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Humility versus Self-Esteem: Implications for Research and Practice

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The subject of self-esteem has become a fairly controversial one in the United States. During the 1970's, increasing self-esteem was seen as somewhat of a panacea for many social ills, including being an important step toward solving problems in the schools. The State of California developed a task force to study and report on the subject of self-esteem. The final report contained the following statement regarding the vision of the task force:

Today many Californians have a new vision to build a society in which self-esteem is nurtured and people naturally assume personal and social responsibility. (Mecca, 1990, p. 9)

The report also included the idea that "self-esteem and responsibility must be woven into the total education program." It was felt that increasing self-esteem and personal responsibility would be a significant factor in rehabilitating prison inmates, helping people get off welfare, combating the problem of gangs, and reducing teenage pregnancies. However, there is little evidence to suggest that any of the self-esteem programs that were developed were able to make a significant impact on any of these serious social ills.

Many of the initial studies in the 1970's and 1980's showed a positive correlation between self-esteem and

academic performance. It was, then, assumed that high self-esteem led to better school performance. However, several researchers now question the interpretation of these results. Roy Baumeister and colleagues (1999, 2003) conclude, after reviewing the literature, that the modest correlations between self-esteem and school performance do not indicate that high self-esteem leads to good performance. Instead, they suggest, high self-esteem is partly the result of good school performance. They found that efforts to boost the self-esteem of pupils have not been shown to improve academic performance. Additionally, Baumeister, et al. (2003) stated that it was not clear how self-esteem programs in the schools may affect students, because other variables such as citizenship are usually targeted at the same time. An earlier researcher (Bean, 1991) concluded that there was "scant evidence" that the packaged programs for building

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self-esteem that were used in educational settings actually accomplished what they were attended to do.

It is helpful to define the concept of self-esteem, inasmuch as there are numerous ways researchers use the term. Mary Guidon (2002) proposed a useful working definition: self-esteem can be defined as the "evaluative component of the self," recognizing its dependence upon both self-appraisal of abilities and attributes and feedback from the external world. Guidon (2002) also divided self-esteem into two main parts: (1) global self-esteem and (2) selective self-esteem (related to specific qualities and situations). Most researchers are referring to what Guidon would term global self-esteem when discussing the topic of self-concept.

One point that the majority of researchers appear to agree upon is that low self-esteem is correlated with a sense of personal unhappiness (Haugen, 2002; Baumeister et al., 2003). Diener & Diener (1995) performed a major international study involving 13,000 college students and found a .47 correlation between self-esteem and happiness. Murrell, Meeks & Walker (1991) interviewed a sample of a 1,000 adults at 6-month intervals for several years and found that low self-esteem predisposed people to depression. Nicholas Emler (2002) performed a review of longitudinal studies and found that low self-esteem was not a risk factor for delinquency, violence toward others, drug use, alcohol abuse, educational attainment, or racism. However, he did find that the clearest effects of low self-esteem were related to what he called "private troubles" — depression, suicide attempts, being bullied, eating disorders and teen pregnancies.

Actual Treatment Approaches

A cursory review of more than two thousand self-esteem articles in the literature of the past two years reveals very few studies that directly attempted to modify self-esteem; the vast majority were either theoretical or examinations of correlations between measures of self-esteem and other variables. This supports a conclusion that changing self-esteem is considered to be a very complex undertaking. That is, self-esteem — like many other personality variables — is fairly stable over time, and therefore can be expected to be difficult to alter (see Trzesniewski, Donnellan & Robins, 2003). Additionally, available paradigms for

self-concept may not be easily broken down into simple therapeutic steps.

Two recent studies did obtain positive results in increasing self-esteem (Hall & Tarrrier, 2003; O'Dea, 2002). These two studies had some important similarities. Both employed concepts of self-worth that are often associated with religious thought and philosophy — such concepts as: the *universal worth* of humanity, the importance of focusing on one's own *character development*, and *avoiding comparisons* with others.

Hall & Tarrrier (2003) had psychotic patients identify specific behavioral examples to provide evidence of positive self-attribute. Clinical benefits of increased self-esteem, decreased psychotic symptomatology, and improved social functioning were largely maintained at 3-month follow-up. Jennifer O'Dea (2002) developed a program called "Everybody's Different" in order to improve the body image, eating attitudes, and eating behaviors of young male and female adolescents by focusing on developing their self-esteem. The program focused on expanding 7th and 8th grade students' self-identity and sense of self-worth in nine weekly lessons by encompassing the many aspects of the self besides physical appearance. In addition, the program activities promoted themes of self-acceptance, respect and tolerance, and reduced self-expectations of perfection. This program significantly improved the body image of students, as compared with controls.

Two experiments are clearly an insufficient number from which to draw strong conclusions (these findings do need to be replicated). Another concern is the small number of subjects in the Hall & Tarrrier (2003) study: the treatment group had only ten subjects and the control group eight. Also, it is not clear that Hall & Tarrrier's work, though laudable, could readily generalize from their subject population of psychotic patients to more normal groups. Although O'Dea (2002) involved a greater number of subjects, only one aspect of self-esteem (body image) was measured; it is not known whether this particular change (based on body image) would generalize to overall self-esteem. At present, there appears here to be no clearly empirically-validated method for improving self-concept. In this regard, James Beane (1991) made a very telling statement in his seminal article in *Educational Leadership*: "Clearly, enhancing self-esteem is not the soft or simple work that so many people believe it to be" (1991, p. 30).

