CHAPTER 11

UNDERSTANDING THE INNER NATURE OF LOW SELF-ESTEEM

UNCERTAIN, FRAGILE, PROTECTIVE, AND CONFLICTED

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In recent decades, psychologists have offered many speculations and hypotheses about people with low self-esteem. Perhaps they hate themselves. Perhaps they seek to distort things in a negative, pessimistic direction. Perhaps they are indifferent to praise and popularity. Perhaps they lack some key drive to succeed or to think well of themselves. Perhaps they are irrational and self-destructive. In the last two decades, however, a growing body of enlightening data on low self-esteem has allowed psychologists to move beyond the earlier, more speculative theories. One can begin to sort the welter of competing theories into a coherent set of empirically grounded conclusions.

It is clear that there is no one key, no single answer to the puzzle of low self-esteem. But taken together, the various contributions covered in this book may finally allow us to understand the person with low self-esteem better. Let me summarize some main themes emerging from the previous chapters.

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THE NEED FOR SELF-WORTH

It is apparent that the vast majority of people generally want to think well of themselves. Intuitively, this is easy to accept; favorable views of self are associated with happiness, pleasant emotional states, and other positive subjective results. People with low self-esteem do not lack the desire for self-worth. Thus, to understand low self-esteem, one should not think in terms of the absence of needs, but rather in terms of unfulfilled needs and possibly conflicting, competing needs.

The need for self-worth is indicated in many of the chapters. Spencer, Josephs, and Steele (Chapter 2) make self-affirmation the cornerstone of their argument (following Steele, 1988) and contend that this need for self-worth, which they label *self-integrity,* is fundamental and widespread. They note that self-affirming gestures are particularly relevant to coping with threats. Blaine and Crocker (Chapter 4) explore the variety of strategies people use to nurture a positive sense of self, both before and after threatening events. Tice (Chapter 3) argues that people desire to protect their self-esteem against loss and to enhance their positive views of themselves when possible. Pelham (Chapter 10) points out convincingly that even depressed people manage to find something about themselves to be proud of, and they are quite jealously protective of that basis for self-worth.

What distinguishes people with low self-esteem is not the size of their desire to think well of themselves, but rather some interference with fulfilling that desire. Their basis for thinking well of themselves may be smaller than other people's, in the sense that they have fewer reasons to regard themselves as superior beings. This shortage makes them more vulnerable to threats insofar as when events impugn their self-worth, they are less able to point to alternative positive qualities they have (Spencer et al., Chapter 2). Because of this fragility, they need to emphasize protection rather than enhancement of self-worth (Tice, Chapter 3). This weakness, which Spencer et al. portray as a deficiency in resources, may be an important reason that people with very low self-esteem will become jealously defensive of their few positive attributes: They cannot afford to have these undermined, because they depend heavily on these for their sense of self-worth.

The only view that even begins to suggest any exceptions to the basic, universal need for self-worth is the one advanced by De La Ronde and Swann (Chapter 8), who contend that the need to confirm one's view of oneself is a powerful motive, especially for cognitive functioning. Still, even their position does not suggest that people with low self-esteem desire to change for the worse. Their data suggest that people

are more likely to believe criticism than praise where their faults are concerned, even though they may have initial reactions that emotionally prefer the praise. Ultimately, according to De La Ronde and Swann, people with low self-esteem therefore desire neither highly positive nor strongly negative feedback. They do not want to change their self-conceptions in either a positive or a negative direction.

Combining these various views, it seems safe to conclude that people with low self-esteem hate to experience anything that threatens to lower their self-esteem further. They want to think well of themselves, and most seem to find some basis for doing so, although this basis tends to be more fragile and limited than what someone with high self-esteem might have. Events that threaten to undermine self-worth may therefore bring out defensive and protective reactions among people with low self-esteem. The view of low self-esteem as a weakly or inadequately satisfied desire for self-worth is an important part of the key to understanding such people.

SELF-CONCEPTIONS ACCOMPANYING LOW SELF-ESTEEM

The essence of self-esteem is how a person regards himself or herself, and it is therefore extremely valuable to understand the self-conceptions of people with low self-esteem. Two key insights into the nature of these self-conceptions have been articulated and elaborated in this book. They complement each other and form a vital foundation for understanding the person with low self-esteem.

