



Episode 543: Crushing the Self-Esteem Scam Like a Bug

Guest: Michael Edelstein

WOODS: I do remember that chess game that we played at the Mises Institute; I'm pretty sure you played the Sicilian.

EDELSTEIN: (laughing) If I was black I probably did.

WOODS: Yeah, so how about that? That was years ago, but I remember a person by his opening (laughing).

EDELSTEIN: Right. Tom, I'm trying to forget the game, so let's move on (laughing).

WOODS: Okay, okay, we'll move on to happier things. Well, happier things — self-esteem. We're talking about self-esteem today. It's an interesting topic, because I think among the general public there is a sense, let's say among people right of center, that there's an excessive emphasis on self-esteem, let's say, in schools, that there's an emphasis on teaching the kids to feel good about themselves, regardless of what the facts on the ground may be, the thinking being that if they have a positive outlook about themselves overall that this will translate into good results. And yet, even these conservatives who think there's too much emphasis on this, they still I think in other aspects of their lives have somehow bought into this, I don't know, kind of like a gospel of self-esteem. And you have spoken and written against this, this kind of cult of self-esteem, so I want to begin by having you explain what is the claim that the self-esteem gurus are making. Is it pretty much as I've described? What are they saying is the reason that we ought to be encouraging people to have high self-esteem?

EDELSTEIN: Okay, that's a good question, but just to back up a little, Tom, I'd like to define self-esteem so you know exactly what we're talking about.

WOODS: Please do.

EDELSTEIN: So "to esteem" means to think highly of, so self-esteem means to think highly of oneself, and when you think highly of yourself, normally you feel good about yourself. You feel like you're a good person and deserve all the good things in life. So that's the basic idea. Now, the other side of the coin of low self-esteem where you feel bad about yourself, you feel you're a no-good, rotten person and you don't deserve anything good in life. So that's what we're talking about, and I think part of the claims

of the self-esteem movement is muddling what they mean by self-esteem and where it comes from.

But one of the main claims is that having high self-esteem is a way to be more productive, it's a way to feel good about yourself, it's a way to feel good, it's a way to motivate yourself, and it gives you all the good things in life. So that's largely the claim — and that if you are depressed or guilty, that's because you have poor self-esteem, and then the solution is to change that to high self-esteem. And so in the groups you mentioned who are on the self-esteem bandwagon, I'll include psychologists. Unfortunately most psychologists tend to teach their clients to have high self-esteem, which I think is a trap.

WOODS: Well, I'm curious; how old is this idea? How long has this been around, this obsessive emphasis on self-esteem?

EDELSTEIN: Well, I'm really not that much of a historian; I believe it started in the '60s or thereafter as an obsession with people. I think it's probably been around as long as humans have been around, because there's a human tendency to overgeneralize from yourself, from your behaviors — I did well on the exam or this person likes me — to rating your total self — therefore I'm a good person, therefore I'm wonderful — and that leads to high self-esteem. So it's certainly been around for a while, and people have a natural tendency to believe in it.

WOODS: Is this something that you encountered in your own training as a clinical psychologist?

EDELSTEIN: Yes, I would say that 80 to 90% of my clients have this problem of low self-esteem. You see, the thing about humans is they tend to focus on the negative — there was probably an evolutionary advantage to doing that at one time — so normally they see themselves as failing in some ways or being imperfect in some ways and then overgeneralize that to their total selves.

So the way self-esteem works is first you rate your behaviors — I did well; I gave a good talk or I got the job or I won the love of the fair damsel — that's good, and that makes sense to rate your behaviors. But then self-esteem comes when you overgeneralize from the rating of your behaviors to the rating of your total self as a total person, your being, your personhood, and that's what the error is. There's no evidence that because you do well at things that you're a good person; rather, an imperfect person who does well at times and poorly at times and neutrally at other times.

WOODS: I was thinking in terms of when you were actually going through your training as a student. Did you have to study — was there self-esteem literature that you then had to repeat on tests?

EDELSTEIN: Well, my training as a student was not very relevant to my work. We studied Freud and more traditional kind of therapy, and they didn't focus so much on

self-esteem; they focused more on a person's childhood, upbringing, dysfunctional parents, traumatic events in their lives — all these things are in quotes — that supposedly — and wrongly, in latest research's view — causes adult personality.

