

Working on your Self-Esteem

**A Self-Help Guide to Building Self Esteem
Using Cognitive Behavioural Based Techniques**



The Nature of Self Esteem

This booklet explains how low self-esteem can affect people, how it develops, and what keeps it going. Practical self-help methods for overcoming low self-esteem are introduced so you can learn to use them yourself. These methods come from cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT for short). CBT has been found to be effective in treating many psychological difficulties, including depression and anxiety. This booklet may be useful as a self-help guide whether you are trying to overcome low self-esteem on your own or with professional support.

How do I know if I have low self-esteem?

Read and respond to the following statements as appropriately as you can. Be honest, there are no right or wrong answers.

Self-esteem statements	Yes	Sometimes / partly	No
My life experiences have taught me to value and appreciate myself			
I have a good opinion of myself			
I treat myself well and look after myself properly			
I like myself			
I give as much weight to my qualities, skills, and strengths as I do to my weaknesses and faults			
I feel I deserve other people's attention and time			
I feel good about myself			
I believe I am entitled to the good things in life			
I do not expect anymore of myself than I do of others			
I am kind and encouraging towards myself, rather than self-critical			

If you answered anything other than 'yes', and 'sometimes / partly', then this booklet could be of use to you and even if you have answered 'yes' to all statements, you may still benefit from the information that follows.

What is low self-esteem?

Having low self-esteem means having a low opinion of yourself. It affects people in different ways and to different degrees. Most people experience some degree of self-doubt in certain situations like at a job interview or when meeting a new group of people. However, low self-esteem may cause people to lack confidence in many situations, or to dislike themselves in a general way. Common signs of low self-esteem are listed below, showing how it affects thoughts, feelings, body state, behaviour, and relationships.

Thoughts

- Self-criticism
- Self-blame
- Self-doubt
- Ignore or discount praise, successes and strengths
- Focus on criticisms, weaknesses & mistakes

Emotional Feelings

- Sadness
- Anxiety
- Guilt
- Shame
- Frustration
- Anger

Behaviour

- Not looking after yourself
- Difficulty being assertive & speaking out
- Avoiding challenges & opportunities
- Shyness, avoiding eye contact, hesitancy
- Difficulty making decisions
- Perfectionism & working too hard

Body State

- Tension
- Tiredness
- Difficulty sleeping



Relationships / Environment

- Self-consciousness
- Worrying too much about what other people think of you
- Trying too hard to please other people
- Over-sensitivity to criticism

Think about how your level of self-esteem reflects your reactions in these areas. Think about your environment and relationships and the various different roles and situations you find yourself in at different times, which determine different levels of self-esteem and confidence. You may find your self-esteem alters depending on where you are, whom you are with, and what you are doing.

What causes low self-esteem?

Low self-esteem can be seen as an understandable reaction to past experiences. We start to form ideas about ourselves during early childhood based on how other people treat us. These early beliefs continue to be shaped by experiences as we grow up and after we become adults. This means that if another child were to grow up in our shoes and have similar experiences to us, then s/he might develop similar beliefs.

Low self-esteem usually stems from adverse experiences during childhood, but can also result from bad or traumatic experiences that occur in adulthood. Some people have clear ideas about what caused them to develop low self-esteem, but others find it puzzling. Some of the experiences that commonly lead to low self-esteem are listed below

- Physical, sexual or emotional abuse
- Physical or emotional neglect
- Rejection
- Being bullied
- Other traumatic events (e.g. bereavement, being assaulted, accidents, serious illness, losses)
- Excessive criticism
- Not enough affection or praise
- Being different to the people around us
- Parents having unrealistic expectations of us
- Parents having low self-esteem

Some causes of low self-esteem may be harder to identify than others, making it difficult to understand where it comes from. For instance, the experiences in the bottom half of the list may be harder to identify than those nearer the top. However, these less obvious experiences can still impact on self-esteem.

Bad experiences may lead us to develop low self-esteem if we see them as signs of personal inadequacy, rather than unfortunate

events that could in theory happen to anyone. It is very important to bear in mind that our perceptions and beliefs can be inaccurate, as explained below.

Beliefs are not facts

It may be possible to sum up the negative opinion of yourself in terms of one or two specific beliefs, such as “I’m unlovable”, “I’m not good enough”, “I’m unacceptable”, and so on. These fundamental beliefs are referred to as **Central Beliefs**, because they are thought to be central to self-esteem, and influence how we think, feel and behave.

Although our opinions of ourselves (i.e. **Central Beliefs**) can be realistic, they can also be inaccurate, outdated, or completely false. This is not surprising when we remember that these beliefs start to form during early childhood, before we have much understanding of relationships and the world around us. For example, Tim had been a normal lively three-year old when his parents lost a baby and started to have major marital problems. Consequently, Tim’s parents had less tolerance for his lively behaviour, and he was frequently shouted at and received little affection. Tim was not old enough to understand that his parents’ shouting and lack of affection was not his fault. He started to develop the **Central Belief** that he was not acceptable.

So although you may view your **Central Beliefs** as fact, they are more likely to be opinions based on your experiences and the signs you have received from others about the kind of person you are. If your experiences have generally been positive then your beliefs about yourself are likely to be just as positive. If your experiences have been mixed, like most people’s are, then you may have a range of different views and ideas about yourself, which you may apply flexibly depending on the situation. If your experiences have been generally negative, then your beliefs about yourself are likely to match. These lead to low self-esteem, which may have upset parts of your life. However, remember that beliefs about ourselves are likely to be opinion rather than fact and *opinions can be changed*.

