

# Full ESTEEM Ahead

Our self-esteem can take a beating after divorce. Here are some tips to raise it back up again.



**1) Recognize that what you're going through is normal.** "It's an emotional process," says M. Chet Mirman, Ph.D., a clinical psychologist and co-founder of The Center for Divorce Recovery, a Chicago-area psychotherapy center specializing in divorce-related issues. "It helps when someone's going through a divorce if they remind themselves that this is a normal part of the process — that this too will pass."

**2) Go on living your life as fully as possible while grieving the loss of your marriage,** advises Jeffrey Rossman, Ph.D., a psychologist and the director of the Behavioral Health Department at Canyon Ranch in the Berkshires.

Know that the grieving can take place right alongside full engagement with life, he says. "And try to 'live well': That's a wonderful way to boost your self-esteem."

**3) Calm, subdue, and wrestle those self-punishing thoughts to the ground.** In their book, *Conquer Your Critical Inner Voice* (New Harbinger Publications), Robert W. Firestone, Ph.D., Lisa Firestone, Ph.D., and Joyce Catlett, M.A. note that: "The critical inner voice is the language of the defended, negative side of your personality; the side that is opposed to your ongoing personal development."

**4) Work to replace the inner critic with a healthier voice.** Pick up a copy of *Self-Esteem*, by Matthew McKay, Ph.D. and Patrick Fanning (New Harbinger Publications). Chapter Four deals with "Accurate Self-Assessment." These important pages will help you create a realistic inventory of your strengths and weaknesses, which the authors claim will lead to a "self-description that is accurate, fair, and supportive."

**5) Avoid assigning blame, either to your ex or to yourself.** When you feel yourself blaming either yourself or your spouse, shift to learning, suggests Dr. Rossman. "Ask yourself, 'What can I learn from this?'" Avoiding the blame game is particularly important if you have children. Bad-mouthing your former spouse in front of the children may provide you with a sense of release in the short-term, but it's very damaging for the children in the long-term, stresses Dr. Rossman.

**6) Take responsibility for your own happiness.** In his book, *A Woman's Self-Esteem: Struggles and Triumphs in the Search for Identity* (Jossey-Bass), Nathaniel Branden (who also authored *The Six Pillars of Self-Esteem*) explores the origins of personal happiness and suggests that intrinsically happy individuals consciously commit themselves to their state of eternal bliss.

**7) Develop a more positive body image.** While physical appearance alone cannot determine an individual's self-esteem, learning to accept and appreciate how you look is important. In his book, *The Body Image Workbook: An 8-Step Program for Learning to Like Your Looks* (New Harbinger Publications), author Thomas F. Cash, Ph.D., discusses body-image distortions and offers guidance through sensitively written text and useful "Helpsheets for Change."

**8) Start dating again — if you're ready.** "Look at it as an opportunity to learn more about yourself. Each date is a chance to cultivate your skills; it's also an opportunity to get to know another person." But resist the temptation to look at dating as a "spouse hunt," advises Dr. Rossman. "If you're on a date, and you decide that this is not the person of your dreams, you can feel like you've wasted your time. Even if that person is not going to be your life partner, there can still be something very worthwhile in getting to know him/her."

**9) Learn to enjoy your own company.** "How you think about it makes all the difference," says Dr. Rossman. "Instead of saying, 'Oh, I'm divorced and I'm home alone, what a loser I am,' why not say, 'What a nice opportunity to do whatever I want?'"

**10) Feel the pain, experience the gain.** "I think when people want advice about self-esteem, sometimes what they're really saying is, 'What can I do to feel better?'" My advice is almost the opposite," concludes Dr. Mirman. "It's a really difficult and painful process, and if you allow yourself to feel bad, you're going to get through it better. There's going to be more happiness at the other side — but you need to actually give yourself permission to feel badly for a while in order to feel good later on." ■

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