

The Costs of Seeking Self-Esteem

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Americans are deeply engaged in the pursuit of self-esteem, attempting to satisfy contingencies or criteria for what makes a person worthwhile. In this article, I examine the costs of this pursuit of self-esteem for the self, in terms of competence, relatedness, and mental health, and for others. I hypothesize that external contingencies of self-worth require validation from others and are unreliable as a basis of self-esteem, and hence are associated with greater costs. Data from a longitudinal study of an ethnically diverse sample of 642 college freshman support the view that contingencies of self-worth shape how students spend their time, and the prediction that external contingencies of self-worth, especially appearance, have high costs for stress, aggression, drug and alcohol use, and symptoms of disordered eating.

The pursuit of self-esteem has become a central preoccupation in our society. Self-help books advise us how to achieve high self-esteem, child rearing guides tell us how to raise children with high self-esteem, schools devote aspects of their curriculum to raising children's self-esteem, and most people organize their lives, in part, around seeking out or avoiding activities, situations, and people to protect, maintain, and enhance their self-esteem (Miller, 2001). In this article, I consider the costs of this pursuit. I have four goals: first, to consider what previous research

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suggests are the costs of seeking self-esteem; second, to show how the pursuit of contingent self-esteem affects how we spend our time; third, to show that this pursuit of contingent self-esteem is costly, particularly when we seek self-esteem through external validation of our worth or value; and fourth, to consider some alternatives to pursuing contingent self-esteem.

Concern about self-esteem has usually focused on *level* of self-esteem, and the costs of having low self-esteem (Baumeister, 1998). Low self-esteem is correlated with depression, eating disorders, and other indicators of poor mental health (Mecca, Smelser, & Vasconcellos, 1989). It has been invoked as an explanation for or a contributing factor in aggression, poor school achievement, adverse health outcomes, substance abuse, eating disorders, teenage pregnancy, marital discord, and a host of other problems (Mecca et al., 1989). Yet empirical research has rarely demonstrated that low self-esteem is a cause, rather than merely a symptom, of these problems (Baumeister, 1998). This has led researchers recently to focus on other aspects of self-esteem (Kernis & Waschull, 1995).

The Costs of Seeking Self-Esteem

I will focus not on whether self-esteem is high or low—whether or not we *have* self-esteem, but instead on the *pursuit* of self-esteem—whether or not we are engaged in events or living our lives with the primary goal of proving to ourselves and to others that we satisfy some criteria or conditions of worth and value (James, 1890). People might feel they are worthwhile if they can satisfy some standard of physical attractiveness, competence, or being a moral, good person. Or they might believe they are worthwhile when they are admired, approved of, or respected by others. Or they might believe they are worthwhile when they are the best at something, when they outdo others in some competition. Connie Wolfe and I have called these contingencies of self-worth, because they reflect the domains in which people believe they must achieve or succeed to be worthwhile. Pursuing self-esteem, then, involves attempting to convince oneself and others that one does, indeed, satisfy these contingencies of self-worth (Crocker & Wolfe, 2001).

In this article, I argue that this pursuit incurs high costs. These costs are not immediately apparent or obvious, because in the short term there are significant emotional benefits to the pursuit of self-esteem—when we are successful, we feel worthy, which leads to positive affect and a sense that we are safe, secure, and superior. As terror management theory argues, self-esteem is a great anxiety reliever (Solomon, Greenberg, & Pyszczynski, 1991). But the “high” or feeling of safety that results from success, accomplishment, earning others’ approval, or being a “good” person is short-lived. When we take a long-term and more global perspective, the costs of pursuing self-esteem are clear.

Considering the costs of pursuing self-esteem requires that we consider what people really need to survive and thrive. Many psychological human needs have been proposed; I will focus on two psychological needs for which there is wide agreement across theories. First, humans have a need for competency—the ability to effect outcomes, or master the environment (Deci & Ryan, 2000; White, 1959). Without competency, and especially the ability to learn from our experience, we would be totally at the mercy of our environment, and the people and events in our lives. A second psychological need is relatedness—having close, mutually caring and supportive relationships with others (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Deci & Ryan, 2000). Close, mutually caring relationships provide a safe haven in times of distress, which, in turn, contributes to more effective coping and better mental and physical health.

Costs to Learning and Competence

More than 30 years of social psychological research has shown that when people are engaged in the pursuit of self-esteem they tend to avoid or dismiss information about their weaknesses, shortcomings, and failures (Blaine & Crocker, 1993). For example, people tend to attribute failure to external causes, whereas they take credit for their successes (Bradley, 1978; Miller & Ross, 1975); and people will self-handicap to protect themselves from the possibility of a failure being attributed to lack of ability (Tice, 1991). This defensiveness detracts from adopting a learning orientation in which one can take full advantage of feedback, using it to improve performance and enhance competency (Dweck, 1986). The costs to competence come not from having self-esteem that is low (or high), but rather from reacting to events or feedback in ways that primarily serve to maintain, protect, and enhance self-esteem, rather than promote learning.

