Self esteem self-help guide

1. Introduction

This self-help guide is intended for people with mild-to-moderate mental health issues. If you're feeling distressed, in a state of despair, suicidal or in need of emotional support you can phone NHS 24 111. For an emergency ambulance phone 999.

This guide aims to help you:

- learn more about self-esteem
- understand the effects of low self-esteem
- find ways of improving your self-esteem

This guide is based on Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT). CBT helps you to examine how you think about your life, and challenge negative automatic thoughts to free yourself from unhelpful thought and behaviour patterns.

How to use the self-esteem self-help guide

Working through this guide can take around 30 to 40 minutes, but you should feel free to work at your own pace.

To type in a graphic or diary, click or tap the part you'd like to fill in and use your keyboard as usual.

You can save and print this PDF guide on your device at any time.

2. What is self-esteem?

Self-esteem relates to how we think and feel about ourselves, and how much value you think you have as a person. Your self-esteem can affect how you view achievements and setbacks, so if you have low self-esteem, for example, you're likely to focus more on your setbacks than your successes. People with low self-esteem often ignore their own achievements and positive things about themselves, and criticise themselves even when there's no reason to.

For some people, self-esteem can vary in different situations. Everyone has different characteristics – things that determine how we view ourselves. How you feel about one characteristic can be very different to how you feel about another. For example, you might like your sense of humour, but dislike how you respond to a crisis.

It's possible for your level of self-esteem to change between different parts of your life. For example, you might have low self-esteem when it comes to work, but feel more positive about the way you handle family relationships and responsibilities.

However, it's not uncommon to have low (or high) self-esteem about every part of your life or all of your characteristics.

Low self-esteem isn't a medical condition or mental illness on its own, although you can experience low self-esteem as a result of mental health issues.

Visit the other mental health self-help guides on NHS inform for help with a range of mental health issues.

3. Causes of low self-esteem

The world continually sends messages telling you how to feel and think about yourself.

What affects self-esteem?

Self esteem is affected by 'implicit' and 'explicit' messaging.

The people around you, like parents, teachers, friends and colleagues will tell you things that affect your self-esteem either positively or negatively. At the same time, influences like social media and TV will give other messages about what is 'good' and 'bad' that can affect how you feel about yourself.

'Implicit' means something isn't directly being said to you – its meaning is something you interpret yourself. It's very common for people to interpret implicit messages in different ways – for some people it can be more positive, for others more negative. For example, if someone is posting on social media about being in the gym, you might get the implicit message that you're lazy because you're not in the gym.

'Explicit' messaging is direct – it's what someone says to you. So if a teacher calls you stupid for doing poorly on a test, you will get the explicit message that you're stupid (even when you clearly aren't).

Causes of low self-esteem

There are a lot of potential causes for low self-esteem. These can happen in childhood or later in life.

Here are some examples of events and situations which can cause low self-esteem. Do any of these sound like things that have affected the way you feel about yourself?

- physical or mental health problems
- illness or disability

- bullying
- abuse or mistreatment
- relationship problems
- feeling bad about the way you look
- money worries
- housing problems
- difficulties with work or study
- experiencing stigma or discrimination
- trouble finding a job

4. What are the effects of low self-esteem?

As well as affecting how you feel, low self-esteem can affect how you think about yourself and how you live your day-to-day life.

Here are some ways low self-esteem can affect different parts of your life. These might not all apply to you, but think about the ones that do.

Low self-esteem and behaviour

If you have low self-esteem, your negative thoughts could have a big impact on how you behave. Here are some examples of things you might do:

- avoid doing things in case you aren’t good at them
- over-prepare for tasks you have to perform
- avoid looking at or talking to other people
- struggling to say 'no' to things, and being eager to please other people
- avoiding places where you don’t feel confident
- checking things you have done over and over again to ensure they’re 'perfect'
- trying to get things that you have to do 'over with' quickly, because you feel like it will be no good whatever you do

- negative coping strategies – these can include alcohol or drug misuse, binge eating, self-harm, or other potentially destructive behaviours

Low self-esteem and emotions

Low self-esteem can have an effect on your emotions – not just how you feel about yourself, but how you feel about the world in general. Here are some examples of emotions you might have:

- sad
- insecure
- anxious
- upset
- angry
- guilty
- shame
- nervous and ‘on edge’

Low self-esteem and your body

Having low self-esteem can affect how your body moves and feels. Here are some examples of the physical impact of low self-esteem:

- tense body
- slumped posture
- low energy
- trouble sleeping
- difficulty concentrating
- anxiety symptoms like rapid heartbeat and breathing, upset stomach, and tense feelings

Low self-esteem and your thoughts

Low self-esteem can have an impact on how you think. If you have developed any of these thought patterns, they could be making your self-esteem worse. There is more information on negative thoughts later on in this guide.

