

The Costly Pursuit of Self-Esteem

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Researchers have recently questioned the benefits associated with having high self-esteem. We propose that the importance of self-esteem lies more in how people strive for it rather than whether it is high or low. We argue that in domains in which their self-worth is invested, people adopt the goal to validate their abilities and qualities, and hence their self-worth. When people have self-validation goals, they react to threats in these domains in ways that undermine learning, relatedness, autonomy and self-regulation, and over time, mental and physical health. The short-term emotional benefits of pursuing self-esteem are often outweighed by long-term costs. Previous research on self-esteem is reinterpreted in terms of self-esteem striving. Cultural roots of the pursuit of self-esteem are considered. Finally, the alternatives to pursuing self-esteem, and ways of avoiding its costs, are discussed.

The pursuit of self-esteem has become a central preoccupation in North American culture (Baumeister, Campbell, Krueger, & Vohs, 2003; Heine, Lehman, Markus, & Kitayama, 1999; Pyszczynski, Greenberg, & Solomon, 1997; Sheldon, Elliot, Kim, & Kasser, 2001). Hundreds of books offer strategies to increase self-esteem, childrearing manuals instruct parents on how to raise children with high self-esteem (Benson, Galbraith, & Espeland, 1998; Glennon, 1999; P. J. Miller, 2001, April), and schools across the country have implemented programs aimed at boosting students' self-esteem in the hopes of reducing problems such as high dropout rates, teenage pregnancy, and drug and alcohol abuse (Dawes, 1994; McElherner & Lisovskis, 1998; Mecca, Smelser, & Vasconcellos, 1989; Seligman, 1998). The preoccupation with self-esteem can also be seen in the volume of scholarly research and writing on the topic. More than 15,000 journal articles on self-esteem have been published over the past 30 years, and interest

in this topic has not waned (Baumeister, 1998; Baumeister et al., 2003).

Empirical research has documented the many ways people seek to maintain, enhance, and protect their self-esteem (Baumeister, 1998). The desire to believe that one is worthy or valuable drives behavior and shapes how people think about themselves, other people, and events in their lives (e.g., Crocker, 2002a; Greenberg, Pyszczynski, Solomon, Pinel, & et al., 1993; Kunda & Sanitioso, 1989; Leary & Baumeister, 2000; Ross, 2002). For example, the best predictor of satisfaction with positive events is their impact on self-esteem (Sheldon et al., 2001). The pursuit of self-esteem is so pervasive that many psychologists have assumed it is a universal and fundamental human need (Allport, 1955; Baumeister, Heatherton, & Tice, 1993; Maslow, 1968; Rogers, 1961; Rosenberg, 1979; Solomon, Greenberg, & Pyszczynski, 1991; Taylor & Brown, 1988); some have even argued that humans evolved

as a species to pursue self-esteem (Leary & Baumeister, 2000; Leary & Downs, 1995).

With a few notable exceptions, the vast majority of the published articles on self-esteem have focused exclusively on level of trait self-esteem—whether people typically or characteristically have high or low self-regard. Hundreds of studies have demonstrated that high self-esteem is strongly related to the beliefs people hold about themselves. High self-esteem people believe they are intelligent, attractive, and popular, for example (Baumeister et al., 2003); although high self-esteem people acknowledge that they had flaws or made mistakes in the distant past, they see their present or recent past selves in a particularly positive light, believing they have changed for the better even when concurrent evaluations suggest they have not (Ross, 2002; Wilson & Ross, 2001). High self-esteem people believe they are superior to others in many domains (Brown, 1986; Campbell, 1986), and they expect their futures to be rosy relative to other people's (Taylor & Brown, 1988). Consequently, high self-esteem people have more self-confidence than low self-esteem people, especially following an initial failure (McFarlin & Blascovich, 1981).

In light of these positive beliefs about the self, high self-esteem is assumed to have beneficial effects and low self-esteem detrimental effects. Recently, however, researchers have argued that the objective benefits of high self-esteem are small and limited. For example, a recent and extensive review concluded that high self-esteem produces pleasant feelings and enhanced initiative, but does not cause high academic achievement, good job performance, or leadership, nor does low self-esteem cause violence, smoking, drinking, taking drugs, or becoming sexually

active at an early age (Baumeister et al., 2003).

We suggest that the importance of self-esteem lies not only in whether trait self-esteem is high or low, but also in the pursuit of self-esteem: what people do to achieve boosts to self-esteem and avoid drops in self-esteem in their daily lives. Because increases in self-esteem feel good, and decreases in self-esteem feel bad, state self-esteem has important motivational consequences. Consequently, in the domains in which self-worth is invested, people adopt the goal of validating their abilities or qualities, and hence their self-worth. When people have the goal of validating their worth, they may feel particularly challenged to succeed, yet react to threats or potential threats in ways that are destructive or self-destructive: they interpret events and feedback in terms of what they mean about the self; they view learning as a means to performance outcomes, instead of viewing success and failure as a means to learning; they challenge negative information about the self; they are preoccupied with themselves at the expense of others; and, when success is uncertain, they feel anxious, and do things that decrease the probability of success but create excuses for failure, such as self-handicapping, or procrastination.

The pursuit of self-esteem, when it is successful, has emotional and motivational benefits, but both short- and long-term costs, diverting people from fulfilling their fundamental human needs for competence, relatedness, and autonomy, and leading to poor self-regulation and mental and physical health (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Crocker, 2002a; Deci & Ryan, 2000). We argue that in the pursuit of self-esteem, people often create the opposite of what they need to thrive, and this pursuit has high costs to others as well. People pursue self-

esteem through different avenues, and some of these have higher costs than others, but we argue that even “healthier” ways of pursuing self-esteem have costs, and it is possible to achieve their benefits through other sources of motivation.

The Pursuit of Self-Esteem

The pursuit of self-esteem is linked to motivation and goals. When people pursue self-esteem, their actions are guided by beliefs about what they need to do or be to have worth and value as a person (Dykman, 1998). Success at these goals not only means “I succeeded,” but also, “I am a success and therefore I feel worthy.” Failure not only means, “I failed,” but also, “I am a failure and therefore I feel worthless.”

There is little reason to think that level of trait self-esteem, which is stable over time and across situations, drives behavior; because it does not fluctuate much, it has little incentive power. Instead, we argue that people are motivated to achieve increases in state self-esteem over their trait level, and to avoid drops in state self-esteem below their trait level; these fluctuations in state self-esteem have powerful affective consequences and therefore are highly motivating (Crocker & Wolfe, 2001; Wolfe & Crocker, 2002). Boosts to state self-esteem follow from success in the domains in which self-worth is invested; drops in self-esteem follow from failure in these domains (Crocker, Karpinski, Quinn, & Chase, in press; Crocker, Sommers, & Luhtanen, 2002; Crocker & Wolfe, 2001). The pursuit of self-esteem focuses not on changing trait or typical levels of self-esteem, but instead on striving to obtain boosts to state self-esteem over and above one’s trait level, or avoiding drops in state self-esteem below one’s typical or trait level.

People differ in what they believe they must be or do to be a worthy and

valuable person, and therefore in what types of events will produce a boost or a drop in their self-esteem (Crocker & Wolfe, 2001). Over a century ago, William James (1890) noted that people tend to stake their self-esteem on their success in some areas of life and not others; for James, it was his success as a psychologist, but not his skill as a linguist, that determined his self-esteem. Some people stake their self-worth on being beautiful, thin, or strong, others on being morally virtuous, others on accumulating wealth or professional success, and so on. Self-esteem depends on perceived success or failure in those domains on which self-worth is contingent; success and failure in these domains generalize to the worth and value of the whole person (Crocker, Karpinski et al., in press; Crocker et al., 2002).

People are not merely passive victims, their self-esteem tossed around by events over which they have no control. Instead, they actively pursue self-esteem by attempting to validate or prove their abilities or qualities in the domains in which self-worth is invested. People work to achieve success and avoid failure in these areas, to demonstrate to themselves and others that they are worthy because they satisfy their contingencies of self-worth, or at least do not fail in these domains. In other words, people are motivated by self-validation goals in the domains in which they have invested their self-worth. We have found, for example, that basing self-esteem on academic achievements is strongly correlated with the goal of validating intelligence through schoolwork (Crocker, 2003).

When self-esteem is invested in a domain, people become preoccupied with the meaning of events for their own worth and value. For example, in a study of college seniors applying to graduate school, we found that students whose self-esteem was invested in

academics tended to view acceptances by graduate programs as a validation of their ability (Wolfe & Crocker, 2002). One typical highly contingent student wrote, "I believe that getting into graduate school would be a reassurance to me that I belong in my field and that those who are well respected in my field believe that I am competent and have potential." In contrast, students whose self-worth was less invested in academics did not view admission to a graduate program as a validation of their worth; they tended to view it as one step toward their career goals. For example, one student wrote, "I don't think of my possible admission to graduate school as necessarily placing a value on me "as a person" per se. I know that I have done my best work (for the most part!) here at U of M, and that I still have a lot more to learn and to contribute."

Consistent with cybernetic control models of self-regulation (e.g., Carver & Scheier, 1998), we assume that in the pursuit of self-esteem, goals are hierarchically organized, with more abstract goals guiding and informing more specific, lower level goals (Broadbent, 1977; Powers, 1973; Vallacher & Wegner, 1987). For a student whose self-esteem is invested in academics, "Be worthy and wonderful" is at the top of the goal hierarchy, "Validate my intelligence through schoolwork" would be at the middle of the hierarchy, and at a more specific or subordinate level, the student might have the goal to get a good grade on a test, or say something brilliant in class. From this perspective, the pursuit of self-esteem is not simply about *what* goals people pursue at the specific or concrete level, but also *why* they pursue those goals; self-esteem is the higher-order goal that is served by the behavior (Deci & Ryan, 2000).

It is seldom obvious whether people are engaged in the pursuit of self-esteem, because any behavior could have different underlying motivations (Cooper, Frone,

Russell, & Mudar, 1995; Cooper, Shapiro, & Powers, 1998; Ryan & Connell, 1989). How do we know whether people are pursuing self-esteem? Ideally, we would directly measure self-esteem goals in research; however, because researchers have largely focused on level of self-esteem and not self-esteem goals, they rarely directly measure self-esteem goals (for an exception, see Dykman, 1998; Grant-Pillow & Dweck, in press). In the absence of direct measures, we infer people have self-esteem goals in anticipation of, during, and following success or failure in domains on which they have staked their self-worth, or when situations raise questions of whether the self meets salient or accessible standards of worth and value. In many studies, participants succeed or fail in domains that are assumed to be important to self-esteem, such as the intellectual and social domains among college students. Therefore, most studies of ego threat effects have intentionally threatened participants in domains that activate their self-esteem goals. Confidence that reactions reflect self-esteem goals is increased when research shows that self-affirmation manipulations, which restore the integrity of the self, reduce or eliminate those reactions (Sherman & Cohen, 2002; Steele, 1988), when self-relevant emotions such as shame or pride are evoked (Covington, 1984; Leary & Baumeister, 2000; Tangney, 1999), when self-esteem changes in response to outcomes (Crocker et al., 2002), when self-protective or self-enhancing strategies are elicited (Kunda, 1990), and when people with unstable or contingent self-esteem share those reactions (Crocker & Wolfe, 2001; Kernis & Waschull, 1995).