Costs to Relationships

The pursuit of self-esteem also interferes with satisfying the need for relatedness. Hundreds of studies have shown that people respond to threats to self-esteem with avoidance, distancing, and withdrawal, or with blame, excuses, anger, antagonism, and aggression (Crocker & Park, in press). Furthermore, the degree of self-focus required by the pursuit of self-esteem is incompatible with awareness and responsiveness to others' needs (Carver & Scheier, 1998). If I am focused on what every event means about me, how I am performing, and what others are thinking about me, I am unlikely to be alert to the impact of these events on other people, or the impact of my own behavior on others. Thus, the crucial issue is not whether self-esteem is high or low, but whether people feel their self-esteem is under assault, and hence are attempting to restore it.

Costs to Others

The costs of seeking self-esteem extend beyond the self and those we are close to. Others, even complete strangers, often bear the costs of our pursuit of self-esteem. The person whose self-worth depends on being smart or competent often needs to prove that others are less smart or less competent; the person whose self-worth depends on being kind and compassionate implicitly requires that others be less kind and less compassionate. For how can I convince myself and others that I am smart or good if you are smarter or better than I am? Thus, in seeking self-esteem we not only need to be competent, right, or good—we need to be more competent than others, right “over” them, or “more good” than they are (Brown, 1986; Taylor & Brown, 1988). In the mode of seeking self-esteem, life becomes a zero-sum game, with things that bolster my self-worth coming at the expense of your self-worth, and vice versa. And, of course, the blame, hostility, antagonism, and aggression that people show in response to self-esteem threats affect not only those with whom we are in close relationships, but also strangers who unluckily find themselves in our vicinity when we experience a threat to self-esteem (Baumeister, Smart, & Boden, 1996). This pursuit of self-esteem by attempting to satisfy contingencies of self-worth can become relentless, because each time we need even greater success or validation to achieve the temporary high of self-esteem, to feel safe or secure.

In sum, the pursuit of self-esteem has high costs for our competence and relatedness and takes a toll on the people who happen to be in proximity when we are seeking self-esteem. It interferes with the satisfaction of our fundamental psychological needs for relatedness and competence. Ironically, then, in pursuing self-esteem we end up getting exactly what we don’t want— isolation, frustration, insecurity, and unhappiness.

The Pursuit of Contingent Self-Esteem in College Students

My own research on the costs of seeking self-esteem examines the possibility that external contingencies of self-worth—those that require continual validation from others—have particularly high costs. Contingencies of self-worth represent the domains in which we are not only most likely to pursue self-esteem, but also are most vulnerable—in which a failure or rejection is devastating to our sense of self-worth (Crocker, 2002). Some contingencies of self-worth are more fragile and require us to be more relentlessly engaged in the pursuit of self-esteem. Contingencies of self-worth that are external rather than internal, or dependent on others rather than our own behavior, are much more vulnerable to threat on a day-to-day basis, and constantly require earning the approval of yet another person, winning yet another award, or outdoing yet another competitor. Thus, these external contingencies of self-worth keep people constantly engaged in the

Table 1. Highest-Loading Item from Each Subscale of the Contingencies of Self-Worth Scale (CSW-65)

1. I feel worthwhile when I have God's love. (Religious Faith)
2. It is important to my self-worth to feel loved by my family. (Love and Support from Family)
3. Doing better than others gives me a sense of self-respect. (Competition)
4. My self-esteem depends on whether or not I follow my moral/ethical principles. (Virtue)
5. I don't care what other people think of me. (Others' Approval)
6. My sense of self-worth suffers whenever I think I don't look good. (Appearance)
7. I feel better about myself when I know I'm doing well academically. (Academic Competence)

effort to prove that they are worthwhile, and therefore should be associated with greater costs.

Measuring Contingencies of Self-Worth

Exploring the implications of individual differences in contingencies of self-worth requires first that we have a reliable and valid measure of contingencies. My colleagues and I have developed a measure of common contingencies of self-worth in college students, called the Contingencies of Self-Worth scale (CSW-65; Crocker, Luhtanen, & Bouvrette, 2001). The 65-item version of the measure assesses seven contingencies of self-worth: academics, appearance, approval, outdoing others in competition, love and support from family, virtue, and religious faith. The highest-loading item on each subscale of the measure is included in Table 1. Each subscale has high internal consistency (all alphas > .80), high test-retest reliability (.63 or higher over 8.5 months), and correlates as expected with other measures.

