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Real Self-Esteem Builds on Achievement, Not Praise for Slackers

By SHARON BEGLEY

At the annual meeting of psychology researchers in Boston three years ago, two scientists weighed in on a question that seemed to be as much in need of investigation as whether the sun rises in the east.

The pair had asked a professor to send weekly e-mail messages to students of his who had done poorly on their first exam for the class. Each missive included a review question. In addition, one-third of the students, chosen at random, also received a message -- advice to study, for example -- suggesting that how well they did in the course was under their own control. The other third received the review question plus a "You're too smart to get a D!" pep talk aimed at raising their self-esteem, which everyone knows boosts academic performance. Oops.

Compared with the other e-mail recipients, the D and F students who got the self-esteem injection performed notably worse on later tests. It has been 20 years since self-esteem became a household word and an educational mantra. The watershed moment came in 1986, when California funded a task force to increase the self-esteem of state residents, based on arguments that the \$245,000 annual cost would more than pay for itself in reduced welfare dependency, unwanted pregnancy, school failure, crime and drug addiction. With that, the self-esteem movement was off and running, preaching that one's beliefs about oneself have important consequences no matter what the underlying reality. Healthy self-esteem was to be the wellspring from which wonderful outcomes flowed.

Now, the most exhaustive study ever finds that programs to raise self-esteem fall woefully, even comically, short.

In the case of the struggling students, the likely reason the self-esteem intervention backfired speaks volumes. Students work hard partly because it helps them do better academically; 95s feel better than 65s. But "an intervention that encourages them to feel good about themselves regardless of work may remove the reason to work hard—resulting in poorer performance," suggest psychologist Roy Baumeister and colleagues in a monograph to be published next month in *Psychological Science in the Public Interest*. (The four were tapped by the American Psychological Society to undertake the study.) If you get to feel good without learning Maxwell's equations or the causes of the Korean War, why bother?

It isn't just school performance. From the 200-plus studies they analyzed, the APS group found no evidence that boosting self-esteem (by therapeutic interventions or school programs) results in better job performance, lowered aggression or reduced delinquency. And "high self-esteem does not prevent children from smoking, drinking, taking drugs, or engaging in early sex," it concluded.

Of course, self-esteem and school or job performance are correlated. But long overdue scientific scrutiny points out the foolishness of supposing that people's opinion of themselves can be the *cause* of achievement. Rather, high-esteem is the *result* of good performance.

Boosting self-esteem without helping people learn more or perform better does not bring higher achievement at school or work (and can backfire, as our D and F students show). And speaking of backfiring, high self-esteem fosters experimentation, which may increase teenage indulgence in sex, alcohol or drugs.

One solid link does seem to exist between higher self-esteem and performance. The higher your opinion of yourself, the more likely you are to persist in the face of failure. It is left as an exercise for the reader to decide whether this is a desirable character trait. Sometimes, isn't it better to just cut and run?

Self-esteem proponents have also fallen into the trap of taking people at their word. People high in self-esteem report that they're more likable and have better relationships than do those with low self-esteem. But "this is true mainly in their own minds," says Prof. Baumeister, a psychology professor at Florida State University, Tallahassee. Objective measures typically find the opposite, undercutting the claim that high self-esteem brings superior social skills.

Even the National Association for Self-Esteem is backpedaling. President J.D. Hawkins, who criticizes scientists for confusing "healthy self-esteem" with narcissism, argues that "self-esteem is more than just feeling good about yourself. It's about being socially and individually responsible."

Still, it's a popular product. "People contact us daily saying they need help with their self-esteem," says Mr. Hawkins, who notes the widespread use of the "Esteem Builders" program in K-12 education.

Amid the ashes of self-esteem, the APS team finds one benefit: High self-esteem makes you happier. But that jolly outcome ensues whether your self-esteem is justified or **delusional**.

As we persist in praising children even for mediocre work and trivial accomplishments, I can't resist ending with a plea from the APS scientists: "Psychologists should reduce their own self-esteem a bit and humbly resolve that next -time they will wait for a more thorough and solid empirical basis before making policy recommendations to the American public."

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