The first insight is articulated in detail by Campbell and Lavallee (Chapter 1; based on Campbell, 1990; see also Baumgardner, 1990): People with low self-esteem seem to know less about themselves than people with high self-esteem. Campbell and Lavallee have labeled this as *self-concept confusion,* which takes a variety of forms. People with low self-esteem have self-conceptions that change and fluctuate from day to day. Their views about themselves may contain contradictions and inconsistencies, and they simply have fewer definite beliefs about what they are like than other people have. In short, what they know about themselves tends to be uncertain, incoherent, and in flux.

This deficient self-knowledge is a powerful key to understanding a great deal about people with low self-esteem. Even seemingly paradoxical patterns, such as the occasional apparent preference for failure or criticism (as described by De La Ronde and Swann in Chapter 8), may be linked to self-knowledge. De La Ronde and Swann contend that people mainly seek to confirm their most firmly held self-conceptions (see also

Swann, 1987), and that many people with low self-esteem will have relatively few such firm self-conceptions. A motive to maintain consistency with one's firmly held self-conceptions would therefore be largely irrelevant to people with low self-esteem, although in a few well-selected domains such consistency effects may be quite powerful and may extend to a rejection of praise or other overly positive feedback.

The self-knowledge deficiency is also relevant to understanding how people with low self-esteem fare in the large and small events that fill everyday life. Heatherton and Ambady (Chapter 7) analyze how people manage their lives: People must make appropriate commitments and then live up to them. Making appropriate commitments and undertaking the most promising projects depends, however, on self-knowledge. People with high self-esteem can draw on their extensive self-knowledge to manage their lives effectively. Lacking such firm and clear self-knowledge, people with low self-esteem may fall into various problems of setting inappropriate goals, starting things that are too difficult to achieve or too easy to be worth achieving, and so forth.

The second insight into low self-esteem is spelled out by Tice (Chapter 3; see also Baumeister, Tice, & Hutton, 1989). By and large, low self-esteem is low only in a *relative* sense; in an absolute sense, it is medium. To be sure, there may be occasional people who hate themselves or think they are utterly worthless (although Pelham in Chapter 10 questions even that), but if so these are probably a small minority marked by pathological extremes. The vast majority of people who end up classified as low in self-esteem do not regard themselves as hopeless, worthless individuals, as contemptible rejects, as wicked, morally despicable villains, or as chronic losers. They describe themselves instead in neutral, intermediate, noncommittal terms.

Low self-esteem can thus be understood more as the absence of positive views of self rather than as the presence of negative views. Consistent with this, Blaine and Crocker (Chapter 4) have discussed the relative lack of self-aggrandizing patterns or biases exhibited by people with low self-esteem. Whereas many people systematically interpret events in ways that favor themselves, people with low self-esteem show an absence of such self-serving biases. It would be wrong to suggest that people with low self-esteem twist things in the opposite direction or bias their thoughts to give themselves less credit or more blame than they deserve. Rather, what distinguishes them is the absence of positive, self-serving patterns.

Pelham (Chapter 10) indicates that even the self-views of severely depressed people are not low or negative in an absolute sense. Ironically, depressed people hold "best" views of themselves as being supe-

rior to 86% of other people on selected dimensions. These people clearly do not despise themselves. It is the lack of more positive views about the self, rather than the definite assertion of negative views, that characterizes people with low self-esteem.

These two key insights are, of course, highly compatible, as Campbell and Lavallee suggest. A confused, incoherent pattern of self-knowledge could easily lead to a globally intermediate, neutral self-evaluation.

ROADBLOCKS TO SELF-LOVE

The central dilemma of low self-esteem, then, is what prevents these people from holding the positive views of themselves that others have. The key factor that needs explaining is not the presence of self-hate (for self-hate is not generally there), but rather the absence of self-love. As Tice indicates, people with low self-esteem generally evaluate themselves in neutral, intermediate ways. Or, as articulated in the chapters by Campbell and Lavallee and by Spencer et al., what afflicts people with low self-esteem is a relative lack of positive things to assert and believe about themselves, rather than a firm belief in one's own bad qualities. Understanding what keeps low self-esteem low is not, therefore, a matter of explaining how they became convinced that they are bad, but rather of analyzing what keeps them from adopting a broadly positive view of self.