Of the contingencies assessed by the CSW-65, appearance, competition, and others' approval are the most external and unreliable contingencies of self-worth, and consequently they should lead people to be more relentlessly engaged in the pursuit of self-esteem. Family support is external but typically a more stable source of self-esteem, and virtue and God's love are relatively stable and internal sources of self-esteem. School competence could be either internal or external—our data indicate that it is associated with both the internal and the external contingencies, but more strongly with external contingencies, especially competition ($r = .74$).

Pursuing Contingent Self-Esteem Through Organizations and Activities

In seeking self-esteem, people direct their energies to those domains in which they have staked their self-worth. In other words, contingencies of self-worth serve a self-regulatory function (Crocker, 2002; Wolfe & Crocker, 2002). A person whose self-esteem is contingent upon being attractive, for example, might spend more time on behaviors related to appearance—shopping for clothes, getting dressed and

groomed, and exercising—than does a person whose self-worth is less contingent on this domain.

In a test of this hypothesis, we studied an ethnically diverse group of 642 college students during their freshman year. We first contacted students during the summer before their freshman year, and asked them to complete the CSW-65 scale. Near the end of both their first and second semester of college, students were asked to report what campus organizations they had joined, and how much time they spent in a variety of activities, including studying, volunteering, going to church or synagogue, partying, socializing, exercising, shopping for clothes, and grooming. More detail on the specific measures included in this study, and more detailed analyses using a more recent version of the Contingencies of Self-Worth scale can be found in Crocker, Luhtanen, Cooper, and Bouvrette (2002). We expected that contingencies of self-worth that students endorsed prior to the start of their freshman year in college would predict the types of organizations they joined and how much time students spend in various activities during their freshman year.

Contingencies of self-worth predicted joining campus organizations. Controlling for gender, ethnicity, parents' income, and level of self-esteem, students who based their self-esteem on appearance were more likely to join sororities and fraternities, $\beta = .41, p < .07$, whereas those who based their self-esteem on virtue, $\beta = -.41, p < .07$, or outdoing others in competition, $\beta = -.45, p < .05$, were less likely to join sororities and fraternities; students who based their self-esteem on their religious faith were more likely to join religious organizations, $\beta = .57, p < .001$.

Controlling for differences associated with students' gender, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status, level of self-esteem had little or no effect on how much time students spent in most activities in their first semester, but contingencies of self-worth prior to entering college significantly predicted first semester activities. Furthermore, as Table 2 shows, specific contingencies predicted specific activities. For example, the number of hours per week spent studying was predicted by basing self-esteem on academics, hours per week spent being with or talking to family members (assessed at the end of the second semester only) was predicted by basing self-esteem on love and support from family, hours spent on religious activities was predicted by the faith and virtue contingencies, and hours spent exercising was predicted by basing self-esteem on appearance, and so on.

Two issues immediately arise from these findings. First, the effect of contingencies of self-worth on activities might be entirely due to the organizations students with different contingencies joined. For example, basing self-esteem on religious faith might predict religious activities indirectly, through the effects of joining a religious organization. Second, because these data are correlational, one explanation for the association between contingencies of self-worth and time spent on activities is that how people spend their time shapes their contingencies of

Table 2. First Semester Activities Predicted by Pre-College Contingencies of Self-Worth, Controlling for Gender, Ethnicity, Parents' Income, and Level of Self-Esteem

Activity	Contingency	β	p
Studying	Academics	.15	.001
Talking to Family	Family Support	.13	.01
Religious Activities	Faith	.33	.001
	Virtue	.09	.05
Exercising	Appearance	.12	.04
Grooming	Appearance	.13	.01
	Virtue	-.15	.002
Clothes Shopping	Appearance	.12	.03
	Virtue	-.12	.03
Socializing	Appearance	.12	.03
	Competition	-.12	.04
Partying	Appearance	.20	.001
	Family Support	.13	.004
	Virtue	-.30	.001
	Faith	-.08	.07
	Competition	-.11	.02

self-worth rather than contingencies shaping behavior. In other words, the direction of causality might be the reverse of what I have suggested. Consistent with this view, activities during the first and second semesters of college did sometimes predict contingencies of self-worth assessed at the same time, controlling for contingencies prior to college, suggesting that behavior shapes contingencies of self-worth. Thus, contingencies assessed prior to college might be related to activities in the first and second semester of college only spuriously, through the effect of activities prior to college, which were not assessed in our study.

