

Seeking Self-Esteem: Construction, Maintenance, and Protection of Self-Worth

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It is almost axiomatic in social psychology that people seek to maintain, enhance, and protect their self-esteem. Although there may be cultural variability in its expression (Heine, Lehman, Markus, & Kitayama, 1999), the tendency to seek self-esteem is well established in Western cultures where individualism is a dominant ideology. In this chapter, we consider how people arrive at the judgment that they are worthwhile, that is, how they arrive at a sense of self-worth. We explore how the desire to be a person of worth influences the ways people organize their lives and spend their time. We examine what makes people vulnerable to feelings of worthlessness, and we consider the strategies people use to avoid feeling worthless. Our central proposition is that people seek to maintain, protect, and enhance self-esteem by attempting to obtain success and avoid failure in domains on which their self-worth has been staked. Contingencies of self-worth, then, serve a self-regulatory function, influencing the situations people select for themselves, their efforts in those situations, and their reactions to successes and failures. Finally, we conclude with a consideration of the costs of living one's life in the pursuit of self-esteem.

#### Constructing Self-esteem: Contingencies of Self-Worth

How do people decide that they are worthy or unworthy human beings? Do we need to excel at all things to be worthy, or are we selective in the domains on which we stake our self-worth? In his seminal discussion of self-esteem, William James (1890) made two points that have shaped our contemporary understanding of global self-esteem. First, James argued that global self-esteem has the qualities of both a state and a trait. Specifically, he argued that people tend to have average levels of self-esteem that are “direct and elementary endowments of our nature,” (James, 1890, p. 43). This “average tone of self-feeling which each one of us carries about with him...is independent of the objective reasons we may have for satisfaction or discontent” (p. 43). On the other hand, James believed that the state of self-esteem rises and falls as a function of achievements and setbacks. As James put it, “... the normal provocative of [state] self-feeling is one's actual success or failure, and the good or bad position one holds in the world.” (James, 1890, p. 43, emphasis in orig.). Thus, according to James, while one's typical level of self-esteem is independent of one's objective circumstances or achievements, changes around one's typical level will reflect changed circumstances, successes and failures.

If any success or failure, acceptance or rejection, good deed or bad deed had the power to affect our self-esteem, we would spend each day with our state self-worth totally at the mercy of events. Yet not all successes and failures have the same effect on self-esteem, and this is a second major contribution of James' (1890) analysis. James (1890) argued that instead, people are highly selective about the domains on which they stake their self-worth,

concluding that “our self-feeling in this world depends entirely on what we back ourselves to be and do” (James, 1890, p. 45). In other words, people differ in the contingencies they must satisfy to attain high self-esteem. A contingency of self-worth is a domain or category of outcomes on which a person has staked his or her self-esteem, so that person’s view of his or her worth depends on perceived successes, failures, or adherence to self-standards in that domain. For some people, self-esteem may depend on being attractive, loved, or competent. For others, self-esteem may depend on being virtuous, powerful, or self-reliant.

We have developed a measure of common contingencies of self-worth in college students, called the Contingencies of Self-Worth scale (CSW). The current version of the measure assesses seven contingencies of self-worth: appearance, others’ approval, outdoing others in competition, academic competency, love and support from family, virtue, and God’s love. Each subscale of the measure has high internal consistency (Cronbach’s  $\alpha$ ’s range from .82 to .97), high test-retest reliability (ranging from .63 to .89 over an 8.5 month interval), and is distinct from other constructs such as level of self-esteem, social desirability, and the Big Five dimensions of personality (Crocker, Luhtanen, & Bouvrette, 2001b). The highest-loading item on each subscale of the measure is included in the Appendix.

We believe that James (1890) intended his two hypotheses to be taken together and not in isolation from one another. This leads to an important but overlooked statement about the nature of self-esteem: global state self-esteem rises and falls around its typical, trait level in response to achievements, setbacks, and altered circumstances related to one’s contingencies of self-worth. We think that James overstated the extent to which a person’s typical level of self-esteem (i.e., trait self-esteem) is independent of objective circumstances, achievements, and contingencies of self-worth. Nonetheless, fluctuations of state self-esteem around a person’s typical level of trait self-esteem are crucially important to understanding the role of self-esteem in our daily lives (see also Kernis, this volume).

#### A Model of Contingencies of Self-Worth

Building on and extending James’ (1890) insights, Crocker and Wolfe (Crocker & Wolfe, in press; Wolfe & Crocker, in press) developed a model of contingencies of self-worth and its relation to affect, motivation, and cognition. Central to their model is the contention that the impact of events and circumstances on self-esteem depends on the perceived relevance of those events to one’s contingencies of self-worth. Self-esteem is both more vulnerable to and more defended in response to events that are relevant to one’s contingencies of self-worth. In

other words, it is the person's interpretation of the event or circumstance and of its relevance to his or her contingencies of self-worth, rather than the objective event or circumstance as categorized by an independent observer, that determines whether and how strongly the event will affect state self-esteem (McFarland & Ross, 1982).

Contingencies of self-worth and state self-esteem. State self-esteem rises and falls around its trait level in response to construals of external events such as achievements, setbacks, altered circumstances, and internal events (Greenier et al., 1999; Levine, Wyer, & Schwarz, 1994), but only when those events are relevant to one's contingencies of self-worth. For example, an imagined insult, a success at work, or a memory of a kind remark may all lead to temporary increases or decreases in state self-esteem if those events are perceived to be related to one's contingencies of self-worth. Furthermore, events in domains of contingencies of self-worth are particularly likely to affect state self-esteem when the events are clearly positive or negative and are important to people's lives.

A study of college seniors applying to graduate school provides support for this view (Crocker, Sommers, & Luhtanen, 2000). Participants first completed a measure of contingencies of self-worth (this was an early version of our measure, assessing appearance, others' approval, academic competence, love of friends and family, power, self-reliance, virtue, and God's love as contingencies of self-worth). Then, for the next two months (from February 15 to April 15), they accessed a web page twice a week (and any day they heard from a graduate school to which they had applied), completed a state version of the Rosenberg (1965) self-esteem scale, and reported on contacts from graduate programs. At the conclusion of the study, participants again completed the contingencies of self-worth scale. According to a contingencies of self-worth view, the impact of acceptances and rejections from graduate programs should be greater, the more these college seniors based their self-esteem on being good at school. Consistent with this prediction, relative to baseline days on which students received no news from the graduate programs to which they had applied, self-esteem increased more on acceptance days and decreased more on rejection days, the more students based their self-esteem on being good at school. Furthermore, only the school competency contingency, and none of the eight other contingencies assessed in this study, moderated both changes in response to acceptances and changes in response to rejections. The specificity of the effect supports the view that fluctuations in self-esteem are not due to a general characteristic of contingent self-esteem but rather, to the specific match of life events with a particular contingency of self-worth. This study thus supports the central hypothesis that

successes and failures lead to increases and decreases in state self-esteem around a person's typical level, to the degree that self-esteem is contingent on that domain.

Contingencies and trait self-esteem. James (1890) believed that a person's typical, trait level of self-esteem is a direct and elementary endowment of his or her nature and is therefore unrelated to how successful that person is in domains of contingencies of self-worth. A person's trait level of self-esteem may be influenced by a variety of factors such as biologically based dispositions to experience positive or negative affect. However, trait self-esteem is also influenced by people's enduring circumstances, their contingencies of self-worth, and their chronic tendency to construe contingency-relevant events and the self as satisfying or not satisfying those contingencies. High trait self-esteem may result from enduring environments, relationships, and activities that enable people to satisfy, or to believe they satisfy, their contingencies of self-worth. Low trait self-esteem may result from choosing or being trapped in enduring environments, relationships, or activities in which it is difficult to satisfy one's contingencies of self-worth, chronically engaging in behaviors that make it less likely that those contingencies will be satisfied, or consistently interpreting events in a negative light.