Research shows that young children commonly blame themselves for events that are clearly not their fault, such as their parents getting divorced, or childhood abuse. It is also possible for people to develop beliefs that make perfect sense of their childhood experiences, but then become unrealistic or outdated during

adulthood. For example, a neglected child may understandably develop the belief “I’m not worth caring about”. However, this belief may persist during adulthood despite the person having contact with people who are caring and supportive. This is because it is normal for our **beliefs to be resistant to change**. This resistance plays a key role in keeping low self-esteem going, and is explained in the next section.

Summary

- Low self-esteem is an understandable reaction to past experiences.
- It often stems from childhood but it can also develop during adulthood
- The beliefs we develop about ourselves are opinions rather than facts, and can be inaccurate, outdated, or completely false

What Keeps the Problem Going?

This section explains how **negative biases**, unhelpful **Rules for Living** and **self-defeating behaviours** can keep low self-esteem going.

Negative Biases

Psychologists have discovered that our beliefs tend to influence how we view, make sense of, and remember our daily experiences. In particular, we tend to view new events in ways that match our existing beliefs. This normal, automatic process may help us simplify the complex world around us, so that we can react quickly to new events and information. However, this process also makes our beliefs resistant to change, and problems may arise if the beliefs we develop are unrealistic.

Low self-esteem (i.e. overly negative **Central Beliefs**) may lead people to ignore, discount, or forget positive information about themselves, such as strengths, achievements and compliments. It may also lead people to focus on negative things, such as

weaknesses, mistakes and criticism. Ignoring the positives and focussing on the negatives only strengthens overly negative **Central Beliefs**, and stops people from developing more realistic beliefs.

Example:

Sandra's childhood experiences led her to develop the **Central Belief** - "I'm unlovable". If anybody criticises her, or does not show her clear signs of friendliness, she automatically sees this as evidence that she is unlovable. On the other hand, when people are friendly and pay her compliments, she either does not notice or assumes that people are just being kind. Therefore this process keeps Sandra believing that she is unlovable.

Rules for Living

As with **Central Beliefs**, our **Rules for Living** are likely to be a reaction to our past experiences. We may develop certain rules to help us deal with and compensate for our **Central Beliefs**. We may not be aware of these rules, and may not have put them into words before. However, we can usually work out what they are from observing our behaviour patterns.

Examples of **Rules for Living** are shown in the following table:

	Central Belief	Rules for Living
Rachael	I'm not good enough	If I work extremely hard at work and do everything perfectly then I can't be a complete failure
Tim	I'm unacceptable I'm not worth caring about	If I don't let anyone get to know what I'm really like then people might think I'm okay
Sandra	I'm unlovable	If I please other people all the time then I might not be rejected
Allan	I'm stupid	If I don't try then I can't fail

Although these **Rules for Living** may have some pay-offs, such as making us feel better in the short-term, they can have disadvantages in the long-term. These rules can play a role in keeping low self-esteem going if they are unrealistic or too rigid. An example of an unrealistic and rigid rule is - "I must always please other people no matter what". A more realistic and helpful alternative might be - "I would like to be considerate to others most of the time".

Examples of short-term payoffs and long-term disadvantages

- Rachael's rules lead her to put all her energy into her work. She feels great when she does well at work, but frequently feels stressed and exhausted. She neglects other areas of her life and sees herself as a failure when she does not meet her unrealistic standards at work.
- Tim's rules lead him to have little contact with other people, hide his feelings, and to avoid being himself. In the short term this may reduce his anxiety about being rejected, but in the long-term it prevents him from discovering that people accept the 'real Tim', so he remains anxious about letting his guard down.
- Sandra's rules mean that she feels good when people praise her for her help and kindness. However, always putting others first causes Sandra to feel resentful at times and this makes her feel bad about herself. Her rule also stops her from realising that her true friends would still like her if she were assertive and fairer to herself.
- Allan's rules lead him to avoid challenges and opportunities to learn new skills. They help him to deal with his fear of failure in the short-term. In the long run his rules stop him finding out what he can achieve, and therefore stop him building self-confidence.

Patterns that maintain low self-esteem

If **Central Beliefs** are overly negative then they may lead to **negative biases** in how people view, make sense of and remember events. Low self-esteem can make people over-sensitive to aspects of their physical appearance, personality, work performance etc. and all shortcomings, flaws and weaknesses jump out and blind us to our positives. This serves to reinforce or create more **Rules for Living** to manage the parts we are not happy with. You may focus on all the things you do wrong and ignore all the things you do right.

Low self-esteem can also lead to **bias interpretation** insofar as you distort the meanings you attach to what you experience. For example, if something does not go well you may over-apply this experience, which leads to an over-generalised judgement of yourself – "typical, I always get it wrong". With bias interpretation, even positive experiences can be misinterpreted, like receiving a compliment from someone and assuming they don't mean it or are after a favour. There is a tendency for thinking to be biased in favour of self-criticism, rather than encouragement, acceptance or praise.

