Self-Worth – At Work (For Employees)

Meaningful work is one of the most important ways to feel good about oneself. While work can certainly be a source of boosting self-worth, it can also cause suffering and low self-worth in a negative environment.

Signs of workplace unhappiness

There are some early warning signs of being unhappy at work to look out for and which can be addressed when they are understood, including:

- Finding it difficult to concentrate on tasks
- Procrastination
- Feeling overtired or exhausted
- Easily angered or frustrated by tasks or people
- Overly emotional or teary
- Using illicit substances to cope
- Having trouble making decisions
- Avoiding conflict to the detriment of performance
- Working beyond designated hours
- Isolating yourself in work
- Feeling trapped
- Feeling like you don't belong at your job
- Trouble turning off
- Changes in mood
- Increased resentfulness about work
- General unhappiness with your job.

What can cause low self-worth at work?

There are many ways self-worth can be damaged in a negative work environment. For instance, the demand for productivity has grown so significantly that it's easy to feel that not enough has been accomplished in the course of a day. An incomplete workload can leave strong feelings of inadequacy, potentially leading to dangerous working hours to 'finish' the job. This encroaches on downtime and can deprive people of the most restorative of experiences—connecting with self, friends and family.

Added societal expectations at work have also contributed to a genuine rise in aggression and rudeness in some workplaces. Rudeness anywhere makes people feel devalued, and in the workplace this causes a loss of loyalty between co-workers and management. Some workers, perhaps lacking in social and communication skills, may challenge authority inappropriately and assume an entitlement unattainable against the demands of productivity.

Bullying in the workplace

Bullying must not be tolerated in any workplace. Bullying can severely damage a person's self-worth and lead to a loss of motivation and productivity. Be on the lookout for these behaviours characteristic of bullying and report them to management:

- Physical or verbal abuse
- Taking advantage of someone else
- Negative teasing, being rude or impolite
- Spreading misinformation about a colleague
- Fooling around that goes too far
- Harassment based on race, gender, religion, sexual orientation or disability.

The effects of bullying can feel intense to the victim. You might notice the following:

- You feel less confident about your performance
- You don't want to go into work
- You feel scared, anxious or depressed
- You don't feel you can trust your workplace
- You experience physical symptoms of stress-related disorders such as headaches
- You lose sleep.

It's easy to feel maligned in a workplace, but you should be aware that even though something may feel like bullying, not all instances are. These usually relate to management. Reasonable management actions include:

- Annual performance reviews
- Meetings to address underperformance
- Investigating and disciplining misconduct charges
- Changing an employee's job role
- Refusing permission for an employee to return to work due to a medical condition.

Why is low self-worth at work a problem?

Dr Lars Madsen, clinical advisor to The MindShift Foundation, confirms the workplace environment has a critical impact on self-worth. Workplaces that focus on performance and achievement to the exclusion of other factors are very stressful and lead to diminishing self-worth. Indeed, being exposed on a day-to-day basis to negativity, critical feedback and competitiveness doesn't only reduce self-worth, but can also lead to burn-out and depression.

If you are struggling with self-worth in the workplace, it is important to manage your self-talk. Often, when people are struggling, they can become very critical of themselves and only notice the things that make them feel bad. By identifying what it is that you are saying to yourself and then replacing it with something more realistic (and useful), helps. Also, consciously focusing on activities that you do well can reverse the 'negative bias' that happens when you are not feeling good enough. Try making a series of small and achievable goals for yourself every day.

Of course, there can be things about work that you have little control over, such as a toxic workplace culture or being in a job that you do not enjoy or feel suited for. In cases such as these, it can be useful talking to someone you trust about your experience in the workplace, especially bullying. This may make it easier to figure out what your options are to change the aspects of work that you don't enjoy, or what you can do to cope better. There may be things that are not easily changed, and in these situations, the options may be limited to either to learning to cope with the circumstances, or to make a decision about whether the job is worthwhile for you in the long term.

Strategies for boosting self-worth at work

1. Keep a record of your best efforts and give yourself credit where it's due. Each day note your three best efforts, and by week's end you'll have 15 reminders as to why you deserve to think highly of yourself. If you can't think of anything positive, have a trusted co-worker do it for you.

2. Make a self-worth bulletin board. Carve out some wall space that you can see every day, several times a day. Put up a bulletin board and mount on it tangible evidence of your achievements. For instance, an e-mail full of praise for a job well done is a great start.

3. Stop negative thinking by focussing on how to solve your problems. Make a red stop sign (or employ another image that forces you to stop), and post it on your phone, computer or office wall as a constant reminder to dispute negative thoughts about yourself. Posting the stop sign will help make you aware that you can control your thinking. Your next aim is to convert your negative thoughts to positive solutions to your problems.

4. Be proactive about seeking projects that generate passion. Learn new skills so you can feel passionate about your work again.

Healthy thoughts about work

Thoughts of someone with healthy self-worth who likes what they do for a living are:

- I like my job.
- My workplace has plenty of natural light.
- I can leave my workstation for a break whenever I need to.
- I like my colleagues and clients.
- I think my workspace suits me as a person.
- I'm comfortable at my desk or moving around.
- I have everything I need to do my job.
- I'm supported in my job by my colleagues and management.
- I know the policies that govern my workplace and workplace rights.
- I know how my workplace responds to mental health issues.
- I know how my workplace responds to bullying issues.
- I would feel comfortable sharing any mental health concerns with my manager.
- I feel comfortable taking a sick day when necessary.
- I like going into work.
- I don't feel pressured to take on more than I can handle.
- I don't obsess over my work or take it home.
- My work doesn't affect my personal life.

Where to get help

Always remember you are not alone. Your doctor or registered health professionals are there to help you.

Our online resource page also has a full list of organisations where you can get further information. http://mindshift.org.au/suggested-links/.

Things to remember

Feeling better in the workplace involves challenging unhelpful thinking, focusing upon your positive achievements (big and small), establishing achievable goals and for the things that cannot be changed to talk to someone you can trust about your options for the future.

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In summary

Dr Lars Madsen confirms the impact that work can have on overall wellbeing and self-worth is significant. It is a complex relationship. Work that is meaningful and challenging but not beyond a person's skill set can generate a strong feeling of achievement and lead to feelings of optimism about tackling future challenges. These positive experiences can drive a person to achieve more and lead to bigger projects and challenges. This, of course, can be a good thing—however, it can also cause a person to bite off more than they can chew and lead to being overcommitted, overwhelmed and experiencing lowered self-worth. Therefore, having realistic expectations of yourself and setting achievable goals will ensure that you don't unintentionally create the circumstances where you set yourself up for failure.

Updates and Further information

For the latest updates and further information please visit www.mindshift.org.au.

Our Mission

It is our mission to ensure that every person has access to the resources available to build healthy self-worth, to have a positive sense of self and to find meaning in life.

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