In sum, we contend that self-esteem is linked to behavior and social problems through the pursuit of self-esteem, specifically the goal to validate one's

abilities and qualities in domains of contingent self-worth. Whereas critics have argued that self-esteem has no important objective effects (Baumeister et al., 2003; Scheff & Fearon, 2003), we argue that the desire for self-esteem, and the goal to validate the self in these domains, underlie much of human behavior. The problem with research in this area is not that self-esteem is irrelevant, but rather that research has focused too much on level of trait self-esteem and insufficiently on what people do to demonstrate to themselves and to others that they have worth and value, and the consequences of this pursuit.

Why do People Pursue Self-Esteem?

In our view, people pursue self-esteem because their attempts to satisfy their contingencies of self-worth help them manage their fears and anxieties. In this framework, core contingencies of self-worth, and therefore people's characteristic ways of striving for self-esteem, are developed in childhood, when humans are vulnerable and require care and protection from adults (Bowlby, 1969, 1973). Early experiences initiate a process of self-esteem construction that continues into adulthood. As Mischel and Morf suggest, "The self-system thus is a *motivated meaning system* insofar as the self-relevant meanings and values that are acquired in the course of its development (or self-construction) inform, constrain, and guide the interpretation of experience, goal pursuits, self-regulatory efforts, and interpersonal strategies. In this life-long self-construction process, identity, self-esteem, and self-relevant goals, values, and life projects are built, maintained, promoted, and protected. Through the self-construction process the self-system takes shape and, in turn, affects, as well as being influenced by, the social contexts and networks that constitute its social world...It begins with relations to caretakers, and

continues throughout the life course" (W. Mischel & Morf, 2003, p. 29, italics in original).

Inevitably, children experience events that are threatening, frightening, or upsetting. From these events, the child draws some conclusion about other people—a conclusion that can be phrased as, "They will _____ me." For example, in the case of physical danger, the child might conclude that others won't be there for protection in times of need—for example, they will abandon me, overlook me, or forget me. In the case of social danger, the child might conclude that others are the source of the danger—for example, they will reject, humiliate, or criticize me. Because the event was upsetting, the child tries to determine what kind of a person he or she needs to be in order to be safe, so that the event will not happen again. Consistent with terror management theory, we think the conclusions the child draws depend on the contexts of family, race, gender, neighborhood, region, and culture. It might involve being strong, self-reliant, or independent, so one cannot be harmed by abandonment, for example. Or, it might involve being beautiful, charming, successful, or wealthy enough so that one will not be ridiculed, rejected, or criticized (Blatt, 1995). The domains in which people choose to invest their self-worth are not necessarily the domains in which they believe they can or will succeed, but rather the domains in which, *if* they could succeed, they would feel safe and protected from the dangers they perceived in childhood. Contingencies of self-worth are associated with specific attachment styles in adulthood, consistent with the idea that attachment relationships may be a source of distressing events that lead children to conclude that their worth as a person depends on being or doing certain things (Park, Crocker, &

Mickelson, 2003). In addition, a great deal of research indicates that successful pursuit of self-esteem reduces anxiety and other negative emotions.

Unfortunately, no amount of success can guarantee that similar events will not happen. Although success momentarily relieves the anxiety, it eventually returns, and the pursuit of self-esteem by trying to satisfy contingencies of self-worth resumes. Thus, the pursuit of self-esteem involves both approach and avoidance motivations: the approach motivation to be worthy enough to be safe, and the motivation to avoid being worthless, and hence vulnerable to childhood dangers.

Emotional consequences of pursuing self-esteem. Successful pursuit of self-esteem produces temporary boosts to positive affect, including pride (Crocker, Karpinski et al., in press; Crocker et al., 2002; M. Lewis, 1993; Mascolo & Fischer, 1995). A study of college seniors applying to graduate school showed that the more students based their self-esteem on their academic competence, the bigger the boost to self-esteem and positive affect they experienced on days they received acceptances to graduate programs (Crocker et al., 2002).

Conversely, failure at goals that are linked to self-esteem leads to drops in state self-esteem and increases in sadness, anger, shame, and other intensely negative emotions. For example, the more college seniors based their self-esteem on academics, the more their self-esteem dropped and negative affect increased in response to rejections from graduate programs (Crocker et al., 2002). Failure at self-esteem goals also can lead to feelings of shame and anger (Tangney, 1999). As Tangney and her colleagues note, "When shamed, a person's focal concern is with the entire self. Some negative behavior or

failure is taken as a reflection of a more global and enduring defect of the entire self." (Tangney, Wagner, Hill-Barlow, Marschall, & Gramzow, 1996, p. 798). In everyday experience, anger commonly follows a loss of self-esteem (Averill, 1982). Defensive, retaliatory anger, or a state of humiliated fury, may follow from feelings of shame that accompany failure when self-worth is at stake (H. B. Lewis, 1971; Scheff, 1987; Tangney, 1999; Tangney et al., 1996). People with unstable high self-esteem are high in hostility following ego threats, supporting the view that anger and hostility are responses to thwarted pursuit of self-esteem goals. Children with unstable self-esteem indicate that they get angry because of the self-esteem threatening aspects of events (Waschull & Kernis, 1996).

Reduction of Anxiety

Self-esteem reduces anxiety, including anxiety about death (Greenberg, Pyszczynski, & Solomon, 1986; Solomon et al., 1991). According to terror management theory, humans can achieve literal or symbolic immortality, thereby vanquishing their fear of death, by satisfying standards of worth and value specified by their particular cultural worldview. Research shows that people with chronically high levels of self-esteem, as well as those whose self-esteem has been experimentally boosted, show less anxiety and less defensive denial of their vulnerability to an early death (Greenberg, Pyszczynski, Solomon, Pinel, Simon et al., 1993) and less defensive responses to reminders of death (Arndt & Greenberg, 1999; Harmon-Jones, Simon, Greenberg, Pyszczynski, & Solomon, 1997) than people whose self-esteem is chronically or temporarily lowered. Raising self-esteem with positive personality feedback lowers self-reported anxiety in response to graphic video depictions of death. Similarly, positive feedback on an IQ test reduces

physiological arousal in response to the threat of painful electric shock (Greenberg et al., 1992). Thus, one benefit of boosts to self-esteem is reduction of anxiety in general, and specifically, anxiety regarding the ultimate annihilation of the self.

Although *boosts* to self-esteem decrease anxiety about death, the *pursuit* of self-esteem through the goal of self-validation does not, in itself, reduce anxiety. Perceived failure at this pursuit increases anxiety about death (Solomon et al., 1991). People are particularly vigilant for evidence of failure (or lack of success) in those domains in which self-worth is staked, especially if they are motivated to avoid loss of self-esteem. For example, people who are high in rejection sensitivity have self-esteem that is highly dependent on love and approval from others; they anxiously expect rejection and therefore are vigilant for signs of rejection, and detect rejection in ambiguous cues (Downey & Feldman, 1996; Downey, Freitas, Michaelis, & Khouri, 1998). Consequently, they perceive and experience rejection repeatedly, react to it strongly, and this undermines their close relationships and confirms their expectation that others will reject them and increases subsequent anxiety about rejection.

Even successful pursuit of self-esteem that results in approval from others based on one's accomplishments does not reduce defensiveness (Schimel, Arndt, Pyszczynski, & Greenberg, 1999). Dykman (1998) found that people who characteristically have self-validation goals across situations are high in anxiety. His measure appears to capture the avoidance goal of not demonstrating that one is worthless, rather than the approach goal of demonstrating that one is wonderful (e.g., "It seems that I am constantly trying to prove that I'm "okay" as a person," and "I feel like I'm constantly trying to prove that

I'm as competent as the people around me.") Thus, although *having* high levels of self-esteem is related to reduced anxiety, the goal of validating self-esteem by avoiding demonstrations of one's worthlessness is related to increased anxiety. Furthermore, evidence of reduction of anxiety about death following boosts to self-esteem is paradoxical, because boosts to self-esteem increase the perceived value and worth of the self, presumably making death a greater loss. And although levels of self-esteem have been increasing in the United States for the past 20 years, so have levels of anxiety (Twenge, 2000; Twenge & Campbell, 2001). In sum, although boosts to self-esteem reduce anxiety, the pursuit of self-esteem may increase it. Only when people are successful at this pursuit, and only in particular ways, such as through validation of their intrinsic self, is anxiety temporarily reduced (Schimel et al., 1999).

Perceived belongingness. Another benefit of high levels of trait self-esteem is feelings of social inclusion, or decreased concern about social exclusion. Sociometer theory proposes that state self-esteem functions as an internal monitor that is sensitive to social indicators of one's current relational value (Leary & Baumeister, 2000). According to this view, people pursue self-esteem because the behaviors that lead to high self-esteem (e.g., meeting cultural standards of worth and value, satisfying contingencies of self-worth) increase perceived includability in relationships, presumably because they increase one's relational value. Consistent with sociometer theory, low self-esteem is strongly associated with social anxiety, friendship problems, perceived social mistreatment, and social alienation (Crocker & Luhtanen, 2003; Leary, 1983). This relationship remains strong even when controlling for demographic variables such

as gender, ethnicity, parents' income, and related personality variables such as neuroticism, social desirability biases, and narcissism.

Low self-esteem is strongly correlated with negative mental models of the self in relationships (Griffin & Bartholomew, 1994) and is associated with feelings that one is not valued by or valuable to others (Murray, Holmes, Griffin, Bellavia, & Rose, 2001). Rejection from social groups lowers self-esteem (Leary, 1990; Leary & Downs, 1995). People may pursue self-esteem because when they are successful, they feel confident that others will include them, and their anxiety about being excluded from social relationships decreases. However, we know of very little evidence that the things people do to increase their self-esteem, and hence their perceived includability, actually increase popularity, interpersonal connections, or mutually supportive relationships. For example, high self-esteem people blame others following self-threats; this behavior protects self-esteem but makes them appear antagonistic and unlikable to others (Heatherton & Vohs, 2000).

Perceived competence and optimism. Low trait self-esteem is associated with believing that one is lacking in abilities and competence, and pessimism about the future, whereas high self-esteem is associated with positive, even inflated beliefs about one's skills and abilities and optimism about the future (Alicke, 1985; Brown, 1986; Campbell, 1986; Taylor & Brown, 1988). Instability of self-esteem over time co-varies with instability of optimism, instability of anxiety, and instability of perceived control over events (Gable & Nezlek, 1998). Thus, people may pursue self-esteem because high self-esteem contributes to a sense of competence, control, and optimism about one's ability to

attain certain goals and desired outcomes (Taylor & Brown, 1988). Perceived competence and optimism reduce anxiety because they lead people to believe that they can handle what life brings, which is related to self-efficacy (Franks & Marolla, 1976; Gecas & Schwalbe, 1983; Tafarodi & Swann, 1996; Tafarodi & Swann, 2001).