Harter in Chapter 5 points out some important factors that restrain people from coming to regard themselves in more favorable terms. By and large, nobody is good at everything, and so each person has good points and bad points. Many people maintain high self-esteem by convincing themselves that the things they are good at are important, widely valued ones, whereas their weaknesses are confined to relatively trivial domains. But there are substantial limits on what one can come to regard as trivial, because society places considerable value on certain attributes. People get stuck at a low level of self-esteem when they are unable to minimize the importance of their weaknesses. Physical attractiveness, charm and sex appeal, charisma, and intelligence are generally recognized as important traits, and people who lack these qualities may not be able to dismiss them as unimportant, unlike people who may be tone-deaf or poor at swimming or inept at video games. Although many researchers have emphasized intellectual and social aspects of self-esteem, Harter points out that physical attractiveness is a strong and stable predictor of self-esteem, partly because the culture emphasizes

the importance of physical attractiveness (perhaps especially for females). If you are ugly, it will be harder to think very highly of yourself.

Social forces operate in another way to keep self-esteem low in some people, according to Harter: People compare themselves with others, and these comparisons inevitably reveal many of one's shortcomings. Thus, in principle one might be able to discount one's shortcomings as long as one is improving, but at certain stages in life (especially childhood) everyone else is improving, too, and so improving in an absolute sense may still leave one at the bottom of the heap. Because so many abilities are evaluated solely in comparison with others, people may find it hard to persuade themselves that they are better than they are. Too often, it will be obvious that others are superior to oneself.

Blaine and Crocker (Chapter 4) offer a broad context for this inability to dismiss one's weaknesses. Normally, people support favorable views of themselves by using a variety of biases and defenses. Taylor and Brown (1988) proposed that these *positive illusions* are an integral part of mental health and adjustment. People with low self-esteem seem to lack these biases and distortions to some extent.

Inevitably, circular relationships develop. If one's view of self is not all that favorable, then one may shy away from forming large positive illusions about oneself, because these are vulnerable to being disconfirmed (Blaine & Crocker, Chapter 4). To convince oneself erroneously that one will accomplish great things is to invite disappointment. People with low self-esteem prefer to see themselves in a fairly accurate and unbiased fashion, which deters them from distorting daily feedback so as to form great, exaggerated expectations about the future. In this way, they can protect themselves against loss and disappointment, but they sacrifice the chance to inflate self-esteem through such biases and distortions.

Another circular pattern was suggested by Harter in Chapter 5. Low self-esteem is often based on an accurate appraisal of one's abilities (or lack thereof). If one can see one's own shortcomings, others may see them, too, and in many cases social rejection may ensue. As Harter has persuasively explained, self-esteem is based mainly on those two pillars, namely, competence and social acceptance. If you see yourself as lacking competence and as rejected by others, the combination is likely to be a very persuasive basis for keeping self-esteem low.

As these people gradually become convinced of their own shortcomings and weaknesses, these firm self-conceptions generate their own consistency pressures. De La Ronde and Swann (Chapter 8) review evidence that people resist changing their views of themselves after these are firmly in place, and this applies even to unflattering views.

Once low self-esteem is established, people will tend to be skeptical of highly flattering messages, will distrust others who may hold excessively favorable opinions of them, and will tend to fit new information into these firm and stable self-conceptions. Low self-esteem can thus become self-perpetuating.

Further self-perpetuating patterns were suggested by Heatherton and Ambady (Chapter 7). Poor self-regulation strategies deprive one of chances for successful experiences that might have raised self-esteem. Because of their poor self-knowledge and resultant inability to make appropriate commitments, and perhaps because of their broadly self-protective orientation, people with low self-esteem may skip some undertakings that might have brought them important success experiences. Meanwhile, the commitments they do make will sometimes be excessive and unrealistic, leading to the vicious spiraling effect described by Heatherton and Ambady in terms of dieting. They set goals that are too high, and so they fail, and so their self-esteem remains low or becomes even lower.

EMOTIONAL PATTERNS

Thus far I have focused on beliefs about the self, interpretations of the world, and other cognitive patterns associated with low self-esteem, but a number of chapters have shed light on emotional patterns as well. Self-esteem goes beyond cognition to involve motivation and emotion. Campbell and Lavallee (Chapter 1) reviewed evidence linking low self-esteem to a high frequency of mood swings. The deficit in self-knowledge results in a surplus of emotion. The reason, presumably, is that people with low self-esteem are more at the mercy of situations and events because they lack a firm sense of who they are. When situations and events go against what might be expected or desired, emotional responses are intensified. A firm and positive sense of self enables one to navigate life on an even keel. People with low self-esteem, who lack this firm and positive self-knowledge, experience more of an emotional roller coaster in their daily lives.