Two findings argue against this conclusion, however. First, although behaviors appear to influence contingencies, these effects were not as consistent or reliable as the effects of prior contingencies on later activities. Second, as Table 3 shows, when we examined the effects of contingencies of self-worth prior to college on second semester activities, controlling for time spent on those same activities in the first semester, and controlling for organizations the students had joined,

Table 3. Second Semester Activities Predicted by Pre-College Contingencies of Self-Worth, Controlling for Gender, Ethnicity, Parents' Income, Level of Self-Esteem, Organizations Joined, and First Semester Activities

Activity	Contingency	β	p
Studying	Academics	.11	.002
Volunteering	Virtue	.07	.07
Religious Activities	Faith	.10	.002
Exercising	Appearance	.09	.06
Clothes Shopping	Virtue	-.12	.003
Partying	Family Support	.07	.05
	Virtue	-.06	.05
	Faith	-.08	.05

contingencies of self-worth continued to predict subsequent activities. For example, the academic contingency still predicted hours spent studying, the religious faith contingency continued to predict hours spent in religious activities, the virtue contingency was a marginally significant predictor of volunteer service activities, the appearance contingency continued to predict time spent exercising, the virtue and family support contingencies continued to predict shopping for clothes, and the religious faith, virtue, and family support contingencies continued to predict time spent partying. Although first semester activities were the strongest predictors of all second semester activities, confirming the folk saying that the best predictor of future behavior is past behavior, only in a few cases was the effect of prior contingencies on second semester activities reduced to nonsignificance when we controlled for first semester activities. Thus, although there may be a reciprocal causal relationship between contingencies of self-worth and the time students spend on activities, the effect of prior contingencies on later behavior is stronger and more reliable than the effect of prior behavior on contingencies. These data alleviate another concern as well—they make it less plausible that students are simply telling us a good story about themselves, by reporting that the activities they spend their time on are consistent with their contingencies of self-worth.

Implications of Pursuing Contingent Self-Esteem for Freshman Year Outcomes

What are the costs of these contingencies of self-worth? We expected that external contingencies of self-worth, including appearance, competition, and others' approval, would be associated with more negative outcomes, because they require constant validation from others and therefore keep people engaged in the pursuit of self-esteem. This pursuit, in turn, creates, stress, vulnerability, and perhaps maladaptive coping.

In our longitudinal study of college freshmen, we included measures of a host of negative outcomes that freshmen students might experience. At the end of the second semester of college, participants completed a daily hassles scale for college students (Kohn, Lafreniere, & Gurevich, 1990), which includes subscales for romantic problems (e.g., conflicts with boyfriend or girlfriend), friendship problems (e.g., conflicts with friends), general social mistreatment (e.g., being taken advantage of), developmental challenges (e.g., struggling to meet academic standards of others), time pressure (e.g., not enough time to meet obligations), academic alienation (e.g., finding courses uninteresting), and general annoyances (e.g., transportation problems; see Crocker & Luhtanen, 2002, for a more detailed report of the results). We included, also, a measure of aggression (Buss & Perry, 1992), which includes subscales for verbal aggression, physical aggression, anger, and hostility. Measures of alcohol use, drug use, and symptoms of eating disorders, as well as experiences with sexual assault (unwanted sex, sexual harassment, rape) developed by the authors for this study were included. To reduce the

number of variables for presentation here, we factor analyzed the subscale scores for all of these measures. The factor analysis yielded factors for social problems (friendship problems, romantic problems, general social mistreatment, and hostility), academic problems (developmental challenges, time pressure, and academic alienation), aggression (physical aggression, verbal aggression, and anger), sexual assault (rape, sexual harassment, and unwanted sex, coded as participants experience none of these or one or more of them), drug and alcohol use, and symptoms of eating disorders. Most of these we measured only at the end of the freshman year, but drug and alcohol use and symptoms of disordered eating were assessed after both the first and second semesters.

We analyzed the effects of CSW using hierarchical regression, looking at several issues. First, in all analyses we controlled for the effects of gender, ethnicity, and parents' income, then entered all seven contingencies of self-worth as a block to predict each negative outcome. As Table 4 shows, contingencies of self-worth predicted a wide range of negative outcomes. Basing self-esteem on appearance and on outdoing others in competition predicted social problems. Basing self-esteem on academics and on appearance predicted academic problems. Basing self-esteem on competition and appearance positively predicted aggression-related problems, whereas basing self-esteem on virtue and others' approval was negatively related to aggression problems. Logistic regressions, controlling for gender, ethnicity, and parents' income, indicated that basing self-esteem on appearance positively predicted whether students had an experience with sexual victimization, whereas basing self-esteem on virtue or religious faith negatively predicted sexual victimization. Regarding drug and alcohol use, students who based their self-esteem on appearance or love from family were higher in alcohol and drug use, whereas students who based their self-esteem on virtue or religious faith were lower in alcohol and drug use. And finally, students who based their self-esteem on appearance were higher in symptoms of disordered eating, whereas students who based their self-esteem on virtue were lower in symptoms of disordered eating.