Motivational consequences of pursuing self-esteem. People may pursue self-esteem because they believe it brings other benefits, such as professional or financial success, love, or fame. Intuitively, it seems that many great acts of generosity, altruism, and helping, as well as artistic and scientific accomplishments, are motivated by the pursuit of self-esteem (Pyszczynski, Greenberg, & Goldenberg, 2002; Solomon et al., 1991). Indeed, a long-standing debate in the helping literature has concerned whether people ever help out of truly altruistic motivations, or are always guided by egoistic concerns (e.g., Batson, 1987, 1998).

Underlying the view that the pursuit of self-esteem is responsible for many great accomplishments and acts of altruism is the assumption that pursuing self-esteem provides a powerful source of motivation. For example, according to sociometer theory, pursuing self-esteem motivates people to behave in ways that decrease their risk of exclusion from social relationships or groups (Leary & Baumeister, 2000; Leary & Downs, 1995). This perceived motivational benefit can be a highly valued aspect of pursuing self-esteem. The fear of feeling worthless, or other negative emotions associated with failure in domains on which self-worth is staked, and the happiness and self-esteem associated with success in these domains, can be a powerful incentive to succeed and avoid failure.

Research indicates that staking self-worth on one's success in a domain is

motivating, in the sense that it leads to increased effort (Crocker & Luhtanen, 2003; Deci & Ryan, 2000). Yet, there is little evidence that the motivation associated with the pursuit of self-esteem actually results in the success people seek. For example, students who base their self-esteem on academics do not actually get higher grades, even though they report studying more (Crocker & Luhtanen, 2003). One exception is found for narcissists, who perform better when they have the opportunity to self-enhance and therefore garner admiration from others (Wallace & Baumeister, 2002). As we will argue, the pursuit of self-esteem can interfere with learning and performance under difficult or challenging circumstances, lead to poor self-regulation, and undermine autonomy and relationships; indeed, it seems that people sometimes achieve success, love, or fame in spite of their pursuit of self-esteem, rather than because of it. People who value the motivation they derive from pursuing self-esteem may assume that without that motivation, they would be totally lacking in drive or ambition. Although the pursuit of self-esteem can provide an important source of motivation, other motivations could drive the same behavior, as several theories of motivation suggest. For example, in self-determination theory, students may want to do well in school because a) they will be rewarded; b) they will feel good about themselves; c) they believe it is important; or d) they enjoy it (Ryan & Connell, 1989). Thus, giving up the pursuit of self-esteem need not lead to a lack of motivation.

Summary. From very different theoretical perspectives, research on terror management theory, sociometer theory, and perceived control and optimism, point to something essential about the pursuit of self-esteem: success at this pursuit leads to positive emotions, reduced anxiety, and a

sense of safety and control over events, and can be highly motivating. On the other hand, failure at the pursuit of self-esteem can lead to feelings of worthlessness, shame, sadness, and anger, leaving people feeling vulnerable to mortality, social rejection, or unable to cope with life events.

Although high self-esteem is associated with the illusion of belongingness, competence, and optimism, and perhaps also with the illusion of immortality, there is little evidence that pursuing self-esteem by attempting to satisfy standards of value and worth actually increases social inclusion, competence, efficacy, relatedness, immortality, or leads to improved objective outcomes (Baumeister et al., 2003; Colvin & Block, 1994). Thus, although the pursuit of self-esteem may temporarily boost positive emotions or relieve anxiety, this relief is short-lived. The downside of failing at this pursuit—intensely negative emotions, increased anxiety, feelings of being at risk of social rejection—seem at least as great as the benefits of success. Indeed, empirical research indicates that drops in self-esteem that result from failure in domains on which self-esteem is staked are larger than increases in response to success (Crocker, Karpinski et al., in press; Crocker et al., 2002). Thus, the emotional benefits of the pursuit of self-esteem outweigh the costs only if people can guarantee that they succeed more than they fail, perhaps by limiting their aspirations, or if they can protect themselves from the implications that failure at this pursuit has for their worth and value as a person, an issue we return to shortly.

When and Where do People Pursue Self-Esteem?

Many situations can trigger self-doubts or raise questions of whether the self meets salient or accessible standards of

worth and value. Here we consider some examples of situational triggers of the pursuit of self-esteem.

Conditionality of others' regard. When regard from others is conditional on one's performance or other extrinsic qualities, people are likely to be triggered into pursuing self-esteem goals (Rogers, 1959). People become defensive when they receive approval that is based on their performance rather than some intrinsic or stable quality of the self (Greenberg, Pyszczynski, Solomon, Pinel, & et al., 1993; Pyszczynski, Greenberg, & Solomon, 2000). Simply exposing people to the name of a critical significant other can lead to more negative self-evaluations, whereas exposing them to the name of an accepting significant other leads to relatively positive self-evaluations (Baldwin, 1994). These findings suggest that when relationships with significant others are perceived to be highly conditional or critical, thoughts about those significant others trigger concerns about self-esteem and self-worth.

Mortality salience. Reminding people of their mortality increases defensiveness and the pursuit of self-esteem. For example, manipulating mortality salience increases people's identification with self-esteem enhancing aspects of self, and decreases identification with aspects of the self that threaten self-esteem (Goldenberg, McCoy, Pyszczynski, Greenberg, & Solomon, 2000). Mortality salience manipulations increase identification with an ingroup when positive aspects of the ingroup have been primed, and decrease identification when negative aspects of the ingroup have been primed (Dechesne, Greenberg, Arndt, & Schimel, 2000). Thus, reminding people of their mortality may lead them to try to alleviate their death-related anxieties by bolstering the self and pursuing self-esteem.

Devalued identities. When one's identity is stigmatized or devalued in a particular context, concerns about self-worth are likely to be activated (Crocker, Major, & Steele, 1998; Jones, 1996). Although these concerns do not always lead to low self-esteem in stigmatized people (Crocker & Major, 1989), they often require those with devalued identities to struggle with the meaning of their devaluation (Cross & Fhagen-Smith, 2001; Jones, 1996; Steele, 1988). For example, when African-American students are rejected by White students, they may wonder whether it reflects something about them personally, or the racial attitudes of the other person. These considerations, in turn, may trigger concerns about self-esteem by raising doubts about whether or not the negative evaluation was deserved, or whether one's social identity places one at risk of devaluation (Crocker, Voelkl, Testa, & Major, 1991; Major & Crocker, 1993).

A particularly powerful trigger of self-esteem goals is the experience of being devalued in an environment of scarcity, competition, or evaluative focus. The power of scarcity to trigger self-esteem goals in those who feel devalued was demonstrated in an experiment by Jambekar and colleagues (Jambekar, Quinn, & Crocker, 2001). The researchers recruited overweight and normal weight college students to the laboratory and exposed them to one of two messages: a message about the "winner take all" nature of success in American society, or a message about the importance of taking time to relax and enjoy life. The "winner take all" message, but not the "relax" message, led to drops in self-esteem for the overweight women. When resources are scarce, a single quality that could be interpreted as a flaw may mean that one is not likely to become a "winner."

Women in engineering also face the double-whammy of stigma, in the form of suspicions about their ability (Spencer, Steele, & Quinn, 1999; Steele, 1997), combined with a competitive, evaluative academic environment. In a daily report study of self-esteem among male and female engineering and psychology majors, women in engineering whose self-worth was based on academics were more likely to experience large drops in self-esteem on days they received grades that were worse than expected (Crocker, Karpinski et al., in press).

In sum, a wide range of situations can activate standards of worth or value and raise questions about whether one satisfies those standards. These situations, we argue, trigger self-esteem goals—the desire to maintain, enhance, or protect self-esteem.

Who Pursues Self-Esteem?

We begin with the assumption that the pursuit of self-esteem is pervasive, at least in North America. The person who is not concerned with feeling worthy and valuable, or with avoiding feelings of worthlessness, is a rarity in our culture. For example, fewer than 4% of college students scored below the scale midpoint on all of seven contingencies of self-worth assessed by the CSW scale (Crocker, 2002a). The important difference among people is not whether they have self-esteem goals, but what they believe they must be or do to be worthy and valuable. Although the pursuit of self-esteem is pervasive, some people are more frequently or more intensely concerned with the pursuit of self-esteem than others. For example, people with unstable self-esteem tend to be highly ego-involved in events and are easily triggered into self-esteem goals (Kernis & Waschull, 1995). In addition, narcissists (Morf & Rhodewalt, 2001; Rhodewalt, Madrian, & Cheney, 1998) and depressives (Dykman,

1998) both seem to be easily and frequently caught in the pursuit of self-esteem.

How do People Pursue Self-Esteem?

Although the pursuit of self-esteem is pervasive, people differ in their strategies or styles of pursuing self-esteem. Individual difference variables can moderate how people attempt to maintain, enhance, and protect their self-esteem. Here we consider a few examples of individual differences that moderate how people pursue self-esteem.

Level of self-esteem. In our view, both high and low self-esteem people pursue self-esteem, especially following threats to the self-concept, but they do so in different ways (Blaine & Crocker, 1993). High self-esteem people have more positive self-views and are more certain of them (Blaine & Crocker, 1993); consequently, they are less concerned with avoiding failure in domains of contingency and are more likely to adopt approach goals with regard to self-esteem (Power & Crocker, 2002), self-enhance directly (e.g., by evaluating their own creations positively) (Brown, Collins, & Schmidt, 1988), and respond to threats by emphasizing their abilities, dismissing negative feedback, seeking competency feedback, and becoming more independent (Blaine & Crocker, 1993; Vohs & Heatherton, 2001). In sum, high self-esteem people typically pursue self-esteem through dominance and competence. In contrast, low self-esteem people have relatively negative self-concepts and are less certain of their self-views (Blaine & Crocker, 1993); consequently, they are more concerned with avoiding failure in domains of contingency, more likely to adopt avoidance or prevention self-esteem goals, self-enhance indirectly (e.g. by evaluating their group's creations positively) (Brown et al., 1988), accept negative feedback (Brockner, 1984), and respond to threat by focusing on their social

qualities, seeking interpersonal feedback (especially reassurance), and becoming more interdependent (Baumeister, Tice, & Hutton, 1989; Schuetz & Tice, 1997; Tice, 1991; Vohs & Heatherton, 2001). In sum, low self-esteem people pursue self-esteem by seeking acceptance. These findings suggest that both high and low self-esteem people pursue self-esteem, but do so through different avenues.

Expectancies and self-theories. One response to failure in a domain of contingency is to feel worthless, give up, and withdraw, protecting self-esteem by disengaging from the domain; another response is to increase effort and persist in attempts to boost self-esteem through success in that domain (Carver, Blaney, & Scheier, 1979). Both of these reactions are stronger when failure is experienced in domains on which self-worth has been staked. Which reaction people show depends on their self-theories of ability and expectancies for future efforts. People persist when they think they can redress failure, but disengage when they think they cannot (Carver et al., 1979). Self-theories of ability influence whether or not people think they can redress a failure or not. Entity theorists believe that ability is fixed and unchangeable; therefore, a failure indicates lack of ability and cannot be improved through greater effort. Incremental theorists believe that ability can be learned and improved; therefore, a failure can be redressed through subsequent efforts (Dweck, 2000). When entity theorists stake their self-worth on success in a domain, failure in that domain results in feelings of worthlessness that cannot be redressed. Hence, entity theorists pursuing self-esteem should show large drops in self-esteem, and give up following failure, or search for ways to deflect the implications of the failure for the self, such as by self-handicapping or

procrastinating, which may allow them to persist (Rhodewalt & Sorrow, 2003). When incremental theorists have staked their self-worth on a domain, they believe that improvement is possible, and should persist rather than disengage (Dweck, 2000). As a result, whereas contingent entity theorists should show signs of hopelessness, contingent incremental theorists may be perfectionist, and experience greater stress and time pressure. The interaction between self-theories about whether abilities can change, contingent self-worth, and global self-esteem may predict how people react when they confront difficulty, and the costs of those reactions.