Directions for Progress

As one considers the recent literature on the subject of self-esteem, it is apparent that there are serious concerns about the heavy emphasis placed upon self-esteem by the U.S. education system and the California Task Force in particular (Bower, 2003; Begley & Rogers, 1998; Kaplan, 1995; Marzano, 1993). Beane (1991) perhaps summarizes it best:

There has been considerable backlash against the California Task Force report on self-esteem, which is seen by many people as an unsupported statement of New Age, pop psychology "fluff" (Beane, 1991, p.27)

One effect of this counter-reaction has been to add more momentum to the movement in the country to "get back to the old-fashioned values" of *self-control*, *greater personal responsibility*, and *respect for authority*. Some notable changes have occurred in society as part of this conservative thrust: more schools are again requiring school uniforms and there is a greater demand for accountability, including the idea of requiring that students pass standardized tests to graduate from high school. In the corrections area, there is an increase in "boot camp" programs for youthful criminals, and many states now require mandatory sentences for repeat offenders.

One can certainly agree in light of the considerable amount of research over the past three decades that the California Task Force (Mecca, 1990) was overly optimistic in predicting the advantages of raising self-esteem. However, even though higher self-esteem does not appear to correlate highly with academic learning or decreasing antisocial behaviors, it clearly is associated with good mental health. Those individuals with lower self-esteem are more vulnerable to depression, suicide, victimization, teen-age pregnancy, and eating disorders. These particular problems have substantial ramifications for society.

Unfortunately, the professional mental health community appears to have developed few sound theories and techniques that can be utilized to strengthen self-esteem. Despite many years of serious research on this subject, there appears to be a scarcity of answers in the professional literature that can engender real confidence.

The Truth about Self-Esteem

Self-esteem certainly does not work quite like one might suppose. At least on the surface, the rules about

self-esteem do not appear very orderly or predictable.

High self-esteem does not guarantee good character or high performance. Spencer (2002) found that boys with high self-esteem were 2.4 times more likely to initiate intercourse than boys with low self-esteem. College athletes who might be expected to have very healthy self-concept because of their accomplishments had low self-esteem if they had a maladaptive sense of perfectionism (Gotwals, Dunn & Wayment, 2003). Low self-esteem predicts eating disorders (Button, 1996; Cervera, 2003; Ghaderi, 2001; Gual, 2002), but narcissistic high self-esteem is associated with aggression (Campbell, Foster & Finkel, 2002; Evans, 1999). High self-esteem is considered by many to be a very positive trait, but Crocker (2002) found that the external contingencies of self-worth, especially appearance, have high costs for stress, aggression, drug/alcohol use, and eating disorders. The United States education system has for a long while encouraged the building of self-esteem in order to facilitate learning (Mecca, 1990). However, despite American youth scoring higher than Korean and Japanese youth on confidence about their math abilities and feelings of being approved of by parents and teachers, they scored significantly lower on math tests (Stevenson, 1987).

One might ask what went wrong as social scientists studied self-esteem. Why has clarity been so hard to achieve? It is important to note that while the ordinary people may be focused on surpassing their peers in order to improve self-esteem, virtually no serious researcher advocates this type of approach. There seems to be agreement on some basic concepts such as the universal worth of humanity, the need to avoid comparisons, and the importance of character values and social responsibility. The California Task Force (Mecca, 1990) built their research on a definition for self-esteem that appears to have such sound roots. The definition for self-esteem as contained in the official Task Force document includes:

- Appreciating my own worth and importance and having the character to be accountable for myself and to act responsibly toward others.
- Appreciating that my own worth and importance does not depend on measuring the quantity or quality of my abilities against those of someone else.
- Living with integrity is essential to valuing ourselves.
- Accepting ourselves does not discount the need for change and growth. (Mecca, 1990 pp. 18-21)

It has, however, been difficult to fully understand self-esteem because of a basic flaw in the self-esteem paradigm adopted by most researchers and educators: that flaw is a bias toward assuming that high self-esteem is always a desirable quality. Dr. Albert Ellis, the noted cognitive psychologist, insightfully commented regarding this, “self-esteem is the greatest sickness known to man or woman because it is conditional” (as cited in Epstein, 2001, p.72) – while low self-esteem is clearly associated with unhappiness, the relationship of high self-esteem to happiness is far more complex.

There is clear evidence that efforts to maintain or improve self-esteem can be problematic. Jennifer Crocker (2002) found that there are significant costs associated with pursuing high self-esteem. These costs include damage to relationships, increased stress, decreased ability to learn, and vulnerability to substance abuse and eating disorders. Bushman & Baumeister (1998) found that narcissists, who as a group score high on self-esteem, tend to be more aggressive than other individuals when provoked by an insult.

Humility and Self-Esteem

It may be that it is more advantageous and less risky to maintain a realistic and stable (i.e., non-reactive) self-concept than to seek to have a high self-concept. A midrange firmly-grounded sense of self-esteem might be more conducive to life satisfaction and good social relations than a vacillating or distorted high self-esteem. Along these lines, some researchers and philosophers have suggested that problems in self-concept may be best managed by focusing on increasing one’s humility. Only 110 articles on *humility* appear in the EBSCO host research database, compared to 2,796 articles on *self-esteem*. These numbers pertain to scholarly peer-reviewed journals. Most of the articles on humility are theoretical – only a few explain specific techniques – and the majority appear in journals which focus on either religion or philosophy.

Steven Sandage & Tina Wiens (2001) advocate the more religious view of recognizing all individuals as having equal value and believing that basic self-worth follows from the status of being children of God. They also suggest that the way to incorporate this egalitarian idea is to practice the virtue of humility and to move away from comparisons with others. Other theorists and researchers favoring the use of humility are Tangey (2000) and Exline (2000).