In analysis after analysis, external contingencies of self-worth, such as appearance, were associated with more problems of all types during their freshman year, whereas internal contingencies, such as virtue or religious faith, were associated with lower levels of these problems. Because the external contingencies are correlated, albeit weakly, with personality variables such as neuroticism, narcissism, low self-esteem, and low social desirability (Crocker et al., 2001), we wanted to know whether these effects were due to an association between external contingencies of self-worth and these negative personality characteristics. In addition, some of the negative outcomes might have been due to other factors, such as belonging to sororities and fraternities. We know, for example, that female students who base their self-esteem on appearance are more likely to join sororities, and sorority membership is associated with higher levels of partying, drug and alcohol use, and eating disorders. Therefore, we controlled for all four of these personality

variables (neuroticism, narcissism, level of self-esteem, and social desirability), and all relevant organizations students had joined, as well as gender, ethnicity and parents' income, to see if contingencies of self-worth still predicted negative outcomes. In most cases, the effects of the appearance contingency on negative outcomes was decreased or eliminated when we added all of these controls. For example, basing self-esteem on appearance no longer predicted social problems, academic problems, or aggression problems, sexual victimization, or drug and alcohol use with all of these control variables entered, suggesting that the effect of the appearance contingency on negative outcomes is due to its association with these personality characteristics. However, as shown in Table 4, the effects of other contingencies generally still held, even with all of these controls entered; basing self-esteem on academic competence still predicted academic problems; basing self-esteem on outdoing others in competition still positively predicted aggression and basing self-esteem on others' approval still negatively predicted aggression; basing self-esteem on religious faith and virtue still negatively predicted sexual victimization; basing self-esteem on virtue still negatively predicted alcohol and drug use and symptoms of eating disorders and basing self-esteem on appearance

Table 4. Second Semester Problems Predicted by Pre-College Contingencies of Self-Worth, Controlling for Gender, Ethnicity, Parents' Income, and Level of Self-Esteem (Step 1), and Narcissism, Social Desirability, Neuroticism, and Organizational Memberships (Step 2)

Problem	Step 1		Step 2	
	β	p	β	p
Social Problems				
Appearance	.21	.001		n.s.
Competition	.11	.05		n.s.
Academic Problems				
Academics	.15	.008	.13	.002
Appearance	.17	.001		n.s.
Aggression				
Competition	.19	.001		n.s.
Appearance	.17	.001		n.s.
Virtue	-.13	.005		n.s.
Approval	-.26	.001	-.27	.001
Sexual Victimization^a				
Appearance	.47	.008		n.s.
Virtue	-.53	.002	-.45	.02
Faith	-.19	.05	-.24	.02
Drug and Alcohol Use				
Appearance	.10	.03		n.s.
Family Support	.14	.002		n.s.
Virtue	-.31	.001	-.13	.001
Faith	-.09	.04		n.s.
Disordered Eating				
Appearance	.31	.001	.25	.001
Virtue	-.14	.003		n.s.

^a Sexual victimization was analyzed with logistic regression, and the regression coefficients for this variable are unstandardized B s.

still positively predicted symptoms of eating disorders. Thus, many of these effects of contingencies on negative outcomes in the freshman year of college go above and beyond the effects of personality variables and organizational membership on those outcomes.

Finally, we wanted to know whether contingencies of self-worth could explain changes in these negative outcomes from the first to the second semester of college. Only two of our outcome variables—drug and alcohol use and symptoms of eating disorders—were assessed at the end of both the first and second semesters. Controlling for first semester drug and alcohol use, and all the demographic variables, personality variables, and organizations participants had joined, we found that basing self-esteem on virtue, $\beta = -.08$, $p < .004$, and appearance, $\beta = -.05$, $p < .05$, predicted decreases in drug and alcohol use, whereas basing self-esteem on love and support from family, $\beta = .06$, $p < .02$, predicted increases in drug and alcohol use in the freshman year. Controlling for first semester disordered eating, and all demographic, personality, and organizational membership variables, we found that basing self-esteem on appearance still was a significant predictor of second semester disordered eating, $\beta = .11$, $p < .001$.

In sum, these analyses indicate that the contingencies on which students base their self-esteem prior to beginning their freshman year of college not only predict how they spend their time during their freshman year, but also predict vulnerability to negative outcomes such as problems with academics, aggression, sexual victimization, drug and alcohol use, and disordered eating. They have these effects controlling for all the relevant personality variables and organizational memberships, and where we have data to test it, they predict changes in levels of these negative outcomes from the first to the second semester of college. The general pattern of results indicates that external contingencies, such as basing self-esteem on appearance, competition, or academics are related to more negative outcomes, whereas basing self-esteem on internal contingencies, especially virtue, is related to less negative outcomes.