Although Dweck (2000) has proposed that entity theorists have contingent self-esteem, we have found these two constructs to be independent (Bartmess, 2002). In the academic domain, for example, contingent self-worth was correlated with entity theories of ability only at $r = .12$. In a laboratory experiment, students who scored high or low on basing self-esteem on academic performance were primed with entity versus incremental theories of intelligence, and then either succeeded or failed on an intellectual task (Niiya, Bartmess, & Crocker, 2003). Students' whose self-worth was contingent on academics showed drops in self-esteem following failure, but only if they had been primed with an entity theory of intelligence; students whose self-esteem was not contingent or who were primed with an incremental theory did not show drops in self-esteem following failure.

Approach and avoidance self-esteem goals. Goals can involve approaching desired states or avoiding undesired states (Carver & Scheier, 1998; Carver, Sutton, & Scheier, 2000; Elliot, 1999; Elliot & Church, 1997; Elliot & Covington, 2001; Elliot & Sheldon, 1997; Higgins, 1998). Self-

regulation guided by approach goals involves reducing the discrepancy between the goal value and current behavior or state (Carver & Scheier, 1998; Carver et al., 2000). Approach self-esteem goals involve attempting to bring the self closer to some personal or cultural standard one associates with being a person of worth or value, such as being popular, intelligent, successful, or virtuous. Self-regulation guided by avoidance goals involves increasing the discrepancy between the goal value and current behavior (Carver & Scheier, 1998; Carver et al., 2000). Avoidance self-esteem goals involve attempting to distance the self from attributes one associates with being worthless, such as being socially rejected, incompetent, a failure, or unattractive.

People may sometimes focus on approach goals related to being worthy, and sometimes focus on avoidance goals related to not being worthless (Baumeister et al., 1989; Tice, 1991). People with approach self-esteem goals may adopt a promotion focus in self-regulation, eagerly doing what they can to obtain boosts in self-esteem (Higgins, 1997, 1998); they may self-enhance, striving to outshine others, putting in extra effort to demonstrate their positive qualities. People with avoidance self-esteem goals may adopt a prevention focus in self-regulation, vigilant to avoid mistakes, errors, or failures that could lead to a drop in self-esteem. Avoidance performance goals and prevention focus generally are associated with anxiety, decreased task interest, and poor performance (Elliot & Harackiewicz, 1996; Higgins, 1998; Middleton & Midgley, 1997). Approach performance goals have more complicated effects on performance and intrinsic motivation; however, recent evidence indicates that approach goals to validate one's ability lead to withdrawal, loss of intrinsic motivation, and poor performance

in challenging situations (Grant-Pillow & Dweck, in press; Morf, Weir, & Davidov, 2000). The focus on approach versus avoidance self-esteem goals is affected both by situational variables and individual differences in the tendency to be promotion or prevention focused (Higgins, 1998). We argue that although people with high self-esteem may have more approach or promotion self-esteem goals, whereas people with low self-esteem may have more avoidance or prevention self-esteem goals (Baumeister et al., 1989), both types can have costs.

The Costs of Seeking Self-Esteem

Regardless of how people pursue self-esteem, there are costs associated with this pursuit. In our view, the pursuit of self-esteem impedes the satisfaction of the needs for competence, relatedness, and autonomy, and the ability to self-regulate behavior. These costs may not be apparent in the short-term because they may be outweighed by immediate emotional benefits when the pursuit of self-esteem is successful. In the long run, however, the benefits dissipate while the costs accumulate. In some cases, the costs of pursuing self-esteem are not borne by the self but by others, even strangers. Thus, a full appreciation of the costs of this pursuit requires a global and long-term perspective to consider costs both to the self and to others.

What Do People Need to Thrive?

Evaluating the costs of the pursuit of self-esteem requires a conception of what people need psychologically to thrive. Our analysis of what humans need draws heavily on self-determination theory, which states that competence, relatedness, and autonomy are essential for continued personal growth, integrity, and well-being (Deci & Ryan, 1995, 2000). Daily activities that facilitate the fulfillment of these basic psychological needs lead to increased well-being, whereas

activities that detract from meeting these needs lead to decreased well-being (Reis, Sheldon, Gable, Roscoe, & Ryan, 2000; Sheldon & Elliot, 1999; Sheldon et al., 2001). We add self-regulation of behavior, and mental and physical health, to the list of what humans need to thrive. In self-determination theory, needs are distinct from goals; needs are like nutrients required for health—one fails to thrive without them, whether or not one has the goal to satisfy the needs. Goals, on the other hand, consciously or unconsciously regulate behavior; specific activities are enacted for the purpose of moving one toward the goal (Deci & Ryan, 2000). Consistent with self-determination theory, we assume that relatedness, competence, autonomy, and self-regulation are always needs (but not always adopted as goals). We assume that self-esteem or self-worth is often a goal, but not necessarily a need.

Costs to Autonomy

Autonomy refers to the sense of being the causal origin of one's behavior (deCharms, 1968), with the internalized self experienced as the source of motivation. Autonomous behavior is self-determined, volitional, and is accompanied by the feeling of choice (Deci & Ryan, 2000). When autonomy is low, people experience pressure from internal or external demands, expectations, and standards—they feel that they are “at the mercy” of these pressures.

Autonomy is the most controversial of the fundamental needs posited by self-determination theory, perhaps because the construct is sometimes confused with independence, individualism, or emotional detachment (Deci & Ryan, 2000). In fact, autonomy is positively related to satisfying, authentic relationships with others (Hodgins, Koestner, & Duncan, 1996), and to well-being (Ryan & Lynch, 1989), even in

collectivistic cultures (Deci & Ryan, 2000). Autonomy in goal pursuits is related to increased behavioral persistence, more effective performance, and better mental and physical health (see Deci & Ryan, 2000, for a review).

The pursuit of self-esteem sacrifices autonomy. As Deci and his colleagues suggest, “The type of ego involvement in which one's ‘worth’ is on the line—in which one's self-esteem is contingent upon an outcome—is an example of internally controlling regulation that results from introjection. One is behaving because one feels one has to and not because one wants to, and this regulation is accompanied by the experience of pressure and tension” (Deci, Eghrari, Patrick, & Leone, 1994, p. 121). When people have the higher order goal of protecting, maintaining, and enhancing self-esteem, they are susceptible to stress, pressure, and anxiety because failure leads to a loss in self-esteem (Deci & Ryan, 1995; Ryan, 1982). For example, students whose self-esteem is contingent on academic performance experience pressure to succeed and lose intrinsic motivation (Deci, Nezlek, & Sheinman, 1981; Deci & Ryan, 2000; Ryan & Deci, 2000). College students who base their self-esteem on academic performance report experiencing more time pressure, academic struggles, conflicts with professors and teaching assistants, and pressure to make academic decisions than less contingent students (Crocker & Luhtanen, 2003). These effects are independent of level of self-esteem, grade point average, and personality variables such as neuroticism and conscientiousness.

In sum, these findings suggest that when people seek to protect, maintain, and enhance their self-esteem, they lose the ability to act autonomously. Converging evidence is provided by studies of people with unstable self-esteem. College students

with unstable self-esteem show less self-determination (i.e., autonomy) in the motivations underlying their personal strivings, and greater feelings of tension associated with those strivings (Kernis, Paradise, Whitaker, Wheatman, & Goldman, 2000). Children with unstable self-esteem also show less curiosity and interest in their school work, and less preference for challenge than children with stable self-esteem (Waschull & Kernis, 1996).

Narcissistic males appear to represent an exception to this general rule; in contrast to nonnarcissists and narcissistic females, they show increased intrinsic motivation when their competence is assessed relative to others, instead of relative to themselves (Morf et al., 2000). Morf et al. (2000) suggest that the congruence between narcissists' chronic preoccupation with satisfying ego concerns and the situational goal of outperforming others leads to increased intrinsic interest in the task. That congruence between chronic and situational self-validation goals increases, rather than decreases intrinsic motivation, is potentially important, as it suggests that for some people, the pursuit of self-esteem may actually increase the satisfaction of the need for autonomy, rather than decrease it (Harackiewicz & Sansone, 1991). However, because the goal to outperform others is distinct from the goal of self-validation, and has distinct consequences (Grant-Pillow & Dweck, in press), we think more research is needed. It seems plausible that people with chronic self-validation goals find opportunities to validate their abilities and qualities inherently interesting and enjoyable, unless the task is too challenging, in which case failure could invalidate their worth and intrinsic motivation may decrease. In addition, the distinction between approach and avoidance self-esteem goals may be

important; narcissists typically have the approach goal of demonstrating their superiority and uniqueness (Rhodewalt & Sorrow, 2003); perhaps it is only avoidance self-esteem goals that undermine intrinsic motivation.

Costs to Learning and Competence

Competence and mastery, or learning, have been recognized as a fundamental human need in several theoretical traditions (Bowlby, 1969; Deci & Ryan, 2000; White, 1959). In these theoretical frameworks, competence refers not to the content of one's knowledge or to the level of one's skills, but rather to the ability and willingness to learn and grow from experience, which is essential for humans to thrive (see Pyszczynski, Greenberg, & Goldenberg, 2003, for a discussion).

The pursuit of self-esteem interferes with learning and mastery (Covington, 1984; Deci & Ryan, 2000; Dweck, 2000). When people have self-validation goals, mistakes, failures, criticism, and negative feedback are self-threats rather than opportunities to learn and improve. In domains in which self-worth is invested, the goal of obtaining outcomes that validate self-worth is paramount; learning becomes a means to desired performance outcomes that validate the self, instead of performance outcomes being opportunities for learning. For example, we recently administered a measure of contingencies of self-worth (Crocker, Luhtanen, Cooper, & Bouvrette, in press) and achievement goals (Grant-Pillow & Dweck, in press) to a sample of 75 students in Introduction to Psychology (Crocker, 2003). As previously noted, the more students based their self-esteem on academics, the stronger their goal to validate their intelligence through their schoolwork. In addition, basing self-esteem on academics was strongly correlated with the

performance goal of obtaining a high grade, but nonsignificantly related to the goal of learning. Entering all the achievement goals as predictors of the academic contingency in a regression, the goals of validating ability, getting a high grade, and outperforming others were each uniquely and positively related to the academic contingency; learning goals were negatively related to basing self-esteem on academics, $\beta = -.19$, $p < .06$. Apart from its usefulness for obtaining grades, outperforming others, and validating ability, students who base their self-worth on academics seem uninterested in learning for its own sake. When asked to choose between learning goals and getting high grades, more academically contingent students reliably chose grades over learning, $r = .34$, $p < .003$. True mastery, we argue, reverses this relation between learning and performance goals; performance, including mistakes and failures, is a means for learning, not for self-esteem (Dweck, 2000).