Baumeister & Exline (1999) linked pride to high self-esteem, specifically suggesting that prideful people might be so self-focused that they would put their needs above the welfare of the group. Jennifer Crocker (2002) recommended establishing less costly, more *user-friendly* methods for enhancing self-esteem. She suggested four main possibilities:

- self-affirmation,
- abandoning dysfunctional or external contingencies for worth,
- non-contingent self-esteem (e.g. every person has worth), and
- shifting goals from self-focused to other directed larger goals. (Crocker, 2002, pp. 610-13)

John Means (1990) provided some specific techniques for helping individuals learn to practice humility. His main intent was to help aggressive individuals learn better social skills. He advocated a four-point approach of:

- accepting one’s real inadequacies,
- recognizing that no one has complete control over other people,
- taking a general attitude of patience with others, and
- developing empathy. (Means, 1990, p. 214)

However, Means (1990) did not conduct research experiments or scientifically measure changes. Emmons (2000) says that to be humble means to have *a sense of self-acceptance, an understanding of one’s imperfections, and to be free from arrogance and low self-esteem*. This particular definition seems to very well represent the ideas of other philosophers and religionists in the literature. Notwithstanding the general agreement on the definition of humility, it appears that research on humility has been hampered by both a lack of precise methodology for bringing about changes in self-concept and an absence of controlled experiments.

Pride and Self-Esteem

People tend to view things in set “mental frameworks.” These models are called *paradigms*. Sometimes change is only possible by considering a problem and its solution in a totally new way – so a complete transformation in thought becomes necessary. True and lasting improvement in self-concept is only possible if there is a dramatic change in the way the problem is conceptualized.

There is an old story about a sailing ship blown off

course by storms near the eastern coast of South America. After the storm there was a great calm, and the ship drifted for many days because of lack of wind to fill the sails. The crew eventually ran out of fresh water to drink, and they feared they would perish from thirst. Their hope was kindled when they saw a sail on the horizon. They fired their cannon to hail the other vessel and frantically cried out for water when it came closer. The reply from the other ship's captain was short and to the point: "Lower the buckets into the sea and drink." They did not respond at first. This did not fit their model for obtaining water at sea. They knew that drinking salt water when dehydrated can cause death. The other captain shouted again, "Lower your buckets into the sea." Finally they complied. They filled their buckets and carefully tasted the contents. To their amazement it was fresh water. The ships were floating near the mouth of the Amazon River. The outflow from this mighty river is so prodigious that the water in the ocean at its mouth is fresh as far as 70 miles out to sea (see Richey, 2002).

It would be wise to be willing to "lower the buckets," so to speak, and embrace a unique paradigm that is truly awesome in its implications. Much of the world seems overly focused on the concept of building self-esteem; however, building self-esteem in the popular sense is not a true gospel principle. God does not define self-esteem in the popular sense of the word. In fact, often what the world considers to be self-esteem the Lord would define as pride. Pride exists when worth is determined or earned through comparisons with others or personal achievement. The gospel teaches that, rather than attempting to increase self-esteem, the primary objective should be to *transcend* worldly self-esteem, to move away from questioning one's value. The ideal state is to have a sense of self-worth based on eternal truth. Thus, an accurate self-concept comes from understanding humanity's relationship with God and correctly appraising one's emotional/intellectual development as measured by God's perfect character.

The Lord loves his children perfectly; all individuals are of equal worth to God regardless of beauty, stature, or accomplishments. It follows that one does not have to *do* anything to gain personal value. To believe otherwise is to deny the word of God and to limit his goodness:

• I have said, ye are gods; and all of you are children of The Most High. (Psalms 82:6)

• The worth of souls is great in the sight of God. (D&C 18:10)

Nonetheless, worth must always be counterbalanced by humility – lest some begin to think themselves as having more value than others. Sailing ships would topple over from the weight of the mast if heavy material (ballast) was not placed in the lower part of the ship; humility provides ballast to mankind while progressing in knowledge, skill, earthly possessions and status.

About the same time that the best and brightest of California's educators and social scientists presented their *Final Report* (Mecca, 1990) regarding self-esteem, President Ezra Taft Benson (1989) articulated an alternative "final report" regarding self-esteem – which outlines significantly viable methods for improving self-worth. President Benson covered this topic extremely thoroughly in his 1989 April Conference address about pride (Benson 1989). He said: "In the scriptures there is no such thing as righteous pride — it is always considered a sin" (p. 4). He emphasized the concept that "the central feature of pride is enmity — enmity toward God and toward our fellowmen" (p. 4). President Benson went on to explain that pride places people in a state of opposition. He said that when we are prideful in our hearts, we resist the authority of God and suppose that we know more than he. He stated that the proud "pit their perceptions of truth against God's great knowledge" (p. 4). People are especially prone to do this in regards to their own affairs, about which they tend to feel quite expert.