Harter's data in Chapter 5 are consistent with the picture of emotionality among people with low self-esteem. In particular, Harter says that low self-esteem is typically accompanied by a relatively high frequency of emotional distress and negative affect. Moreover, emotion is not merely linked to one's stable, ongoing level of self-esteem. Kernis's ground-breaking work on stability of self-esteem, as reviewed by him in Chapter 9, makes clear that emotion is strongly linked to temporary

changes and fluctuations in self-esteem (see also Harris & Snyder, 1986). He has shown convincingly that some people have stable levels of self-esteem, whereas others show fluctuations. For the latter, emotions follow; when self-esteem rises, people experience good moods and pleasant emotions. Losing self-esteem is linked to anger, hostility, and probably a host of other bad emotions.

If low self-esteem is marked by a surplus of bad emotions, it may also bring some special ways of experiencing positive emotion. An especially interesting one is discussed by Pelham in Chapter 10. As already noted, Pelham points out that depressed people (who have low self-esteem) also have a few strongly positive views about themselves, about which they are very protective. One form this protectiveness takes is that they derogate others on these dimensions. Derogating others on things about which one cherishes special images of one's own competence is something that everyone does, but only these depressed, low self-esteem individuals appear to derive strong emotional benefits from doing so. It makes them feel good to describe others in unflattering terms, at least on dimensions where they pride themselves on being superior.

INTERPERSONAL PATTERNS

Low self-esteem is also marked by some distinctive patterns of interpersonal behavior. To a substantial extent, these can be understood on the basis of the cognitive and emotional patterns already covered, but they are of considerable interest in their own right and can lead to social consequences that in turn affect self-esteem.

Tice in Chapter 3 articulates one broad and fundamental pattern. In contrast to people with high self-esteem, who are generally trying to make a good impression on others and to boost their reputations, people with low self-esteem are cautious and tentative in their self-presentations. Their first goal is to avoid any loss of self-esteem. This self-protective orientation can be understood in the context of the analysis by Spencer et al. (Chapter 2) of self-esteem as a personal resource. When resources are scarce, people want to preserve them and avoid taking any chances with them. Campbell and Lavallee's exposition of self-concept confusion (Chapter 1) is also relevant. When people are not sure about themselves, it is prudent to be cautious in one's self-presentational claims and interpersonal acts.

Thus, people with low self-esteem do desire social approval and acceptance, and they want to think well of themselves, but they are

reluctant to approach social interactions with an aggressive, self-aggrandizing attitude. Bold, confident claims about one's own fine qualities generate pressures and anxieties to live up to inflated images of oneself, along with risks of disconfirmation, failure, and disappointment. People with low self-esteem eschew such claims because these might lead ultimately to further losses in esteem.

The reluctance to seek self-enhancement in an open, direct manner does not mean, however, that people with low self-esteem entirely abandon the project of boosting their self-worth through interpersonal contacts. They are merely forced to use safer, more roundabout means. Brown in Chapter 6 highlights some of the *indirect* methods of self-enhancement that people with low self-esteem prefer. Instead of claiming to be personally superior to others, they claim that the group to which they belong is superior. (In fact, they are careful to boost their group's esteem in ways that will not obviously implicate themselves or put pressure on themselves to maintain this superiority.) Superiority, after all, does not have to be achieved individually; through most of history, people have derived the better part of their self-worth from belonging to esteemed groups (Baumeister, 1991a). Brown's research indicates that the collective path to self-worth is still preferred by some people, particularly those with low self-esteem.

Pelham's research with depressed people suggests another indirect approach. Rather than exaggerating one's own good qualities, the depressed person demeans and derogates other people on selected dimensions. One can thus achieve superiority relative to others without making excessive claims about oneself. Rather than saying, "I'm wonderful," people say "I'm so-so, but you and he and she are terrible." Baumgardner, Kaufman, and Levy (1989) have likewise suggested that people with low self-esteem use derogation of others to shore up their sense of self-worth, rather than using directly self-enhancing strategies. Spencer et al. (Chapter 2) have also provided useful evidence of the downward comparison patterns favored by people with low self-esteem. In these studies, subjects who were low in self-esteem sought out others who were performing poorly or making a poor impression, because comparing oneself with such people is reassuring.

