

Worksheet

Professional Version | US English

Low Self-Esteem Formulation



Description

At the core of low self-esteem are negative beliefs or judgments about the self, which persist despite seemingly contradictory evidence. Melanie Fennell draws upon Christine Padesky's metaphor to describe negative beliefs in low self-esteem as being analogous to prejudices: unfair and ill-informed (Fennell, 1997; Padesky, 1990). Fennell argues that information relating to the negative beliefs may be subject to perceptual and interpretational biases:

- **Perceptual bias:** Information that is consistent with one's beliefs is readily accessible and easily processed, whereas data inconsistent with the negative belief is 'screened out'.
- **Interpretation bias:** Information that is perceived is biased toward the negative belief. Ambiguous data is interpreted negatively, and positive or neutral data is distorted to fit. Negative data is "attributed to enduring flaws or weaknesses".

Fennell proposes that negative beliefs in low self-esteem are perpetuated by a sequence in which:

1. Negative beliefs are activated by situations in which rules and standards are threatened.
2. Once they are 'on line' they result in biased predictions and expectations.
3. These predictions lead to anxiety, which promotes avoidance or the use of safety-seeking behaviors.

Information processing biases place the individual with low self-esteem in a 'no win' situation:

- If their negative predictions turn out to be accurate then the negative beliefs are reinforced ("I knew it").
- If the predictions turn out to be inaccurate, the contradictory evidence is usually ignored, discounted ("I only succeeded because..."), or distorted ("They said they liked it, but I could see in their eyes that they didn't").

The *Low Self-Esteem Formulation* worksheet displays this sequence underlying schemas maintenance in low self-esteem. It can be used with clients to explore specific situations that activated their negative schema and led to negative predictions, and the ways in which they interpreted the outcome of events.

Instructions

Suggested Question

Surprisingly, people with low self-esteem often continue to think badly of themselves despite having achievements and successes. Would you be willing to help me to understand more about what happens when you have successes and setbacks?

1. **Situations** in which our rules or personal standards might be broken are often the most triggering. For example, if someone has the rule "I'm OK as long as I'm not criticized", situations where they might get feedback from other people can be particularly stressful for them.

Suggested Questions

- *Can you think of a recent situation that made you feel particularly anxious?*
- *Can you think about a recent situation when you gave yourself a hard time?*

2. **Beliefs & rules.** Our positive and negative beliefs about ourselves are based on the things that have happened to us. These beliefs are often expressed in the form "I am ...", as if it is a fact about yourself.

Suggested Questions

- *Write your negative belief here.*
- *What belief about yourself could have been activated in this situation?*

We all have rules that we live by and which guide our behavior. In low self-esteem these rules often try to compensate for your underlying negative belief. For example, if you believe "I'm unlovable" you might compensate by always putting other people's needs first, in order to receive love. When these rules *might be* or *are* broken, we feel very anxious.

Suggested Questions

- *Which of your rules might be broken here?*
- *What rule or standard is in danger of being broken in this situation?*

3. **Negative predictions.** Some people are optimistic and expect or predict that positive things will happen. People with low self-esteem often make negative predictions about particular situations, especially when their rules are being threatened.

Suggested Questions

- *In that situation, what were you predicting or expecting?*
- *What were you worried might happen?*
- *How strongly were you expecting that to happen?*

Instructions

4. Emotions. What you think affects the way that you feel.

Suggested Questions

- *How did that prediction or expectation make you feel?*
- *What did you feel when you were predicting that would happen?*

5. Safety behaviors. When we predict something bad will happen, we are often tempted to avoid it. If we can't avoid it, we might use our 'safety behaviors' to prevent the worst from happening. For example, if someone is very worried about being criticized, they might try very hard to please other people, or they might be very conscientious at work.

Suggested Questions

- *How did you respond when you couldn't avoid that situation?*
- *What did you do to that helped you to cope?*
- *What safety behaviors did you use?*
- *Did you do anything to make sure that the worst didn't happen?*

6. What happened? Unhelpful beliefs persist because of perceptual biases and interpretation biases. It is important to obtain an accurate report of what actually happened.

Suggested Questions

- *What happened?*
- *Did your negative prediction(s) come true?*

7. Interpretations of what happened. When things go badly, the negative belief is confirmed and strengthened. Even when things go well, they can be discounted or distorted, so that the negative belief goes unchallenged.