President Benson further explained that pride is essentially *competitive* in nature. Men and women feel they have no worth unless they surpass others in a myriad of worldly contests and competitions. President Benson quotes C.S. Lewis to illustrate the spiritual realities of such situations:

We are tempted daily to elevate ourselves above others and diminish them. The proud make every man their adversary by pitting their interests, opinions, works, wealth, talents, or any other worldly measuring device against others. In the words of C.S. Lewis [1952, pp. 109-110], "Pride gets no pleasure out of having something, only out of having more of it than the next man ... It is the comparison that makes you proud: the pleasure of being above the rest. Once the element of competition is gone, pride has gone." (Benson, 1989, p. 4)

President Benson then declared the profound insight that even those with low self-esteem and a lack of the worldly trappings of success can be guilty of pride:

Pride is a sin that can readily be seen in others, but is rarely admitted in ourselves. Most of us consider pride to be a sin of those on the top, such as the rich and learned, looking down at the rest of us. There is, however, a far more common ailment among us and that is pride from the bottom looking up. (Benson, 1989, p. 5)

President Benson also suggested that gossiping, fault-finding, murmuring, coveting, envying and such sins are all directly related to pride. This is true because they all have to do with competition. Seeking glory for oneself leads to evil (see Mormon 8:36). If only winners can have self-esteem, then ultimately there must be a lot of losers. The battle for pride produces many casualties. Things can get very ugly when people are desperately fighting for glory. The fighting is intense because no one wants to lose, and feel that he/she is worthless. It becomes, then, a fight for emotional survival. And when people are fighting for survival, few rules of conduct apply; it becomes “dog-eat-dog” and “every-man-for-himself.” Then, of course, we resent those who surpass us, and hold in contempt those below us on the scale of success.

When individual interests are placed above others’ welfare, we tend to get off track. Satan was seeking personal glory when he put forth his own plan of salvation – and in doing so, planned to take the honor from God (Moses 4:1-4). This is so very much like the most evil kings on the earth; i.e., those who did not care for the welfare of their people but only for their own pride and evil desires (see Alma 43:6-8, Alma 49:10).

In many ways pride has become Satan’s greatest weapon. It makes men fight among themselves for recognition. It causes people to hate themselves when they cannot achieve “greatness” or “perfection” (Benson, 1989). Worry about gaining others’ approval creates constant tension and turmoil. Pride becomes a thorn in the side which can greatly interfere with the quest for eternal salvation. Individuals who feel they are worthless are very vulnerable – and thus become easy prey for Satan’s other temptations. They forget who they really are, and out of pain and discouragement they give up eternal goals. Satan even wins when people compete

successfully and feel really good about themselves: these individuals become so puffed up and self-assured that they feel they know more than God and do not need him; they stop caring about those who are less fortunate (and thus, in their eyes, less important). The scriptures give many warnings about the dangers of pride. Consider the following scriptural verses:

- And the large and spacious building, which thy father saw, is vain imaginations and the pride of the children of men. And a great and a terrible gulf divideth them; yea, even the word of the justice of the Eternal God. (1 Nephi 12:18)
- And the hand of providence hath smiled upon you most pleasingly, that you have obtained many riches; and because some of you have obtained more abundantly than that of your brethren ye are lifted up in the pride of your hearts, and wear stiff necks and high heads because of the costliness of your apparel, and persecute your brethren because ye suppose that ye are better than they. And now, my brethren, do ye suppose that God justifieth you in this thing? Behold, I say unto you, Nay. But he condemneth you, and if ye persist in these things his judgments must speedily come unto you. (Jacob 2:13-14)

President Benson (1989) additionally commented about *false pride*, pointing out that it is possible to have low self-esteem and to be prideful at the same time:

The proud do not receive counsel or correction easily. Defensiveness is used by them to justify and rationalize their frailties and failures. The proud depend upon the world to tell them whether they have value or not. Their self-esteem is determined by where they are judged to be on the ladders of worldly success. They feel worthwhile as individuals if the numbers beneath them in achievement, talent, beauty, or intellect are large enough. Pride is ugly. It says, “If you succeed, I am a failure.” (Benson, 1989, p. 6)

Clinical Application

It appears that society has become so captivated with the idea of building popular self-esteem, it is difficult to accept that such a focus could be a false doctrine. In fact, on a personal level, it can be quite challenging to give up one’s own inner desires for praise and recognition. After all, pride

does feel very good momentarily. When first explained, this concept of forsaking pride amazes many clients. They say such things as, “Why would you try to succeed at all?” or “Why have goals then?” One client actually asked, “Why would you even get out of bed in the morning?” The answer to these questions is, obviously, that higher goals provide more meaningful motivation: one should do well in a career to provide for family, also there is the satisfaction in learning to do a job well and accomplishing a task. The noblest goal, of course, is to serve others. The Savior’s mission had only to do with benefiting others. He was chosen to suffer and sacrifice so all might be saved, and he willingly gave the glory to the Father. Cultivating the Spirit of the Lord should be a chief aim in life, not seeking pride or fame. Pride is no more capable of making one happy than is cocaine. Pride promotes an illusion, a great deception:

- Pride is the universal sin, the great vice. The antidote for pride is humility meekness, submissiveness. It is the broken heart and contrite spirit. (Benson, 1989, p. 6)
- Even so I would that ye should remember, and always retain in remembrance, the greatness of God, and your own nothingness, and his goodness and long-suffering towards you, unworthy creatures, and humble yourselves even in the depths of humility, (Mosiah 4:11)
- Yea, all of you be subject one to another, and be clothed with humility: for God resisteth the proud, and giveth grace to the humble. (1 Peter 5:5-6)
- And there was a strict command throughout all the churches that there should be no persecutions among them, that there should be an equality among all men; That they should let no pride nor haughtiness disturb their peace; that every man should esteem his neighbor as himself, laboring with their own hands for their support. (Mosiah 27:3)

The Blessings of Humility

The commandment to be humble is very clear. What is often lacking is sufficient faith to trust that humility is actually a prerequisite for true happiness. However, consider the great blessings the Lord has promised for the humble as contained within the following scriptures (emphasis added):

- Wax stronger and stronger in their humility, and firmer and firmer in the faith of Christ, unto the filling their souls with *joy and consolation*. (Helaman 3:35)

- But be meek and lowly of heart, for such shall find *rest* to their souls. (Alma 37:34)
- Humble yourselves in the depths of humility, and be *filled with the love of God*. (Mosiah 4:11-12)
- Be thou humble and the Lord shall give thee *answers to thy prayers*. (D&C 112:10)
- If they humble themselves before me, I will *make weak things strong* unto them. (Ether 12:27)
- Whosoever humbleth himself shall *be exalted*. (Luke 14:11)
- By humility are *riches and honor and life*. (Proverbs 22:4)
- Let him that is ignorant *learn wisdom* by humbling himself. (D&C 136:32)
- *Honor* shall uphold the humble in spirit. (Proverbs 29:3)

Humility is actually the key to self-esteem problems as well as the gateway to spiritual power. Though it seems a paradox that it could be so effective, humility is quite possibly the most powerful psychological tool available.