Here are some examples of how low self-esteem can affect your thoughts:

- always thinking negatively
- fearing the worst will happen
- criticising yourself a lot
- feeling you can't cope if anything negative happens
- ignoring or disregarding positive events and achievements
- worrying a lot and overthinking

Focusing on the negative

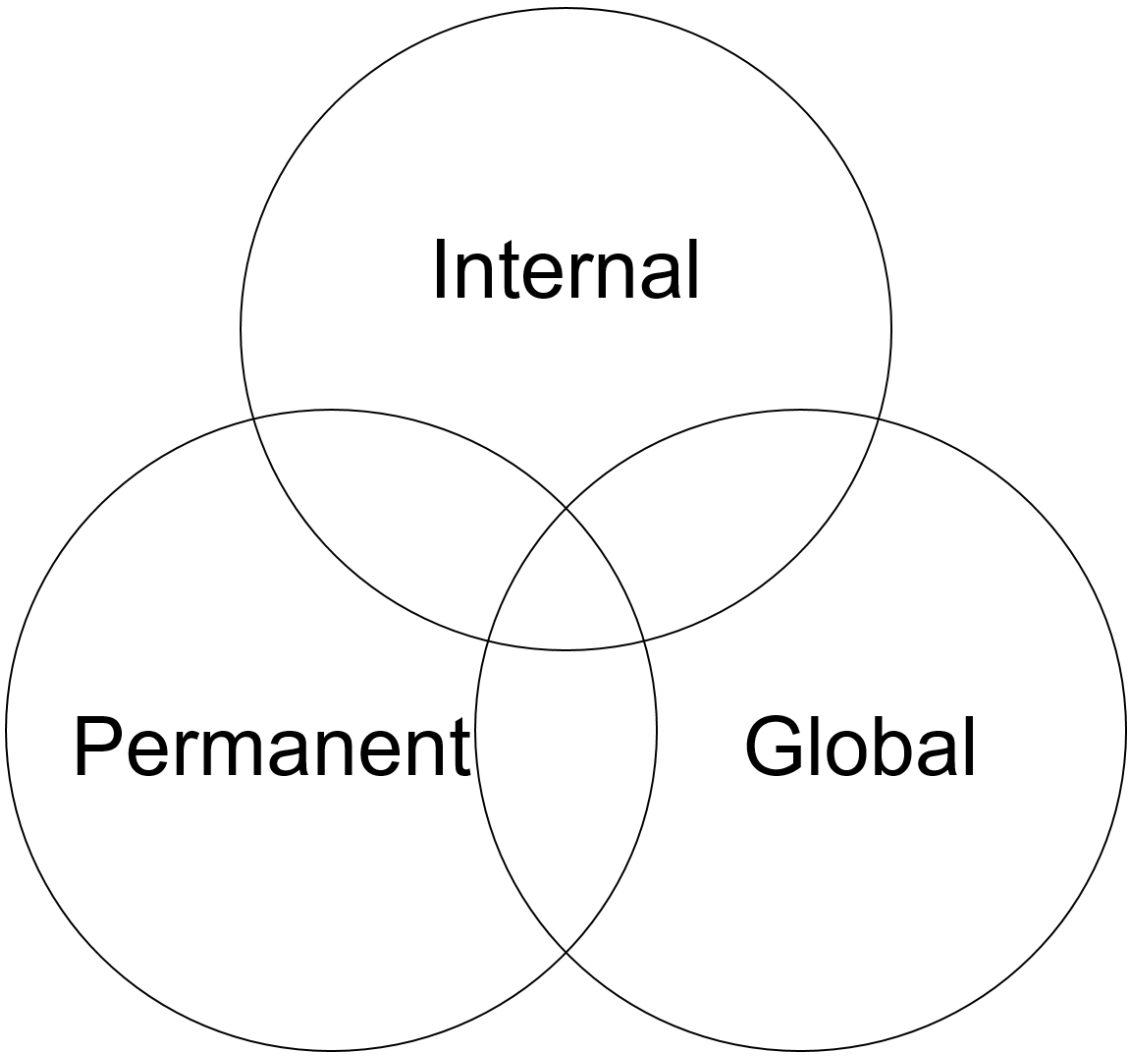
People with low self-esteem tend to remember the negative implicit and explicit messages, and how they made them feel, more clearly because it's difficult for them to remember positive messages. This is particularly true for people who have been treated poorly in childhood. If you've heard a lot of messages saying bad things about you, and very few positive messages, it's hard to interpret the positive messages as true and important.

If you have low self-esteem you can develop a very firm idea of who you are – you might have learned at a young age to think of yourself as ugly or lazy, for example, and changing that idea is very difficult. So when you hear a message that strengthens the negative self-image you have, it stays with you for longer and has more of an impact than a positive message would.

5. Attribution error

There’s a term in psychology called 'attribution error'. This means if something goes wrong, and that makes you think negatively about yourself, you think the negative thought is true about lots of things in your life, and it’s going to be true forever.

For example, if your boss calls you stupid for making a mistake, you think “I’m a stupid person, and everyone will always think I’m stupid.” While someone with higher self-esteem might think, “that was a stupid mistake, but normally I’m good at my job, and my boss likes to bully people so I shouldn’t take it personally.”



Internal

Internal means you interpret an event or criticism as being about yourself and the things that make you 'you', even if it's more to do with an external event – meaning something that's nothing to do with you.

- For example, if you fail an exam, you might think, "I'm stupid," instead of "that was a really hard exam that most people would struggle with."

Thinking you're stupid would mean that you're blaming only your own abilities, while considering how hard the exam was would mean you're able to see other reasons things didn't go well. If you're able to look at other reasons, you're less likely to put yourself down.

Permanent

Permanent means you see a setback or criticism as something that will always be true about you, no matter what happens in your life.

- For example, if you don't go to the gym for a week because you have a cold, you might think, "I'm always so lazy", instead of "I don't have as much energy this week while I'm dealing with this cold."

