

Do I Matter?

A JOURNEY TO BUILDING
YOUR SELF-ESTEEM

WONG LAI CHUN

SAMARITANS OF SINGAPORE

“A great book written in simple language for the everyday person. Lai Chun’s insights and experience make her an empathetic writer for a topic that is usually difficult for people to confront or discuss. The concepts are explained in simple terms and the warm, conversational writing style makes the reader feel understood and supported.”

—Carrie Tan, executive director,
Daughters of Tomorrow

“An important book because building self-esteem and finding self-acceptance are the foundations for mental wellness, and success in life and in work. It is the road to realising our full potential as human beings.”

—Chow Yen-Lu, executive chairman,
WholeTree Foundation

“An invaluable work that addresses self-esteem in a wide range of contexts. A practical and much needed resource guide for this generation.”

—Dr Danny Tan, chief executive,
Odyssey Dance Theatre

“An easy-to-understand, practical self-help book which addresses how one can take small but significant steps towards improving one’s self-esteem. The book is simple but encouraging, as Lai Chun discusses many factors that affect self-esteem while sharing various tools and techniques that individuals can easily adopt to improve their self-esteem.”

—Dr Harminder C. Rajan, trainer, consultant and assistant professor,
Embry-Riddle Aeronautical University

“A step-by-step guide to building self confidence. Cleverly mixes anecdotes with practical advice that readers can take towards improvement.”

—Lindsay Courtney, executive director,
Art Outreach Singapore

“Practical and clear in its suggestions, direct and supportive in its tone. It is compulsory reading for people searching for ways and means to increase their resilience or to help their loved ones.”

—Dr Ng Beng Yeong, consultant psychiatrist,
Mount Elizabeth Medical Centre

“Rich in wisdom yet written in simple, friendly language. This book is accessible to everyone, be they teenagers searching for self-identify, adults facing a mid-life crisis or seniors grappling with life after retirement in true Singaporean style, with charts, diagrams and quizzes.”

—Ng Tze Yong, chief executive, EQUAL

“To develop a sustainable advantage, organisations must take good care of the emotional well-being of every customer, colleague and team member.

Do I Matter? teaches how to take very good care of ourselves and each other in a manner that is easy to understand and apply.”

—Ron Kaufman, motivational speaker and
New York Times bestselling author of *Uplifting Service*

“A much needed book in Singapore today. The structure and content of the book reflect her practical and sensitive approach to an issue that is complex, evolving and one which requires self-reflexivity... Lai Chun’s empathy, love and honesty shine throughout.”

—Dr Subadhra Devi Rai, research fellow, Centre for Biomedical Ethics,
National University of Singapore

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EPIGRAM
SINGAPORE • LONDON

I Am Me

*In all the world, there is no one else exactly like me
Everything that comes out of me is authentically me
Because I alone chose it – I own everything about me
My body, my feelings, my mouth, my voice, all my actions,
Whether they be to others or to myself – I own my fantasies,
My dreams, my hopes, my fears – I own all my triumphs and
Successes, all my failures and mistakes Because I own all of
Me, I can become intimately acquainted with me – by so doing
I can love me and be friendly with me in all my parts – I know
There are aspects about myself that puzzle me, and other
Aspects that I do not know – but as long as I am
Friendly and loving to myself, I can courageously
And hopefully look for solutions to the puzzles
And for ways to find out more about me – However I
Look and sound, whatever I say and do, and whatever
I think and feel at a given moment in time is authentically
Me – If later some parts of how I looked, sounded, thought
And felt turn out to be unfitting, I can discard that which is
Unfitting, keep the rest, and invent something new for that
Which I discarded – I can see, hear, feel, think, say, and do
I have the tools to survive, to be close to others, to be
Productive to make sense and order out of the world of
People and things outside of me – I own me, and
therefore I can engineer me – I am me and
I AM OKAY*

—Virginia Satir

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INTRODUCTION

Samaritans of Singapore (SOS) is the pioneer organisation in suicide prevention and intervention. It is Singapore's only suicide prevention centre, as well as the first in Southeast Asia in postvention work. It has been lending a sympathetic ear since 1969, and it has come a long way.