The California Task Force asserted in their definition of self-esteem that that we all have intrinsic worth and one’s worth should not depend upon surpassing others. However, without the stabilizing force of humility it is almost impossible to resist the temptation to compare one’s self to others. Pride feels very good on a temporary basis and is quite addicting – unfortunately, though, measuring against others invariably leads self-concepts to become unstable: there is always someone better. Only if individual character and abilities are juxtaposed with the shining light of the Savior of the world can a balanced perspective about worth be maintained (see Figure 1).

STEPS FOR IMPROVING SELF-WORTH

1. Accept that Worth is a Gift

All human beings have equal worth by virtue of being God’s children. This worthiness does not depend upon individual efforts. Further, experiencing one’s value to God is relationship-based.

Individual human power and goodness is so small in comparison, that people cannot even begin to give back comparably what the Lord has given. Heavenly Father has given this earth to live on, physical bodies, sustenance, scriptures, prophets, inspiration through the gift

of the Holy Ghost, the Atonement – as well as the very power to live and breathe. And besides all these blessings, God will reward with unlimited richness and power to those who prove faithful in this life:

I say unto you, my brethren, that if you should render all the thanks and praise which your whole soul has power to possess, to that God who has created you, and has kept and preserved you, and has caused that ye should rejoice, and has granted that ye should live in peace one with another – I say unto you that if ye should serve him who has created you from the beginning, and is preserving you from day to day, by lending you breath, that ye may live and move and do according to your own will, and even supporting you from one moment to another – I say, if ye should serve him with all your whole souls yet ye would be unprofitable servants. (Mosiah 2:20-21)

Oftentimes individuals will say, “I don’t deserve to be happy (or forgiven).” The best answer for this is to agree that, indeed, they do not deserve it – it is a divine gift; Christ suffered that they might inherit the joy of the celestial kingdom:

O how foolish, and how vain, and how evil, and devilish, and how quick to do iniquity, and how slow to do good, are the children of men; yea, how quick to hearken unto the words of the evil one, and to set their hearts upon the

vain things of the world! Yea, how quick to be lifted up in pride; yea, how quick to boast, and do all manner of that which is iniquity; and how slow are they to remember the Lord their God, and to give ear unto his counsels, yea, how slow to walk in wisdom’s paths! Behold, they do not desire that the Lord their God, who hath created them, should rule and reign over them; notwithstanding his great goodness and his mercy towards them, they do set at naught his counsels, and they will not that he should be their guide. O how great is the nothingness of the children of men; yea, even they are less than the dust of the earth. For behold, the dust of the earth moveth hither and thither, to the dividing asunder, at the command of our great and everlasting God. (Helaman 12:4-8.)

For we labor diligently to write, to persuade our children, and also our brethren, to believe in Christ, and to be reconciled to God; for we know that it is by grace that we are saved, after all we can do. (2 Nephi 25:23)

Humanity’s main choice is whether or not to choose to receive the gift of worth. Consider the options: what will happen if this gift is refused and each individual’s worth as a child of God is denied? What will be the life consequences if we ignore the Atonement and insist on being “perfect,” or insist on punishing ourselves for our sins?

On the other hand, what will the results be if the Lord’s gift of worth is accepted? What would our attitude be? It would be inspiring to follow the example of Alma the Younger (Mosiah 27:28-37) who gratefully accepted the mercies of the Savior and rose from the depths of guilt and despair to mightily serve the Lord the rest of his days. Accepting the gift of worth is the first step toward developing a truly positive self-concept.

Heavenly Father does ask some things in return for his gifts. The sacrifice the Lord asks from each individual is to give up willfulness and pride. He seeks obedience and not mortal opinion regarding how to live the gospel. His instructions include how to view ourselves and others. Although many people feel emotionally driven to be self-punitive or prideful, being willing to accept the Lord’s love and direction can lead to wonderful positive changes:

- Thou shalt offer a sacrifice unto the Lord thy God in righteousness, even that of a broken heart and a contrite spirit. (D&C 59:8)

Figure 1. Differences between pride and self-worth

<i>Self-esteem (pride)</i>	<i>Humility and Self-worth</i>
Distorted view of self	True estimate of self
Competitive	Self-directed
Only a minority can win	All have worth
Trying to stay on top creates stress	Brings peace
Value is measured by status and talents	Worth comes from being a child of God
Those of lower status treated differently	All treated equally
Dependent upon the approval of others	Set one’s own achievable standards
Enemy to God	Humility as the gateway to spiritual power
Causes alienation and conflicts	Brings love and unity
Rejects counsel	Teachable
Vulnerable to depression	Resilient

- And now it came to pass that the burdens which were laid upon Alma and his brethren were made light; yea, the Lord did strengthen them that they could bear up their burdens with ease, and they did submit cheerfully and with patience to all the will of the Lord. (Mosiah 24:15)

2. Strengthening the Inner Self

Elder James E. Faust (2003) clarified several extremely important points of doctrine in a very straightforward and eloquent manner. Some of the main points he made were as follows:

- Man’s spirit is not perfect, but must be “purged and cleansed of transgression.”
- The basic program of the Church is to transform the spirit within man, “to strengthen the inner self.”
- The inner soul with all that is stored within it, is what continues beyond this life. (Faust, 2003, p. 3)

The inner self can be strengthened in two main ways. The first way is to live so as to encourage the constant companionship of the Holy Ghost. The light from the Spirit of God transforms the soul in marvelous ways, enhancing abilities and changing one’s very desires.

