***Improving Self- Esteem***

Most of us experience periods of self- doubt or wondering if we are doing as well as others around us. However, for some of us, we are trying a lot of the time to look like we belong, to fit in, to not show our flaws or vulnerabilities because we believe that we are not as worthy or as valuable as other people. We all have flaws, but some of us the idea of other people being aware of these, is cringe-making at least or extremely anxiety provoking at worst.

The United Nation’s 1948 declaration on universal rights asserts that all humans are free and equal in dignity and rights. Why then, do so many of us struggle with feeling less than others, with even feeling ashamed of ourselves and our faults? For some of us the answer lies in our family of origin. As adult human beings, we know and understand that our parents did their best, but they were first and foremost, like us, flawed human beings. They were also products of a particular time in history, for some of them, a harder time, where women were not treated as equal and valuable members of society, or where children were brought up to be ‘seen but not heard’.

For all of these reasons, and also factors to do with our individual personality and our life experiences, we can find that our self-esteem is shattered. Some of these difficulties are best worked through with a therapist. However, some of these difficulties may relate to the way we take in information and what we do with that information ( i.e., how we interpret it or what it means to us).

Think about the way a teacher or a parent guides a child’s learning. If we are thinking about this with a view to increasing our self-esteem the same principles apply. Let’s think of the example of teaching a child the alphabet. Children are shown the letters many times. They have the letters repeated to them and opportunities to reinforce the learning are taken. The gold nugget of learning happens when the child makes attempts to read or recite the letters. Good parents and teachers reinforce these attempts and praise what the child is doing well.

Consider this applied to an adult trying to build their self- esteem. If you have someone around you who builds you up, gives you encouragement- fantastic. Hopefully, this is also characteristic of your relationship with your therapist. However, for a lot of adults you have to become your own best cheerleader and if you are full of self- doubt, that isn’t easy. One of the important things you can begin to do is gather a database of positive information about yourself. Did you do anything today you are proud of? It might not be world changing, but everyday things like completing your tax, meeting a work deadline, taking the time to ask a colleague how they are doing, tidying that irritatingly messy cupboard out, making the time to go for a run are all acts which improve our day. Did you receive any positive feedback or compliments over the week? You might have to become a bit of a scientist in analysing information in order to allow positive information through. Often low self-esteem gathers momentum because we discount positive things that occur or are part of our lives.

A useful thing to do with this positive information about ourselves is to use it to give ourselves some credit. Allowing ourselves to feel some enjoyment about positives can feel unfamiliar and is something we need to practice. Like the child learning their alphabet, this is where we begin to act like a kind, understanding teacher towards ourselves and reinforce our attempts to build our self- esteem, and treat ourselves with the dignity and pride we deserve by acknowledging our efforts to do things which are good for us, achievements, tasks from the to-do list and things which we enjoy. Noticing these things and giving ourselves credit for them, are the first steps in building healthy self-esteem.