Thinking that you're always lazy, even if you normally work out regularly, suggests you have low self-esteem because you're ignoring the fact you normally exercise. If you're able to think about how the cold is affecting your ability to do your normal routine at the moment, you can consider how events outside of your control affect your decisions sometimes. This makes it easier for you to avoid judging yourself negatively.

Global

People have many different parts to their personalities, and usually a number of different responsibilities. It's normal to be better at some things than others, and have good days and bad days even with things you're really good at. When you have low self-esteem, it's common to think negative events and criticism apply to every part of your life, instead of only one small part of who you are.

- For example, if you're playing tennis for the first time and you lose, you might think, "I'm terrible at everything." A healthier thought would be, "I don't think I'm very good at tennis, I think I'll stick to football."

If you're able to think of yourself as a person with a number of different skills and parts to your personality, some stronger than others, your self-esteem is less likely to be affected by problems with one area.

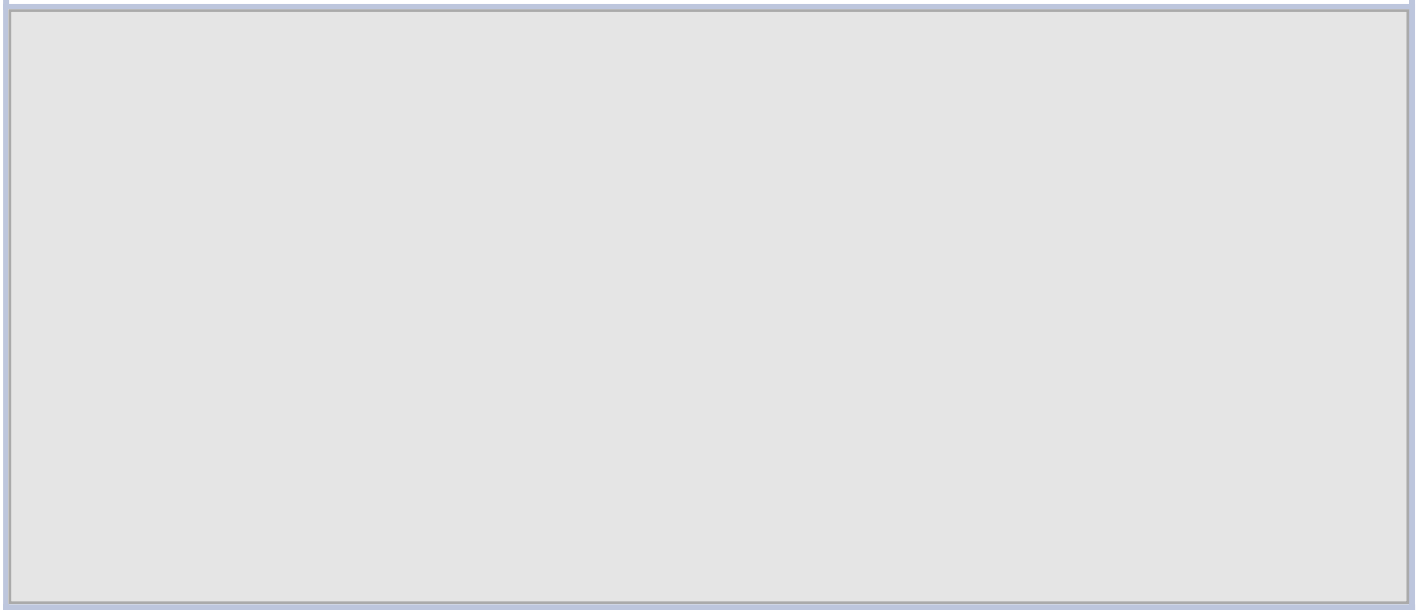
6. Improving your self-esteem – Activity 1

In this activity, you should write details about a situation and the thoughts that you had. Later on, you can try to change this type of attribution error to something more helpful.

First, use the worksheet on the next page to write about the situation and the negative thoughts.

Situation

For example, you try a new recipe using ingredients you've never used before. It doesn't taste like it's supposed to, and your partner doesn't like it.



Internal – the thoughts you had about yourself.

For example, "I'm useless for messing that up."

Permanent – what you think this situation means for the future.

For example, "I'll never be able to cook anything decent."

Global – what you think this means for every situation you're in.