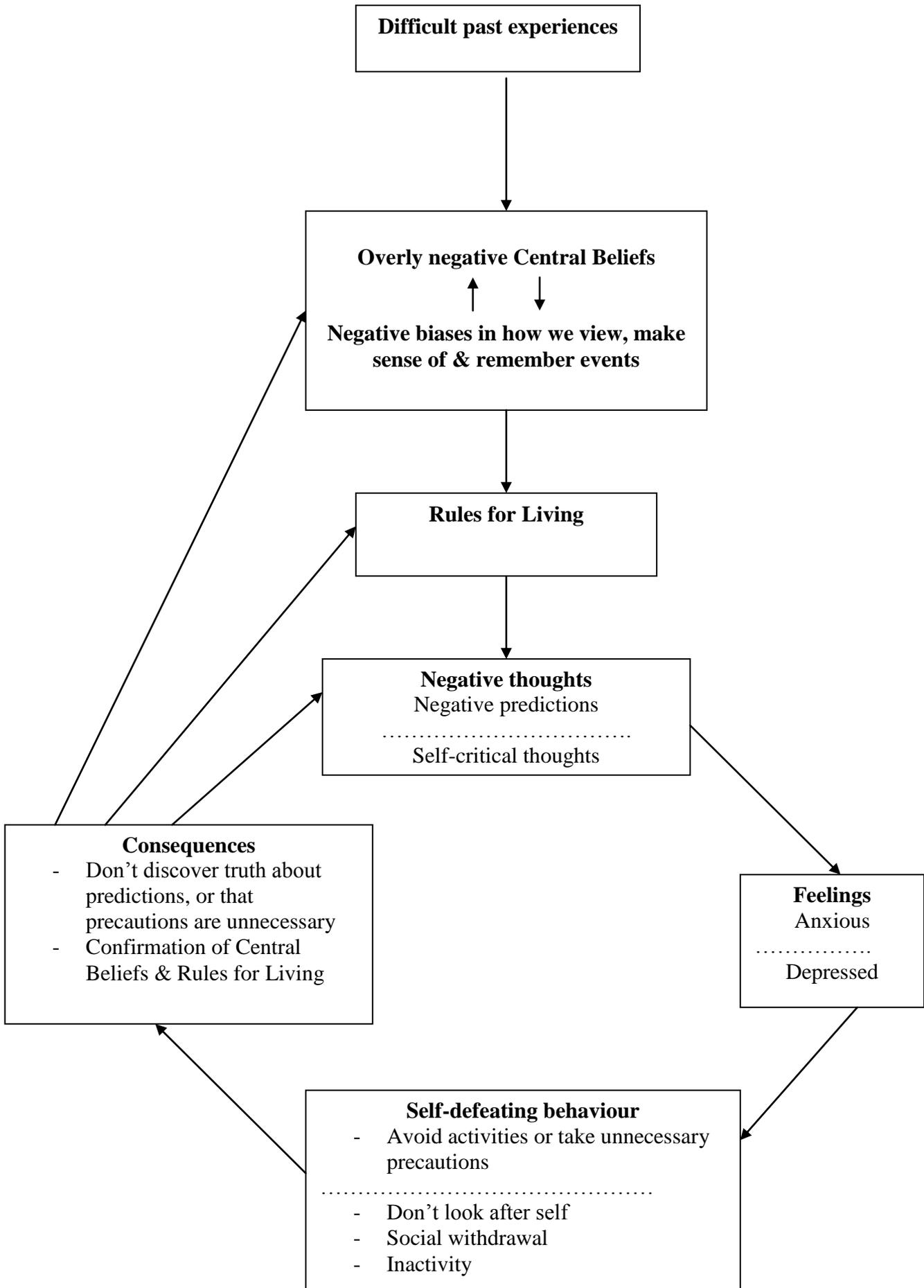
The patterns that are believed to keep self-esteem going are illustrated in the diagrams overleaf, using Tim's and Sandra's experiences as examples.

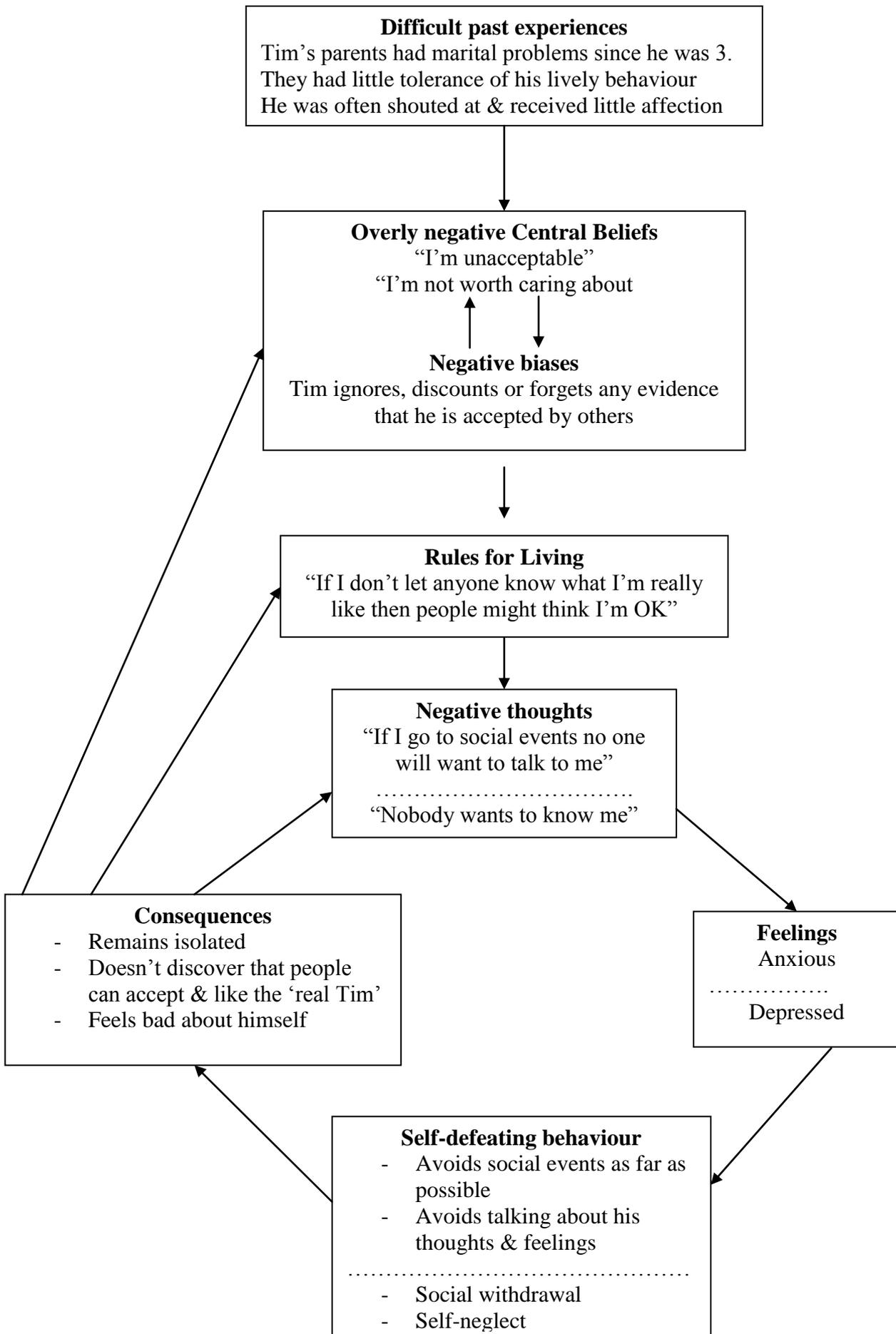
The top part of the diagrams suggests that past experiences lead to the development of **Central Beliefs**. These beliefs may influence how we view, make sense of, and remember daily events, as well as our **Rules for Living**.