Confidence is, of course, an asset in social situations, and people with low self-esteem may suffer from a lack of confidence in approaching others or initiating social interactions. I have already touched on Harter's discussion in Chapter 5 of the social problems that accompany and reinforce low self-esteem. Physical attractiveness and general competence in life are important foundations of self-esteem, and many children and adults have low self-esteem partly because they know, cor-

rectly, that they are deficient in these areas. These deficiencies—that is, unattractiveness and incompetence—increase the likelihood of social rejection. Because social rejection is extremely painful, causing acute anxiety, people with low self-esteem may gravitate toward shyness and reticence. After all, a few painful or embarrassing rejections may make one reluctant to continue approaching others or initiating conversations. But because good interpersonal relationships are important foundations for high self-esteem (as well as for emotional health and adjustment), these people therefore may remain low in self-esteem.

CHANGING LEVELS OF SELF-ESTEEM

Researchers have generally found self-esteem to be relatively stable. If one measures self-esteem on two separate occasions, correlations are quite high; in my own research, for example, I found a test-retest correlation of .904 on self-esteem as measured by Fleming and Courtney's version (1984) of the Janis and Field (1959) scale (Baumeister, 1991c). Still, this general stability should not be overestimated. Self-esteem levels do fluctuate from day to day, and there is significant evidence of long-term change in level of self-esteem, particularly at certain periods in life.

Heatherton and Ambady, in Chapter 7, summarize some of their work measuring state self-esteem. It appears that there is a substantial correlation between state and trait self-esteem. The implication is that each person's self-esteem fluctuates around a baseline level, and it returns to that baseline after the short-term effects of daily events wear off. Receiving a compliment, an unexpected exam grade, or a romantic rejection will alter one's view of oneself temporarily, but after a while it returns to where it was initially. Yet the temporary states of self-esteem are of interest in their own right, and one may expect research on them to build, especially now that a reliable measure of state self-esteem has been furnished (Heatherton & Polivy, 1991).

Another approach to examining fluctuations in self-esteem has been taken by Kernis and his colleagues, and this approach has yielded interesting and exciting findings (see Chapter 9). Kernis's approach begins with the insight that certain people fluctuate more than others, and so his work compares people with stable self-esteem against people whose self-esteem is prone to fluctuating. Depression, for example, has been linked to low self-esteem in many studies, but Kernis finds that only people with *stable* low self-esteem exhibit depression. Low but fluctuating self-esteem is not associated with depression. By the same token,

only people with stable low self-esteem tend to overgeneralize the implications of failure. A setback or disappointment leads them to believe they are helpless and incompetent, and that the future will be full of more such failures. In contrast, people with unstable low self-esteem respond to failure by making excuses and attempting to minimize the implications.

The core of the distinction between stable and unstable low self-esteem is the chance to feel very positively about oneself. Unstable low self-esteem contains grounds for hope and for struggle, because one does occasionally enjoy a very positive view of oneself. In contrast, stable low self-esteem means that the person rarely or never experiences moments of high self-esteem.

Of course, high self-esteem can also be either stable or unstable, and Kernis shows that there are important differences at that level, too. The essence, again, is that people who are high and stable simply do not feel vulnerable to losing self-esteem, whereas the person with unstable high self-esteem knows what it is like to feel very badly about oneself. The threat of a severe drop into low self-esteem is familiar and palpable to the people with unstable high self-esteem, whereas such a threat does not touch the individual with stable high self-esteem.

Thus, the individual with unstable high self-esteem is of particular interest, even to the study of low self-esteem, because this individual sees low self-esteem as a familiar and threatening—but still basically uncharacteristic—state. The responses of these people confirm the undesirable nature of low self-esteem, for they seem driven to defend themselves against these low moments and against anything that might provoke a loss of esteem. According to Kernis, their defenses go well beyond the interpretive biases and other patterns described by Blaine and Crocker in Chapter 4. Indeed, unstable high self-esteem is associated with unusually high levels of aggression and hostility. Kernis's work thus furnishes an essential insight into the psychology of the bully. Most likely, the bully is someone with an insecure but inflated view of self. Feeling that he or she may lose esteem at any moment, the bully responds zealously, even violently, to potential threats. Bullies may seem egotistical, but they are very different from the secure person with high self-esteem, who does not feel vulnerable to threat or loss. Entering a state of low self-esteem is thus apparently an extremely aversive experience, and people who are familiar with that threat show all manner of defensive reactions designed to avoid the experience.