In addition to the effects of the Holy Ghost, a part of strengthening the inner self comes from logical and wise self-talk. As important as it is to follow the Savior in performing the kinds of good deeds Christ practiced on earth, we must also learn to think like him. Cognitive therapy is based upon the A-B-C principle of Dr. Albert Ellis (1994); our thoughts affect our emotions. The inner man must be taught the basic principles of the gospel, including the worth of souls. It will become obvious that this self-instruction is necessary when a split between mind (knowledge/logic) and heart (emotion/desire) is felt. When these conflicts arise, it is necessary to reason within oneself until the truth becomes accepted:

- For as he thinketh in his heart, so is he. (Proverbs 23:7)
- A double-minded man is unstable in all his ways. (James 1:8)
- Behold, the Lord requireth the heart and a willing mind. (D&C 64:34)

Lifetime Achievement Award. Many individuals have made very significant progress in character development over the years, but generally do not recognize their

progress, seldom give themselves credit, and tend to compare themselves to others.

The following exercise highlights change over time and provides a good opportunity for recognizing personal progress: The therapist instructs the client to check the attributes that mostly apply to him/her on the Personal Strengths Inventory list below. The client then slowly reads aloud the list of qualities he/she has developed – “I am ...”, “I am...”, etc. This experience is invariably a very safe and positive one. It is helpful for the therapist to ask people how they feel after doing this exercise, and to point out that the inner self appreciates getting such positive feedback (see Figure 2).

Say Hello to Yourself. Self-worth is, basically, how a person chooses to view him/her self. God gave everyone a marvelous physical brain to aid in eternal progression. The conscious physical mind has its own sense of identity and acts as a tutor or guide to the *spiritual self* within. The importance of this remarkable relationship with the inner self must not be overlooked. People can demonstrate to their inner selves that they have value by improving self-care and meeting basic needs for food, rest, spirituality, socialization, and recreation.

Writing a letter to the inner self or performing a visual imagery exercise can both be very helpful ways to begin productive communication. In the visual imagery exercise, one’s present adult self speaks to an image of one’s self as a child (which can be considered to symbolically represent the inner spirit of man – see Brigham

Figure 2. Personal Strengths Inventory

Appreciative	Aware	Calm	Caring
Chaste	Cheerful	Compassionate	Confident
Conscientious	Considerate	Cooperative	Courageous
Creative	Curious	Dependable	Disciplined
Energetic	Enthusiastic	Fair	Faithful
Firm	Flexible	Forgiving	Fun
Generous	Gentle	Genuine	Grateful
Happy	Honest	Humble	Independent
Industrious	Insightful	Kind	Likable
Listener	Logical	Obedient	Open
Optimistic	Organized	Patient	Practical
Prudent	Quiet	Realistic	Receptive
Reliable	Respectful	Responsible	Sensitive
Serious	Sharing	Sincere	Spiritual
Strong	Supportive	Temperate	Tender
Tolerant	Trusting	Unique	Warm

Young, *Journal of Discourses* 6:332). Writing a letter can be an easier experience for those who want to begin slowly, or who are not totally comfortable with practicing visual imagery.

Although on the surface these types of exercises may seem silly or even illogical, they often can be very powerful and meaningful. More importantly, they provide some personal evidence that there is a relationship between spirit and mind. This type of work has proven extremely helpful for clients. The following is a format that can be used for developing a suitable introductory message (see Figure 3).

After this initial positive contact, one must follow through on the commitment to continually guide and support the inner person with constructive self-talk. It cannot be emphasized enough that this decision is a prerequisite for achieving emotional stability and peace of mind.

3. Self-acceptance

It would be terrific if everybody could simply accept themselves as having divine worth as children of God, and then just move on, never again to be bothered with self-esteem issues. But people are much more complicated than that. Although it may be doctrinally correct, very few individuals seem to be able to accept themselves unconditionally. Everyone seems to be far too aware of imperfections to be able to offer oneself blanket immunity from personal prosecution.

Some individuals have some very difficult standards to reach. The following are examples of common unrealistic goals:

- *Everyone must like me.*
- *I must be perfect.*
- *My parents must approve of me.*
- *I must be rich and successful.*
- *I must weigh 115 pounds.*
- *I must have a college degree and a professional career.*

Although these types of ideas are obviously rigid and illogical, people hold tight to such criteria because of strong subconscious forces, punishing themselves unmercifully whenever they fall short – and consequently suffering significantly.

Because people will continue to insist on judging themselves by unrealistic standards, it is therapeutic to suggest they switch to standards that are achievable and associated with short-term goals. Point out that clients actually have the power to do this! After all, they decided on the ones they are presently using. It's a good idea to suggest some more reasonable criteria, such as:

- *I will accept myself if I give a good effort on the tasks of each day and strive to be kind to others.*

Once such logical new standards are adopted, a close watch on everyday thoughts becomes very important, so as to not become self-critical – and end up deserting the new compact. Giving up negative self-statements is an important component of improving self-concept.