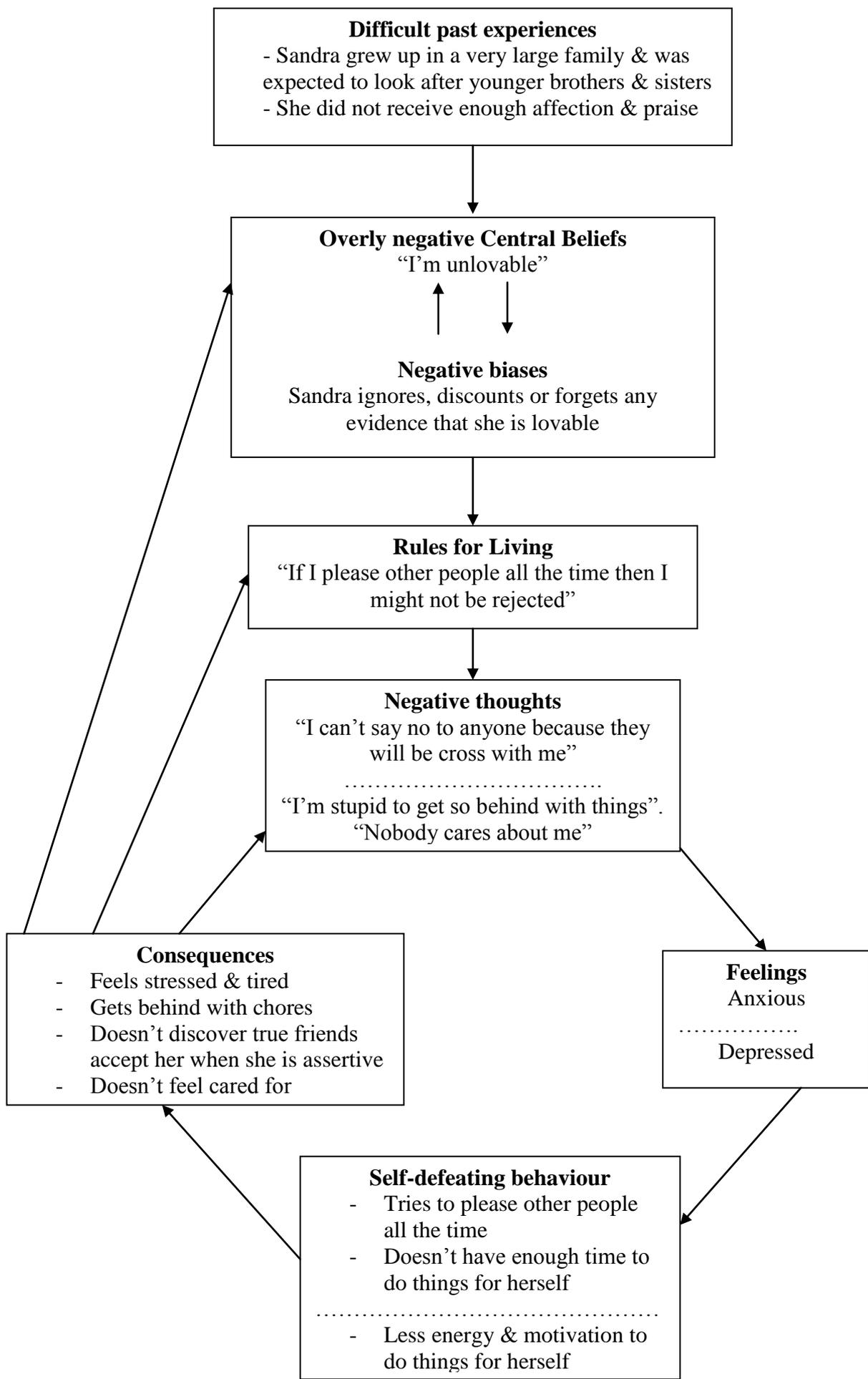
The bottom half of the diagrams show that negative thoughts can affect how we feel. Negative predictions (as shown above the dotted line) may lead to anxiety and self-defeating behaviours, such as avoiding things or taking unnecessary precautions. Such behaviours can stop us discovering the truth about our predictions. For example, when Tim is invited to a social event he predicts – “no one will want to talk to me”, and he feels anxious. This leads him to either avoid going to the social event, or to put on a façade and not let people see the ‘real Tim’. These behaviours are **self-defeating** because they stop Tim discovering that some people do want to talk to him, and that they like him when he is being himself.