This book serves to both celebrate the organisation's half-century of suicide prevention work in 2019 and to expand upon it by addressing a core life skill—resilience, or nurturing hope from within.

Resilience is the ability to successfully cope with a crisis and to return to pre-crisis status quickly. It exists when the person uses “mental processes and behaviours in promoting personal assets and protecting self from the potential negative effects of stressors”.

A person on the brink of suicide often experiences hopelessness. Typically, the person may even perceive himself or herself to be of no value to self and others and hence the urge to terminate a “worthless” existence. Any stressful trig-

ger in any phase of one's life may reinforce this thought of worthlessness and plant the seed of suicide.

Resilience is the buffer against the risk of suicide. Resilience is from the inside out—starting from the core of one's self-perception in relation to the world and how one gains self-esteem. Suicide is preventable. *Do I Matter?* is not about suicide intervention but prevention. This book explores one's self-esteem and how it can be a bedrock for resilience.

It is the hope of all of us at SOS that, over the following pages, the reader can come to understand the factors that influence one's self-esteem and what can be done to reframe it—ultimately, to develop acceptance and love for oneself regardless of the challenges or crises in life.

Ms Lee Sook Fung

Chairman, Board of Management, Samaritans of Singapore

“Self-esteem has profound implications for every aspect of our existence... I cannot think of a single psychological problem, from anxiety and depression to fear of intimacy or of success, to spouse battery or child molestation, that does not have its roots in low self-esteem.”—Nathaniel Branden, 1984

PART 1

FROM INSIDE OUT

Self-esteem sounds simple enough. Isn't it all about loving and accepting yourself, something people naturally do to survive?

Healthy self-esteem is not self-conceit or arrogance. They are unrelated. The sturdiest self-esteem can still be crushed should one meet with a dramatic life event or crisis. No person can truly claim to have absolutely unshakeable self-esteem 24/7. Self-esteem fluctuates, coming and going in relation to life circumstances.

A toddler who yearns to be loved wholeheartedly by his parents the way he was before a younger sibling came along to divide their attention. A student who strives to be “intelligent” so that his teacher will stop picking on him. A teenager who worries about her/his body image. A newly-wed who wants to be accepted into a new family. A middle-aged professional who is passed over for promotion in favour of younger colleagues. A retiree left behind by his grown children.

At some point, everyone struggles to evaluate their own worth to themselves, others and the world.

Resilience is built on a foundation of self-worth.

suffer from depression, anxieties and a sense that he has no control over any aspect of his life.

A healthy self-esteem is necessary for an individual's general sense of well-being regardless of external factors. It is the value we place on ourselves, secure in the knowledge that we have a worthy existence because we make a difference to others. This is the key to one's happiness and well-being.

EXERCISE

How is your self-esteem? Try this exercise adapted from Andrew G. Marshall's *Learn to Love Yourself Enough*. Answer Yes or No to the following questions.

1. I tend to like and stay within what is familiar to me—tasks, people, places, etc.
2. I am easily upset by criticisms.
3. I feel I need to control situations and want predictability.
4. I find it hard to be open and honest with people most times.
5. I blame myself and/or others for things that go wrong.
6. I don't like myself sometimes.
7. I tend to compare myself with others.
8. I make myself feel better sometimes at the expense of others.
9. I feel alone and insecure.
10. If people get close to me, they will not like me.

ONE

WHAT IS SELF-ESTEEM?

Resilience starts with a healthy self-esteem.

According to Glenn R. Schiraldi in *10 Simple Solutions for Building Self Esteem*, self-esteem is defined as “a realistic, appreciative opinion of oneself”. It has to be realistic as most issues of self-esteem include an unrealistic, often delusional view of self that precludes any actions to maximise one's potential for happiness and achievements in life.

Self-esteem can also simply be defined as the value we put on ourselves and the worth we see ourselves bringing to others. In other words, “Do I matter?” to myself and others.

A person with healthy self-esteem is often one with strong emotional and psychological resilience plus motivation to choose a productive and healthy life. This is in contrast to someone who has low self-esteem, who is more likely to

If you had answered Yes more than five times, it means that you have a tendency to have a low opinion of self.

REFLECTION

1. Do you generally have a low opinion of yourself?
2. Are you willing to start your journey to a stronger and more resilient self-esteem?