When people are driven by self-esteem goals, they are eager to take credit for their success (for reviews see Blaine & Crocker, 1993; Bradley, 1978; Greenberg & Pyszczynski, 1985; D. T. Miller & Ross, 1975). Because self-esteem is the end goal, when people succeed in a domain of contingency they may consider it the end of the story, without really trying to understand what led to the success (Carver, 2003). In the experience of pride that accompanies success, people may envision even greater achievements (Fredrickson & Branigan, 2001). The tendency to take credit for success that accompanies self-esteem goals can interfere with learning from experience. When people boost their self-esteem by taking full credit for success, they do not explore many other factors that may have contributed to the success, including the efforts of other people, changed circumstances, and so on. Consequently,

they do not learn all they can about how to re-create success in the future.

Because negative self-relevant information in domains of contingent self-worth implies that one is lacking the quality on which self-esteem is staked, people resist and challenge such information (Baumeister, 1998). People minimize the amount of time they spend thinking about negative information about the self, unless the presence of an audience makes this difficult (Baumeister & Cairns, 1992). People selectively forget failures and negative information about the self, while remembering their successes and positive information (Crary, 1966; W. Mischel, Ebbesen, & Zeiss, 1976). After failure in domains linked to self-esteem, people make excuses (for reviews see Blaine & Crocker, 1993; Bradley, 1978; Greenberg & Pyszczynski, 1985; D. T. Miller & Ross, 1975). For example, they derogate a test as invalid or inaccurate when they fail but not when they succeed (Frey, 1978; Greenberg, Pyszczynski, & Solomon, 1982; Shrauger, 1975) and evaluate evidence about the validity of the test in self-serving ways (Pyszczynski, Greenberg, & Holt, 1985). People with high and unstable self-esteem are particularly likely to make excuses following failure (Kernis & Waschull, 1995); a self-affirmation manipulation reduces this self-serving attributional bias, supporting the view that taking credit for success and avoiding blame for failure follows from the pursuit of self-esteem (Sherman & Kim, 2002).

If failure or negative feedback cannot be explained away, people search for other ways to restore their self-esteem, through compensatory self-enhancement (e.g., Baumeister & Jones, 1978; Gollwitzer & Wicklund, 1985; Greenberg & Pyszczynski, 1985); downward comparison (Beauregard & Dunning, 1998; Crocker,

Thompson, McGraw, & Ingerman, 1987; Pyszczynski, Greenberg, & Laprelle, 1985; Wills, 1981; Wood, Giordano-Beech, & Ducharme, 1999), remembering negative information about others (Crocker, 1993), or distancing themselves from others who outperform them (Tesser, 1988, 2000). They may derogate outgroups, creating worse-off others to restore self-esteem following a self-threat (Aberson, Healy, & Romero, 2000; Crocker & Luhtanen, 1990; Crocker et al., 1987; Fein & Spencer, 1997; Spencer, Fein, Wolfe, Fong, & Dunn, 1998; Wills, 1981).

When self-worth is at stake, people pursue many strategies to avoid failure, even if they undermine learning, including arguing and cheating (Covington, 1984, 2000; Dweck, 2000). For example, students with contingent self-worth in the academic domain report that they would be willing to cheat if they were unable to succeed at a task (Covington, 1984).

All of these reactions to self-threat are focused on maintaining, protecting, or restoring self-esteem following negative self-relevant information, rather than learning from the experience. The tendency to discount, excuse, minimize, or forget failures and negative feedback limit how much can be learned from experiences of failure. The effort to dismiss or discredit negative information is incompatible with focusing on what could be important to learn from the failures or criticisms people experience. When people discount, dismiss, or excuse their mistakes and failures, they are unable to appraise their flaws and shortcomings realistically, to identify what they need to learn. Even if the test is unfair, the evaluator is biased, or there is a good excuse for failure, there is often some important information or lesson to be learned from these negative experiences. Yet, when people have the goal of validating

their worth, they do not seem open to these lessons.

When failure or criticism in domains in which self-worth is invested cannot be discounted, it may be overgeneralized as an indictment of the entire self, lowering global self-esteem (Carver & Ganellen, 1983; Carver, la Voie, Kuhl, & Ganellen, 1988; Crocker, Karpinski et al., in press; Crocker et al., 2002). Although overgeneralizing failure exaggerates rather than dismisses failure and criticism, it nonetheless interferes with realistically identifying one's strengths and weaknesses or learning from one's mistakes and failures. People who view their past failures as specific show more constructive self-criticism than people who view their past failures as broader or more global. For example, specific failure on a shape perception test led to less negative emotional reactions and less self-improvement processes than global failure on an intelligence test (Kurman, 2003). Concluding that one is a terrible person, or that everything is one's own fault, typically leads to intensely negative self-focused attention and emotions, instead of a cooler, less emotional appraisal of what went wrong and what to do differently next time. Realistic appraisal and acknowledgement of one's responsibility for mistakes may actually be more painful for self-esteem than the sweeping overgeneralization that one is a terrible person, which is neither entirely true nor focused on the real issue of what specific aspects of the self need improvement.

The stress and anxiety associated with the pursuit of self-esteem can also undermine learning and performance. Students whose self-worth is based on their academic performance report more daily hassles, including time pressure, conflicts with professors and teaching assistants, and dissatisfaction with grades than students

whose self-worth is less staked on academics (Crocker & Luhtanen, 2003). Stress affects the ability to learn and recall information through the effects of cortisol on the brain (de Quervain, Roozendaal, & McGaugh, 1998; de Quervain, Roozendaal, Nitsch, McGaugh, & Hock, 2000; Vedhara, Hyde, Gilchrist, Tytherleigh, & Plummer, 2000). Stress also impedes decision making in students undergoing medical training (Cumming & Harris, 2001). Although arousal improves performance on well-learned tasks, it undermines performance when the task is complex, difficult, or at the limits of one's ability, as in high-stakes testing situations (Covington, 1984; Steele, 1997; Stone, 2002).

Costs to Relationships

Psychologists generally agree that humans are social creatures, and have a fundamental need for relatedness (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Bowlby, 1969; Deci & Ryan, 2000). True relatedness is more than simply believing that others like us, care about us, or will be there for us when we need them. Relatedness involves close, mutually caring and supportive relationships with others, having and providing a "safe haven" in times of distress—it involves giving as well as receiving (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Collins & Feeney, 2000; Deci & Ryan, 2000). Close, mutually caring relationships provide a sense of felt security (Collins & Feeney, 2000) which contribute to more effective coping (Cohen, Sherrod, & Clark, 1986), better mental and physical health, and overall longevity (Ryff, 1995).

When self-esteem is the goal, relatedness is hindered because people become focused on themselves at the expense of others' needs and feelings (Park & Crocker, 2003). People pursuing self-esteem want to be superior to others (Brown, 1986; Taylor & Brown, 1988).

Consequently, life becomes a zero-sum game, and other people become competitors and enemies rather than supports and resources. Responding to self-esteem threats with avoidance, distancing, and withdrawal, or blame, excuses, anger, antagonism, and aggression (Baumeister, 1998; Baumeister, Bushman, & Campbell, 2000; Baumeister, Smart, & Boden, 1996; Crocker & Park, 2003; Heatherton & Vohs, 2000; Kernis & Waschull, 1995; Tice, 1993) is incompatible with caring for or being cared for by others. Whether the response is distancing, avoidance, and withdrawal, or blaming, anger, and aggression, connections with others are sacrificed. These defensive reactions may result in isolation and disconnection from others and hinder the formation of meaningful, authentic, supportive relationships (Pyszczynski et al., 2002).

A recent study shows how the pursuit of self-esteem can cause people to be less attuned to the needs and feelings of others (Park & Crocker, 2003). In this study, two unacquainted same-sex students participated in each experimental session. One of the participants (the partner) wrote an essay about a personal problem while the other participant (the target) completed either a GRE analogies test and received failure feedback or completed a non-GRE word associations task and received no feedback. In the second part of the experiment, the essay partner discussed his or her personal problem with the target. At the conclusion of the conversation, partners rated the target on various interpersonal qualities, such as how compassionate, helpful, preoccupied, bored, etc. the target was, and indicated how much they liked the target, wanted to interact with him or her again, and wanted to disclose another personal problem to him or her in the future.

The results showed that for targets in the failure feedback condition, the combination of having high self-esteem and being highly contingent on academic competence was related to being perceived by their partners as being less caring, supportive, concerned, and invested, and more interrupting, preoccupied, and bored with the perceiver's personal problem. Furthermore, high self-esteem, highly contingent targets who failed were rated as less likable, less desirable for future interactions, and less appealing as a person to discuss one's problems with in the future. In the no threat condition, highly contingent, high self-esteem targets were not rated negatively or disliked by their partners. Taken together, these findings suggest that people whose self-worth is at stake, especially if they have high self-esteem, may have difficulty disengaging from the pursuit of self-esteem following threat, and thus are not really "present" to support others. In the long-run, this reaction to self-threat detracts from forming and maintaining close, mutually caring and supportive relationships with others (Deci & Ryan, 1995).

Level of trait self-esteem moderates how people pursue self-esteem, and consequently, the costs of this pursuit for relationships. People with high self-esteem sacrifice mutually caring relationships with others for the sake of maintaining, enhancing, and protecting self-esteem through achievement (e.g., Baumeister et al., 1996; Heatherton & Vohs, 2000; Vohs & Heatherton, 2001). But what about people who pursue self-esteem through the principle of "be loved," "be included," or "be accepted," the pattern more characteristic of people with low self-esteem (e.g., Joiner, Katz, & Lew, 1999; Joiner, Metalsky, Katz, & Beach, 1999; Vohs & Heatherton, 2001)? People who base their

self-esteem on others' regard and approval tend to have poor relationships, and behave in ways that make those relationships worse over time.

People whose self-worth is tied to others' regard and approval respond to self-threats by seeking reassurance from others (Murray et al., 2001). Joiner and his colleagues have explored the antecedents and consequences of reassurance seeking (Joiner, Alfano, & Metalsky, 1992; Joiner, Katz et al., 1999; Joiner, Metalsky, Gencoz, & Gencoz, 2001; Joiner, Metalsky et al., 1999). They argue that, "Excessive reassurance seeking is a maladaptive interpersonal coping strategy specifically aimed at negotiating doubts about one's lovability and worthiness (i.e., self-esteem) and doubts about future prospects and safety (i.e., anxiety). According to this view, people seek reassurance to assuage the experience of lowered self-esteem and heightened anxiety" (Joiner, Katz et al., 1999, p. 631). In a study of college undergraduates, Joiner et al. (1999) found that negative life events increased anxiety and decreased self-esteem, which, in turn, increased reassurance seeking.