Evidence for this view is provided by a study of African-American and European-American freshmen on a predominantly white college campus (Crocker et al., 2001b; Crocker & Wolfe, in press). Predominantly white campuses may threaten African-American students' self-esteem and depress academic performance because of negative stereotypes about their intellectual ability (Steele, 1997), prejudice and discrimination (Crocker & Major, 1989), and failure to live up to standards of attractiveness or worthiness that tend to be based around the values and norms of the majority culture (Steele, 1992). Unless they are able to define their own standards of success in these domains, and ignore the standards of the dominant group, contingencies of self-worth may increase vulnerability of African-American students to low self-esteem. The more African-American students' self-esteem is based on others' approval, school competency, physical attractiveness, or other interpersonal contingencies of self-worth, the more vulnerable they should be to low levels of trait self-esteem. Indeed, this is what Crocker, Luhtanen, and Bouvrette (2001) found: For African-American students, basing self-esteem on others' approval, physical appearance, being good at school, or outdoing others in competition were negatively correlated with level of trait self-esteem—more negatively than was the case for students from European-American backgrounds. Although these data may suggest that any contingency of self-worth is more negatively related to trait self-esteem for Black than White students on a predominantly White campus, this was not the case. Basing self-esteem on love and

support from one's family, on God's love, or on being a moral, virtuous person did not differ in its link to trait self-esteem for Black and White students. These data indicate that trait self-esteem depends on both a person's contingencies of self-worth and on whether the person's circumstances enable him or her to satisfy those contingencies. Does it matter which contingencies of self-worth a person uses as the standards for evaluating self-worth? We believe the answer is a resounding "yes." As the study of African-American and European American students suggests, interpersonal contingencies of self-worth can be difficult to satisfy, particularly in certain contexts. Consequently, these contingencies may be more strongly associated with low trait self-esteem as well as unstable state self-esteem. For example, basing self-esteem on others' approval may result in either or both low trait self-esteem or unstable state self-esteem because it is difficult to always avoid disapproval from a wide range of people, and easy to interpret ambiguous or absent feedback as disapproval (Murray, Holmes, & Griffin, 1996; Murray, Holmes, MacDonald, & Ellsworth, 1998). On the other hand, basing self-esteem on being a virtuous person depends more on one's own standards, although they may be influenced by others. Consistent with this view, basing self-esteem on being virtuous is positively correlated with trait self-esteem, whereas basing self-esteem on the approval of others, physical appearance, or outdoing others in competition are all negatively correlated with level of trait self-esteem (Crocker & Wolfe, in press). This does not mean it is impossible for people whose self-esteem is dependent on approval from others to maintain a high level of self-esteem. However, in order to do so, they may need to constantly impress others or surround themselves with admirers.

Where do contingencies of self-worth come from? How do people arrive at their contingencies of self-worth? Do we choose to base our self-esteem only on domains that we expect to succeed at? Some research indicates that people are adept at basing their self-worth, or choosing as relevant to the self, only those things on which they tend to outperform others, particularly close others (Tesser, 1988; see also Tesser, this volume). In our view, this is not so easy to do. We argue, along with others, that contingencies of self-worth develop over the course of time in response to many forms of socialization and social influence (Bandura, 1986; Bandura, 1991) such as parent child interactions (e.g., Bartholomew, 1990; Moretti & Higgins, 1990), cultural norms and values (e.g., Solomon, Greenberg, & Pyszczynski, 1991b) and observational learning (Bandura, 1991). It is also possible that contingencies of self-worth develop in those domains in which people have experienced acceptance or rejection from others (Leary & Baumeister, in press). For example, a child who receives parental attention only when he or she has won some academic award or recognition may conclude that to be worthwhile, he or she must be smart. In

addition, contingencies of self-worth such as self-reliance may develop based on experiences of being physically unsafe. For example, in a recent case, a 3 year-old child (whose mother was a drug addict) was responsible not only for his own physical well-being, but for his two younger siblings as well (Bellamy, 1995). As a result, this child might develop self-esteem that is contingent on his ability to be self-reliant.

More generally, we suspect that contingencies of self-worth develop based on personal or vicarious experiences that lead people to believe that will be safe and secure (and accepted by others) if they succeed in those domains. Because contingencies of self-worth develop over the life span, they are relatively stable but not immutable.

How can we reconcile this view with research indicating that people decide that areas in which they are outperformed by close others are irrelevant to the self? This apparent contradiction can be resolved if we consider that higher-order, superordinate contingencies are relatively stable, whereas the more specific, and subordinate contingencies are more amenable to change (Crocker & Wolfe, in press). In our view, it is easier to shift from one subordinate contingency of self-worth to another (e.g. from being good at chemistry to being good at psychology) than to shift from one superordinate contingency to another (e.g., from being smart to being virtuous). Thus, many academic couples may base their self-worth on intellectual abilities yet define their areas of specialization differently so as not to be outperformed by their spouse in an area of expertise. We will return to the issue of when and under what circumstances people shift their contingencies of self-worth to protect self-esteem in a later section.

#### Implications for Cognition, Affect, Motivation and Behavior

Contingencies of self-worth, once developed, have implications for much of people's experience. In particular, they shape our interpretations of situations, our emotional reactions to events, and our personal goals.

Cognition. Consistent with recent cognitive interpretations of personality (Kihlstrom & Cantor, 1988; Kihlstrom & Hastie, 1997), we argue that contingencies of self-worth provide one of the mental schemas through which people filter their daily experience. Contingencies of self-worth are hypothesized to direct attention to contingency-relevant information and events, guide interpretation of those events, and consequently, shape emotional reactions to those events (see Taylor & Crocker, 1981, for a review). Preliminary support for this view was provided by a study in which participants read a description of an incident and were asked to imagine that it happened to them (Sommers & Crocker, 2000). In the incident, a person found a wallet and returned it (with cash and credit cards) to the owner. The recipient of this good deed, however, was quite ungrateful, and berated the

unfortunate do-gooder. Sommers and Crocker (2000) hypothesized that this event would be interpreted positively by people who based their self-esteem on being virtuous, but negatively by people who based their self-esteem on others' approval. As predicted, the more participants based their self-esteem on being virtuous, the more virtuous they said the event would make them feel; the more they based their self-esteem on others' approval, the less approved of they would feel. To examine effects on self-esteem, a difference score was calculated to assess how much more participants based their self-esteem on virtue than others' approval. This difference in contingencies of self-worth predicted participants' reports of how their self-esteem and affect would be influenced by the event. The more participants' contingencies were weighted toward others' approval instead of virtue, the more they reported that their self-esteem would decrease and negative affect would increase as a result of this event.

Affect. Because contingencies of self-worth reflect the domains in which people have invested their self-worth and because people typically strive to be worthy rather than unworthy, contingencies of self-worth are linked to a person's goals and self-standards (see Wolfe and Crocker, in press, for a discussion). Consequently, affective reactions to events are more intense, the more relevant those events are to one's contingencies of self-worth. Previous research has demonstrated that goal-related events elicit stronger emotional responses than do goal-unrelated events (Cantor et al., 1991; Emmons, 1991; Lavalley & Campbell, 1995). If being a person of worth is a goal for most people, then affective reactions to events in a domain should be stronger the more self-esteem is based on doing well in that domain. The study of seniors applying to graduate school described previously provided an opportunity to test this hypothesis. Specifically, in addition to completing daily self-reports of self-esteem, participants also completed a measure of positive and negative affect (Larsen & Diener, 1992). HLM analyses examined within-person effects of acceptances and rejections from graduate programs on affect (positive minus negative), relative to baseline days. As expected, the results indicated that positive affect rose in response to acceptances from graduate schools and fell in response to rejections. Furthermore, the more participants staked their self-worth on being good at school, the greater the affective increases and decreases.