Self-critical thoughts (as shown below the dotted line) may lead to depression, which in turn can lead to self-defeating behaviours, such as self-neglect, social withdrawal and inactivity. For example, Tim has self-critical thoughts such as “no one wants to know me” and this makes him feel depressed. Depression causes him to become more withdrawn, and his isolation makes him more convinced that no one wants to know him.

Self-defeating behaviours are likely to create more negative thoughts and stop us building more realistic **Central Beliefs** and so a vicious circle is created.







Summary

- Low self-esteem (i.e. overly negative **Central Beliefs**) can cause people to ignore, discount and forget positive information about themselves, and to focus on negative things.
- Low self-esteem can also lead people to develop unhelpful **Rules for Living** and self-defeating behaviours
- These **negative biases, unhelpful rules, and self-defeating behaviours** can keep low self-esteem going

Building Self-Esteem using CBT

The main aims of the CBT approach are to identify and break the unhelpful patterns that keep low self-esteem going and to build more balanced and realistic beliefs. This involves recognising and overcoming the negative biases, unhelpful rules, and self-defeating behaviours. Methods for building self-esteem, and the reasons why they help, are outlined in the table below.

Method	Rationale
Activity Record	To help you improve your mood and self-esteem through planning more satisfying activities, looking after yourself better, and recognising your achievements on a daily basis.
Positives Record	To help you notice and remember your positive qualities. This can help compensate for the tendency to ignore, discount and forget positive information about yourself, so that you can start to gain a more balanced view of yourself.
Thought Record	To help you to become aware of and deal with biases in your thinking. This can improve how you feel, and help you build a more realistic view of yourself.
Behavioural Experiments	Testing out negative thoughts in practice can be a powerful way of putting biased thinking in perspective. Experimenting by doing things differently can also help with overcoming unhelpful rules and self-defeating behaviours.

These CBT methods are described in detail below so that you can try them. It is probably best to learn how to use one method at a time, and to use each method for a few weeks before deciding whether it seems to be helping you or not. Once you feel comfortable with one method you may then wish to introduce another one and so on. These CBT methods are most likely to be helpful if you can incorporate them into your life for at least a few months rather than for just a few weeks. They may also be needed again in the future to help you deal with any setbacks.

Activity Record:

People with low self-esteem, especially when linked to low mood and depression, often find it hard to partake in pleasurable and satisfying activities. This is because they may not feel motivated or may feel they do not deserve enjoyment, or because they are too busy working.

People with low self-esteem may neglect themselves, for example, Sandra spends all her time helping others; Rachael works so hard that she has virtually no time for relaxation and fun, and Tim neglects his health and appearance because he feels that he is not worth caring about. Not looking after yourself may reinforce low self-esteem, and make you more vulnerable to stress and depression. The purpose of tracking your activity is to help you look after yourself better, make your life more satisfying, give yourself credit for your daily achievements and strike a balance between work, recreation and relaxation.

❖ Step 1: Keeping an activity diary

Firstly, look at how you spend your time and consider how satisfying you find your daily activities and routine. It can help to do this in a systematic way for a week by recording what you do on a record sheet – splitting the day into sections. It is best to record each activity as soon as you can, as leaving it for more than a few hours may make it difficult to remember how you felt and negative thinking can cloud how you remember it. The idea is to record daily activities along with ratings of how satisfying you find each one. Activities may be satisfying because they are pleasurable or because they give you a sense of achievement. Use the letter **P** and a number from 0-10 to indicate how pleasurable an activity was, with 'P0' indicating an activity was not at all pleasurable, and 'P10' indicating an activity was extremely pleasurable. Likewise, use the letter **A** and a number from 0 to 10 to rate how much achievement was felt from an activity.

Examples:

3-4 pm: Collected kids from school & visited supermarket: P2, A7

1-2pm: At work – served customers: P4, A6

With the achievement ratings it is important to take into account how you were feeling at the time, so that you give yourself credit for how much effort you put into the activity. For example, it may be easy to get out of bed when feeling well and looking forward to the day ahead, but may be a struggle when feeling unwell on a difficult day, and would therefore deserve a higher achievement rating.

Here is an example of how Tim has not given himself enough credit:

He put off going to the bank for months and felt ashamed of his financial difficulties, believing that the staff at the bank would be critical and disapproving. He gave himself an achievement rating of only 3 when he finally forced himself to go to the bank. His reasoning was “this should be easy – most people go to the bank without giving it a second thought”. So, his achievement rating failed to take account of his personal circumstances and the mental effort required to face something he feared. Not giving ourselves credit for the effort we put into things can reduce motivation, and keep depression and low self-esteem going.

❖ Step 2: What would you like to change?

Once you have kept the diary for a week or so, it is time to reflect on how you spend your time and to consider what you would like to change.

Consider the following questions:

- What was satisfying and what wasn't? What changes could you make so that your daily activities and routine are more satisfying?
- Are you looking after yourself and treating yourself as if you are a worthwhile person? If you were helping someone you cared about and wanted to treat well, what changes would you make?
- Are you striking a balance between enjoyable activities, relaxation, and things for yourself on the one hand, and work, duties, things for other people on the other? If not, what could you do to create a better balance?
- Are you able to acknowledge your daily achievements in the way someone else might? Low self-esteem and depression

commonly lead people to discount their achievements. If this is a problem for you then further practise in acknowledging achievements may be helpful. Remember to take into account how you felt at the time and how much effort was required for the activity.