Not all changes in self-esteem, however, involve temporary states. In principle, it should be possible for self-esteem to show a permanent change in either direction. Harter (Chapter 5) provides important evi-

dence that substantial, long-term self-esteem change does occur, at least among young people. She finds, though, that these changes are far more likely to occur around major transition points in life than during periods of external stability. Major changes in social roles, statuses, relationships, and identities are crucial points for self-esteem: People reassess who they are when they begin or leave a job, graduate from school, enter or leave a marriage, and so forth.

Still, it is reassuring that self-esteem can change substantially, regardless of what circumstances bring it about. This important part of personality is not fixed in concrete for one's whole life. Significant changes in one's life structure may often be accompanied by significant changes in how one regards oneself.

RESPONDING TO IMAGE THREATS

Many of the themes covered in this work converge in the issue of how people respond to threats to self-esteem. It is undeniably true that daily life contains many events that have the potential to deflate self-esteem, to prove that we are not as good as we like to think we are, to embarrass and humiliate us. Dealing with these threats is an important key to adjustment and happiness. People with low self-esteem do not deal with these threats in the same ways that people with high self-esteem do; indeed, their ways of dealing with these threats almost certainly contribute to making their self-esteem low.

Several perspectives agree that people with low self-esteem are more vulnerable to these threats than people with high self-esteem. For one thing, people with low self-esteem do not have firm, strongly held views about themselves, and this uncertainty of self-knolwedge leaves them at the mercy of external sources of feedback and information (Campbell & Lavallee, Chapter 1). (Kernis in Chapter 9 adds that instability of self-esteem, in which one fluctuates among high and low levels of self-esteem, also involves a lack of firm self-knowledge and a vulnerability to external evaluation.) People with secure, high self-esteem can dismiss or ignore criticism because they feel certain that it does not describe them correctly. But a person with low self-esteem, lacking these firm convictions about the self, may pause to think that the criticism might be correct and accurate.

Thus, a lack of secure certainty in one's good qualities increases one's fragility, that is, one's vulnerability to threat. Spencer et al. (Chapter 2) elaborate another aspect of this vulnerability. When events threaten self-esteem in one realm, some people can simply turn their attention

to arenas where they excel. A person with high self-esteem presumably has plenty of strengths, capabilities, and virtues (at least in his or her own opinion), and so a threat to any one of them will not seriously damage the overall positivity of self-regard. But a person with low self-esteem does not have all these alternative supports for self-worth. There are fewer alternative strengths or virtues to ruminate about when consoling oneself for a particular failure or setback. Threats are therefore more devastating to the person with low self-esteem.

This may well be why, as Pelham explains in Chapter 10, people with low self-esteem are particularly jealous and defensive about their good points. These people certainly do think they have some exceptionally positive qualities, but they cannot afford to have these jeopardized or undermined, because they do not have others to fall back on. More generally, it seems likely that the fragility and vulnerability associated with low self-esteem persons may be an important reason for the defensive, cautious, self-protective orientation that they show.

If people with low self-esteem are more defensive, however, then what is the basis for the "breakdown in motivation to enhance the self" discussed by Blaine and Crocker in Chapter 4? Why do these people seem to lack various interpretive and self-serving biases? On the face of it, this conclusion seems to run contrary to the findings of an important body of research. Blaine and Crocker provide a valuable insight into this seeming contradiction by stressing the importance of distinguishing between how people act before versus after the threat. The lack of defensive reactions by people with low self-esteem is more apparent than real. In truth, people with low self-esteem seem quite aware of their vulnerability, and so they begin dealing with threats before these arise. (In Tice's terms, they develop a self-protective approach to events in general.)

People with high self-esteem may exhibit dramatic defensive responses after a failure, but these are exaggerated because such individuals normally do not expect to fail and normally manage their lives to cultivate and maximize success. To them, failure is a rare, unforeseen, and even shocking outcome, and so they exhibit drastic responses. To persons with low self-esteem, in contrast, failure is a familiar, ongoing concern, neither rare nor unforeseen. Blaine and Crocker emphasize that these individuals start preparing for possible failure (and other threats) long in advance, and so when these threats do arise, they can be taken more in stride. The blow has been softened in advance.