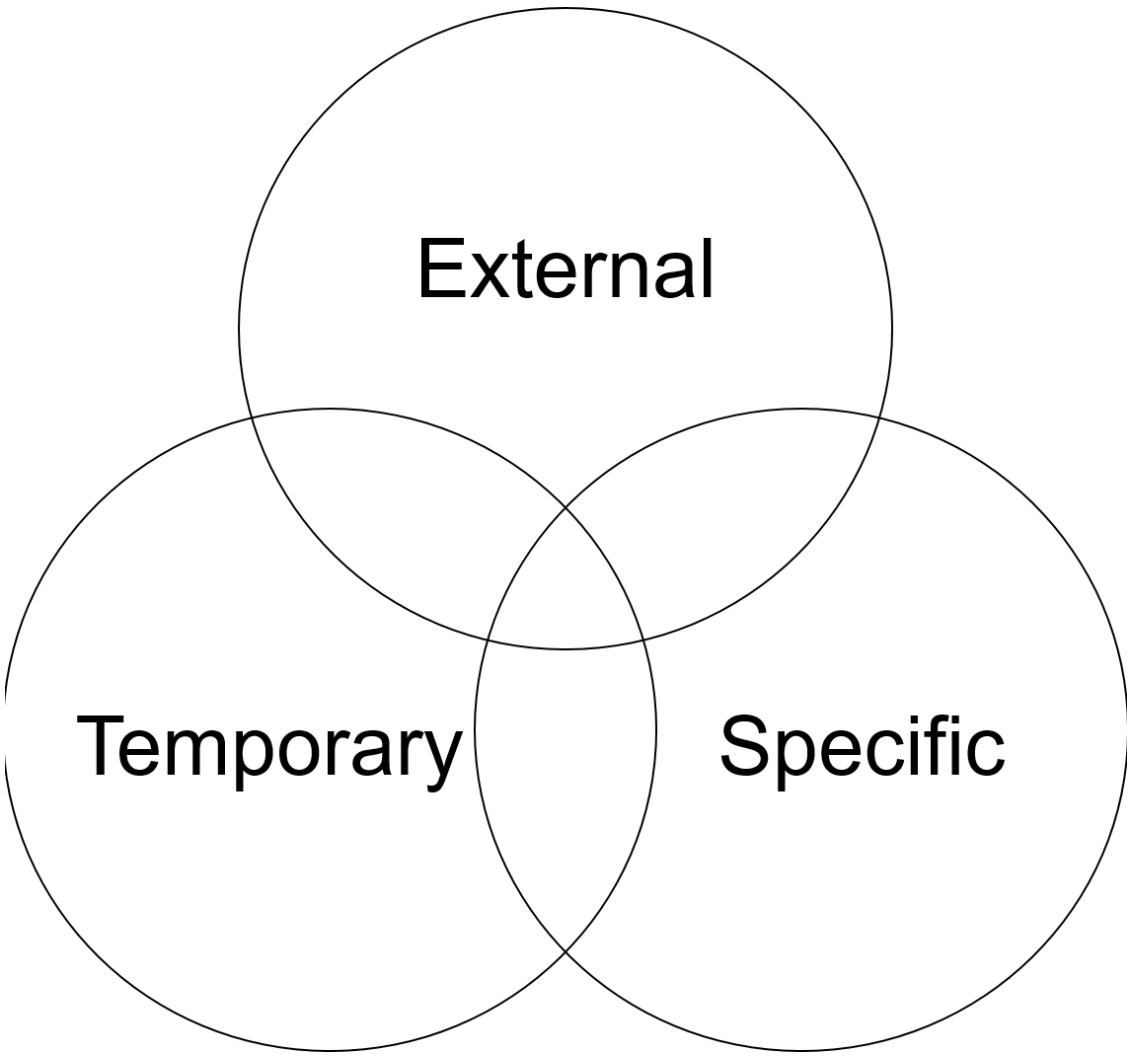
For example, "I'm useless at this recipe, I'm going to mess up everything that I cook and every new thing I try."

Now you've written out the answers based on attribution error, the next step is working to see the situation without it.

7. Modifying attribution error

Instead of believing the negative thoughts you have about yourself reflect internal, permanent, and global characteristics of yourself, you can modify the attribution error you're experiencing. The goal is to try and think of how these issues are external, temporary, and specific.

For example, if your boss calls you stupid for making a mistake, you can think: "my boss being a bully isn't my fault, I don't usually make mistakes, and I'm not stupid - this was just one mistake that I made once. It doesn't define me as a person."



External

Thinking about negative things as external means you recognise there are factors outwith your control that can have an impact on a situation, so if something goes wrong it's not your fault.

- For example, if you're late for a meeting, you might think, "I'm unreliable," instead of a more accurate and helpful thought, like "there was an accident on the road that delayed traffic - there was nothing I could do about that."

Thinking you're unreliable would mean you're only blaming yourself as a person for being late, while considering how bad the traffic was would mean you're able to see reasons external to you for things not going as planned.

Temporary

Thinking about negative things as temporary means recognising that negative things, such as lateness, may not be true or relevant all the time, or forever.

- For example, if you're late because of traffic, thinking "I'm always late" doesn't make sense if you usually arrive to work on time. It makes more sense to think "I was late today, that doesn't mean I'll be late all the time."

Thinking that you're always late ignores all the times that you haven't been late, and all the times you'll be punctual in the future.

Specific

Thinking about negative things as being caused by specific circumstances helps you to understand that they don't reflect everything about you or your life. Instead, the negative thing only applies to one particular situation.