The desire for others' approval and reassurance creates sensitivity to real or imagined signs of rejection. People high in rejection sensitivity base their self-worth on others' acceptance, and anxiously expect, readily perceive, and overreact to rejection (Downey & Feldman, 1996; Downey, Feldman, & Ayduk, 2000; Downey et al., 1998). These behaviors harm, rather than enhance, relationships. Highly rejection sensitive people assume that their significant others' negative behavior reflects hostile intentions, report feeling more insecure and dissatisfied with their relationships, and are more likely to exaggerate their partners' dissatisfaction and desire to leave the relationship than low rejection sensitive

people (Downey & Feldman, 1996). Men who are high in rejection sensitivity tend to react with jealousy, hostility, and attempts to control their partner, whereas women high in rejection sensitivity tend to withdraw support and become despondent (Downey & Feldman, 1996). Over time, this style of interaction may hinder relationship partners from supporting each other and ultimately lead to the dissolution of the relationship (Downey et al., 1998). Ironically, people who seek the approval of others (and simultaneously fear rejection from them) create exactly what they do not want—in a self-fulfilling prophecy, their fears of rejection and attempts to seek reassurance result in rejection (Downey et al., 1998; Joiner, 1994; Joiner et al., 1992; Joiner, Metalsky et al., 1999; Murray, Holmes, & Griffin, 2000).

Attachment theory also suggests that approval seekers do not achieve the relationship security they seek. According to attachment theory, people with a preoccupied attachment style have a positive mental model of others and a negative mental model of the self (Bartholomew, 1990; Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991). Their self-esteem is highly dependent on others' approval, and they crave constant reassurance from their partners (Bartholomew, 1990). People with this attachment style tend to be obsessive and preoccupied with their relationships, fearing that their partners will not want to be as intimate or as close as they desire them to be (Collins & Read, 1990; Feeney & Noller, 1990; Simpson, Rholes, & Nelligan, 1992). Recent research has also shown that whereas people with secure attachment styles engage in more effective forms of support-seeking and caregiving, insecurely attached people are less effective support-seekers and caregivers (Collins & Feeney, 2000). Taken together, the findings on attachment styles

suggest that people who are highly contingent on the approval of others may have a diminished capacity for creating and maintaining mutually supportive, caring relationships.

In sum, people with low self-esteem, high reassurance seeking, rejection sensitivity, and certain insecure attachment styles, pursue self-esteem by trying to earn the acceptance and approval of others. However, they rarely get what they want and instead, behave in ways that increase the chances they will be rejected by others. Moreover, when people pursue self-esteem, they sometimes behave and think in ways that are incompatible with forming mutually caring, supportive relationships. They do not provide a secure base for others, do not elicit caring and supportive relationships from others, and consequently, undermine their connections with others.

The pursuit of self-esteem not only undermines satisfaction of the need for relatedness for the self; it also has implications for the experience of others (Crocker, Lee, & Park, in press). Researchers have rarely considered how one person's pursuit of self-esteem affects other people. We suggest that preoccupation with the implications of events and behavior for the self causes people to lose sight of the implications of events and their own actions for others. They have fewer cognitive resources to take the perspective of the other, and therefore fail to consider what others need, or what is good for others. Consequently, others have reason to mistrust their motives and do not feel safe. The goal of validating self-worth often creates competition, or the desire to be superior to others. This, in turn, triggers competition in others, who do not want to be inferior, and can create the desire for revenge or retaliation. These ripple effects rebound to the self, creating a lack of safety for the self,

and in the end, create the opposite of what most people really want and need.

Costs to Self-Regulation

Self-regulation involves restraining impulses to engage in behaviors that have known costs to the self (e.g., smoking, binge eating, or breaking laws), as well as the ability to pursue goals that have future benefits (Metcalf & Mischel, 1999). Self-regulation and self-control have demonstrated long-term benefits (W. Mischel & Shoda, 1995; Shoda, Mischel, & Peake, 1990). As Baumeister (1998) notes, “a high capacity for self-regulation appears to be an unmitigated good in that it improves one’s chances of success in nearly every endeavor to which it is relevant” (p. 717).

The pursuit of self-esteem may involve behavioral self-regulation, emotional self-regulation, or both. That is, people sometimes regulate their behavior to achieve a success that will enhance their self-esteem; at other times, they may abandon efforts at behavioral self-regulation and pursue strategies that protect their feelings of self-worth, such as blaming others (Tice & Bratslavsky, 2000; Tice, Bratslavsky, & Baumeister, 2001).

When self-regulation occurs with the higher-order goal of self-esteem, people have difficulty self-regulating their behavior. Metcalfe and Mischel (1999) argued that there are two systems for self-control and self-regulation: a cool, cognitive system which “allows a person to keep goals in mind while pursuing them and monitoring progress along the route,” (p. 5), and a hot, emotional system that is fast, simple, reflexive, accentuated by stress, and under stimulus control. Because self-esteem has powerful consequences for emotion, the pursuit of self-esteem is largely under the control of the “hot” system. When self-esteem is threatened, people often indulge in immediate impulses to make themselves feel

better, giving short-term affect regulation priority over other self-regulatory goals (Tesser, 1988; Tice & Bratslavsky, 2000; Tice et al., 2001). Procrastination and self-handicapping, for example, protect self-esteem by creating excuses for failure, but decrease the chances of success (Tice, 1991).

When people have self-esteem goals, they are motivated to see themselves in a positive light, deflecting responsibility for failure and taking credit for success. As a result, self-regulation suffers because they have difficulty realistically appraising their current state and comparing it to their ideal state; they may become either overly positive or overly negative about the discrepancy, or avoid considering it altogether by focusing on other people’s shortcomings. People also have difficulty assessing their rate of progress toward a goal (Wilson & Ross, 2000, 2001). Effective self-regulation also requires disengaging from goals when progress is too slow (Carver & Scheier, 1998), but people often have difficulty disengaging from goals that are connected to their self-worth (Baumeister et al., 1993; Pyszczynski & Greenberg, 1987).

In addition to these examples of self-regulatory failure, the pursuit of self-esteem may also deplete self-regulatory resources in domains that are linked to self-esteem, so that one is unable to exercise self-control in other domains. For example, Vohs and Heatherton (2000) showed that chronic dieters who exerted self-control by not eating a good-tasting snack food were subsequently less able to exert self-control on a task that required inhibiting emotional expression; non-dieters did not show this depletion of self-regulatory ability. We suspect that these effects extend broadly to the pursuit of self-esteem; when people successfully self-regulate in domains in

which self-worth is staked, this is likely to consume self-regulatory resources for various reasons, including the effort required to overcome “hot” system responses. Consequently, the pursuit of self-esteem may be associated with poor self-regulation in other domains.

Use of time is an important aspect of self-regulation. One of the most pernicious costs of the pursuit of self-esteem is that people use this limited resource to demonstrate their worth or value. For example, students who base their self-esteem on academic performance spend more time studying but do not get better grades; students who base their self-esteem on their appearance spend more time shopping for clothes and partying (Crocker, Luhtanen et al., in press). Perfectionists have high standards and find failure to meet them unacceptable (Blatt, 1995); consequently, they misuse their time and sometimes sacrifice long-term goals.

The pursuit of self-esteem also makes it difficult to plan one’s use of time. People consistently underestimate how long it will take them to complete a project, in part because they protect their self-esteem by attributing failure to external causes (Buehler, Griffin, & Ross, 1994). When avoiding responsibility for past failures, it is difficult to estimate accurately the likelihood that one will cause similar difficulties in the future.

Less obvious, but perhaps more important, is the amount of time people spend diverted from pursuing their immediate goals because of self-esteem concerns. Time spent worrying or procrastinating rather than doing, self-handicapping rather than preparing, or seeking perfection rather than moving forward imperfectly, is time that cannot be recovered for activities that are more likely to achieve other goals and satisfy

fundamental human needs. Particularly pernicious is the tendency to focus on the shortcomings of others as a way to avoid looking at one’s own weaknesses and faults. When this behavior triggers defensive responses in others, it may create conflicts that consume time. Of the many costs of such diversions, perhaps the least appreciated is the cost of time.

Costs to Physical Health.

Although research has not directly examined the links, the pursuit of self-esteem likely has long-term costs to physical health. Self-esteem goals may lead to physical health problems through anxiety and stress (Suinn, 2001). People with self-esteem goals tend to be highly anxious (Dykman, 1998), and anxiety has negative effects on health (Suinn, 2001). Stress and anxiety are associated with activation of the pituitary-adrenal-cortical system, which releases corticosteroids from the adrenal cortex (Hellhammer & Wade, 1993; Stroebe, 2000). Corticosteroids increase levels of triglycerides and cholesterol in the blood, so chronic and frequent stress is often associated with heart disease. Corticosteroids also reduce immune system functioning (Kiecolt-Glaser, Cacioppo, Malarkey, & Glaser, 1992; Kiecolt-Glaser & Glaser, 1994), resulting in greater susceptibility to illnesses such as upper respiratory infections (Kiecolt-Glaser, Dura, Speicher, Trask, & Glaser, 1991). It is not surprising, then, that students who procrastinate early in an academic semester are ill more frequently and report more stress and illness late in the term (Tice & Baumeister, 1997).

Stress is associated with activation of the sympathetic-adrenal medullary system, which stimulates cardiovascular activity with consequences for cardiac health

(Stroebe, 2000; Suinn, 2001). Hostility is also associated with the pursuit of self-esteem, especially through external avenues such as appearance, perhaps because people with external contingencies of self-worth feel angry when their worth is not validated by others (Crocker, 2002b). People who have high but fragile (i.e., unstable or contingent) self-esteem tend to be hostile, especially when they experience threats to self-worth (Baumeister et al., 1996; Kernis, in press). Hostility is a risk factor for coronary heart disease (T. Q. Miller, Smith, Turner, Guijarro, & Hallet, 1996; Suinn, 2001) and also diminishes immune system functioning (Kiecolt-Glaser et al., 1993).

Self-esteem goals also lead to physical health problems through unhealthy coping behavior. College students whose self-esteem is based on their appearance are particularly likely to spend time partying, and use more alcohol and drugs (Crocker, 2002b). To cope with the negative affect associated with the pursuit of self-esteem, people may drink alcohol or have unprotected sex, with potentially serious health consequences (Cooper, Agocha, & Sheldon, 2000; Cooper et al., 1995; Cooper et al., 1998; Hull, 1981; Hull, Levenson, Young, & Sher, 1983; Hull & Young, 1983; Stroebe, 2000; Suinn, 2001). When people pursue self-esteem, they tend to be highly self-focused or self-aware because their superordinate goals concern the self. When negative events occur in domains on which self-worth is staked, this self-awareness intensifies their painful emotional consequences. Consequently, the pursuit of self-esteem, especially when failure is experienced, should frequently lead to attempts to escape the self (Baumeister, 1991). People may escape the self by consuming alcohol (Hull, 1981), binge eating (Heatherton & Baumeister, 1991),

masochism (Baumeister, 1991), and even suicide (Baumeister, 1990).