Another factor pointed out by Blaine and Crocker is that identical failures may provoke more defensive after-the-fact responses from high than low self-esteem persons because the responses are more discrepant

with how the people regard themselves. Simply put, a C on an exam is less discrepant to an acknowledged mediocre student than to someone who fancies himself or herself to be a genius. People with high self-esteem may show drastic responses to such a setback because they need to rebuild their views of themselves back to an extremely high level. But people with low self-esteem may not even want to rebuild their self-images to that extreme, because they anticipate further problems or disappointments in the future.

Still, it is apparent that people with low self-esteem do use some defenses and strategies to boost their self-regard. One of these is downward social comparison, discussed in Chapters 2 and 10. When events imply that you are less than excellent, it may be easier to convince yourself that other people also fall short than to convince yourself that you are excellent after all. And if other people also fall short, then it is not so bad for you to fall short, too. For this reason, downward social comparisons seem to have a strong appeal to people with low self-esteem.

Thus, people with low self-esteem do not seem to respond to threats by trying to bounce back to a highly favorable opinion of themselves. Rather, they seem to stay where they are and seek out company. Or, better yet, they like to find others who have done even worse than they have.

But why don't people with low self-esteem want to build themselves up to a high level after some threatening event? As Blaine and Crocker suggest, they are well aware that an overly favorable view of self is vulnerable to future disconfirmations. This danger is not merely an abstract exercise, as revealed in some of the fascinating findings covered by Brown in Chapter 6. When unexpectedly favorable things happen, people with low self-esteem feel bad and actually begin to get sick. In a sense, strongly favorable feedback and positive life events constitute a different sort of "threat" to people with low self-esteem, because these events undermine their views about themselves. People resist change in either direction, especially if an upward change may bring an increased burden of expectations.

GOALS AND MOTIVATIONS

These various insights make it possible to return to one of this book's fundamental questions, namely, the issue of what goals and motivations guide people with low self-esteem. As we have seen, in many

respects their goals and motives are not very different from those of people with high self-esteem; however, they do have some distinctive features.

It is clear, first of all, that people with low self-esteem want to avoid losing esteem. Whether this is described as a general self-protective orientation (Tice, Chapter 3) or a wish to conserve a scarce resource (Spencer et al., Chapter 4), people with low self-esteem are strongly motivated to prevent any further losses. Even the apparent preference for negative feedback that De La Ronde and Swann (Chapter 8) discuss is only a desire for confirmation of their current level of self-esteem, and certainly not any desire to fall even lower.

There are several aspects to the interest shown by people low in self-esteem in hearing about their faults or shortcomings. Both Tice and Spencer et al. have emphasized the desire to remedy deficiencies and shortcomings; these persons want to learn about their faults and flaws so that they can fix them. Spencer et al. report evidence that people with low self-esteem only want to hear about their shortcomings if these can be remedied, and that they avoid hearing about unchangeable faults or inadequacies. By the same token, Kernis (Chapter 9) finds that people with unstable low self-esteem—that is, people who know they can occasionally escape from low self-esteem—defend themselves aggressively against failure and its threatening implications. Taken together, these findings show that people with low self-esteem are oriented toward finding some positive self-worth. They want to avoid threatening events, remedy their shortcomings, and reach a level of adequacy that will enable them to think well of themselves.

There are other signs of an interest in positive self-worth among people low in self-esteem. Pelham (Chapter 10) shows that these people seek out negative feedback about their weaknesses but prefer favorable feedback in connection with the few things they think they are good at. The indirect ego-boosting strategies elucidated by Brown (Chapter 6), Blaine and Crocker (Chapter 4), and others provide further testimony to a general wish for positive self-worth.

Still, low self-esteem individuals find it difficult to think well of themselves, and the risks associated with an overly inflated egotism seem to deter them from pursuing ego-boosting strategies with too much zeal. Blaine and Crocker note that a too-favorable image of self is highly vulnerable to disconfirmation and disappointment, and so a broad tendency toward modest humility is a strategic adaptation designed to avoid such painful letdowns. Brown has detailed how overly positive outcomes can undermine the stable security of the self-concept.

De La Ronde and Swann explain how overly positive feedback can jeopardize one's sense of knowing oneself and can disrupt one's social life and interaction patterns.