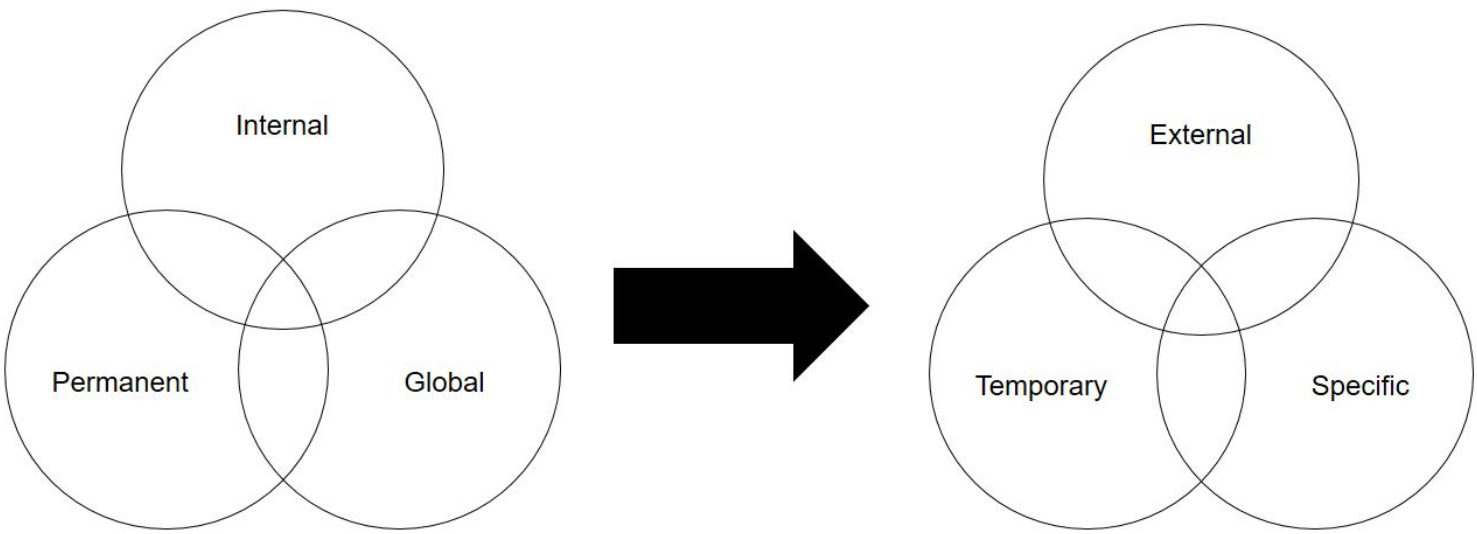
- For example, if you're late for work you might think, "I'm unreliable." It would be more helpful to think: "I'm reliable in most parts of my life, and I'm usually reliable when it comes to getting to work. I was late today because of one specific issue."

Thinking that you're unreliable ignores all the evidence you have that you can be reliable.

8. How to modify attribution error - Activity 2

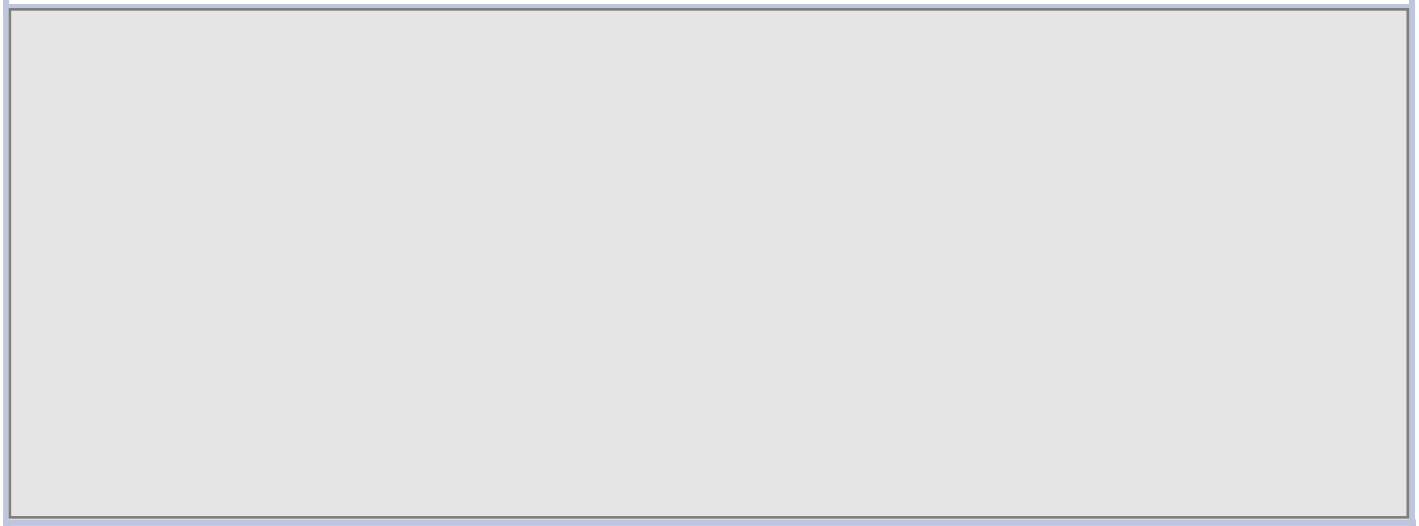
In this activity, you should write about the thoughts that you had, and try to change the attribution error to something positive.

On the worksheet on the next page, write about the same situation as you did in the last section, but this time write about how the situation is external, temporary, and specific.



External – the things that affected this situation that had nothing to do with you.

For example, "that was a really complicated recipe, and the shop didn't have a couple of the ingredients."



Temporary – reasons that this exact problem may not happen again.

For example, "this was the first time I tried this recipe. Next time I'll have a better idea of what to do."

Specific – reasons that this situation doesn’t represent everything in your life.

For example, "there are lots of other recipes I'm good at making. I've only had trouble with this one. That doesn't make me a bad cook."

Keep doing this every time you find yourself thinking incorrectly about a situation and thinking it means bad things about who you are.

9. Attribution error when things go well

Attribution error also works when things go well - people with low self-esteem often think their achievements are down to external, temporary, or specific factors. This means you might feel as though positive things you do aren’t reflections of you as a person or your qualities.

