Exercise
UK English

What Do People Think About Themselves?

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What Do People Think About Themselves?

Description

Low self-esteem is characterised as a negative sense of the self and co-occurs with many other mental health problems. Although not formally represented in the diagnostic manuals it is nevertheless a distinct and treatable psychological difficulty.

People are not born with low self-esteem. Instead, we develop ideas about ourselves and our place in the world as a result of our life experiences. People who experience enough positive reinforcement, praise, love, and acceptance are more likely to develop positive self-beliefs. Those who suffer experiences of adversity, trauma, criticism, bullying, and neglect are more likely to experience low self-esteem. Known predictors of low self-esteem include peer victimisation (van Geel et al, 2018), childhood trauma (Weindl et al, 2018), maltreatment (Bolger, 1998), and chronic illness (Pinquart, 2013).

The cognitive behavioural theory of low self-esteem proposes that negative self-beliefs are self-reinforcing: once activated, they can bias the way that an individual perceives, remembers, thinks, and feels (Fennell, 1997). Treatment of low self-esteem involves understanding one's negative self-beliefs and their origin; becoming aware of the processes that maintain one's negative self-belief (including cognitive biases, safety seeking and avoidance behaviours); testing whether such globally negative summaries (and the predictions made in their wake) are fair and accurate; and developing healthier beliefs and assumptions.

What Do People Think About Themselves? is a 'conversation starter' exercise designed for children and young people to explore how self-beliefs are developed. Clinically, the purpose of the exercise is to help young people to make links between experiences and self-beliefs in a de-centered (and potentially less threatening) way.

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Instructions

"Would you be willing to look at these people's stories with me? Imagine how each person feels, and what they might think of themselves."

Helpful questions to explore ideas about self-esteem may include:

- What might <the children mentioned in the vignette> think about themselves?
- What words would they use to describe themselves?
- Why do these children use different words to describe themselves? Where have those words come from?
- What words do you use to describe yourself? What things have happened to you that make you see yourself in this way? Where have those words come from?
- Sometimes people describe themselves using only a few short words like 'not good enough', 'unlovable', or 'defective'. Is that fair? Can you really 'sum up' a whole person using so few words?
- Were any of these children born thinking this way about themselves?
- If <a child mentioned in the vignette> was your friend, what would you want to do for them?

References

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van Geel, M., Goemans, A., Zwaanswijk, W., Gini, G., & Vedder, P. (2018). Does peer victimization predict low self-esteem, or does low self-esteem predict peer victimization? Meta-analyses on longitudinal studies. *Developmental Review*, 49, 31-40.

Pinquart, M. (2013). Self-esteem of children and adolescents with chronic illness: a meta-analysis. *Child: Care, Health and Development*, 39(2), 153-161.

Weindl, D., Knefel, M., Glück, T. M., Tran, U. S., & Lueger-Schuster, B. (2018). Motivational capacities after prolonged interpersonal childhood trauma in institutional settings in a sample of Austrian adult survivors. *Child Abuse & Neglect*, 76, 194-203.

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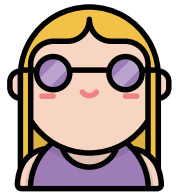
What Do People Think About Themselves?

Paul has lots of energy and finds it hard to sit still. He is good at sports, but his teachers are often cross with him in class. He struggles to sit still and be quiet even when he tries his hardest.

I am .....

Julie wants to be popular. She tries to wear the same clothes and listen to the same music as other children. She just can't seem to get it right.

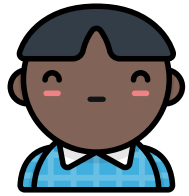


I am .....

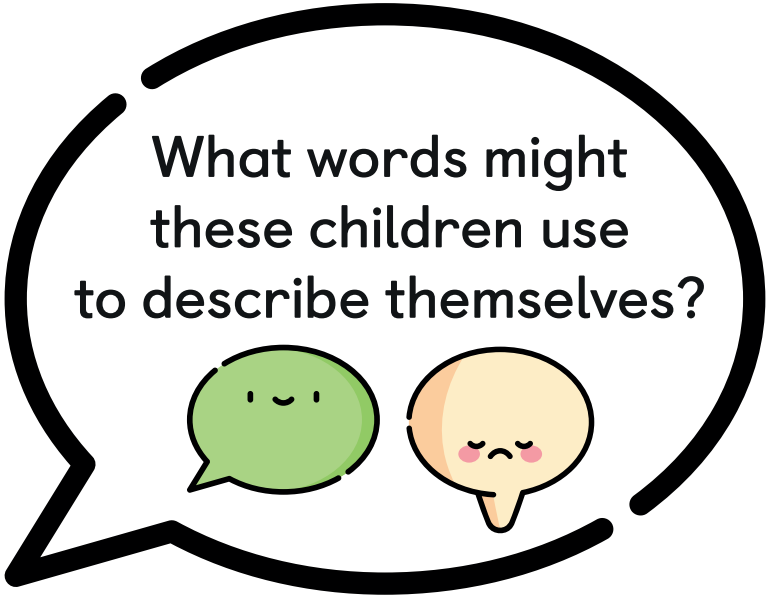
Lisa was sick and in hospital. She was off school for a year and had to rejoin another class. Physically she feels weaker, and she gets tired very easily.

I am .....

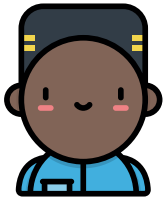
Logan has been kept back a year at school. He finds reading particularly difficult – words don't stay still on the page for him. His Dad doesn't think he's trying hard enough.



I am .....



John had to live with his grandparents after his mother died. He has a group of good friends at school, and he knows that he is liked for who he is.



I am .....

Sally can't do anything right. Her parents tell her off and compare her to her sister, who does everything perfectly.

I am .....

Jim's family does not have much money, and he wears hand-me-down clothes. He is bullied at school: he is called names and looked down on. He doesn't have anyone to talk to.

I am .....

What words would you use to describe yourself?

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