The pursuit of self-esteem can also lead to poor physical health outcomes through health risk behaviors (Leary & Jones, 1993; Leary, Tchividjian, & Kraxberger, 1994). People concerned about how they are perceived and evaluated by others tend to consume more alcohol (Faber, Khavari, & Douglass, 1980), smoke (Camp, Klesges, & Relyea, 1993), sunbathe (Leary & Jones, 1993), diet excessively (Gritz & Crane, 1991), undergo cosmetic surgery (Schouten, 1991), use steroids (Schrof, 1992), drive recklessly (Jonah, 1990), and engage in unsafe sex (Abraham, Sheeran, Spears, & Abrams, 1992; Schlenker & Leary, 1982) to obtain the approval of peers. Although these behaviors may boost self-esteem or reduce anxiety in the short-term, they have health consequences that accumulate over time. In many cases, the cumulative damage to physical health is irreparable and poses a burden not only to individuals, but also to others and to society. *Costs to Mental Health.*

The pursuit of self-esteem has implications for mental health, especially depression, narcissism, and anxiety.

Depression. Clinical psychologists have long debated the relation between self-esteem and depression. Although low self-esteem is correlated with the presence of depressive symptoms, evidence that low self-esteem is a risk factor for depression, rather than a symptom of it, is inconclusive (Roberts & Gamble, 2001; Tennen & Herzberger, 1987). Other theorists have argued that depression-prone people have self-esteem that is vulnerable, or contingent, in particular domains (Beck, Epstein, Harrison, & Emery, 1983; Bibring, 1953; Blatt, Quinlan, Chevron, McDonald, & Zuroff, 1982; Blatt & Shichman, 1983; Higgins, 1987). In our view, the pursuit of

self-esteem is a risk factor for the development of depression.

People who tend to approach situations and events with self-esteem goals are high in symptoms of depression (Dykman, 1998). The tendency to overgeneralize negative events to the worth of the entire self, characteristic of people with self-esteem goals, is related to depression and prospectively predicts the development of depressive symptoms (Carver, 1998; Carver & Ganellen, 1983; Carver et al., 1988). Instability of self-esteem caused by success and failure in domains of contingency can contribute to depressive symptoms (Butler, Hokanson, & Flynn, 1994; Kernis et al., 1998; Kuiper & Olinger, 1986; Kuiper, Olinger, & MacDonald, 1988; Roberts & Gotlib, 1997; Roberts, Kassel, & Gotlib, 1995, 1996; Roberts & Monroe, 1992). For example, temporal variability in self-esteem, together with life stress, prospectively predicted the onset of depressive symptoms in a sample of college students (Roberts & Kassel, 1997). A daily report study of college students showed that the more students based their self-esteem on academic performance, the more their self-esteem tended to drop on days they received a worse-than-expected grade on an exam or paper. This instability of self-esteem, in turn, predicted increases in depressive symptoms over the 3 weeks of the study, especially among students who were initially high in depressive symptoms (Crocker, Karpinski et al., in press).

Narcissism. Clinical and experimental descriptions of narcissism are remarkably similar to our description of the pursuit of self-esteem (Rhodewalt & Sorrow, 2003). Clinical accounts of narcissism describe a pathological self-focus and unstable self-esteem resulting from fragile or damaged self-views (Kohut, 1971). Like most people pursuing self-

esteem, narcissists put the goal of self-worth above other goals and are caught up in the question of whether they are worthless or wonderful. What distinguishes narcissists from others with contingencies, however, are their extremely positive self-concepts, extreme fears of being worthless (Morf & Rhodewalt, 2001; Rhodewalt & Morf, 1995), and their constant need for external validation in the form of attention and admiration from others to sustain their exaggeratedly positive self-views (Morf, 1994; Morf & Rhodewalt, 1993, 2001; Rhodewalt & Morf, 1995). Narcissists' self-esteem fluctuates in response to their social interactions (Rhodewalt et al., 1998). It has even been suggested that narcissists are addicted to self-esteem (Baumeister & Vohs, 2001).

Although narcissism and depression differ in many respects, both of these disorders are characterized by strong concerns about self-worth. This similarity raises an alarming possibility: that the pursuit of self-esteem, so strongly emphasized in our cultures, encourages the development of both narcissistic and depressive tendencies. Indeed, as the self-esteem movement has taken hold in the U.S., levels of depression, narcissism, and anxiety have been rising (Smith & Elliott, 2001; Twenge, 2000). For example, the average American child in the 1980s reported more anxiety than child psychiatric patients in the 1950s (Twenge, 2000), teenagers today are ten times more likely to be depressed than teenagers a generation ago, and suicide rates among this age group have tripled (Smith & Elliott, 2001).

"Healthy" Pursuit of Self-Esteem?

Do the costs of pursuing self-esteem depend on what people think they need to be or do to have worth and value? Some ways of pursuing self-esteem do appear to have more costs than others. External

contingencies of self-worth, which require validation from others, have greater costs (Crocker, 2002b; Pyszczynski et al., 2002). A longitudinal study of college freshmen (Crocker, 2002b; Crocker, Luhtanen et al., in press; Crocker & Luhtanen, 2003; Lawrence & Crocker, 2002) found that external contingencies of self-worth such as appearance, others' approval, competition, and academic competence were associated with more problems during the freshman year, whereas internal contingencies, such as virtue or religious faith, were associated with lower levels of these problems (Crocker, 2002b). For example, students who based their self-esteem on appearance partied more, used more alcohol and drugs, and were higher in symptoms of disordered eating, whereas students who based their self-esteem on virtue used less alcohol and drugs, had fewer symptoms of disordered eating, and even earned higher grades in college (Crocker & Luhtanen, 2003). Thus, it does seem to matter how one pursues self-esteem. Pursuing self-esteem by being virtuous, compassionate, generous, or altruistic would seem to have fewer costs, especially fewer costs for others.

Nevertheless, we believe that many of the costs we have identified hold no matter what avenue people travel in their pursuit of self-esteem. Whether they pursue self-esteem by trying to be the richest or by trying to be the kindest, because self-esteem is the goal people will feel threatened by negative feedback or criticism in that domain, and will have difficulty appraising their strengths and weaknesses realistically. If self-worth is the ultimate goal, they will feel pressure to succeed in that domain, value success and self-esteem boosts ahead of learning, and will be preoccupied with what the behavior means about themselves, rather than focus on what others need. For example, consider a woman in a small town

who has made a commitment to doing good by baking and delivering cookies to the elderly. In doing so, she undoubtedly feels virtuous and has high self-esteem. And what could be wrong with that? But she sometimes delivers cookies to people who neither need nor want them, focusing more on proving her kindness than on what the elderly individuals really need. The recipients of these acts of kindness sometimes feel put on the spot—they would like to refuse the cookies, but find it awkward to say so. Although this is simply an example, we think it captures an important point; when the motivation for doing good is to raise one's self-esteem, people tend to lose sight of what others really need because they are focused on their own self-esteem. Because it has a selfish goal, pursuing self-esteem through kindness or compassion can ultimately, and ironically, create a lack of connection with others.

Thus, although we think that compassion, kindness, altruism, and generosity are generally valuable, when they are motivated by self-esteem concerns, their benefits to others can be diminished. There are other ways to get the benefits of these contingencies, other motivations for kindness that are more likely to satisfy fundamental human needs of the self and others. For example, kindness motivated by the goal to create an authentic and supportive relationship may have fewer costs than kindness motivated by the goal to boost self-esteem.

Culture and the Pursuit of Self-Esteem

Our consideration of the costs of pursuing self-esteem, and the temporary emotional benefits it produces, leads us to question whether pursuing self-esteem is a fundamental human need, as suggested by many theorists (Allport, 1955; Maslow, 1968; Rogers, 1961; Rosenberg, 1979;

Solomon et al., 1991; Taylor & Brown, 1988). In addition, recent evidence that self-esteem concerns are diminished or even absent in some cultures also challenges the view that the pursuit of self-esteem is a fundamental human need. In our view, the pursuit of self-esteem is a particularly American phenomenon, born of the founding ideologies of our nation.

Cultural Roots of the American Pursuit of Self-Esteem

Several particularly North American ideas encourage the belief that one's worth or value is contingent on one's accomplishments and deeds (Greenberg et al., 1986; Pyszczynski et al., 2002).

The Protestant ethic. Calvinist doctrine and the Protestant ethic link a person's worth or value to self-discipline, virtuous hard work, worldly achievements, and accomplishments. The Protestant ethic is a core American value rooted in the Calvinist tenet that only a few worthy people--the "elect"--will go to heaven (Weber, 1904-1905/1958). Although membership in the elect is predetermined, one's life on earth may indicate whether one is among the elect and thus, belief in one's own worth or value is crucial. Although the religious basis of the Protestant ethic and the worldly asceticism of the Puritans have largely faded from American culture, most Americans continue to believe in the intrinsic value of self-discipline and hard work and view success as an indicator of one's worth or value as a person.

Self-reliance. A related core American idea contributing to the importance of self-esteem in our culture is self-reliance—the notion that each of us is separate, independent, and responsible for our own fate. This view of the person as separate from others creates the need to believe in our own value, worth, and competence. As cultural psychologists have

noted, many aspects of American culture assume and support independence and self-reliance (Heine et al., 1999, p. 769), which is associated with high self-esteem (Heine et al., 1999; Oyserman, Coon, & Kemmelmeier, 2002).

Meritocracy. The Protestant ethic and the creed of self-reliance are related to a third deeply held American idea: the belief that the U.S. is a meritocracy. Particularly in the last half of the 20th century, Americans became persuaded that access to elite educational institutions, and hence, to later occupational success, should be determined by merit and not by family connections or wealth (Lemann, 1999). This shift in thought underscores the belief that some people are more meritorious than others and that it is possible to measure individual differences in merit (Haney & Hurtado, 1994; Lemann, 1999). These beliefs suggest that some people are worthier than others, and thereby fuel the pursuit of self-esteem.

Taken together, these ideas lead North Americans to conclude that their worth or value as a person is not a given, but must be demonstrated, proven, or earned; consequently, we pursue self-esteem. The goal is to be superior to other people (see also Markus & Kitayama, 1991), and the corresponding fear is to be worthless – to fail as an individual, lacking personal qualities that make one worthy and valuable.

The Pursuit of Self-Esteem in Japan

Evidence of cross-cultural differences in the pursuit of self-esteem support the view that the pursuit of self-esteem is a cultural phenomenon, rather than a universal human need. A growing body of evidence, particularly from Japan, suggests powerful cultural differences in the nature and importance of self-esteem (Heine et al., 1999). Heine and his colleagues have suggested that Japanese are focused on

relationships and connections with others, on fitting in rather than standing out. Just as American ideas of individualism, the Protestant ethic, and meritocracy support the pursuit of self-esteem as a means to relieve anxiety in North America, Japanese cultural ideas of interdependence, incremental theories of ability, Buddhism, and Confucianism, support interdependence and belonging in relationships, which may also relieve anxiety (Fiske, Kitayama, Markus, & Nisbett, 1998; Heine et al., 2001; Heine & Lehman, 1997; Heine et al., 1999).

Japanese do not appear to maintain, protect, and enhance self-esteem to the same degree as North Americans; they are more willing to appraise their strengths and weaknesses, address their shortcomings, and persist through difficulties (see Heine et al., 1999, for a review). Consequently, we suspect that the Japanese do not incur many of the costs of pursuing self-esteem. However, the prevalence of shame in Japanese culture suggests that the ego is alive and well. We suspect that there are significant costs to the Japanese way of relieving anxiety by fitting in, just as there are significant costs to the American way of relieving anxiety by pursuing self-esteem. Future research could examine these possibilities.