To work against this type of attribution error, you need to look at achievements and do the opposite of what you did for setbacks in the previous section. This will allow you to see the positive things about yourself more clearly, and recognise when you’ve achieved something and you should be proud.

Don’t be afraid to say positive things about yourself. Remember, it’s not boasting if it’s true.

10. Activity 3

Use the boxes below to write about a time when things have gone well.

Write about how attribution error left you thinking your achievement was external, temporary, and specific instead of internal, permanent, and global.

Situation

For example, you organise a party for someone and it goes really well, and everyone praises you.

External – reasons you think the achievement wasn't because of you.

For example, "everyone at the party was only happy because someone else organised those games."

Temporary – reasons you think this achievement won't happen again.

For example, "I got lucky with this party, I won't be able to pull that off again."

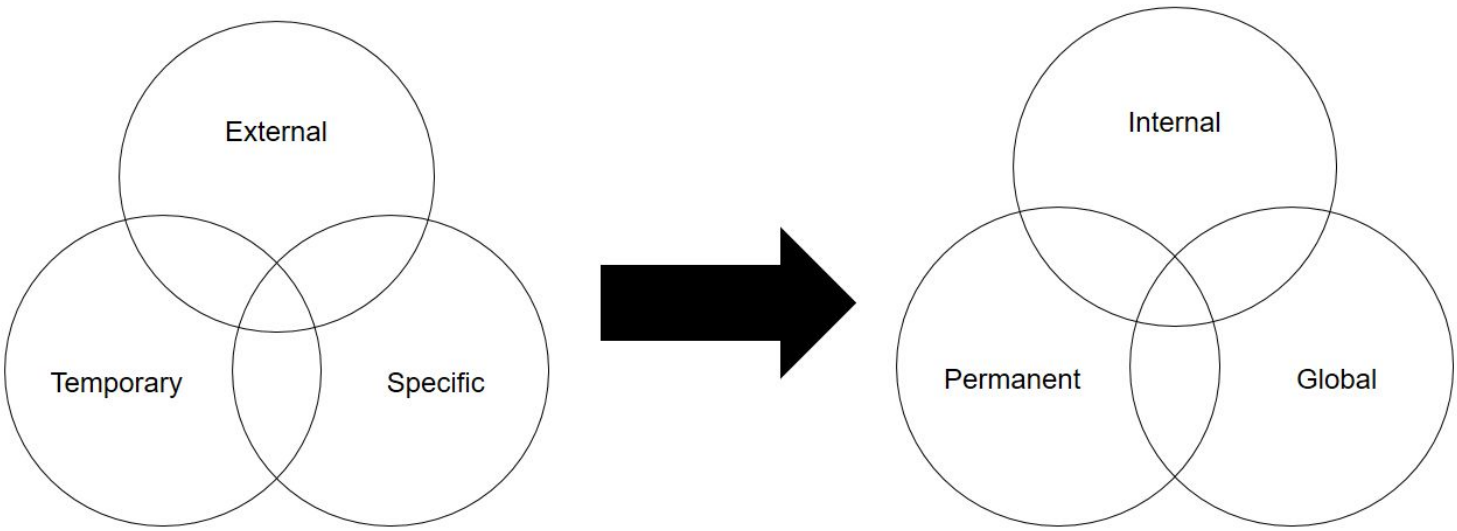
Specific – reasons you think this achievement doesn't truly say anything about you as a person.

For example, "I might have done well organising this party, but I'm useless at organising anything else."

11. Activity 3 (continued)

In this activity, you should write about the thoughts that you had, and try to change the attribution error to something positive.

Write about the same situation as you did in the last section, but this time write about how the situation is internal, permanent, and global.



Internal – reasons this achievement was because of you.

For example, “I worked really hard on this party and it wouldn’t have gone as well if it wasn't for my planning skills.”

Permanent – reasons this achievement could happen again.

For example, “usually when I put my mind to organising something it works out well – I can’t think of many times when I’ve planned something and it hasn’t been a success.”

Global – reasons this achievement says something about you and your qualities.

For example, “I’m quite an organised person, and this party is a good example of that.”

Try to do this every time something goes well in your life, until it's easier for you to recognise your own achievements and good qualities.

12. Negative thoughts about yourself

Negative automatic thoughts are unhelpful thoughts that pop into your mind, without you making any effort to think of them. They're believable and usually upsetting – this can affect your mood and what you do. You might have unhelpful thoughts about all kinds of things.

It's important to remember that a thought isn't necessarily a fact, or based on reality. You might believe the negative unhelpful thoughts that pop into your mind, but it's actually important to question them. They can be based on unhelpful assumptions.

If you're experiencing a lot of negative automatic thoughts about yourself, it could be helpful to work through the Depression self-help guide.

Beginning to recognise certain patterns of thinking that are common in people with low self-esteem is an important first step in feeling better. People with low self-esteem often accept negative thoughts about themselves as facts, when actually they're just judgements that are affected by how they feel.

Here are some common patterns of unhelpful thinking:

Black and white thinking:

People often see things as black or white when they have low self-esteem – there's no 'in between'.

For example:

- "I failed that maths exam – my life is a disaster and I'm stupid."
- "My partner broke up with me – no one will ever love me again."

Over-generalising:

Based on one isolated incident, people with this thinking pattern assume all future events will follow a similar pattern. It becomes hard to see a negative event as a one off.

For example:

- After failing your driving test, you think you'll never be able to drive.