Thus, both changes in self-esteem and changes in positive affect in response to successes and failures are more intense the more that self-esteem is contingent on the domain. This does not mean, however, that state self-esteem and positive affect are identical. Positive affect and self-esteem should be more strongly linked in domains in which self-esteem is highly contingent, because positive events will lead to both happiness and high self-esteem. In noncontingent domains, however, positive events may lead to happiness without self-esteem increases.



Consistent with this view, self-esteem and positive affect were more strongly linked the more that students in the study of graduate school applicants based their self-esteem on being good at school (Crocker et al., 2000). In other words, for students high in this contingency, admissions to graduate school tended to raise self-esteem and affect together, while rejections tended to lower them. For students whose self-worth was not at stake, however, acceptances led to positive affect without raising self-esteem, and rejections led to negative affect without lowering self-esteem. Thus, it seems that self-esteem and affect function independently in response to events that are irrelevant to one's contingencies of self-worth

Motivation and behavior. Contingencies of self-worth have motivational implications: people will generally try to avoid the drops in self-esteem and increases in negative affect that follow from failing in domains on which self-worth has been staked, and they will seek the increases in self-esteem and positive affect that follow from succeeding in domains of contingency. Although the level of a person's trait self-esteem is strongly related to affect and life satisfaction, it is relatively unimportant as a cause of behavior (see Baumeister, 1998, for a discussion). As the baseline of self-worth, trait self-esteem and the positive or negative affect that typically accompanies it has little motivational power. Trait self-esteem by definition is unlikely to change in response to temporarily falling short of or fulfilling one's standards. Because it tends to be stable, trait self-esteem lacks the power to provide internally generated rewards and punishments for behavior. State self-esteem, on the other hand, fluctuates in response to events that are relevant to one's contingencies, and is also associated with heightened affective reactions to events. Consequently, fluctuations of state self-esteem and accompanying affect have the power to shape behavior. Indeed, the strongest influence on whether people in the United States find events satisfying or unsatisfying is the effect of those events on self-esteem (Sheldon, Elliot, Kim, & Kasser, 2001). Because fluctuations of state self-esteem depend on the contingencies of self-worth a person has, a focus on contingencies of self-worth may provide deeper insights into the link between self-esteem and behavior than a focus on trait self-esteem.

There are multiple routes through which contingencies of self-worth may influence behavior. First, people with different contingencies may choose to be in different situations, and the pressures or forces that operate on behavior in those situations may affect behavior. Second, contingencies of self-worth may serve as self-standards for behavior, motivating behaviors that help people to satisfy their contingencies or avoid failing to live up to them.

Finally, people with different contingencies of self-worth may actually create different situations and circumstances in their lives.

### Contingencies of Self-Worth, Situations, and Behavior

In our view, people organize their lives around their contingencies of self-worth. They do this for two reasons; first, to have their beliefs about what makes them a person of worth validated by others who share their contingencies and second, to increase their chances of avoiding the pain of drops in state self-esteem and obtaining the pleasure of increases in state self-esteem.

Selecting situations. People select for themselves situations, settings, and circumstances in which their contingencies of self-worth are widely shared and valued. Thus, people whose self-esteem is based on being smart are likely to apply to selective colleges or graduate programs where other people share their view of what constitutes a worthy person. People whose self-esteem is based on their religious belief that God loves them are likely to join religious organizations where others share this contingency. People who base their self-esteem on their physical appearance may seek out settings in which a high value is placed on attractiveness. For example, college students who base their self-esteem on God's love are more likely to join religious organizations, and college women who base their self-esteem on their appearance are more likely to join sororities (Crocker, Luhtanen, & Bouvrette, 2001a). Selecting situations in which others share their contingencies of self-worth may provide reassurance that the domains on which people have staked their self-worth really do determine who is worthy and who is not. Furthermore, these situations may provide opportunities to satisfy one's contingencies. It is important to note, however, that selecting situations in which others share one's contingencies of self-worth does not guarantee that one will experience high self-esteem. Indeed, in addition to providing validation of one's contingencies and opportunities to succeed in those domains, these situations may also provide opportunities for failure in domains of contingency. For example, the person who bases self-esteem on being smart and seeks out situations in which this contingency is widely shared may find himself or herself surrounded by people -- all of whom also want to be smart. The resulting struggle to be the smartest (or at least, not the dumbest) affords many opportunities for both increases and decreases in self-esteem.

Once people select situations based on their contingencies of self-worth, these situations, in turn, may influence behavior. For example, in our study of college freshmen, we found that women (particularly European-American women) who base their self-esteem on their appearance are more likely to join sororities. Even after

controlling for their contingencies of self-worth, women who join sororities spend more time partying, use drugs and alcohol more, and show more symptoms of disordered eating than women who do not join sororities (Crocker et al., 2001a). Thus, by shaping the situations people choose for themselves, contingencies of self-worth may indirectly shape behaviors.

Choosing how to spend one's time. Each of us has only 24 hours in a day, and we make choices each day about how to use that time. One influence on those choices is our contingencies of self-worth. Contingencies serve an important self-regulatory function, by shaping people's goals and directing their behavior as they attempt to achieve those goals. Our study of college freshmen examined how contingencies of self-worth that students had before they entered college affected their use of time over the course of their freshman year (Crocker et al., 2001a). After the end of both their first and second semester of college, students were asked to report how much time they spent in a variety of activities, including studying, volunteering, going to church or synagogue, partying, socializing, exercising, shopping for clothes, and grooming. Controlling for differences associated with students' gender, race, and socioeconomic status, contingencies of self-worth prior to entering college significantly predicted how much time students spent in each of these activities. Furthermore, specific contingencies predicted specific activities. For example, students who based their self-esteem on school competency reported spending more time studying, students who based their self-esteem on virtue spent more time volunteering and less time partying, students who based their self-esteem on God's love spent more time in religious activities and less time partying, students who based their self-esteem on love and support from their family spent more time with or talking to their family, and students who based their self-esteem on their appearance spent more time grooming, exercising, shopping for clothes, socializing, and partying.

Thus, it appears that contingencies of self-worth shape people's goals and how they spend their time-- people spend more time on activities that enable them to satisfy their contingencies. But does it work? Does this self-regulatory function result in success at achieving one's goals? For example, is a student who spends more time volunteering really more virtuous than his or her peers? Is a student who exercises and spends more time grooming really more attractive than his or her peers? One area in which we can examine the success of this self-regulatory strategy is in the domain of school competency. The more students based their self-esteem on being good at school, the more hours per week they reported studying. Did this extra effort result in a higher GPA? To address this question, students reported their GPA each semester of their freshman year. (A subset of students gave their

permission to have their freshman-year transcripts examined. Self-reported GPA was highly correlated with actual GPA, particularly for the first semester, when students reported their GPA after they had received their fall-term grades ( $r = .88$ ); second-semester grade reports were mailed after students completed the third session of our study.) Interestingly, although students who studied more had higher GPAs, the correlation between the school competency contingency and GPA was nonsignificant ( $r = .06$ , n.s.) after controlling for SAT scores. Thus, the extra time students spend studying because their self-esteem is at stake may not be particularly helpful in actually increasing their GPA. Perhaps their studying is less efficient, impeded by anxiety because of what is at stake, or distracted by thoughts of how terrible they would feel if they do not succeed in school (Deci & Ryan, 1991). Or perhaps they are more concerned with appearing to be academically serious than with actually being competent. We cannot say for sure what accounts for this interesting but unexpected effect. But it suggests a larger point, to which we will return later: the motivation that comes from having self-worth on the line does not necessarily result in greater success.