Suggested Questions

- *What sense did you make of what happened?*
- *What did you say to yourself when it happened?*

If there was a positive outcome:

Suggested Questions

- *What did you do to discount or distort what happened to make it fit with your negative belief?*
- *What did you say to yourself when that happened?*
- *If your friend did this, what would you say to them?*

If there was a negative outcome:

Suggested Questions

- *What did you say to yourself?*
- *How did it affect your negative belief?*

Instructions

- 8. Reflection.** Reflect on what you have learned, and identify what might need to change.

Suggested Questions



- *(Encourage reflection on the other pathway of the diagram) If things had gone the other way, what sense would you have made of that outcome? What does this tell you?*
- *Can you think of other situations that were similar? Do you notice this pattern in other situations?*
- *Can you imagine a friend or someone you know (someone with a positive self-belief) confronting the same situation? What might they have thought & felt? What does this tell us about what needs to change? How might we get there?*
- *What would you say to a friend who did a lot of self-criticism? What would you say to friend who did lots of minimizing or distorting?*

References

Fennell, M. J. (1997). Low self-esteem: A cognitive perspective. *Behavioural and Cognitive Psychotherapy*, 25(1), 1-26.

Padesky, C. A. (1990). Schema as self-prejudice. *International Cognitive Therapy Newsletter*, 6(1), 6-7.

Low Self-Esteem Formulation

Situation
What was the situation that made you feel so strongly?

Belief
What negative belief about yourself was being activated in this situation?

Rule
Which of your rules might be broken here?

Negative predictions
What negative predictions were you making?

Emotions
How did your predictions make you feel?

Safety behaviors
What did you do when you couldn't avoid the situation?

What happened?
Stick to the facts.

Discounts or distorts
What did you do to discount or distort the positive outcome to make it fit with your negative belief?

Confirms
What did you tell yourself when that happened?

No
My negative predictions didn't come true

Did your negative prediction(s) come true?

Yes
My negative predictions did come true

Low Self-Esteem Formulation

Situation
I had to tell my friend that I can't go to her birthday party and I was worried about how she would respond.
What was the situation that made you feel so strongly?

Belief
I'm a bad person.
What negative belief about yourself was being activated in this situation?

Rule
I must never let people down.
Which of your rules might be broken here?

Negative predictions
She will think I don't care.
She won't want to be my friend.
What negative predictions were you making?

Emotions
Anxious
Scared
How did your predictions make you feel?

Safety behaviors
Compensated for letting her down by sending her an expensive present that I can't really afford.
What did you do when you couldn't avoid the situation?

What happened?
She said she understood and that we could arrange another time to meet. She ignores me and doesn't answer my calls.

"We know that your friend said she understood and didn't mind that you couldn't make it, but imagine if she had responded differently..."

Discounts or distorts
I know she said she understood, but I think that she's saying that and doesn't really mean it. She doesn't really want to be my friend.
What did you do to discount or distort the positive outcome to make it fit with your negative belief?

Confirms
I knew it, I am bad.
This is what happens when I'm not careful enough.
I'll always be alone.
What did you tell yourself when that happened?

No
My negative predictions didn't come true

Did your negative prediction(s) come true?

Yes
My negative predictions did come true

Low Self-Esteem Formulation

Situation
I have a job interview.
What was the situation that made you feel so strongly?

Belief
I'm a failure.
What negative belief about yourself was being activated in this situation?

Rule
I must always perform perfectly.
I must always give 100%.
Which of your rules might be broken here?

Negative predictions
I'll mess it up.
I won't get it.
What negative predictions were you making?

Emotions
Anxious
How did your predictions make you feel?

Safety behaviors
Spend hours preparing
What did you do when you couldn't avoid the situation?

What happened?
I got the job I didn't get the job
Stick to the facts.

"We know that you really did get the job, but what would you have said to yourself if you hadn't got it?"

Discounts **or distorts**
I only got it because my friend helped me practice.
They must be desperate.
What did you do to discount or distort the positive outcome to make it fit with your negative belief?

Confirms
I knew it..
I am a failure.
I'll never amount to anything.
What did you tell yourself when that happened?

No
My negative predictions didn't come true

Did your negative prediction(s) come true?

Yes
My negative predictions did come true

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Resource details

Title: Low Self-Esteem Formulation

Type: Worksheet

Language: English (US)

Translated title: Low Self-Esteem Formulation

URL: <https://www.psychologytools.com/resource/low-self-esteem-formulation/>

Resource format: Professional

Version: 20230721

Last updated by: EB

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