- Was inactivity a problem for you? Depression and anxiety often lead people to become inactive and to avoid activities. This means that they are starved of enjoyment and a sense of achievement. Planning a gradual increase in your daily activities is one of the most powerful ways of improving energy levels and mood.
- Did negative thoughts get in the way of doing things? If they did, write them down and try questioning them as described later on.

Activity is a powerful way of improving energy levels and mood



❖ Step 3: Making changes and planning activity
Once you have ideas about the kind of changes that you would like to make, the next stage involves trying this out in practice. This can be done by looking at the week ahead, scheduling achievable activities for each day, and planning a more satisfying routine for yourself. If you can, try and strike a balance between work, recreation and relaxation – the activities that have to be done alongside the ones you want to do. If this sounds too much then try something more manageable as even one small change a day can make a difference. Once you have tried making changes, review their impact. If the changes lead to an increase in your enjoyment and achievement, then you can build on them. If the changes turn out to be unhelpful, you can work out what went wrong, and take this information into account when you plan further changes.

Allan learnt that being active gave him more of a sense that he was taking control of his life and achieving something worthwhile. Small steps helped him build shattered confidence. He then experienced a chain reaction effect where he felt motivated to try and achieve something else.

Positives Record:

The negative biases that play a role in maintaining low self-esteem were described earlier. You may remember how Sandra takes to heart any negative comments she receives, and ignores or discounts the times when people are friendly towards her or pay her compliments. Ignoring your positives only keeps low self-esteem going because it stops you from having a balanced view that takes into account your good characteristics as well as the genuine shortcomings and things you may like to change. Keeping a 'positives record' helps you pay attention to your good points and achievements and will positively help you change your negative **Central Beliefs** and opinions of yourself, so that you develop a more accepting and balanced opinion of yourself.

❖ Step 1: Identifying positive qualities

People with low self-esteem are generally not in the habit of spotting their own positive qualities and strengths, and may find this difficult initially. The following questions may help you become more aware of your positive qualities. Look out for any negative thoughts that lead you to discount your positive qualities, such as "that's nothing special" or "I could have done it better". These are examples of your negative biases at work. Try not to let them stop you writing down your positive qualities.

- What do you like about yourself, however insignificant it seems?
- What are the positive achievements of your life so far, however modest? Have you maintained any friendships, held down a job, been a parent or a carer, or developed any skills related to your job, domestic life, leisure activities and interests? For example, do you know how to cook, drive, swim, sew, use a computer, do housework, gardening or DIY? Do you have any academic, artistic, sporting or people skills?
- What obstacles have you tried to overcome? Give yourself credit for the efforts you have made to overcome problems and anxieties as this requires courage and determination.
- What would someone supportive of you say your qualities and strengths are? You could try asking someone for help with this, but be careful not to ask someone who may have contributed to your low self-esteem (for example, a critical parent or partner).
- What qualities do you like in others that you also have?

- What negative qualities do you NOT have (for example being cruel or abusive)? If you can think of some that you don't have this suggests that you must have positive qualities (such as being caring or respectful).

Here is an example of Tim's list of qualities, strengths and achievements:

- I did not have an easy time as a child because my parents didn't get on, and I didn't get much support or encouragement from them. My unhappiness as a child made it difficult for me to settle in at school. I felt like giving up at school, but I tried hard during my last year and managed to pass some exams, and I did better than people predicted. I have determination
- I have done OK at work and have been promoted. My colleagues sometimes ask for my advice, and I received a good reference from my old job. I am competent and knowledgeable at work.
- I have friends, a couple of whom I have known for years. Also a teacher seemed to like me when I was a child. I am likeable.
- I have learnt how to use a computer, cook, drive, swim, and play squash. I have skills.
- I am usually punctual and reliable
- I take good care of my dog. I am caring

Now have a go at listing your positive qualities. You can add to it as new things occur to you. In order to bring this alive, look at the list and remember as vividly as you can, the times when you have shown these qualities in the past, and note down these examples. After a few days when you have got as far as you can with the list, the next step is to look for evidence of these qualities daily. You may have been ignoring and discounting your positive qualities for a long time, so daily practice at spotting them will help this become more automatic.



❖ **Step 2: Daily recording of positive qualities**

Write down any evidence of your positive qualities and strengths on a daily basis. If you can, try recording about three each day. This may be difficult initially, but should become easier with practice. (If you are keeping an activity diary this may help you identify your daily achievements). The idea is to keep this going until you are into the habit of identifying your positive qualities frequently without too much difficulty. It may take a few months until this becomes more automatic, or longer if the problem of low self-esteem is particularly severe. An example of a page from a positives record is shown below.

Evidence of positive quality	Positive quality
Let another driver into the queue of traffic. Colleagues asked me to join them for lunch. Dealt with angry customer without losing control.	Considerate Likeable Competent
Sorted out computer problems for colleagues. Colleagues asked me to join them for lunch again. Took dog for a walk despite feeling tired. Nervous about not knowing anyone at evening class but went anyway.	Helpful, skilled Likeable Caring Courageous

Notice that the record does not just list qualities (for example – “considerate”), but gives a bit of detail. If you do this, you will be able to look back over your record and remember what is described in it. It is important to note that the examples don’t need to be earth shattering and that small things count. Beware of ignoring or discounting things because you think they are “trivial” or “nothing special”, or because you have written down something similar already.

Note how your mood lifts when recognising your strengths. The aim is to become so familiar with your good points that you will automatically notice them so they will eventually override your focus on your bad points. When relaxed before going to bed review your list to reinforce your belief and memory of your positives, or display it somewhere where you can readily refer to it when low mood strikes.