Implications of Pursuing Contingent Self-Esteem for Depression

I have argued that contingencies of self-worth represent not only the domains in which we are particularly likely to seek self-esteem, but also the domains in which our self-esteem is particularly vulnerable. In a study that Sam Sommers, Riia Luhtanen, and I conducted (Crocker, Sommers, & Luhtanen, in press), we tracked the self-esteem of college seniors applying to PhD programs from February 15 until April 15. Students initially came to the lab and completed a measure of contingencies of self-worth (an early version of our CSW-65 scale) and the CES-D depression scale (Radloff, 1977). They were instructed to access a web page twice a week, and any additional day they received an acceptance or a rejection from a graduate program. On the web page, they reported contacts from

graduate programs, and completed a measure of global self-esteem (Rosenberg, 1965) worded to assess their self-esteem *that day* (e.g., “Today, I feel like a person of worth, at least on an equal basis with others.”). We predicted that self-esteem would be higher on days students were accepted to graduate programs and lower on days they were rejected from graduate programs than on baseline days when they received no news from graduate programs. Furthermore, the more those students based their self-esteem on academics, the more we expected their self-esteem to increase on days they were accepted to graduate programs, and decrease on days they were rejected from graduate programs. The self-esteem data were analyzed with hierarchical linear modeling (HLM), which estimates the within-person effect of acceptances and rejections on daily self-esteem at level 1, and at level 2 examines whether participant variables, in this case the academic competence contingency, moderates the effects of acceptances and rejections on self-esteem. The HLM analyses indicated that self-esteem was higher on acceptance days and lower on rejection days than on baseline days when participants were not contacted by graduate programs. More importantly, as Figure 1 shows, the magnitude of the effect of acceptances and rejections on daily self-esteem was significantly predicted by how much students based their self-esteem on academics.

We also examined the impact of these fluctuations in self-esteem on vulnerability to depression. Several recent studies have shown that instability of self-esteem over time is a risk factor for increases in depression (Kernis et al., 1998; Roberts & Gotlib, 1997; Roberts & Kassel, 1997; Roberts, Kassel, & Gotlib, 1995). Consistent with this research, we found that controlling for depression in January at the start of the study, depressive symptoms in April were predicted by the within-person standard deviation of self-esteem across time, $\beta = .28$, $p = .05$ (Crocker, 2002). Furthermore, increases in self-esteem on days students received acceptances and decreases in self-esteem on days they received rejections from graduate programs accounted for 65 percent of the variance in the within-person standard deviation of self-esteem. Thus, contingencies of self-worth made these students’ self-esteem particularly reactive to successes and failures, and the resulting instability of self-esteem increased their level of depressive symptoms. In other words, being ego-involved in events because one’s self-worth is contingent on them increases the fragility or instability of self-esteem, which increases vulnerability to depression.

Summary. Taken together, the data I have presented here indicate that contingencies of self-worth shape how we spend our time in our daily lives, and that some contingencies of self-worth, particularly the more external ones, have high costs for mental and physical health. Until we collect more data, I can only speculate about the reasons for this link. But based on what we know at this time, the instability of self-esteem that is linked to having one’s self-worth dependent on external validation seems to create stress, hostility, and conflict. Students may

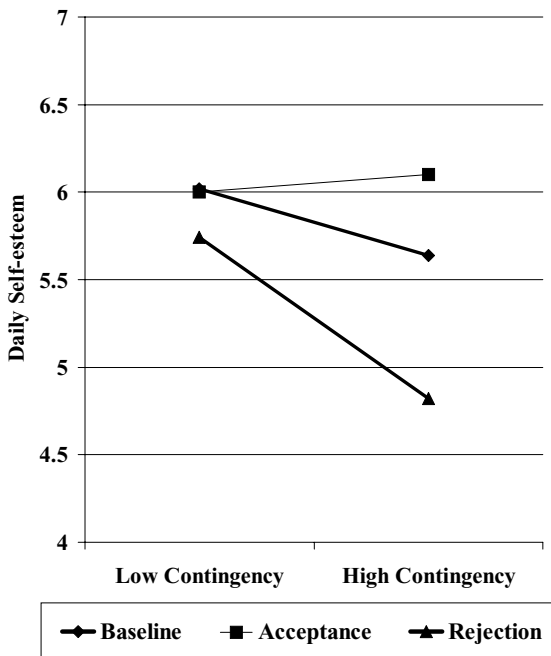


Fig. 1. Daily self-esteem on acceptance, rejection, and baseline days as a function of basing self-esteem on academics. From “Hopes Dashed and Dreams Fulfilled: Contingencies of Self-Worth and Admissions to Graduate School,” by J. Crocker, S. R. Sommers, & R. K. Luhtanen, in press, *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*. Copyright 2002 by the Society for Personality and Social Psychology, Inc. Reprinted with permission.

cope with this stress in maladaptive ways, through partying or drug and alcohol use. All of this ultimately may undermine their ability to develop true competence and relatedness.