What is the Alternative?

Thus far, we have considered how self-validation goals that arise when self-worth is staked on success in a domain can cause people to react to failure, or the possibility of failure, in ways that undermine their fundamental human needs for autonomy, learning, relatedness, self-regulation, and ultimately, mental and physical health. Is there an alternative that is more likely to satisfy the fundamental human needs for autonomy, competence, relatedness, self-regulation ability, and mental and physical health? Several

possibilities have been suggested in previous research and theory: self-affirmation (Sherman & Cohen, 2002; Steele, 1988; Tesser, 2000), abandoning dysfunctional contingencies (Crocker, 2002b; Pyszczynski et al., 2002), and developing noncontingent self-esteem (Deci & Ryan, 1995; Kernis, in press; Rogers, 1961). Our analysis of the pursuit of self-esteem in terms of higher-order self-regulatory goals suggests a fourth alternative: shifting from superordinate goals concerned with self-esteem to superordinate goals that are not focused on self-esteem, but larger than the self, or good for others and the self. We consider the advantages and disadvantages of each of these alternatives from the perspective of our self-regulatory goals framework.

Self-affirmation. Affirming valued and important aspects of the self seems to temporarily satisfy the need for a moral, competent, adequate self (Steele, 1988). Self-affirmation increases willingness to attend to self-threatening information, reduces behavior directed at maintaining a positive self-evaluation, increases tolerance for inconsistency between one's attitudes and behaviors, reduces defensiveness and prejudice, alleviates "hardening of the attitudes" under conditions of uncertainty, and increases openness to negative or threatening information, thus facilitating learning (Fein & Spencer, 1997; McGregor, Zanna, Holmes, & Spencer, 2001; Sherman & Cohen, 2002; Steele, 1988; Tesser, 2000). In other words, self-affirmation appears to temporarily satisfy self-validation goals, and consequently, reduce some of the associated costs. However, in shifting attention to valued aspects of the self, self-affirmation does not resolve the initial threat, and keeps the focus of attention on the adequacy of the self. Thus, in our view, it provides only short-term relief through temporary satisfaction of self-esteem goals. When an

old threat to self-worth returns or a new threat arises, the goal of maintaining, enhancing, or protecting self-worth will again be activated. We do not wish to underestimate the value of the relief provided by self-affirmation. Self-affirmation may relieve anxieties, fears, and self-esteem concerns long enough to enable people to take action or attend to important, if threatening, information (Sherman & Cohen, 2002). But, in our view, because it reinforces the importance of feeling good about the self, self-affirmation may ironically strengthen the pursuit of self-esteem and does not provide a long-term solution to the costs associated with self-esteem goals (see also Crocker, 2002).

Noncontingent Self-Esteem

Developing noncontingent self-esteem is another alternative to pursuing self-esteem goals (Deci & Ryan, 1995; Kernis, in press; Rogers, 1961). Self-worth that is completely noncontingent is not vulnerable to threat and therefore does not need to be protected or defended from threat. When self-esteem is truly noncontingent, it is simply a given and therefore becomes unnecessary to pursue. Thus, developing noncontingent self-esteem would seem to provide an effective way to avoid the costs of pursuing self-esteem goals. Unfortunately, it is not clear whether people with truly noncontingent self-worth actually exist (see Crocker & Wolfe, 2001, for a discussion). Our research has identified very few people who appear to have noncontingent self-esteem; in a study of 750 college freshmen, 96% endorsed at least one of the seven contingencies of self-worth we assessed (Crocker, 2002a). Because the pursuit of self-esteem is deeply embedded in ideas such as the Protestant ethic, self-reliance, meritocracy, and entity theories of the self, we suspect that people rarely achieve noncontingent self-esteem.

Abandoning External Contingencies

Giving up external or dysfunctional contingencies of self-worth provides yet another alternative. When self-esteem is based in domains that require constant validation or comparison with others, self-esteem goals may be continually threatened and chronically activated. Shifting to relatively internal contingencies of self-worth, such as being a moral person, or being compassionate, may make self-esteem less susceptible to threat in daily life and therefore lead self-esteem goals to be activated less often, reducing the costs. However, as we noted, internal contingencies of self-worth can still be threatened under certain circumstances, so shifting to internal contingencies cannot completely eliminate the costs. Indeed, internal contingencies of self-worth may have costs to others; for example, people who pursue moral superiority may trigger self-esteem concerns in others.

Shifting Goals

The alternatives we have considered to this point represent ways to more easily, or more reliably, achieve the higher-order goal of having self-esteem. Our analysis of the pursuit of self-esteem suggests another alternative: shifting from a superordinate goal of being a person of worth, or from the more immediate goal of validating one's abilities or qualities, to another goal that includes others. Whereas contingencies of self-worth are, in our view, difficult to change because they are grounded in early emotional experiences that may not be accessible to conscious awareness, goals can be consciously chosen moment by moment. Although contingencies of self-worth may make self-validation goals of validating one's abilities or qualities chronically accessible, one can replace those self-validation goals by consciously choosing goals that are inclusive--good for the self

and for others. The subordinate goal could remain the same, even with a shift at the superordinate level from self-esteem goals to more inclusive goals. For example, an entrepreneur could shift from the goal of building a business to become rich and influential, to the goal of building a business to create a useful product with a team of employees. The first goal is likely to create scarcity and competition for the self and others and trigger self-esteem goals, whereas the second goal need not do so.

These alternative goals need not be altruistic, or “good” goals in a moral sense. They simply need to include others or involve creating or contributing to something larger than the self. Goals that include others may not quell fears and anxieties as raising self-esteem does, but they provide a powerful reason to move forward in spite of one’s fears and anxieties, because others are counting on it. These goals are more autonomous because behavior is not driven by self-esteem concerns (Deci & Ryan, 1995), and are more connected, because they include others. And because they are not focused on self-esteem, they facilitate openness to learning. In fact, the reduced self-focus associated with goals that include others can relieve anxiety and depression (Nix, Watson, Pyszczynski, & Greenberg, 1995). In sum, we are not suggesting that goals that are larger than the self are morally superior. Rather, it is a pragmatic issue: what goals can motivate behavior without the costs associated with the pursuit of self-esteem?

It is also important to note that we are not suggesting replacing self-esteem goals with goals of having competence, relatedness, or autonomy; such goals do not shift the focus away from the self but instead, are still focused on getting something for the self, and so are likely to trigger fears and anxieties rather than

motivating people to move forward in spite of their fears and anxieties. Increased competence, relatedness, autonomy, and self-regulatory abilities may be the *result* of pursuing goals that include others, but pragmatically, they will not work to decrease costs if they are the goal, unless the goal also includes what is good for others. The consequence of shifting from self-validation goals to goals that include others, paradoxically, might be more stable, noncontingent, and nondefensive self-esteem (Deci & Ryan, 1995; Dweck, 2000; Kernis, in press). As Dweck (2000) suggests, “Self-esteem is not a thing that you have or don’t have. It is a way of experiencing yourself when you are using your resources well—to master challenges, to learn, to help others” (p. 128). Ultimately, letting go of the goal of having self-esteem by proving one’s worth and value in domains of self-worth contingency facilitates autonomy, competence, relatedness, and self-regulation. Letting go of self-esteem goals, however, requires facing one’s fears and anxieties about death, abandonment, rejection, or incompetence without the balm of self-esteem. To pursue one’s goals in spite of these fears is no easy task—it requires the strong motivation that results from having goals that are larger than the self.

A Healthier Route to Self-Esteem?

It is tempting to think that we have now identified a more effective, if indirect, means of obtaining self-esteem—substituting the pursuit of self-esteem with the pursuit of goals that include others. But people who pursue these new goals with the ultimate aim of raising self-esteem fall into the same trap of having a higher order self-esteem goal of seeking something for the self. Only by letting go of the goal of having self-esteem and saying “so what?” to fears and anxieties that are assuaged by self-

esteem can the costs of pursuing self-esteem be avoided. If our self-esteem becomes higher, more stable, less defensive, and less contingent as a result, that is a bonus, but it cannot be the goal.

Conclusion

Recently, the value of having self-esteem has been questioned by researchers (e.g., Baumeister et al., 2003) and in the mass media (e.g., Slater, 2002). Although there are important exceptions (e.g., Deci & Ryan, 1995; Kernis, in press; Morf & Rhodewalt, 2001), most of the scientific debate as well as public discourse has focused on whether self-esteem is high or low. Throughout this article, we have attempted to shift the focus from level of self-esteem to the pursuit of self-esteem. We argued that people pursue self-esteem by trying to satisfy their beliefs about what they need to be or do to have worth and value; this pursuit has temporary emotional benefits when people succeed, but big costs when they fail. The pursuit of self-esteem interferes with relatedness, learning, autonomy, self-regulation, and mental and physical health. Pursuing self-esteem can be motivating, but other sources of motivation, such as goals that are good for the self and others, can provide the same motivation without the costs.

In our view, the most important contribution of this article is to shift the focus of research and theory on self-esteem from whether people *have* it or not, to what they *do* to get it, and the costs and benefits of this pursuit. In doing so, our analysis explicitly connects self-esteem with goals and self-regulation, opening new avenues for empirical research, and, we hope, stimulating others to explore the costs and benefits of pursuing self-esteem goals. In our view, North American culture focuses primarily on the benefits of self-esteem, and we have attempted to balance this emphasis

with a focus on the costs. These costs are most pronounced when people feel threatened by failure, or possible failure, in the domains in which they have invested their self-worth. And the costs associated with the pursuit of self-esteem may differ under different circumstances; we do not expect that every person experiences all of these costs each time they have the goal to validate their self-worth. Fortunately, the perspective we offer not only brings into sharp relief the costs of pursuing self-esteem, but also suggests some alternatives.

We acknowledge that much of the research reviewed in this article does not directly assess goals, and whether they are self-esteem or self-worth validation goals. Instead, we inferred the existence of self-esteem goals from the presence of conditions that trigger the pursuit of self-esteem, from individual characteristics that predict the pursuit of self-esteem, or from evidence that self-affirmation manipulations eliminate the effects. Further research is needed to directly measure and manipulate whether people are pursuing self-esteem goals, the triggers of such goals, and to show that the costs described herein are, in fact, produced by self-esteem goals. In addition, future research could examine whether adopting alternative goals can effectively reduce those costs.

Some readers may believe we have ignored many benefits of pursuing self-esteem, and we acknowledge that these benefits exist; in addition to the immediate emotional benefits of validating one's worth and value by succeeding in domains of self-worth contingency, research suggests that under some circumstances, some people are driven to accomplish great things in the pursuit of recognition, acknowledgement, or fame that shores up their self-esteem. Although chasing after self-esteem can motivate excellent performance,

performance itself is not a fundamental human need, and it can be achieved through other, less destructive sources of motivation. Recognition and acknowledgement are not the same as love or acceptance, and they do not create the safety and security people desire. We cannot protect ourselves from dangers we experienced in childhood by

proving that we are smart, strong, beautiful, rich, or admired, or that we satisfy some other contingency of self-worth. In the words of Claire Nuer, a Holocaust survivor and leadership development trainer, “The only way to create love, safety, and acceptance is by giving them.”

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