Dismissing the positives:

Often people with low self-esteem can ignore the positive aspects of life or situations, and instead focus on the negative.

For example:

- Your boss gives you a good review, but you're certain that he gave everyone a good review and that your job performance is below average.

Emotional reasoning:

This means treating emotions as if they're facts.

For example:

- "I feel alone, that means nobody cares about me."
- "Something bad happened – I must be responsible."

Must and should statements:

People with low self-esteem often live by fixed rules for themselves about what they "should" do and how they "should" feel, and judge themselves harshly if they don't

meet them.

For example:

- “I should have found a better job by now.”
- “I must vacuum the whole house every day.”

When people think like this, they’re being critical of themselves, which brings their mood down.

If you find yourself thinking this way, it can help a lot to accept that things and people aren’t always perfect, and they don’t have to be for you to be happy.

Jumping to conclusions:

People with low self-esteem often assume they know what others are thinking, and the assumptions are usually negative.

For example:

- A friend doesn’t say hello when you see them across the street. You think they must hate you and never want to see you again. In fact, they just didn’t see you.

Jumping to conclusions can also make you feel like you know the future, and that it will be bad.

For example:

- “I lost my job – I’ll never find another one.”

Labelling:

People who have low self-esteem often label themselves in negative ways.

For example:

- “I'm ugly.”
- “I’m stupid.”

Personalisation:

People who think this way believe that everything is to do with them, and it’s usually negative – they place blame on themselves for no logical reason.

For example:

- “My colleague is in a bad mood today – I must have done something to upset them.” In reality, your colleague’s bad day could have nothing to do with you.

It's important to remember that anyone can experience thoughts like this, and that patterns of unhelpful thinking can be managed so they don't bother you as much, or at all.

13. The cycle of negative thoughts

Once you have recognised an unhelpful thought about yourself, the next stage is to challenge it.

The example below outlines the cycle of negative thoughts and feelings. It shows how a situation, combined with negative feelings, can create a cycle with unhelpful thoughts. When you have an unhelpful thought, it makes you feel upset and bad about yourself, which creates more negative feelings. It also works the other way

around - negative feelings make it more likely you'll have unhelpful thoughts, which create more negative feelings.

In the next section, you can fill out an example of this cycle from your own life.

For example:

Situation

"I need to ask my boss for time off."

My feelings

Nervous, scared, hopeless

My unhelpful thought

"I'm worried my colleagues will have extra work to do and be angry with me, and I'm scared my boss will think I'm lazy."

14. Activity 4 - identifying the cycle of negative thoughts

Use the boxes below to write about a time when you had an unhelpful thought. This will help you to understand and remember how the cycle of negative thoughts and feelings works.

The next time you're experiencing unhelpful thoughts about yourself, it will be easier to remember what is happening and challenge the negative thought.

Situation

My feelings

My unhelpful thought

15. Challenging the critic

People with low self-esteem often carry around a ‘critic’ in their heads – like an unpleasant voice repeating negative thoughts and ideas. Part of increasing your self-esteem is learning to challenge and silence that critic, and replace their voice with positive and encouraging thoughts.

Modifying negative thoughts

Here’s an exercise that will help with this.

1. Try saying some of these negative thoughts out loud.
2. Now imagine you’re saying them to a friend instead of yourself. Is this something you’d want to do?
3. What would you say instead?
4. Now practice saying that to yourself every time the critic starts talking in your mind.

Part of challenging the critic is understanding that nobody is perfect – we’re only human. That means that even if you make a mistake, there’s no reason to be harder on yourself than you would be on a friend or family member.

16. Being kind to yourself

Having compassion means understanding someone is having a difficult time, making an effort to understand how they feel, and treating them with kindness.

Being kind to yourself is important for improving self-esteem. If you start to think about how you talk to yourself, it can help you recognise when you’re being unfair or unkind to yourself.

People with low self-esteem often struggle to have compassion for themselves – they find it easier to have compassion for other people. This means that when things go wrong, people with low self-esteem tend to punish themselves, instead of

treating themselves with kindness and acknowledging that it’s okay to be upset.

Being kind to yourself isn’t the same as being self-indulgent, 'letting yourself off the hook', or 'spoiling' yourself. It isn’t lazy to need a break, and it isn’t healthy to be unkind to yourself or ignore your own mental or physical needs.

It's important to take time out for 'self-care'. This means focusing on yourself and your own happiness for a little while, and doing things that make you feel good. Self-care could mean treating yourself to an activity or food you like, or just setting aside time to relax. For example, you could go for a walk, take a hot bath, or just settle in and watch your favourite film.

Use the diary on the next page to write down one thing every day for a week that you can do to make yourself feel good, and help you value yourself more.

Here are some examples:

Day	Activity
Monday	Take a hot bath
Tuesday	Treat myself to a coffee from my favourite cafe
Wednesday	Meet a friend for a catch up
Thursday	Go to the cinema
Friday	Watch my favourite film
Saturday	Go for a walk in the park
Sunday	Have breakfast in bed

Day	Activity

17. Recognising your good qualities

As well as understanding that we all have weaknesses, it's important to understand that you have your own unique strengths. This will help you challenge the negative thoughts that come with low self-esteem.

Here's an exercise that will help with this.