Contingencies create our reality. At various points in this chapter, we have noted that contingencies of self-worth serve as the filters through which people interpret their experience; they shape people's selection of situations and serve a self-regulatory function, motivating behavior in an attempt to satisfy those contingencies. The result of these various processes is that contingencies of self-worth actually shape the situations--the reality--that we experience. The general idea that beliefs can create reality is a cornerstone of social psychology (Merton, 1948; Snyder, 1984). Of course, beliefs do not completely create reality, and contingencies of self-worth are not the only beliefs at play as we create our reality. Nonetheless, it is important to acknowledge the ways in which the creation of our reality is a function of our contingencies of self-worth.

Although we do not have data to support this point, a simple thought experiment about a type of person familiar to most academics should convey its plausibility. Consider, for example, a person we'll call John whose self-worth is based on being smart. John tends to interpret situations through the filter of his contingency, and therefore tends to see all situations as opportunities to be smart, or to be stupid. Because John wants to be a worthy person, he will try to be smart in those situations—perhaps by making insightful comments or asking tough questions, by appearing knowledgeable, by pointing out the flaws in others' comments, by being argumentative, and by always needing to be right or win arguments. John's behavior, directed at the goal of feeling worthy by being smart, is likely to have an effect on those around him—especially if they also need to be smart to feel worthy. They may respect and admire his intelligence, as John probably desires. But it is more likely that they will feel that

John's need to be smart, perhaps even the smartest person in the room, threatens their own need to be smart. Consequently, they may counter-argue, put down John's ideas, and generally engage in intellectual one-upmanships. They may not like him, and may even avoid him. It is probably hard for John to see the extent to which he has created the intellectually combative, unsupportive, even hostile environment in which he quite regularly finds himself. John may indeed feel worthy because he is smart in these situations. On the other hand, the repeated criticism he receives from those around him may wear on his self-esteem. In either case, it seems likely that John may not like the reality he has created for himself.

### Maintaining, Protecting, and Enhancing Self-Esteem

Contingencies of self-worth represent the domains in which self-esteem is vulnerable—in which successes or failures can lead to increases or decreases in self-esteem. This, along with the increases and decreases in affect that accompany changes in self-esteem, is what gives contingencies of self-worth their motivational impetus and leads people whose self-esteem is based on school competency to study more, those whose self-esteem is based on attractiveness to spend more time exercising, grooming, and shopping for clothes, and so on. Thus, an important way that people attempt to maintain the belief that they are worthy is by achieving success in the domains on which their self-worth is staked. However, working to achieve success is not the only way people attempt to maintain and enhance their self-esteem, or protect it from failure in domains of contingency. Sometimes, people lack the time, energy, or ability to be successful in a domain on which their self-esteem has been staked, and it is inevitable that each of us will occasionally experience failure in domains of contingency. Consequently, people develop additional strategies for avoiding the drop in self-esteem that accompanies failure in domains of contingency. Some of these are a priori strategies that people use to avoid potential failure or to cushion the consequent blow to self-esteem. Others represent post-hoc strategies that people use after experiencing failure in a domain of contingency. In the following sections, we consider both a priori and post-hoc strategies for maintaining and protecting self-esteem.

In these sections, the research we review tends not to explicitly consider the role of contingencies of self-worth. Rather, most studies assume that these self-protective strategies will not be elicited unless self-esteem is threatened, and they expose participants to actual or anticipated success or failure in domains that are assumed to be important to nearly everyone. Thus, studies of self-esteem maintenance and protection typically expose college students to the possibility of failure on an intellectual task, or rejection in a social circumstance, on the assumption that this failure or rejection threatens the self-esteem of participants. In each of the studies, there is likely to be

unmeasured variance in the contingencies on which participants base their self-esteem, so the failure or rejection may be more threatening to some participants than to others. But in general, researchers implicitly select tasks or feedback relevant to the contingencies of self-worth of most of their participants. Thus, we interpret these studies as demonstrating the effects of actual or anticipated threats in domains of contingency.

### Avoiding Threats to Self-Esteem

The research we have reviewed thus far in this chapter suggests that people generally try to perform to the best of their ability on domains in which their self-esteem is contingent, and they spend their time in ways that they think will maximize their chances of success. Yet there are times when people are more motivated to avoid the drops in self-esteem and negative affect associated with actual or anticipated failure than with enjoying the increases in self-esteem associated with success; that is, there are times when people are focused more on prevention than on promotion (Higgins, in press). When outcomes are highly desirable but uncertain, people tend to protect themselves from disappointment by engaging in a variety of cognitive and behavioral strategies (Pyszczynski, 1982).

Avoiding the situation. The first line of defense when failure in a domain of contingency is anticipated is to avoid the situation altogether. Thus, in addition to selecting situations in which their contingencies are shared by others and that provide opportunities for succeeding in domains of contingency, people will generally avoid situations in which failure in domains of contingency seems likely. This strategy of avoiding situations is not studied much in social psychology because it is less amenable to laboratory methods. However, it is an important way in which people limit the risk of failure in domains of contingency, at the cost of limiting the range of their experience. Students who base their self-esteem on doing well in school tend to avoid challenges (Covington, 1984). For example, they may avoid taking courses reputed to have tough grading curves, or in areas far removed from their specialization.

Lowering expectations. When people cannot avoid the situation altogether, they may try to buffer the impact of anticipated failure on self-esteem by lowering their expectations to avoid being disappointed by failure (Pyszczynski, 1982). This strategy, called defensive pessimism, is focused on managing the anxiety generated by the possibility of failure and its consequent effects on self-esteem (Cantor & Norem, 1989; Norem & Cantor, 1986a; Norem & Cantor, 1986b). Although low expectations are sometimes associated with poor performance, the strategy of setting low expectations in order to reduce anxiety is not usually associated with poor performance (Cantor & Norem, 1989; Norem & Cantor, 1986a; Norem & Cantor, 1986b). Rather, it appears to reduce anxiety to a

manageable level so it is not debilitating. When their strategy of defensive pessimism is interfered with, people actually perform worse (Norem & Cantor, 1986b).

Self-handicapping. Another strategy to cope with the possibility of failure is to engage in various forms of self-handicapping. Self-handicapping is an ironic phenomenon in that it increases people's chances of failure by creating obstacles to their performance such as not trying or practicing, consuming alcohol or drugs, or procrastinating (Baumeister, 1998). Self-handicapping provides an excuse for failure so that when a person self-handicaps, a poor performance is unlikely to be attributed to a lack of ability. It has the added advantage of making one appear particularly talented if one manages to perform well in spite of the self-handicap. Therefore, people may be motivated to self-handicap because it can provide an excuse for failure or make one's success seem particularly remarkable (Tice, 1991). Most self-handicapping occurs only when others know about the self-handicapping (Kolditz & Arkin, 1982). Thus, it seems that self-handicapping is primarily a strategy for managing the attributions others will make about one's performance. This suggests that self-handicapping is particularly likely to be used by people whose self-esteem is highly contingent on others' approval.

