



Susanne Gaddis, PhD



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"Prescriptions for Effective Communication"

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Prescriptions for Improving a Poor Self Concept

Dear Communications Doctor,
All my life I've struggled with poor self-esteem. Why is it that some people have great self concept while others have such a poor view of themselves?

Janis, Plano, TX
Dear Janis,

You are certainly not alone; millions of people world-wide struggle with low self esteem and a poor self-concept. By way of answering your question, which is general—I'd like to provide a series of tools so that we can tackle the problem at a more personal, immediate level.

What we can be certain of regarding self concept is that it is absolutely multi-dimensional, made up of the following three components: the perceived self, the desired self, and the presenting self.

The Perceived Self. "Who it is that you *think* you are..." effectively translates to that part of the self-concept referred to as the Perceived Self. For the majority of us, the task of deciding our identities begins at a very early age. Once this decision is made, it is very difficult for us to change.

The Desired Self. The desired self is "who it is that you *wish* you were." Unconsciously we often compare ourselves to others. For instance, if I've always wanted to be a member of a county club, and haven't assumed the perceived high status accorded such memberships, my self-concept will suffer. Belonging is an all-important condition essential to a healthy self-concept. If I have always wanted to hold a M.D., Ph.D. or LMNOP degree, and I am surrounded by individuals who have obtained this degree, I begin to suffer by comparison, and the image that I hold of myself can be negatively affected. A large part of our self concept comes from something communication theorists term, "reflected appraisal."

The Presenting Self. When I think of the presenting self I am reminded of the famous Shakespeare line: "All the world's a stage and we are merely players." The presenting self is an actor that we play on the stage of life. This is why some of the most frightened individuals can act with extreme aggression and controlling behaviors.

There are several things that can cause a negative self-concept:

Cause #1 – Obsolete Information. These are things that may have been true at one time, but are not true anymore. For instance, we all probably know some twenty-to-thirty-years out of high school couch-potato who still thinks of himself as an all-star athlete. Similarly, you also may have known someone who believes that he or she can sing, and refuses to limit his or her "talent" to the confines of the shower. A healthy self-concept should stay in the present, "What can I do today that will greatly improve and/or benefit my tomorrow."

Cause #2 – Distorted Feedback. Unfortunately some people are cruel and are compelled to criticize, belittle and insult others. If we have spent a great deal of our life around such a person, it leaves little to the imagination of how quickly our self-esteem and self-concept can be affected.

Cause #3 – The Myth of Perfection. We often believe that we should be perfect. We should be a perfect height, weight and have perfectly straight teeth. We should be able to handle every situation perfectly and never make a mistake.

Cause #4 – Social Expectations. Because our society reinforces modesty, by tradition we are compelled toward humility at all costs. It is actually considered arrogant to desire a positive image of ourselves! We are not reinforced often enough for saying we did a good job.

Susanne Gaddis, PhD, known as the Communications Doctor, is an acknowledged communications expert who has been speaking and teaching the art of effective and positive communication since 1989. Gaddis' workshops, seminars, and keynote presentations are packed with tips and techniques that can be immediately applied for successful results. Gaddis also provides quality training and executive coaching for organizations, corporations, and associations across the United States. For more information, call 919-933-3237 or visit www.CommunicationsDoctor.com.

In other words, a considerable part of our self concept is determined by how we look to others to find out who it is that we are. This discovery process in the eyes and opinions of others can make or break our self-concept. They are a mirror, reflecting back to us messages that we receive and subsequently either accept or reject. We are constantly looking to others to find out who it is that we are. And if you are around a broken mirror, or someone who consistently provides you with distorted and negative messages, this can have a huge impact on your developing a negative self-concept.

To determine your perceived self, make a list of your characteristics. As you build this list, include your beliefs, values and morals, adjectives that describe you, the roles that you play (e.g. nurse, mother, wife, student), your physical and emotional state, your intellectual capability, and anything else that you can think of that you believe makes you who you are. By realizing these concepts, one-by-one and taking a good look at whether they are beneficial or not, you are well on your way to creating a healthier self concept.

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