TWO

AM I WRONG ABOUT SELF-ESTEEM?

When asked to describe a person with good self-esteem, the likely answer would be someone who is extroverted, articulate and talented.

This is a stereotypical misconception—that an outgoing personality equates to a healthy self-esteem. Many confident people would say that they were not born so; rather, they picked up the skills and learned along the way.

Neither is it true that someone who is introverted and quiet struggles with self-esteem.

At the same time, studies have also shown that physically attractive people are not necessarily happier and people with disabilities are not any less happy. Good self-esteem is all a state of the mind.

Myth 1: Self-esteem depends solely on external factors. It comes with looks, wealth, an extroverted personality and the right connections.

We have heard this before: good looks, popularity and wealth help give you positive self-esteem. However, such attributes have no lifetime guarantee. Once they disappear, does self-esteem too? Celebrities and successful people, as portrayed in the media, seemingly have all that we envy.

Yet, Academy Award-winning Hollywood actress Angelina Jolie once told an interviewer, “I struggle with low self-esteem all the time... I have so much wrong with me, it’s unbelievable.”

The blockbuster star Johnny Depp, well-known for the *Pirates of the Caribbean* movies, confessed in an *Avantgarde* interview, “As a teenager I was so insecure. I was the type of guy that never fitted in because I never dared to choose. I was convinced I had absolutely no talent at all... Even today...no matter how famous I am, no matter how many people go to see my movies, I still have the idea that I’m that pale no-hoper that I used to be.”

Said *American Idol* runner-up Adam Lambert, a chart-topping singer/performer and fashion icon, “I didn’t feel attractive in high school. I had self-esteem issues into my early twenties. I was a little overweight, I had skin problems. As I learned to feel attractive from the inside out, my self-worth got better.”

If even the rich and famous suffer from self-esteem issues, then who is spared?

Is it really external factors that build self-esteem? Or something inherent in each individual?

Sim Wong Hoo, founder, CEO and Chairman of global technology company Creative Technology, was from a humble home and had an equally modest diploma from a polytechnic. At the age of 45, he became the youngest billionaire in Singapore.

Boyd Au, former chairman of Enzer, grew up in a Salvation Army home. In his memoir *I Don’t Want to be Poor*, he recalled having no money to even buy shoes. Boyd was the Executive Chairman and Chief Executive Officer of Enzer, overseeing all activities of the group including growth managing and strategic directions. Enzer became a global brand marketed in over 25 countries. It was listed on the Singapore Stock Exchange in May 2001 with turnover close to \$80 million by 2006.

The stories are similar. What these successful people had in common were undying determination and, yes, the belief in themselves—which cannot exist without good self-esteem.

As you can see, genuine, healthy and enduring self-esteem does not depend solely on external factors like looks and popularity. It is also not something inborn or predetermined. It is an asset to be learned and built upon along a continuous journey that needs nurturing daily, just as our physical being needs constant nourishment to survive.

Myth 2: Self-esteem is predetermined. You are born with it. It is in the genes.

The factual accounts of the personalities featured in the above section conclusively debunk the myth that self-esteem is inborn. Physical looks, wealth, health, intelligence or any distinctive talent do help to kickstart a person's self-esteem but they are not self-sustaining. Neither is it true that a person without any of these would never enjoy a healthy self-esteem.

Having a good and resilient self-esteem is a skill anyone can learn—with positive supportive circumstances—even if it comes quickly to some while for others the process is a struggle. It can be learned.

REFLECTION

1. Which myth did you believe in? Myth 1 or 2? Do you still believe now?
2. Do you have any other self-esteem myths you believe to be true?

THREE

DO I HAVE LOW SELF-ESTEEM?

Most of us do not occupy the extreme of very high or very low self-esteem: We vacillate along the spectrum. But there are signs to alert us if we do hover around the lower end.

Indecisiveness

A constant struggle in making decisions ranging from the mundane to the complex. This person is often in limbo, and flip-flops after a decision has been made, consumed by the nagging fear of “What if...what if...”

Since her teens, Sally could never make up her mind about anything. She waffled over spending her weekends hanging out with her friends in the mall, lunching with family, going for a swim... Most times, she ended up not doing anything

except watching television at home because the most minor of decisions could prove disconcerting.

