. Instead of giving in, snap the elastic band when you notice it and remind yourself that:

- The critic has no power unless you believe it.
- You don't have to listen to it.
- You are not a helpless victim to your inner critic.

Day 7: Heal your inner child.

In every adult there is a child within, and no matter how old you get, this inner child needs to be healed. If you choose to continue carrying around the old stories and hurts from the past, they will keep showing up in in different ways in your life because you will be perceiving and interpreting the world through the eyes of the unhealed child within. Find a coach or counsellor who can help you reclaim your true self and your self-worth.

Any time you catch yourself allowing your inner critic to undermine your self-esteem, snap the elastic band and ask yourself: Do I want to feel good or bad today? Remind yourself that you have the power more than anyone or anything else, and choosing to boost your sense of self-worth is ultimate a choice, YOUR choice.

About the Author:

Lise Leblanc is a Registered Psychotherapist with a Bachelor's Degree in Psychology and a Masters in Educational Leadership, along with several clinical, mediation and leadership courses/certifications. For the past twenty years, she has worked in therapeutic, educational, leadership, and coaching roles.