To date, we have examined the costs for the self, and have not yet examined costs for relationships or for others. I suspect that contingencies that appear relatively healthy when we consider the costs to ourselves may actually be less healthy when we consider the costs of our behavior for others. For example, people who base their self-esteem on being virtuous or good may show many acts of kindness to others, but they may also need to prove that they are better, more sensitive, or more politically correct than others, thus putting those around them in the situation of being “bad” or “incorrect.” And countless wars have been fought, and continue to be fought, because of people’s need to defend their religious faith. I want to emphasize again that the problem is not in being good, or attractive, or having faith, or even in *having* self-esteem—whether one’s trait self-esteem is high or low. Rather, the problem is in *seeking* self-esteem—in all the things we do, large

and small, that have as their primary goal proving to ourselves and others that we satisfy our contingencies of self-worth.

What's the Alternative?

Given the high costs of pursuing self-esteem, is it possible to respond to self-threats in a way that is less destructive and more likely to satisfy the fundamental human needs for competence and relatedness? There are at least four possibilities for exiting the vicious and costly cycle of seeking self-esteem: engaging in self-affirmation, abandoning dysfunctional contingencies, developing noncontingent self-esteem, and shifting goals from seeking self-esteem to more altruistic, compassionate, and other-oriented goals.

Self-affirmation. One way that people can cope with a threat to the self is to affirm themselves in another, more important, domain (Steele, 1988). Experimentally, self-affirmation has been manipulated by having students who value science put on a lab coat, or by having people fill out a values scale that reminds them of their core values (Steele, 1988). When people experience a threat to their self-worth, focusing on these valued aspects of the self in other domains increases tolerance for inconsistency between one's attitudes and behaviors, reduces defensiveness, and increases openness to negative or threatening information, thus facilitating learning (Steele, 1988; Tesser, 2000). For example, self-affirmation tends to increase receptiveness to health messages indicating that one's behavior puts one at risk for health problems (Sherman, Nelson, & Steele, 2000). However, at times self-affirmation allows people to feel okay about inconsistencies between attitudes and behaviors, and therefore enables them to dismiss critical and important feedback that could otherwise aid them in learning and growing from experience (Tesser, 2000). Self-affirmation has another drawback—it keeps people focused on the question of whether the self is worthy, moral, and adequate. Consequently, although self-affirmation may temporarily relieve defensiveness, it does not provide a long-term solution to the problem of seeking self-esteem.

Abandoning contingencies. One strategy to reduce the costs of seeking self-esteem is to give up dysfunctional or external contingencies. James (1890) suggested that this strategy is quite ubiquitous: “To give up pretensions is as blessed a relief as to get them gratified; and where disappointment is incessant and the struggle unending, this is what men will always do” (p. 45). The data from our study of freshman year outcomes suggests that some contingencies, such as appearance, are associated with more negative outcomes, whereas others, such as basing self-esteem on virtue, appear to be protective. It is tempting to conclude from this that shifting to healthier contingencies of self-worth is the solution. But as I noted, these contingencies may be healthy for the self but costly for others.

We are currently testing the hypothesis that even people who have internal contingencies of self-worth are likely to react to threats to those contingencies with defensiveness, derogation, hostility, and aggression.

Noncontingent self-esteem. Another alternative is giving up all of one's contingencies of self-worth and developing what Deci and Ryan (1995) call "true" self-esteem (see also Rogers, 1959). True self-esteem is noncontingent, and consequently is not vulnerable to threat and does not need to be defended. According to Deci and Ryan (1995), true self-esteem is rooted in autonomous, efficacious action that occurs in the context of authentic relationships characterized by unconditional positive regard. I suspect that few people have noncontingent self-esteem, at least in our North American culture that emphasizes the importance of self-esteem and the relative worth or value of one person over another based on their accomplishments, appearance, athletic skills, net worth, or good works. Indeed, in our study of college freshmen, only 4 percent of students scored 3 or lower (on a 1–7 scale) on all seven contingencies of self-worth we assessed, and these 4 percent may well have contingencies of self-worth that are not captured by our measure (Crocker, 2002). If we could fully accept and internalize the idea that every person has worth, it might permit us to give up our contingencies of self-worth. But in our culture, that emphasizes that our worth as people is contingent, that it depends on our accomplishments, appearance, and deeds, this is a very difficult belief to internalize.