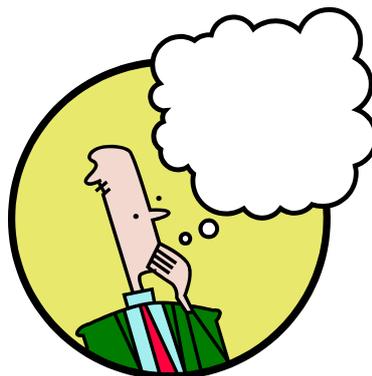
Thought Record:

Low self-esteem can lead people to make anxious predictions and to be overly self-critical. Thought records can help you question and test out these negative thoughts, rather than assuming they are 100 percent true. This can help break the unhelpful patterns in thinking and behaviour that keep low self-esteem going.

Step 1: Recording negative thoughts and feelings:

- You can create a record form like the one shown overleaf. It helps to write down your thoughts and feelings as soon as you can, so you will need to carry a record form or notebook with you.
- The idea is to look out for times when you feel particularly distressed. It may not be practical or helpful to write down every distressing event. You may want to focus on the worst few times or a few typical examples, so that you are not writing down more than three examples each day.
- In the 'situation' column write down what you were doing when you began to feel upset
- In the 'emotion' column write down the main emotions you felt. (Emotions are usually single words such as anxious, sad, depressed, angry, embarrassed, ashamed, or frustrated, but it can be difficult to put them into words.)
- In the 'negative thoughts' column try to catch what was going through your mind when you became distressed and write this down. What was it about the situation that distressed you? Did it trigger any self-critical or anxious thoughts, or distressing images or memories?
- Once you have got into the habit of catching negative thoughts and feelings, perhaps after a week of practice, the next step is to question these thoughts and to look for a balanced and realistic perspective as described below.

It is often not necessarily a situation that causes you distress, but your interpretation of it



Step 2: Questioning negative thoughts: The following questions may help you challenge your negative thoughts, and coming to a more balanced perspective.

- What is the evidence supporting this thought? What is the evidence against it?
- What alternative perspectives are there? What would you say to a friend if they were in your shoes and were having thoughts like these? What might a friend say to you?
- Are you predicting the future? If so, what is the worst that could happen? What could be done about it? What are your personal qualities, how have you coped in the past, what help, advice and support is available?
- What is the best that could happen? – By exaggerating the best outcome you may realise how unrealistic the worst outcome appears.
- Are there any biases? Are jumping to conclusions? Are you thinking in all or nothing terms, or expecting perfection of yourself? Are you focussing on your weaknesses and forgetting your strengths?

As thoughts are linked to how we feel emotionally, note how when challenging a negative thought you may feel less anxious and/or depressed, as the thought becomes more balanced and fair.

Here are examples of thought challenging:

Situation	Emotions	Negative thoughts	Balanced thoughts
Boss pointed out mistakes in my work	Sad	I'm totally useless I can't do my job	Everyone makes mistakes - it doesn't necessarily mean I'm useless. If I were terrible at my job my boss would have told me or sacked me.
Phil didn't invite me out	Sad Angry	Phil doesn't want to spend time with me.	Phil may not have known I was free this weekend or he may have other plans. This is not hard evidence that Phil doesn't like me.
Told about work's new computer system	Anxious	I won't be able to learn how to use the new computer system. I will have to resign	I haven't tried to use it yet, so I might be jumping to conclusions.
Forgot a meeting with son's teacher	Guilty Anxious	I'm a bad mother. The teacher will think I'm a bad mother	It's the first time I've forgotten a meeting about my son. I try to do my best for my children. If the teacher thinks I'm a bad mother then she is wrong

Behavioural Experiments:

Behavioural experiments take the thought record an important step further, by testing out negative thoughts in practice. You can keep a record of behavioural experiments like the one shown overleaf. Here is a step-by step guide.

- ❖ The first step is to write down your negative thoughts in the first column. These thoughts may come from your thought record
- ❖ Then think how you might test out your negative thoughts, and briefly describe the plan of action in the 'experiment' column.
- ❖ Before carrying out your experiment, write down what you predict will happen in the 'prediction' column
- ❖ Once you have carried out the experiment, write down whether your prediction was correct and what actually happened.
- ❖ Finally, compare your prediction with what actually happened and write down what you have learnt in the conclusion column.

Taking the risk to be yourself with people and entering new situations, being outgoing and assertive, accepting challenges and opportunities, and trying things previously avoided will help build experience that supports new balanced predictions and ways of thinking. You can do this gradually by planning to carry out one experiment every day / week or by responding differently to opportunities like accepting an invitation to a party. For example, if you are very quiet at work you may attempt drumming up conversation with one person per day.

Keeping a written record of behavioural experiments can help you find out whether your predictions tend to be realistic or whether they are influenced by negative biases. However, even if your predictions tend to be overly negative, it is still possible that they will be accurate at times. If you receive negative feedback following an experiment, try not to let it become distorted out of proportion. Thought challenging can help keep negative feedback in perspective.

