

Ask the Rabbi: By Rabbi Yerachmiel D. Fried Self Esteem

Dear Rabbi Fried,

Why are there so many teenagers with low self-esteem today and why do they look for “quick fixes” in other means like drugs, alcohol, etc.? Also, what can we do as parents to ensure our teenagers grow up with high self-esteem and with high emotional health?

*Sincerely,
Seth K.*

Dear Seth,

There is no one answer that covers it all, of course.

It is clear, however, from your question that you recognize the relationship between the “quick fixes” so many look for in our generation seeking happiness and fulfillment and the lack of emotional health and self-esteem. These often go hand in hand.

The truth is that it’s not only the teens of our generation who lack self-esteem, but it goes across the board and affects all age groups. It is difficult for adults who, themselves, lack self-esteem to be an inspiration for the teens of our generation. One needs to have a deep sense of pride and self-worth to affect others in a positive way.

My late mentor, the esteemed sage Rabbi Shlomo Wolbe ob”m,, once explained the background upon which the rampant lack of self-esteem in our generation is based.

Firstly, Darwin’s Theory of Evolution turned us into an *accident* of creation, which happens to be the fittest of all the many accidents that grew out of some chemical soup. No matter how fit, and accident doesn’t feel too good about him or herself!

Sigmund Freud further taught that we don’t do a lot out of our own volition or choice. How we act is often due to the effect of hidden desires that are mostly out of our control.

The Industrial Revolution, despite all the good it accomplished, minimized the stature of man. By having most tasks performed by machines it subconsciously dealt a further blow to man’s self-esteem.

This went even further with the computer revolution which taught us to leave much of our thinking to machines which are far superior to ourselves.

Then astronomy finished it off by showing us that we’re merely a tiny speck among billions of galaxies, leaving us with the feeling that our actions are largely inconsequential. (Furthermore, on that infinitesimal speck called Earth, each one of us is merely one of some eight billion homo sapiens!)

With all that, how is one to possibly maintain a healthy sense of self-esteem?!

In previous generations the world at large, and the Jews specifically, lived with the strong belief that we are not an inconsequential chemical accident, rather a creation of the Al-mighty, endowed with a soul, which is a spark of the Divine. Being created in the “Image of G-d” empowers us to affect the entire universe with our actions. The larger the universe, the greater the impact we have!

Our actions even affect directly the extent that the Al-mighty connects Himself to this world, bringing more blessing and bounty to the world, or, the opposite.

Needless to say, this is a vast subject and there's much more to be said about it. However, by inculcating these messages into our own awareness by the study of these concepts in our Torah literature, we will rekindle a profound sense of self-worth and self-esteem which we will then be able to pass down to our youth and teenagers. This would have an incredible impact, and the world would be a very different place for the better!