Low self-esteem is having a generally negative overall opinion of oneself, judging or evaluating oneself negatively, and placing a general negative value on oneself as a person. In a previous information sheet, we explored how low self-esteem begins. In this sheet we will explore what helps maintain low self-esteem, that is, what keeps it going on a day-to-day basis in the ‘here and now.’

Model of Low Self-Esteem: Maintenance

At-risk situations: unhelpful rules & assumptions broken or under threat

Activation of negative core beliefs

Biased expectations: thinking things will turn out badly

Negative self-evaluations: critical thoughts about self

Unhelpful behaviour e.g. avoid, escape, or safety precautions

Unhelpful behaviour e.g. withdrawal, abuse of alcohol or drugs, neglect self-care

Unhelpful emotions (e.g. anxiety, depression) & confirmation of negative core beliefs

What maintains low self-esteem?

A. Unhelpful thinking

The activation of our negative core beliefs means we start to engage in a lot of negative thinking about the situation we are in and more generally. We tend to either expect that things won’t work out (biased expectations) or criticise and blame ourselves (negative self-evaluations).

A lot of this negative thinking arises because generally humans tend to process information in our environment in ways which confirm and maintain our beliefs. We tend to only pay attention to information which confirms our beliefs, ignoring or minimising other information, and we also tend to interpret information in a way that supports our beliefs. For example, if you have a negative core belief “I am a failure” then you will tend to only notice events which support this, minimising your successes, and you might also interpret things in an all-or-nothing way which supports the idea that you are a failure (‘I only got a B - I failed’).

B. Unhelpful Behaviours

Unhelpful thinking and unhelpful behaviours tend to go hand in hand. For example, if we have biased expectations that things won’t go well, we will tend to avoid or escape the situation. If we have negative self-evaluations such that we are harsh and critical towards ourselves, we will tend to isolate ourselves from others, be passive and neglect or abuse ourselves in some way.

C. The End Result

The outcome of all this unhelpful thinking and behaviour, is that we experience unhelpful emotions, such as depression and anxiety. Our unhelpful thinking, behaviours, and feelings lead just confirm out negative core beliefs and lead us to restrict our lives. We never approach life with an open mind and so miss opportunities which over time can change how we see ourselves.

D. The Good News

While we cannot change the past, we can do something about the things we do on a day-to-day basis in the ‘here-and-now’ that maintain the negative core beliefs we have about ourselves. This means that things can be different and you can overcome low self-esteem. What is important now is that you commit to making the effort to address your unhelpful thinking and unhelpful behaviours from day to day.