Examples of behavioural experiments are shown in the table on the next page:

Negative thoughts	Experiment	Prediction	What actually happened	Conclusions
My boss pointed out mistakes therefore I'm no good at my job	Ask boss for feedback on my performance	She will tell me that I'm not good enough	She said that she is happy with my work in general	Perhaps I'm more competent than I give myself credit for
Phil doesn't like me because he didn't invite me out at the weekend	Ask if he would like to meet up one night this week	He will make some excuse	He suggested meeting up on Friday, and seemed friendly	Maybe Phil thinks I'm OK. I was jumping to conclusions.
I will never be able to learn how to use the new computer system	I could ask Jane to explain it to me	I won't be able to take in anything Jane tells me	I remembered most of what I was told. I still need help, but I'm learning	It wasn't as hard to learn as I thought it would be, I tend to underestimate my abilities
My son's teacher will think that I'm a bad mother for forgetting our appointment	Contact teacher to apologise and explain	She will be cross with me and unfriendly	She just said 'no problem' and didn't seem to have time to talk	She might be cross with me, or perhaps she was just in a hurry? At least I apologised.

Behavioural experiments can also be used to tackle unhelpful **Rules for Living** and self-defeating behaviours. The table below shows examples of these along with experiments for tackling them.

Rules for Living	Self-defeating behaviours	Ideas for experiments
Rachael's rule: If I work extremely hard at work and do everything perfectly then I can't be a complete failure	Rachael puts all her energy into her work and neglects other areas of her life	Rachael could set limits on how much time she spends working, and asks for feedback on whether her work is still good enough
Tim's rules: If I don't let anyone get to know what I'm really like then people might think I'm OK	Tim has little contact with other people and avoids being himself	Tim could experiment by having more contact with people and talking a bit more about himself. He could observe whether people accept him
Sandra's rules: If I please others all the time then I might not be rejected	Sandra puts other people first all the time and neglects her own needs	Sandra could experiment with putting time aside for activities she wants to do. She could say 'no' to some requests from others, and see how they react
Allan's rules: If I don't try then I can't fail	Allan avoids opportunities to learn new skills	Allan could try learning a new skill to see if he makes any progress

If you have become aware of any unhelpful rules or self-defeating behaviours, you may wish to experiment with doing things differently.

If you always do what you've always done, you'll always get what you've always got

However, this can be challenging and anxiety provoking, so it is probably best to start with something relatively small, and to make changes one step at a time.

For example, Rachael might start with not taking work home at weekends and planning to do rewarding leisure activities instead. She can assess whether her work is still good enough by seeing whether she receives complaints, and by seeking feedback from colleagues. Her record of this experiment might look as follows.

Self-defeating behaviour	Experiment	Prediction	What actually happened?	Conclusions
Working too hard	Stop working at weekends for one month, plan enjoyable activities instead, ask my colleagues for feedback	My work won't be good enough, my colleagues will notice and complain	I received no complaints, Sam said he thought that my work had been fine, and I have felt more energetic	When I don't work at weekends, my work can still be good enough, and I feel more energetic.

Once Rachael feels more comfortable with not working at weekends, she may decide to experiment with not working so late in the evenings, and so on. This gradual behavioural changing approach will help Rachael to be less cautious about her work performance and lessen her tendency to be restricted by her **Rules for Living**. This will in turn lead to more enjoyment and relaxation, which will boost her self-esteem and help change her negative **Central Beliefs** into more positive ones. With perseverance, Rachael's boost in self-esteem could in the long term lead her to see herself in a whole new positive light.



Maintaining Improvement

The CBT self-help methods described here may help you overcome the negative biases, unhelpful rules and self-defeating behaviours that keep low self-esteem going. In view of the fact that low self-esteem can be a longstanding and resistant problem, it may be necessary to keep using these self-help methods over a period of several months. It is also important to be prepared to start using these methods again in the future, to help you deal with any setbacks.

Key Points

- The CBT methods for building self-esteem include the activity record, the positives record, the thought record, and behavioural experiments.
- These methods involve planning more satisfying activities and looking after yourself, overcoming self-defeating behaviours, compensating for negative biases by learning to notice and record your positive qualities and achievements, and learning to question and test out negative thoughts.
- These methods are most likely to be helpful if you can incorporate them into your life for at least a few months, and if you keep using them whenever you experience any setbacks.
- It is worth noting that setbacks and low points are normal and necessary so that we learn to recognise and appreciate the good / high parts of our lives. Therefore, when you feel low, be careful not to assume it is a permanent setback, as it doesn't necessarily mean your self-esteem is slipping to a low point again, but may need a bit of a boost by revisiting the methods covered.

Further Reading

Burns, David (1999). The Feeling Good Handbook. Published by Penguin.

Burns, David (2000). 10 Days to Great Self-Esteem: 10 Easy Steps to Brighten your Moods and Discovering the Joy in Everyday Living. Published by Vermilion.

Butler, Gillian and Hope, Tony, (1995). Manage Your Mind: The Mental Fitness Guide. Oxford: Oxford University Press

Butler, Gillian (1999). Overcoming Shyness and Social Anxiety. A Self-help Guide using Cognitive-Behavioural Techniques. London: Robinson Publishing Ltd

Fennell, Melanie (1999). Overcoming Low Self-Esteem: A Self-help Guide using Cognitive-Behavioural Techniques. London: Robinson Publishing Ltd.

Gilbert, Paul. (1997). Overcoming Depression A Self-help Guide using Cognitive-Behavioural Techniques. London: Robinson Publishing Ltd.

Greenberger, Dennis and Padesky, Christine (1995). Mind Over Mood: A Cognitive Therapy Treatment Manual for Clients. New York: Guilford.

Kennerley, Helen. (2000). Overcoming Childhood Trauma. London: Robinson Publishing Ltd:

Young, Jeffery and Klosko, Jan (1994). Reinventing Your Life. New York: Plume/Penguin Books.

Useful Telephone Numbers

MIND: The National Association for Mental Health 08457 660163

No Panic 01952 590545

NHS Direct 0845 46 47

National Advice Line – 0845 010900

Mental Health Helpline (Lancashire wide) 7pm-11pm 365 days

0500 639000