Perfectionism. An alternative strategy to avoid losses of self-esteem associated with anticipated failure is perfectionism. Perfectionists are people who are imprisoned rather than served by their rigid demands for perfection (e.g., must get the top score, make no mistakes, win the first prize) rather than excellence. To avoid drops in self-esteem they must strive to be perfect (Blankenstein, Flett, Hewitt, & Eng, 1993; Frost, Marten, Lahart, & Rosenblate, 1990). Perfectionism has high costs, in terms of both time and anxiety. Although perfectionism sometimes increases one's chances of success, it is also linked to procrastination, which may ultimately serve as a self-handicapping strategy and undermine performance (Frost et al., 1990).

### Reacting to Threats to Self-Esteem

When people are optimistic about their chances of success in domains on which their self-worth is staked, they are less likely to engage in a priori strategies that buffer the self from possible failure (Norem & Cantor, 1986a). But how do people cope when failure, rejection, or other negative outcomes in domains of contingency cannot be avoided, or have not been prepared for in advance? People have at their disposal several lines of defense against these threats to self-esteem, including cognitive strategies that minimize or discount the threat and its implications for self-esteem, or that restore a general sense of self-worth (Greenberg, Pyszczynski, & Solomon,

1986). In addition, evidence is accumulating that people respond to such threats with anger and hostility and often lash out against others following threats to their self-worth (Baumeister, Smart, & Boden, 1996).

Dismissing the threat. Perhaps the most effective response to threats in domains of contingency is to reduce the threat to something else—an invalid test, another’s mistake, and so on. People are more likely to derogate a test as invalid or inaccurate when they fail than when they succeed (Frey, 1978; Greenberg, Pyszczynski, & Solomon, 1982; Shrauger, 1975) and evaluate evidence about the validity of the test in a self-serving manner (Pyszczynski, Greenberg, & Holt, 1985). Attributions for success and failure also seem motivated by the desire to take credit for success and avoid responsibility for failure. People are more likely to attribute success than failure to their ability, and failure is more likely to be attributed to others, the circumstances, a poor test, or lack of effort—anything that avoids the implication that the person who failed is deficient (for reviews see Blaine & Crocker, 1993; Bradley, 1978; Greenberg & Pyszczynski, 1985; Miller & Ross, 1975). People can also dismiss social or interpersonal threats. For example, people who are rejected by a group often say, after the fact, that they did not want to be accepted anyway (Leary, Tambor, Terdal, & Downs, 1995).

Compensating. Another response to threats to self-worth is to compensate by inflating the positivity of self-description on the threatened dimension (Gollwitzer & Wicklund, 1985; Gollwitzer, Wicklund, & Hilton, 1982; Wicklund, 1982) or inflate self-descriptions on another dimension (Baumeister & Jones, 1978; Greenberg & Pyszczynski, 1985). For example, people who are told that their personality does not suit them for their chosen profession subsequently describe themselves in ways that indicate that they are, in fact, suited to that profession (Gollwitzer & Wicklund, 1985). And when compensating by inflating the self on the threatened domain is not possible, people will inflate themselves in other domains to compensate (Baumeister & Jones, 1978; Greenberg & Pyszczynski, 1985). These compensatory strategies are aimed first, to maintain positive self-views in domains in which self-definitions are at stake (i.e., self-esteem is contingent) and second, to maintain global self-esteem when maintaining a specific positive self-view in a domain of contingency is not possible. This inflation of the self extends to actual performance; students committed to a professional goal such as becoming a physician or a computer scientist who failed on a task relevant to their professional goal showed enhanced performance on a subsequent task relevant to their goal, although they showed impaired performance on a later task that was irrelevant to their professional goal (Brunstein & Gollwitzer, 1996). This attempt to compensate for failure through enhanced performance on another, relevant task may be related to some problems with self-regulation. Attempts to



compensate for failure can lead people to set inappropriately high goals, and hence end up with less rewards (Baumeister, Heatherton, & Tice, 1993)

Abandoning contingencies. One strategy to protect self-esteem following failure in a domain of contingency is to give up the contingency. James (1890) suggested that this strategy is quite ubiquitous: “To give up pretensions is as blessed a relief as to get them gratified; and where disappointment is incessant and the struggle unending, this is what men will always do” (1890, p. 45). People may disengage self-esteem from specific experiences that are unlikely to satisfy a contingency of self-worth. For example, Major and her colleagues (Major & Schmader, 1998; Major, Spencer, Schmader, Wolfe, & Crocker, 1998) found that Black students disengaged their self-worth from performance on a test when the possibility of racial bias in the test was raised. When people perform worse than close others in a domain that is relevant to their self-concept, they may protect self-esteem by diminishing the relevance of the domain (Major & Schmader, 1998; Major et al., 1998; see also Pyszczynski & Greenberg, 1987; Tesser, 1988, this volume).

It is easier to abandon specific or subordinate contingencies (e.g., being good at engineering) than more encompassing or superordinate contingencies (e.g., being smart or good at school). A study conducted by Crocker et al. (2000) indicated that college seniors’ contingencies remain largely unchanged across a two month period of time, and, notably, their endorsement of school competency as a contingency of self-worth was stable despite the fact that many participants received a preponderance of rejections from graduate programs. Despite the difficulty in revising superordinate contingencies of self-worth, they are not immutable. Abandoning contingencies may be particularly likely when a person is no longer able to satisfy a contingency of self-worth. An example of this can be seen in older adults. Despite losses in domains that are clearly prominent contingencies of self-worth among younger people (e.g., physical appearance, agility), older adults do not suffer from lower levels of self-esteem (Brandstadter & Greve, 1994). One explanation, consistent with research in the aging literature (Carstensen & Freund, 1994), is that as we age, we abandon those contingencies we are no longer able to satisfy.

Distancing from others. A more interpersonal reaction to threats to self-esteem is the process of distancing the self from others. When a close other (e.g., a friend or family member) excels in a domain that is not central to the self-concept, people tend to bask in reflected glory, as if the credit for the other’s outstanding performance extended to the self. However, when outperformed by a close other in a domain that is relevant to the self-concept, people either diminish the relevance of the domain or distance themselves from the other person (Tesser, 1988; this

volume). Thus, people will sometimes cut themselves off from friends and family members whose superior performance constitutes a threat to self-esteem.

Downward comparison. Another strategy for protecting self-esteem from threats is to focus on other people's shortcomings. Although, this does not directly eliminate the threat, it can reduce it by suggesting that one isn't really that bad in comparison to other people. For example, following threats in important domains, people are more likely to remember negative information about others, even information that is unrelated to the domain of the threat (Crocker, 1993). Indeed, people tend to seek out information about others who also did poorly (Pyszczynski, Greenberg, & Laprelle, 1985; Wood, Giordano-Beech, & Ducharme, 1999), and compare themselves with worse-off others following failure (Beauregard & Dunning, 1998; Crocker, Thompson, McGraw, & Ingerman, 1987; Wills, 1981; Wood et al., 1999).

Prejudice and derogation of others. The tendency to focus on others' shortcomings following a threat to self-esteem extends to the derogation of outgroups and expression of ingroup favoritism (Aberson, Healy, & Romero, 2000; Crocker & Luhtanen, 1990; Crocker et al., 1987; Wills, 1981). When people have experienced a threat to the self-concept, they are more likely to evaluate another person stereotypically (Fein & Spencer, 1997) and automatically (Spencer, Fein, Wolfe, Fong, & Dunn, 1998). As a result, negative evaluations of those who belong to stereotyped groups can serve to restore self-esteem (Fein & Spencer, 1997).