4. Utilizing the Power of Humility

It requires a great deal of personal effort to attempt to conduct oneself so as to be all knowing, wise, kind and good. That vain pretense provides absolutely no room for making mistakes. Reality has a way of dashing any attempts to maintain a perfect self-image, often leaving only despair. Additionally, an exalted view of self provides no explanation for everyone's many past errors. Underneath the false front lurks the awful idea that one is actually very inadequate, flawed, and bad. To avoid the pain caused by recognizing weakness, people choose not to think about their faults, and pretend they do not exist. If criticized, they become defensive and angry. The sad reality is that sooner or later the charade must end. Like an inflated Wall Street stock pushed beyond its true market value, the bubble of false pride must eventually burst. When this occurs, the individual feels utterly worthless and plunges into an abyss of despair and self-loathing.

Figure 3. Sample Format for Communication with the Inner Self

When speaking to the person within, it is helpful to use the same type of language used in priesthood blessings – the tone is compassionate, uplifting, and optimistic.

Dear inner self:

- Empathize with his/her difficult journey through life.
- Point out positive actions and accomplishments.
- Accept errors and shortcomings.
- Explain his/her great worth to you and Heavenly Father.
- Explain the role of sin and repentance in the Plan of Salvation.
- Promise to be kinder and more sensitive to his/her needs and feelings in the future.
- Offer other words of encouragement.

It is a set-up for a great fall to assume one must be superior in all activities of life and never make a mistake. The oft-suggested solution of making more positive remarks to self is helpful, but quite insufficient. There is an inner pressure to explain or rationalize frequent mistakes and past failures. Too often the only answer that seems to make sense is that one is “bad” or inherently flawed.

To deal with this kind of criticism, one must recognize and accept normal human (imperfect) nature. The truth is that everyone is completely dependent upon the atonement of Jesus Christ for salvation. As measured by divine standards, everyone has great weaknesses in every area, and all stand in need of daily repentance (Romans 3:23). This is the reality the Lord wishes us to accept:

For behold, this life is the time for men to prepare to meet God; yea, behold the day of this life is the day for men to perform their labors. And now, as I said unto you before, as ye have had so many witnesses, therefore, I beseech of you that ye do not procrastinate the day of your repentance until the end; for after this day of life, which is given us to prepare for eternity, behold, if we do not improve our time while in this life, then cometh the night of darkness wherein there can be no labor performed. (Alma 34:32-33)

The real mandate is to use Jesus Christ as the standard of excellence. This simple procedure tends to clarify things very quickly – and maintain a safe and humble state. It is helpful to contemplate the Savior’s qualities of wisdom, love, patience, humility, self-control, and his skills of leadership and communication. No one could compare to him in any area of life! But with a “God’s eye” view, all are eternal spiritual beings in the process of becoming gods. Everyone has a long, long way to go in eternal development. It’s easy to notice the imperfections of others, but it’s painful to acknowledge our own weaknesses. Actually, thought, accepting the reality of one’s weaknesses before God is painful only to false pride. Such an act of submission can take away all illusions and pretenses; true humility brings a wonderful peace of mind that is to be highly sought after.

For those who tend to struggle on the down side of self-esteem and have trouble seeing the good in themselves, humility offers a relatively easy way to improve one’s emotional state. Humility can be utilized as a form of psychological *ju-jitsu* or *judo* to neutralize the blows of

negativity inflicted by an unkind and highly competitive world (*ju-jitsu* and *judo* are Japanese systems of self-defense in which the individual yields to the opponent’s energy/strength and uses it against him).

The *Worth Protection Formula* uses the principle of humility to provide an antidote to the stinging barbs of criticism. It seems to work instantly and has no known negative side effects. The *Worth Protection Formula* gives individuals a powerful weapon for fighting self-criticism or hurtful remarks by others:

Teach them to never be weary of good works, but to be meek and lowly in heart; for such shall find rest to their souls. (Alma 37:34)

It simplifies the task of learning how to be sufficiently humble. Never let a single negative thought go unchallenged, be cause people *feel what they think*. The following formula can be used to maintain a sense of personal value in the face of intense judgment (see Figure 4).

An Example of Using the Worth Protection Formula:

A person gets a C on a big test and calls himself a “stupid loser.”

1. This is not totally true. I am not a complete loser. I generally do OK academically. Some of the professors in the program seem to respect my abilities. I have an overall 3.2 GPA.
2. It is true that I am not the brightest person in the program. I certainly struggle with physics.
3. However, I still have worth. I am a human being. I am a child of God.
4. There is still a chance to get a B in this class. I received an A- on the first test. I will plan to work with a tutor a few times to get through the most difficult material.

Figure 4. Worth Protection Formula

1. Is this criticism 100% accurate, or do I just strongly feel that way? What is the evidence that it is not totally true?
2. Describe the specific weakness or limitation that actually does exist. It is true that I: (Make sure to avoid using negative labels.)
3. But I still have worth. I am a human being, I am a child of God.
4. I appreciate about myself that... (Note positive qualities, past efforts in this area, or future plans for change.)

Changing Beliefs

There is an emphasis in some areas of psychology on understanding schemas, fixed inner beliefs about self or life (Koch, 2002). Experienced psychotherapists know that these conditioned ideas are highly resistant to change. Many individuals who have low self-worth and feel bad or worthless developed negative ideas about self

Figure 5. Common Mistaken Beliefs

- I am no good.
- I will always be depressed.
- I am unlovable.
- Things never change.
- I will never be successful.
- My sins can never be forgiven.
- I am unworthy unless I have my parents' approval.
- Everything is my fault.
- I cannot do anything right.
- I do not deserve to be happy.
- My feelings do not count.
- Unless I'm a superstar, I have no worth.

