SELF-ESTEEM LITERATURE REVIEW

Self-esteem is a fundamental component of healthy development from childhood through adulthood. It can be generally defined as an individual's overall sense of self-worth or how good they feel about themselves (Rosenberg, 1965). Self-esteem is a part of one's self-concept, that is, one's knowledge and beliefs about their personal attributes (Mann et al., 2004) along with other constructs like self-efficacy (how effective one perceives oneself to be), internal locus of control (having the sense that one has control over things rather than the outside world having control), and self-compassion (compassion that is directed inward towards the self) (Bolger & Patterson, 2001; Lamoureux, et al., 2012; Neff, 2003). Together, these constructs can promote healthy functioning and resilience in the face of life stressors.

In recent years, investigators researching the concept of self-esteem have been critical about its role in development (Baumeister, et al., 2003; Neff & Vonk, 2009). They postulate that self-esteem is founded on self-evaluations that are often dependent on external sources. For example, we feel good about ourselves when others praise us for our accomplishments or when we perceive others as liking us. Therefore, self-esteem is unstable and can fluctuate depending on the feedback received. We may also become defensive in order to protect our self-esteem when we feel it is being threatened. Although these are all valid concerns, it is critically important to distinguish between fragile self-esteem and true self-esteem (Deci & Ryan, 1995; Kernis, 2003). Unlike fragile self-esteem, true self-esteem is relatively stable, is intrinsically motivated, and one's sense of self-worth is not determined by external sources. Rather than fragile self-esteem, true self-esteem is the one that promotes healthy development and functioning.

A very closely related and equally important construct is self-compassion. Self-compassion involves treating the self with kindness and understanding rather than with judgment and self-criticism. It also involves recognizing that we share a common humanity in the sense that successes and failures are experiences shared by all. Mindfulness, which is the ability to stay self-aware and not become overwhelmed by our emotions and thoughts, is included as the third component in self-compassion. Research has revealed that high self-compassion is an indicator of well-being and a predictor of stable mental health (Neff & McGehee, 2010). Self-compassionate individuals are also found to be at a decreased risk for depression, anxiety, neurotic perfectionism, and rumination. Finally, self-compassion has been found to function as a buffer against negative life events and to promote resilience (Leary, et al., 2007). Not surprisingly, individuals with high self-compassion also appear to have high self-esteem. It is likely that self-compassion and self-esteem are interrelated and possibly bidirectional. That is, self-compassion promotes self-esteem and vice versa.

Child maltreatment, in any of its forms, can severely impact the healthy development of the self. Researchers have found that child maltreatment is associated with low self-esteem, low self-compassion, and external locus of control (that is, perceiving external factors as having control over one's actions and outcomes) (Bolger & Patterson, 2001; Eskin, 2012; Tanaka, et al., 2011). This subsequently leads to a series of negative effects including increased risk of emotion dysregulation, suicidal ideation, anxiety, and depression. Damage to the various self-constructs listed can occur from a very young age and the negative consequences can persist throughout adulthood. This highlights the importance of healthy conditions for the optimal development of the self and the necessity of prevention and intervention in childhood to help rectify the negative outcomes caused by toxic conditions such as child maltreatment and/or exposure to violence.

On the other hand, high self-esteem, self-compassion, self-efficacy, and perceived internal locus of control have all been demonstrated to promote resilience and to be protective against the negative consequences of child maltreatment and other life stressors (Afifi & MacMillan, 2011; Bolger & Patterson, 2001; Cicchetti & Rogosch, 1997; Kort-Butler, 2010; Lamoureux, et al., 2012; Leary, et al., 2007; Vettese, et al., 2011). Bolger and colleagues found that when individuals perceived themselves as having an internal locus of control, this was associated with reduced internalizing problems (i.e., anxiety, depression, etc.). Vettese and colleagues found that self-compassion was negatively associated with emotion regulation difficulties. That is, individuals with more self-compassion were able to more effectively regulate their emotions. Overall, these results are encouraging and underscore the necessity of bolstering these self-constructs to support individuals in the face of maltreatment.

Promoting healthy self-esteem, self-compassion, self-efficacy, and an internal locus of control should be included in prevention and intervention programs to provide children with the personal resources to develop a healthy sense of self. This may both reduce the risk of and also bolster resiliency in the aftermath of maltreatment as demonstrated by the studies above. Furthermore, Elliot and colleagues (1995) conducted a study with sex offenders to investigate the characteristics of children who were often targeted for abuse. It was revealed that children who were lacking in confidence or had low self-esteem were often targeted. This underscores the importance of bolstering self-esteem as part of prevention efforts. When children feel good about themselves and have a healthy sense of self-worth, they may be more likely to seek help when encountering a situation that does not feel safe. They may also have more positive friendships and spend more time with their friends, thereby increasing opportunities for getting help.

Furthermore, promoting healthy self-esteem and self-compassion may also serve to prevent individuals from offending in the future. Research revealed that offenders are often plagued with low self-esteem, which is exacerbated by intense experiences of shame (Marshall, et al., 2009). To prevent feeling this shame and further drops in self-esteem, offenders would minimize the consequences of committing assault and also have reduced empathy for their victims. Promoting self-compassion from childhood may help to increase self-esteem and empathy, as well as decrease the negative effects caused by shame. Leary and colleagues (2007) have found that individuals who were placed in an experimental condition that promoted self-compassion reported they experienced less negative affect and were able

to take more personal responsibility for their actions. If self-compassion is nurtured in childhood, this may promote increased empathy for others and perhaps lessen the likelihood to commit offenses against them. Likewise, if self-compassion is incorporated into offender treatment programs, this may help offenders work through the intense shame they experience when relating to their crime and to take more personal responsibility for the offence they committed.

A child's self-concept is critically important in determining how well adjusted they are throughout life. It serves as a foundation by which the child relates to themselves, to others, and to the world at large. Self-esteem, self-compassion, self-efficacy, and an increased internal locus of control serve as the pillars of a healthy self-concept. In the face of child maltreatment, each of these self-constructs may serve to protect the child by motivating them to make the right choices and to seek help. They may also promote resiliency against the devastating effects of maltreatment. It is encouraging to recognize that these self-constructs are malleable and therefore can be boosted with effective programming, especially to counteract against the effects of maltreatment. It is also important to remember that the self does not develop in isolation, but rather through relating with those around us. This serves as a potent reminder to engage children in ways that facilitate the development of a healthy self to ensure that they grow and flourish into adulthood.

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