Antagonism. In light of the evidence that people often distance themselves from close others, engage in downward comparison, seek out negative information about others, and derogate outgroup members, it is not surprising that people who fail in a domain of contingency tend to interact with others in an antagonistic manner (Heatherton & Vohs, 2000) that ultimately drives others away. Heatherton et al. (2000), for example, demonstrated that people with high self-esteem who receive a threat to the self-concept are liked less by interaction partners than high self-esteem people who do not receive a threat to the self-concept.

Aggression and violence. Finally, people who receive a threat to self-esteem may react with aggression and violence toward others (Baumeister et al., 1996). Based on an extensive review of several literatures, Baumeister et al. (1996) conclude that aggression is a response to "fragile egotism," or self-concepts that are positive but vulnerable (see also Bushman & Baumeister, 1998). In our terms, aggression represents a response to threats in domains in which self-esteem is highly contingent.

Why would people become surly or violent after a failure? This response would seem to increase the likelihood of being rejected by others, and therefore seems particularly maladaptive. The answer may lie in research that demonstrates a link between frustration and aggression (e.g., Barker, Dembo, & Lewin, 1941). Failure or rejection in a domain on which self-esteem is staked may be particularly frustrating, especially if it is perceived to be unreasonable or unfair (Kulik & Brown, 1979), and consequently trigger an aggressive response. At times, such aggression may be functional in the sense of removing an obstacle to a goal (Shaver, Schwarz, Kirson, & O'Connor, 1987), although the reactions it elicits from others may often lead to more frustration and more aggression.

#### Genuine or defensive self-esteem?

Genuine self-esteem refers to a true sense of self-worth, self-respect, and acceptance of one's strengths and weaknesses (Rosenberg, 1979). The research we have reviewed suggests that people are typically defensive and unwilling to realistically acknowledge their flaws and shortcomings. The notion that people differ in their contingencies of self-worth provides an alternative way to think about the issue of defensive versus genuine self-esteem. According to this view, it is the potential loss of self-esteem in the face of self-threatening information that spurs defensiveness. Rather than focus on whether self-esteem is true or genuine, it may be more useful to focus on what self-esteem is based on and on whether that contingency of self-worth is vulnerable to, or currently subject to, attack. Self-esteem is relatively impervious to attack in domains in which it is noncontingent. That is, when confronted with negative information about the self, it may be easier to acknowledge nondefensively one's mistakes and failures and to take responsibility for them in noncontingent domains -- domains in which self-worth is not on the line. Thus, people are more likely to avoid self-threats in advance and react defensively to self-threats in domains in which their self-esteem is contingent. This is not the same as arguing that defensive self-esteem is ungentle, untrue, or self-deceptive. The problem is not that this self-esteem is false, hiding inner feelings of worthlessness, but that it is fragile, and consequently needs to be defended (Deci & Ryan, 1995; Kernis & Waschull, 1995).

#### Does Level of Self-Esteem Matter?

Although our analysis focuses on contingencies of self-worth, we recognize that level of self-esteem plays an important role in these processes. Many of the strategies people use to avoid self-threats are more characteristic of people who are low in self-esteem, and many of the reactions to unavoidable self-threats are more characteristic of people who are high in self-esteem (Baumeister, Tice, & Hutton, 1989). People high in trait self-esteem show a

variety of defensive responses to threatening information, including dismissing the accuracy and validity of the feedback (Brockner, 1984; Brockner, Derr, & Laing, 1987; Shrauger, 1975), derogating the source of the feedback, derogating other people (e.g., Crocker et al., 1987; see Wills, 1981, for a review), dismissing the importance of the domain in which they did poorly (Brown, Dutton, & Cook, 1997), and attributing the negative outcome to external or temporary causes (see Blaine & Crocker, 1993; Bradley, 1978; Kernis & Waschull, 1995, for discussions). Because people with high trait self-esteem generally think more positively about themselves and have clearer and more certain self-concepts (Campbell & Lavalee, 1993), they may find it easier to disbelieve or discredit negative information about the self (Baumeister et al., 1989; Blaine & Crocker, 1993; Kernis & Waschull, 1995). High self-esteem people also face potentially greater losses of self-esteem in the face of failure in contingent domains, and therefore may be more motivated to avoid drops in self-esteem by discrediting self-threats in contingent domains.

#### Overall Contingency, or Specific Domains of Contingency?

Our analysis of contingencies of self-worth and their motivational consequences focuses on the domains on which people stake their self-worth. In contrast to this emphasis, other related perspectives have focused on differences between people in whether self-esteem is contingent versus noncontingent. For example, Rogers (1951) emphasized the role of unconditional positive regard from others in producing people with noncontingent self-esteem. Deci and Ryan (1995) argue that self-esteem can be either contingent or “true,” with true self-esteem developing naturally from autonomous, efficacious action in the context of supportive, authentic relationships. Kernis and Washull (1995) emphasize differences between people whose self-esteem tends to be stable and those whose self-esteem is unstable. Whereas these perspectives emphasize between-person differences in the overall quality of contingent self-esteem, our approach emphasizes a within-person perspective, examining the domains on which a person’s self-esteem is contingent versus noncontingent.

There is, of course, no necessary incompatibility between these approaches. We emphasize within-person effects of domains of contingency and noncontingency because we believe that many of the most interesting and unexplored questions regarding contingencies of self-worth concern not whether a person has contingent or noncontingent self-esteem but what it is that they base their self-esteem on. Indeed, our data repeatedly show that different contingencies lead to different behaviors, vulnerabilities, and outcomes. A person whose self-esteem is based on being a good, moral person behaves very differently from a person whose self-esteem is based on being physically attractive or having power over others. Research that simply distinguishes between people with

contingent versus noncontingent self-esteem may obscure these important differences, to the point that the distinction seems irrelevant.

### Seeking Self-Esteem: At What Cost?

In our view, the problem with self-esteem is not in having self-esteem, but rather in pursuing self-esteem to the exclusion of other goals and needs. In particular, we argue that people's efforts to maintain, enhance, and protect self-esteem ultimately hinder them from attaining the things that they really need in life. And what is it that humans need? Many psychological human needs have been proposed (see Sheldon et al., 2001 for a discussion); we focus here on two psychological needs for which there is wide agreement across theories. One of the most important psychological needs may be to have a few close, mutually caring and supportive relationships with others (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Bowlby, 1969; Deci & Ryan, 2000). Close, mutually caring relationships provide a safe haven in times of distress (Collins & Feeney, 2000) which, in turn, contributes to more effective coping (Cohen, Sherrod, & Clark, 1986) and better mental and physical health (Ryff, 1995). In addition to the need for relatedness, humans have a need for competency – the ability to effect outcomes, or master the environment (Deci & Ryan, 2000; White, 1959). Mutually caring relationships that provide a safe haven in times of distress and the ability to master one's environment both contribute to survival, the overarching and primary goal of humans (Pyszczynski, Greenberg, & Solomon, 1997). In our view, what people really need is true relatedness and competence, rather than illusory perceptions of relatedness and competence. Although positive illusions about the self are linked to positive affect, they do not enhance true competency, and may incur long-term costs. For example, Robins and Beer (2001) found that college students with unrealistically positive views of their academic abilities were initially higher in self-esteem than students who appraised their abilities realistically, but over the course of their college experience they disengaged from academics and their self-esteem declined. In the long run, people's attempts to maintain, enhance, and protect contingent self-esteem may detract from their ability to form and maintain mutually caring relationships and acquire mastery through learning experiences. In addition, seeking self-esteem may also exact a toll on people's mental and physical health.