Figure 6. Critical Events Analysis

1. Choose a situation from the past that may be related to current concerns.
2. Recognize what your younger self was feeling and thinking at that time.
3. What explanation or belief did you develop at that time to understand the situation?
4. Does this idea appear to be totally true? Can you substitute a more logical interpretation?

Figure 7. History Change Technique

Theme Scripture: "And ye shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free" (John 8:32)

1. Perform a relaxation exercise.
2. Visualize the childhood event of concern in your mind.
3. Recognize what your younger self was feeling and thinking.
4. What explanations or beliefs did the child develop at the time to understand those events? (Say it out loud in the words of a child.)
5. Let your adult intelligence be a voice inside the child's mind. Talk to him/her and correctly interpret what is happening. (Don't forget to use the *Self-worth Protection Formula – It is true that:*) If appropriate, help the child say or do that which would have made things different or better.
6. After you have helped the child manage the event, have your adult self appear to him/her in a safe place and provide love and support.

in childhood. Problems often have their root in inner decisions which were made as children in response to false interpretations of painful events. These thoughts became firmly entrenched in the subconscious and continue to exert their negative influence throughout the course of the person's lifetime. Although this article cannot provide a thorough examination about how this particularly complex aspect of therapy works, a few suggestions are presented below (see Figure 5).

In doing history work, remember that self-esteem was formed in reaction to perceptions of how others viewed the individual in the past. These ideas, or schemas, can become so deeply impressed that later responses to them become automatic, without any conscious effort. These destructive false ideas must be identified and revised.

Once the faulty beliefs within the subconscious have been identified, the next step is to alter this negative conditioning. Without this type of deep change, improvements are often superficial, and there is a constant battle to avoid falling back into negative habits. Learning how to perform this important task of reprogramming is of immeasurable worth. It provides limitless possibilities for growth, and opens doors that previously may have seemed totally shut. My ideas for changing inner responses to the past were highly influenced by the work of Bob & Mary Goulding who developed the *Redecision Therapy* model (Goulding & Goulding, 1979).

Rewriting Subconscious Programs

The *Critical Events Analysis* is a method that helps bridge the intellectual gap between childhood and the present. It is a way to begin to make sense of the past without feeling all the intense attached emotions. Basically, the *Critical Events Analysis* involves writing down the answers to four questions about each past situation that may be related to current concerns. After recalling some of the pertinent events, write down the answers to the following questions (see Figure 6).

History Change Technique

After gaining some insight and new interpretations of the meanings of significant past events, the next step in the process involves creating a lasting change in the way the subconscious comprehends a specific type of situation. When the critical situation is "experienced" again (i.e., whether in reality or in imagination), take

advantage of superior adult logic and revise perspective. Putting oneself in circumstances similar to the original situations opens the inner chambers of the heart. In that crucial moment, use logic and adult will to refute erroneous beliefs and insert correct ones. Offending programming can be modified in an instant. It can be as simple (but really not so easy) as erasing a message on a blackboard and writing a new one with a piece of chalk (see Figure 7).

Once the false ideas unwittingly learned in childhood and adolescence have been negated, basic worth as human beings is much more easily accepted. Please note that this kind of *reparative* work is not always necessary. Individuals generally sense within themselves whether or not they need to revisit the past. Also, there are a few important safeguards to consider before conducting history change work: the client must have already demonstrated good skills in using cognitive techniques while emotionally aroused and also have expressed a sincere desire to explore the past. Additionally, the therapist should have received proper training and supervision in performing history change work, which often includes dealing with past traumatic events.

There are additional methods that can be used to more completely change one's reactions to the past. Such methods might include gestalt (Polster, 1974; Perls, 1969), hypnosis (Haley, 1993; Erickson, 2001), breath work (Sultanoff, 2002), visual imagery exercises (Lusebrink, 1990), Redecision Therapy (Goulding & Goulding 1979; Gladfelter, 1999), and others.

CONCLUSIONS

Although the Lord avoids the use of the popular concept of *self-esteem*, he does advise that his children build up their confidence:

Let thy bowels also be full of charity towards all men, and to the household of faith, and let virtue garnish thy thoughts unceasingly; then shall thy confidence wax strong in the presence of God; and the doctrine of the priesthood shall distil upon thy soul as the dew from heaven. The Holy Ghost shall be thy constant companion, and thy scepter an unchanging scepter of righteousness and truth; and thy dominion shall be an everlasting dominion, and without compulsory means it shall flow unto thee forever and ever. (D&C 121:45-46)

The Lord recommends that everyone maintain virtuous thoughts, pure and positive, which lead to good works. Men and women of faith who walk unhampered by the selfishness and fears associated with pride will be strengthened in all their righteous goals and can achieve great things. Confidence in this sense of the word appears to be connected to recognizing the power to be productive — to use one's talents and the inspiration of God to serve others and bless their lives.

President Ezra Taft Benson gave prophetic counsel in his address on pride (Benson, 1989). Taking his great message to heart, more directly incorporating humility into counseling and church work, will immeasurably strengthen one's capabilities and personal happiness.

There is a very pressing need for new methods for changing self-concept. As previously mentioned, there are very few empirical studies demonstrating an alteration in self-esteem in research subjects. This five-step approach for strengthening self-concept is based upon sound gospel principles and has been proven to be very helpful therapy. Naturally, the effectiveness of any technique or approach is in question until its utility is demonstrated by others and confirmed scientifically. This writer is willing to collaborate with any who might be interested in doing research on this important subject.

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