The indecisiveness continued into her adulthood, undermining her job and interpersonal relationships. She floated along, miserable but too frozen to take any active steps towards meeting her aspirations. “It won’t happen to me” was her mindset. Even in her relationships with men, she accepted any and every date—ending up with an abusive boyfriend she would not leave because someone better “would just never come along”.

Negative self-talk

When one sees life as a cup half-empty, he is oblivious to its fullness. Often, this person talks himself out of his own wishes and goals, convincing himself not to take action or decision. There is the regular self-sabotage and immense fear of rejection whether in making a sales call or asking someone for a date or a raise.

Alan is in his twenties. He is soft-spoken and shy but pleasant and polite.

Alan is very good in his routine responsibilities at an administrative office, but he would get anxious and stressed when presented with a different task. His boss and coworkers could not get him to assist in any novel assignment or try out a software. His career stalled, and there was mutual frustration between Alan’s colleagues and Alan himself at his reluctance to learn or undertake anything new.

Alan has an inner critic that repeats:

“Why can’t I...?”

“I’ll never amount to anything...”

“I could never...”

The internalisation of these put-downs becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy for Alan as he comes to believe what he is saying to himself. That paralyses him to do anything fresh and unfamiliar.

Highly critical of others

It is a misconception that a person highly critical of others has a “superiority” complex. There is no such thing as a superiority complex.

A person’s apparent “superiority” is a mere façade put up to hide a tangle of insecurities. It is simply a “before you put me down, I’m going to put you down” defence mechanism. What appears on the outside is very different to the reality inside.

Remember the earlier story of Alan and his negative self-talk? Here, the negative talk is directed at others. However, most times, the person would also be subjected to his own negative self-talk. This may be the only kind of talk such a person knows. Someone who cannot stop criticising everything and everyone to the point that he or she becomes intolerable is usually someone with poor social skills and ill-liked.

I got to know a volunteer named Mary at a town-council community event. Through my occasional brief conversations with her, I noticed her habit of faulting the organisers for this or that, a certain person for being like this or like that, and even someone’s taste in clothes. Other volunteers

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Lai Chun is an experienced counsellor who is also the current Senior Assistant Director of the Samaritans of Singapore, a non-profit organisation focused on crisis intervention and suicide prevention. She holds a Master of Science (MSc) in Training (University of Leicester), Bachelor of Arts (BA) in Social Work and Sociology (National University of Singapore) and a Diploma in Training and Development (SIM). She is also a Certified Life Coach (University of NLP, USA) and a trainer in Applied Suicide Intervention Skills (Living-Works, Canada).

ABOUT SOS

Established in 1969, Samaritans of Singapore (SOS) is a secular, non-profit suicide prevention agency. It adopts a holistic approach to suicide, focusing on prevention, intervention and postvention (an intervention conducted after a suicide for loved ones and friends). With the mission to be an available lifeline to anyone in crisis, SOS offers emotional support to people in crisis, thinking of suicide, or affected by suicide.

We provide a listening ear in a confidential and non-judgmental manner through our 24-hour hotline (1800-221 4444). For those who prefer to write, Email Befriending (pat@sos.org.sg) offers an alternative platform to receive emotional support.

Through our Local Outreach to Suicide Survivors (LOSS) programme, SOS also supports those who have lost a loved one to suicide and journey with them through their grief process.

At the same time, SOS is actively raising awareness for its cause through community outreach projects and training the general public and social service professionals to be equipped in providing assistance to those in crisis.

For more information, please visit our website at [**www.sos.org.sg**](http://www.sos.org.sg).

Do I Matter? will help its readers understand the factors that influence their self-esteem and to develop acceptance and love for themselves regardless of life's challenges.

Published with the Samaritans of Singapore—a non-profit organisation focused on crisis intervention and suicide prevention—this book contains helpful exercises to building confidence.

“Easy to understand and apply.”

Ron Kaufman, *New York Times* bestselling author
of *Uplifting Service*

“Practical and clear in its suggestions, direct and supportive in its tone.”

Dr Ng Beng Yeong, consultant
psychiatrist, Mount Elizabeth
Medical Centre

NON-FICTION

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