#### Costs to Relationships

The ways in which people react to self-esteem threat interfere with forming and maintaining close, mutually caring relationships with others. Our review indicates that people tend to respond to threat with blame, excuses, anger, antagonism, aggression, avoidance, or withdrawal (Baumeister, 1998; Baumeister, Bushman, &

Campbell, 2000; Baumeister et al., 1993; Baumeister et al., 1996; Baumeister et al., 1989; Heatherton & Vohs, 2000; Kernis & Waschull, 1995; Tice, 1993). These negative reactions reduce, rather than enhance, people's ability to fulfill their need for relatedness. In particular, seeking self-esteem may incur interpersonal costs because of the focus on maintaining and enhancing self-esteem, rather than attending to the needs and feelings of others. For example, people who fail in a domain of contingency may experience shame and a sense of worthlessness for not meeting their self-standards (Lewis, 2000). Shame, in turn, may lead to hostile intentions and maladaptive, aggressive responses (Tangney, Wagner, Hill-Barlow, Marschall, & Gramzow, 1996) that could strain interpersonal relationships. As another example, people with low self-esteem tend to react to self-doubts by questioning their partners' forgiveness, perceiving fewer positive qualities in their partner, and distancing themselves from their partner (Murray et al., 1998). This finding suggests that when people feel threatened, they may focus on repairing their self-esteem, even if it means devaluing or distancing themselves from close others. The evidence that people react to threats to the self with anger, hostility, and even violence also suggests that when people have the goal of maintaining and protecting self-esteem, they behave in ways that have high costs to their close relationships. Evidence that people who abuse spouses and children have fragile high self-esteem (Baumeister et al., 1996) is consistent with this view—when threatened, these people seem to completely lose sight of their goal to maintain their close and mutually caring relationships. Thus, the crucial issue is not whether self-esteem is high or low, but whether people feel their self-esteem is under assault, and hence are attempting to restore it.

People who base their self-esteem on the approval of others may be particularly vulnerable to experiencing unstable relationships. In terms of attachment theory, those who are contingent on the approval of others may have an insecure (i.e., anxious-ambivalent) attachment style characterized by high levels of dependency and a need for constant reassurance (Bowlby, 1969). Whereas secures (i.e., those who have a safe haven) engage in more effective forms of support seeking and care giving, insecurities are less effective support-seekers and caregivers (Collins & Feeney, 2000). Similarly, people with contingent self-esteem may be less effective at giving care and receiving support from others. In the long run, this maladaptive style of interaction could weaken or even dissolve the relationships with close others on which people depend for their physical and emotional well-being.

### Costs to Learning

When people experience a threat to self-esteem, they engage in defensive strategies in order to repair their self-esteem and maintain the belief that they have satisfied their contingencies. As we have seen, common strategies

include dismissing the validity of the negative feedback, derogating the source of the information, or generating excuses for their behavior. These defensive responses, although temporarily alleviating distress, can drive away people who are trying to be helpful. Moreover, they detract from the ability to consider and incorporate feedback that might lead them to realistically evaluate and address their weaknesses. Thus, seeking to maintain and enhance self-esteem by engaging in defensive behaviors such as making external attributions for failure, derogating the source of the feedback, or discrediting a test may ultimately impede learning and hinder the development of competence and mastery.

As noted, people tend to organize their lives around their contingencies in order to avoid increases in negative affect and maximize increases in positive affect. Although this strategy may protect self-esteem and affect in the short run, it may ultimately deter them from increasing their competence (Robins & Beer, 2001). Many achievement motivation theorists believe that basing self-esteem on academic achievement may increase students' susceptibility to academic difficulties (Burhans & Dweck, 1995; Covington, 1984). Basing self-esteem on competency, for example, may motivate people to demonstrate their competency to themselves and others. Because students who base their self-esteem on academic achievement wish to avoid the negative self-feelings that accompany poor performance, they may avoid challenges (Covington, 1984) and show learned helplessness in response to failure (Burhans & Dweck, 1995). The pressure they place on themselves may also lead them to underperform on academic tasks (Steele & Aronson, 1998; Stone, Lynch, Sjomeling, & Darley, 1999).

Self-determination theory (Deci, Nezlek, & Sheinman, 1981; Deci & Ryan, 2000; Ryan & Deci, 2000) also predicts that students whose self-worth depends on academic performance may experience pressure that undermines their motivation. According to self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 1991; Ryan & Deci, 2000), behavior can be introjected or integrated. Introjected behavior is controlled by internally regulated sanctions and rewards such as increases and decreases in self-esteem; on the other hand, integrated behavior is fully self-determined and performed for its own sake because of the intrinsic value of the activity. Because contingencies of self-worth are introjected, people may engage in tasks out of a feeling of obligation or a fear of loss of self-esteem rather than a sense of autonomy or genuine desire to learn. This attitude, in turn, may impair task performance and undermine intrinsic interest. Indeed, research has shown that whereas introjection is associated with increased academic anxiety, maladaptive coping with failure, and decreased intrinsic motivation, integration is associated with school enjoyment and proactive coping (Deci, Vallerand, Pelletier, & Ryan, 1991). In addition, the negative affect associated with

threats to the self in domains of contingency may undermine performance on cognitive tasks (Spencer & Quinn, 1995) and stifle creativity (Amabile, 1985). Again, the costs to learning come not from having self-esteem that is low (or high), but rather from reacting to events or feedback in ways that primarily serve to maintain, protect, and enhance self-esteem.

### Costs to Mental Health

The repeated fluctuations in self-esteem due to events in domains of contingency may increase people's vulnerability to negative mental health outcomes. In particular, the instability of self-esteem associated with contingencies of self-worth may exacerbate the onset of depression (Crocker and Wolfe, in press). Several models in the clinical literature suggest that people who are prone to depression also have self-esteem that is vulnerable, or contingent, in certain domains (Beck, 1983; Bibring, 1953; Blatt & Shichman, 1983; Higgins, 1987). Consistent with these models, we argue that it is the match between life events and contingencies of self-worth that contributes to increases in depression. However, it is the instability of self-esteem resulting from the fluctuation of positive and negative life events in domains of contingency that mediates the effects of contingencies on depression (Crocker & Wolfe, in press). Instability of depression may derive from both large drops in self-esteem (e.g., loss of a job, loss of a loved one) as well as more minor but repeated decreases in self-esteem (e.g., repeated rejections in a relationship). Recent research supports the hypothesis that contingencies, in concert with life events, lead to unstable self-esteem which increases depressive symptoms (see Crocker & Wolfe, in press, for a discussion; Kernis et al., 1998; Roberts & Gotlib, 1997; Roberts & Kassel, 1997; Roberts, Kassel, & Gotlib, 1995). Once again, level of self-esteem appears to be less important than whether self-esteem is contingent or vulnerable.

### Costs to Physical Health

People's desire to maintain, enhance, and protect self-esteem may also lead them to engage in behaviors that are deleterious to their physical health. People may try to seek self-esteem by engaging in activities that are relevant to their contingencies. For instance, people who are concerned with how others perceive and evaluate them may be at greater risk for adopting negative health practices (Leary, Tchividjian, & Kraxberger, 1994) including drinking alcohol (Faber, Khavari, & Douglass, 1980), smoking (Camp, Klesges, & Relyea, 1993), sunbathing (Leary & Jones, 1993), using steroids (Schrof, 1992, June 1), driving recklessly (Jonah, 1990), and failing to engage in safe sex practices, such as using condoms (Schlenker & Leary, 1982).