Shifting goals. Each of these possibilities I have suggested focuses on finding a way that we can more easily, or more reliably, believe that we have worth or value. In other words, each continues to emphasize the importance of self-esteem, while suggesting new or improved ways of attaining it. Claire Nuer was a Holocaust survivor who was deeply committed to finding a way to reduce the costs of seeking self-esteem. She argued that a radically different approach is needed. She suggested that to avoid those costs we need to shift away from self-focused, self-centered, ego-based goals of maintaining and protecting self-esteem toward goals that connect the self to others or to something larger than the self. Goals focused on giving to others, or creating and contributing something larger than the self, facilitate keeping attention off the self and self-worth, and on a larger purpose. Even for people whose self-esteem is highly contingent, it may be possible to shift out of the pursuit of self-esteem into a more noble, other-directed pursuit when these larger goals are clear, conscious, and salient. This is not the same as basing self-esteem on virtue; virtue as a contingency of self-worth leads to the self-directed goal of proving to myself and others that I have worth or value because I am virtuous. Noble goals are other-directed goals for giving and creating, not goals of getting and having.

For example, in the academy many of us are engaged in the pursuit of self-esteem via recognition and acknowledgement, and we base our self-esteem on

being smart, famous, or important. Yet the many things we do to prove that we are smart, and therefore to reassure ourselves that we have worth and value, constitute small acts of violence against others. First, many of us want to be the smartest person in the room, and try to prove that we are smarter than our colleagues and students. This, of course, triggers their need to be the smartest, and starts small and large wars within the department or the discipline. Second, to reassure ourselves that we are smart, we are intensely critical of others' ideas and research. Often, we are most critical of the work that is most closely associated with our own, because that work is in competition with, or a threat to, our own work. Thus, we create a world in which others, and particularly those whose work is closest to our own, become our enemies.

Yet it doesn't need to be this way. If we could envision a goal of creating something larger than ourselves, doing research and teaching that somehow makes the world a better place, without regard for what we get out of it in terms of prestige, recognition, and acclaim, we might be able to step out of this state in which others are our competitors or enemies, and shift to a state in which we are true collaborators; we could be links in a chain instead of stars. We could see researchers who work in our own area as resources, rather than threats. And we could regard critiques of our work not as threats to our self-worth or value, but as gifts of feedback from which we can learn and improve.

A small example of my own attempt to make such a shift might give you a sense of this shift. The President of SPSSI gives an address at the end of his or her presidential year. Because I need to be, and be seen as, smart and competent to have high self-esteem and feel safe, I thought about this address for several months. What talk could I give that would convince the audience that I am smart and competent? And the standard set by last year's presidential address was daunting. Jack Dovidio's presidential address was brilliant, witty, and presented more than 20 years of research in which each study made sense as part of a life-long program of research. My own career has been characterized much more by jumps from one topic to another—a talk that spanned my research over the past 20 years would be incomprehensible. So I proceeded to write a talk that invoked Weber and the Protestant Ethic to account for our concern with satisfying contingencies of self-worth, because I thought that would be impressive. And then I tried to figure out how to get some of my earlier research to fit into my talk. And I was getting a talk that was longer and longer, and yet did not communicate anything essential. So, I tried to make a shift by recentering on the goal of giving—of identifying what I have to say that might give something useful to perhaps one person who might attend or read my address. And I tried to write a talk that would communicate what is essential about the costs of seeking self-esteem, even if what I had to say would mean that others did not respect me, or think of me as smart and competent. It was not easy to stay centered on this goal—each time I sat down to work on the talk I would find my thoughts going to “What will they think of me?” instead

of “What can I give?” But when I was able to shift to this other-directed goal, I said “so what?” to the fear that I would not be smart or competent, that I would be worthless or unsafe, or that others would misunderstand or reject me. At those moments, I felt much more connected to what is really important to me. And when I shared with a few people my excitement and fears about giving the address, they each offered to read it. Several very busy people gave me extremely thoughtful feedback. It wasn’t necessarily the feedback my ego wanted to receive, but it was incredibly useful and helpful and really was a great gift that helped me be more effective at my goal of giving an address that would make a difference and made me feel more deeply connected with those people.

Although I am far from being able to make this shift at will, this is a small example of how it works: when we are able to identify a goal that is directed toward what we can give or create rather than what we can get, we are paradoxically more likely to satisfy our true needs for competence and relatedness, to receive the gift of feedback and criticism, and connect with others through our shared purpose. Making this shift from seeking self-esteem to pursuing goals that are larger than the self, that involve creating, building, and giving, rather than getting and having is not easy or painless; the academy, by rewarding stars, seems particularly designed to keep people engaged in the pursuit of self-esteem. Fortunately, SPSSI seems to disproportionately attract scholars who genuinely want to give and create something larger than themselves. Making this shift involves facing our ego-based fears of being worthless, being rejected, and being unsafe, yet pursuing our other-directed goals anyway. And it must truly be a gift, not a loan—given with the full understanding that we may get back nothing in return. But as Claire Nuer argued, this is where true connection and the possibility of real learning lie. And this is where we might be able to give up a momentary pleasure of achieving high self-esteem and to experience a much deeper satisfaction and joy that comes with learning and creating, giving, and connecting with others.

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