Elsewhere, I have analyzed some of the dangers and stresses that attend the maintenance of a highly positive image of self (see Baumeister, 1991b; also 1989). These risks include an increased chance of disconfirmation, vulnerability to attack, a demand for successes to live up to inflated images of oneself, a tendency toward overconfidence and overcommitment, and various interpersonal difficulties. People with low self-esteem seem to have an acute grasp of the risks that accompany such a surfeit of egotism.

Perhaps the best integration of these views is Brown's suggestion in Chapter 6 that low self-esteem is often marked by a motivational conflict. Low self-esteem individuals would like to gain in esteem and develop highly positive views of themselves, but they also may fear and distrust such an inflation of self-regard. For people with high self-esteem, consistency motives and favorability motives agree in furnishing a wish for positive feedback, but for people with low self-esteem, the two sets of motives are in conflict.

Shrauger (1975) concluded that people with low self-esteem favor positive feedback on emotional measures but favor negative feedback on measures of cognition. In other words, they feel better after success or flattery than after failure or criticism, but they are also more skeptical. As several chapters have noted, his hypothesis has continued to receive empirical support (e.g., McFarlin & Blascovich, 1981; Swann, Griffin, Predmore, & Gaines, 1987) and still appears to be valid today. As they go through life, people with low self-esteem are frequently caught in the crossfire between thought and feeling.

An analogy to financial investments is useful in understanding the psychology of low self-esteem. As Tice and Spencer et al. suggest, low self-esteem persons resemble investors with limited financial resources. Such individuals want to avoid risk and preserve their capital. Only after this initial objective is met do they begin to look for gains. Like stocks that offers safe returns, the projects undertaken by people with low self-esteem are likely to be cautious, conservative enterprises with small yields but minimal risks. These people cannot afford to enter a situation that holds a significant possibility of some esteem-threatening outcome, even if there is also a large possibility of some significantly esteem-enhancing outcome. As Heatherton and Ambady (Chapter 7) suggest, this caution will result in substantial differences in the way people with low as opposed to high self-esteem go about managing their affairs. It is important to recognize, however, that both strategies have a rational,

comprehensible core. Both make sense in terms of the resources, prospects, and expectations of the individual.

CONCLUSION

The work covered in this book furnishes, at last, a powerful and multifaceted basis for understanding people with low self-esteem. For decades researchers have been puzzled over what inner states and drives lie behind people who seemingly say bad things about themselves (the operational definition of low self-esteem). Various self-destructive, irrational, and maladaptive mechanisms have been suggested. Many of those speculations can now be laid to rest, as a viable picture has emerged.

Low self-esteem can be understood in terms of confusion or uncertainty in self-knowledge, a cautious and self-protective approach to life, a shortage of positive resources in the self, and a chronic internal conflict. To elaborate: People with low self-esteem lack a clear, consistent, unified understanding of who they are, which leaves them at the mercy of events and changing situations and which makes it difficult for them to manage their affairs optimally. They favor self-protection over self-enhancement, inclining toward low-risk situations and preferring to expose themselves mainly to safe, neutral, noncommittal circumstances, even if this strategy means giving up some opportunities for success and prestige. Having fewer positive beliefs about themselves to fall back on in times of stress or pressure, they feel vulnerable to threatening events and sometimes have difficulty coping with adversity. Positive, flattering events, however, elicit an inner conflict between (a) an emotional desire to gain esteem and (b) a skeptical distrust mixed with a reluctance to accept the risks and pressures of a highly positive image.

Generalizing about large numbers of people is always hazardous, of course, and certainly there may be isolated individuals who combine low self-esteem with irrational, self-destructive, or other pathological signs. Sampling techniques that aggressively seek out extremes of self-regard may indeed find enough pathological individuals to yield unusual results and confirm some of the more unsavory impressions and hypotheses about low self-esteem. For the most part, however, low self-esteem is not marked by those patterns. People with low self-esteem can be well understood as ordinary people who are trying in a fairly sensible, rational fashion to adapt effectively to their circumstances and to make their way through life with a minimum of suffering, distress, and humiliation. In that, of course, they are no different from people with

high self-esteem. They do differ, however, in how present and familiar these risks seem, and hence in how necessary it seems to take these risks into account in making the choices and decisions that mark the course of human life.

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