Contingencies based on appearance and social approval may be particularly important in the case of eating disorders. Research has shown that anorexics tend to be highly motivated to live up to others' expectations (Bruch, 1978) and that bulimics tend to be concerned with pleasing others and avoiding rejection (Weinstein & Richman, 1984). Research directly examining the extent to which self-esteem is based on body image and appearance supports the view that this basis of self-esteem constitutes a risk factor for eating disorders (Geller, Johnston, & Madsen, 1997; Geller et al., 1998). Rather than disengaging self-esteem from appearance and the approval of others, people with eating disorders maladaptively persist to achieve their unrealistically stringent self-standards. In the long-run, this pattern of behavior may lead to depleted energy levels, malnutrition, lowered resistance to illness and infection, complications of the digestive system and heart, and in extreme cases, even death (Brownell, 1991; Lissner et al., 1991).

Health outcomes may also be affected by the situations that people seek out based on their contingencies. Research has shown that the situation can exert powerful effects on behavior (Ross & Nisbett, 1991). People who are motivated to satisfy their contingencies may be drawn to situations that enable them to fulfill these needs.

In summary, seeking self-esteem can take a high toll on our relationships with others, our competency, and our mental and physical health. If we assume that people seek self-esteem because they think it will bring them love, respect, accomplishment, and happiness, then the pursuit of self-esteem is ironic because ultimately, it gets us exactly what we don't want—loneliness, isolation, alienation, and illusory but not real competence.

#### What's the Alternative?

Is there an alternative to seeking self-esteem? Given the high costs of pursuing self-esteem, is it possible to respond to self-threats in a way that is less destructive and more likely to satisfy the fundamental human needs for competence and relatedness? In this section, we consider three possibilities for exiting the vicious and costly cycle of seeking self-esteem: engaging in self-affirmation (Steele, 1988), developing noncontingent self-esteem (Deci & Ryan, 1995), and shifting goals from seeking self-esteem to more altruistic, compassionate, and other-oriented goals.

Self-affirmation. One way that people can cope with a threat to the self is to affirm themselves in another domain (Steele, 1988). Self-affirmation involves recruiting and defending positive aspects of the self to maintain a phenomenal experience of the self as adaptively and morally adequate. Self-affirmation has been operationalized in a variety of ways—for example, by reminding people of their most central values, or by having people fill out a self-esteem scale (which presumably reminds high self-esteem people of their many positive attributes). Self-affirmation

restores the sense that the self has integrity and consequently, reduces the need to defend against self-threat. For example, people who freely choose to write an essay that contradicts their beliefs tend to feel uncomfortable about their behavior (i.e., experience dissonance) and therefore respond by changing their beliefs to bring them in line with their behavior (Steele & Liu, 1983). Reminding people of their central values eliminates this shift in beliefs, presumably by restoring the phenomenal experience of the self as morally and adaptively adequate (see Steele, 1988, for a discussion). Self-affirmation may reduce defensiveness and increase openness to negative or threatening information, thus facilitating learning; for example, self-affirmation tends to increase receptiveness to self-threatening health messages (Sherman, Nelson, & Steele, 2000). However, because the goal of self-affirmation is to restore the integrity of the self, self-affirmation may also enable people to live with negative aspects of the self, such as smoking in spite of its health risks. In other words, self-affirmation allows people to dismiss critical and important feedback that could otherwise aid them in learning and growing from experience (Tesser, 2000). Self-affirmation has another drawback—it keeps people focused on the question of whether the self is worthy, moral, and adequate. That is, it keeps the focus on the self and fails to provide an exit from the constant need to defend and maintain self-worth. Consequently, although self-affirmation may temporarily relieve defensiveness, it does not provide a long-term solution to the problem of defending the self from threats.

Noncontingent self-esteem. Another alternative is what Deci and Ryan (1995) call “true” self-esteem. This type of self-esteem is noncontingent because it is not vulnerable to threat and therefore does not need to be defended. According to Deci and Ryan (1995), true self-esteem is rooted in autonomous, efficacious action that occurs in the context of authentic relationships characterized by unconditional positive regard (Rogers, 1951). We suspect that few people have noncontingent self-esteem, at least in our North American culture that emphasizes the importance of self-esteem and the relative worth or value of one person over another based on their accomplishments, appearance, athletic skills, net worth, or good works. Indeed, in our study of college freshmen, only 4% of students scored 3 or lower (on a 1-7 scale) on all seven contingencies of self-worth we assessed, and these 4% may well have contingencies of self-worth that are not captured by our measure (Crocker, in press). It may be possible to arrive at a spiritual or philosophical understanding that all people have worth, and this understanding may form the basis of noncontingent self-esteem. Our own intuition is that this would be a desirable state, if one could achieve it. Yet giving up one’s contingencies may be as difficult as it is relieving because these contingencies tend to be learned at a young age and are reinforced over a lifetime of social experience.

Shifting goals. Is it possible to respond to self-threats in a way that is not focused on maintaining, enhancing, and protecting self-esteem? Perhaps the most promising alternative is to shift away from self-focused, self-centered goals of maintaining and protecting self-esteem, to goals that connect the self to others in an altruistic, compassionate, and meaningful way. This perspective is aligned with self-determination theory (Ryan & Deci, 2000) in which people consciously choose to engage in behaviors based on intrinsic, integrated motivation rather than extrinsic, introjected reasons. However, not all intrinsically motivated behaviors will suffice for shifting away from the goal of self-esteem maintenance and protection; we believe that these goals must connect the self to others in a benevolent, compassionate way. Goals focused on giving to others facilitate keeping attention off the self and self-worth and provide a reason to persist even if one faces difficulty. For example, the goal of writing a manuscript because one wants to share one's discoveries with others keeps the self out of the process more effectively than the goal of writing a manuscript to become famous (Ryan, Sheldon, Kasser, & Deci, 1996).

#### Conclusion

The pursuit of self-esteem has become a central preoccupation in our society (Pyszczynski et al., 1997; Sheldon et al., 2001). Schools have devoted aspects of their curriculum to raising children's self-esteem (Dawes, 1994; Seligman, 1998), and most people organize their lives, in part, around activities, situations, and people that help to protect, maintain, and enhance their self-esteem. The idea that our worth as people is contingent, that it depends on our accomplishments, appearance, and deeds is pervasive in our culture (Greenberg et al., 1986). In this chapter, we have tried to articulate how these contingencies of self-worth operate in our daily lives. We noted the high costs of pursuing self-esteem on our relationships with others, ability to learn from experiences, and mental and physical health. In closing, we want to emphasize again that the problem is not in having self-esteem—whether one's trait self-esteem is high or low. Rather, the problem is in seeking self-esteem—in all the things we do, large and small, that have as their primary goal maintaining and protecting self-worth. Instead of seeking self-esteem, pursuing goals that connect oneself with others or with the world in caring and compassionate ways may not only avoid the costs of seeking self-esteem, but also facilitates the development of authentic relationships that may, in the end, be more sustaining than self-esteem.

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## Appendix

### Highest-loading Items from Each Subscale of the Contingencies of Self-Worth Scale

1. I feel worthwhile when I have God's love. (God's Love)
2. It is important to my self-worth to feel loved by my family. (Love and Support from Family)
3. Doing better than others gives me a sense of self-respect. (Competition)
4. My self-esteem depends on whether or not I follow my moral/ethical principles. (Virtue)
5. I don't care what other people think of me. (Others' Approval)
6. My sense of self-worth suffers whenever I think I don't look good. (Appearance)
7. I feel better about myself when I know I'm doing well academically (Academic Competence)

Note: The total scale has 65 items, and can be obtained from Jennifer Crocker.