1. Write down a few things you like about yourself – these can be anything that comes to mind. For example, you could write, "I make my friends laugh," or "I'm a great cook."
2. Take those pieces of paper and put them in places where you'll see them every day – for example, you could stick one on your fridge so you see it before you make a cup of tea every morning.
3. Every time you see the pieces of paper and read them to yourself, it'll remind you about these good qualities and help you to silence the critic in your mind.

Over time, it'll become easier for you to replace negative thoughts with positive ones, and build better self-esteem.

18. Keep feeling good about yourself

Once you've started challenging the negative thoughts you have about yourself, it's important to keep going and ensure you continue to value yourself in the long term.

Looking after your mind often looks a lot like looking after your body – if you develop some healthy habits, you'll notice your self-esteem grows.

These tips will help you to keep building your self-esteem and feel more confident.

Try to:

Exercise regularly – physical activity improves mental wellbeing and can help you feel better about yourself, even if you're not trying to lose weight

Try not to:

Turn exercise into a punishment – there's no need to be hard on yourself if you can't be active as often as you'd like. Even a small amount of physical activity a few times a week can make a big difference.

Try to:

Eat as healthily as you can – if you're not confident about cooking, try practising some simple recipes for foods you enjoy until you get them right.

Try not to:

Be afraid to treat yourself every now and then, as long as your diet's healthy overall. You can find more information on eating well here.

Try to:

Work on healthy ways of dealing with difficult feelings and thoughts – keep practising the exercises from this guide, especially on days when you feel particularly low.

Try not to:

Use drugs or alcohol as a way of coping with difficult feelings. They might make you feel better in the short term, but long-term health issues, including addiction, are a risk, and this can undermine your self-esteem even more.

Try to:

Build up a network of friends and family members that you enjoy spending time with, and who make you feel supported.

Try not to:

Feel like you have to say “yes” to every invitation or request from a friend or family member – it’s important to make time just to relax by yourself or with loved ones.

Try to:

Make time for health-related self-care like doctor’s appointments, dental check-ups, and taking prescribed medications.

Try not to:

Feel like you have to ‘suffer in silence’ or be strong for other people in your life. You and your health are important.

19. Assertiveness

Low self-esteem can make it hard for you to tell people what you want and need. It can also make it very hard to say no when you don’t want to do something, leaving you feeling guilty and unhappy.

Follow these tips to help you become more assertive and confident about communicating:

It’s okay to say no. Remember you’re saying no to a request, not to the person asking.

Try not to say:

"Yes, that's fine, I think I can manage that."

Try to say:

"No, I won't be able to do that."

It’s okay to make requests and ask for help. Don’t be afraid to speak up about what you need.

Try not to say:

Nothing.

Try to say:

"It would be really helpful if you could put the kids to bed tonight, I’ve had a tiring day.”

Remember it’s good to be clear when you’re making a request, and no one will be annoyed with you for being direct. Don't hint and expect people to guess what you mean or know what you're thinking.

Try not to say:

"This room is looking a bit messy, isn’t it? I can’t find my shoes anywhere.”

Try to say:

"Can you please tidy up your things? The living room’s messy and I can’t find my shoes.”

Remember you don't have to apologise for needing something.

Try not to say:

"I'm really sorry but I need to take Wednesday off of work, is that okay? If not I can make other arrangements."

Try to say:

"I need to take Wednesday off of work, is that something we can arrange?"

Say what you mean clearly and don't be afraid to be firm.

Try not to say:

"I'm really sorry but I think I need some help in the kitchen, if you’re not too busy, would that be okay?"

Try to say:

"Could you come and help wash the dishes please?"

Remember there’s a difference between being assertive and being angry – being assertive isn’t the same as being rude, and being rude isn’t the same as being assertive.

Try not to say:

"No! I don’t want to do that! Why would you ask me to do that?"

Try to say:

"I’d prefer not to do that."

It’s okay to let someone know when they’re doing something you don’t like, or that makes life inconvenient for you.

Try not to say:

“I’m so sorry, but could you maybe let me know if you need to park in front of my driveway? It’s just that I was late for work yesterday, but I don’t mind if you really have to park there.”

Try to say:

“I’d prefer it if you didn’t park in front of my driveway, you’ve been blocking my car in and it’s making me late for work.”

The more practice you get at being assertive, the easier it will be and the more your self-esteem will grow. In time, you’ll find it much easier to assert yourself and your needs.

20. Next steps

Keep using the techniques you found helpful from this guide – they should continue to benefit you. If there are some things that you didn't find helpful to begin with, stick with them for a few weeks – CBT can take a little time to work.

Further help

If you're feeling distressed, in a state of despair, suicidal or in need of emotional

support you can phone NHS 24 on 111. For an emergency ambulance phone 999

If you feel you need more help with your mental health, try speaking to your GP, or search for mental health and wellbeing services in your area.

For information and advice when you're feeling down, you can phone Breathing Space on 0800 83 85 87.

The Breathing Space phoneline is available:

- 24 hours at weekends (6pm Friday to 6am Monday)
- 6pm to 2am on weekdays (Monday to Thursday)

If you found this guide helpful and would like to do more work like this, Living Life offers a range of structured psychological interventions and therapies to improve mental health and wellbeing. This service is appointment-based and specifically for low mood, or mild/moderate depression or anxiety. Living Life are open Monday to Friday, from 1pm to 9pm, and you can phone them on 0800 328 9655 for an assessment appointment.

Learn more

Here are some other resources for building self-esteem that you may find helpful.

Visit the other mental health self-help guides on NHS inform

Learn more about self-esteem