But it's not that — and this is another lesson basic to the whole self-esteem idea, is that it's never situations themselves that cause our emotions, but rather, it's our thinking about them, and I'm just paraphrasing Epictetus, who was the first person who noted that. So if you do well or poorly, that doesn't give you high or low self-esteem, as Nathaniel Branden believed, but rather you then have a view of you're doing well or poorly, and if you conclude from that I'm a good person or I'm a bad person, then that's what's called high or low self-esteem.

WOODS: I want draw out little by little all the problems with this idea, but I want to start by asking what I think a skeptic might reply to you with, which is that even if the gospel of self-esteem is misguided in some way, surely no harm can come from encouraging people to think well of themselves. What possible harm — why would you be so concerned about this as to write against it when just making people feel better about themselves seems like an altogether benign thing?

EDELSTEIN: Well, that's a very important question, and the answer is a lot of harm comes from it, and I see that every day in my office when people come in depressed or even suicidal, guilty, ashamed, those kinds of things, because it comes from the other side of the coin of high self-esteem, and that is low self-esteem. So if you engage in the whole self-esteem concept, you're engaging in self-rating, rating your entire self based on the rating of your behavior. So since at times you do poorly, then that's going to lead you inevitably to rate yourself as a bad, no-good person when you do poorly. So high self-esteem is rating yourself well when you do well, but one of the problems with self-esteem is that there's the other side of the coin — depression and guilt and shame, embarrassment, those kinds of things — when you put yourself down.

Also it leads to trying to prove yourself, rather than enjoy yourself, because if your ego is on the line, you tend to be more worried about how you look to others and how you rate as a person, rather than just enjoying working on the process toward your goals and, if you achieve your goals, enjoying that. So it tends to lead you to prove what a good person you are.

Also it encourages giving up, because when you try to do something and you fail one time and that means, in your view, you're not a good person, you're a bad person, no-good, a failure, then you're more likely to give up and not risk failing again and again and again, and going lower and lower and lower as a sub-human. So that's another problem.

Also it tends to lead to obsessing, dwelling, and ruminating, because if you're worried about how you're going to do and how you're going to look to others because your worth is on the line, then you tend to obsess on it, dwell on it, ruminate on it, those kinds of things.

It also leads to intolerance of others, because if you rate yourself as good or bad, you're more likely to extend that self-rating to other-rating and think of people as good or bad people, heroes, devils, those kinds of things, which they never are. They're always imperfect humans, who at times act imperfectly.

And also it leads you to be self-centered, rather than problem-centered. If you're focused on your worth and whether you're a good person or not, then you're more likely to be self-absorbed, rather than focusing on the problem at hand that you're trying to solve.

Also it tends to lead to insecurity when you do well, because you realize that if you got a lot of positive feedback today and that makes you a good person, then tomorrow, you may get negative feedback. Or if you got the job today and now you have high self-esteem, tomorrow you may lose the job, so you tend to be anxious and insecure at work.

It also is likely to lead to discouraging thinking out-of-the-box, because if you think out-of-the-box, think differently than others, that's risk-taking, and you're not going to go along with the crowd and get the kind of approval that you think you have to have in order to be a good person, so you're more likely to be a conformist and go along with the crowd and not think for yourself.

It also tends to encourage nationalism, because with nationalism people tend to identify with their country: I am the country, and the country is me. So if my country does well, I'm a good person. If we're taking over the world and they're telling people how they should live their life, I'm a noble, wonderful person. So that's a problem in politics with the whole self-esteem idea. So those are some of the problems with self-esteem.

WOODS: You mention in here about criminals, and this is — of course, if you looked at the whole world through the self-esteem lens, you might be inclined to say these violent criminals probably have a low estimate of themselves, and if we can encourage self-esteem, this might be an ingredient in their overall recovery and turnaround. But as you argue in here, to the contrary, these people have very often been found to have excessively high self-esteem, and that's precisely the problem. They're willing to come to blows over some perceived slight, because they think so highly of themselves, they can't imagine they could be in the wrong.

EDELSTEIN: Exactly. That's part of the problem with criminality and high self-esteem. Another problem is, because they're better than you, they deserve what you have even though they didn't earn it, so they'll just go ahead and take it, no matter what the law says or no matter what's right. So if you're a good person, as I mentioned, normally that implies you're much better than these other vermin who don't deserve anything that they have, so why not help yourself to it?

WOODS: All right, I want to ask you about what is the alternative. There is an alternative to low self-esteem that isn't just encouraging people to have high self-

esteem. There is another alternative. People think it's either one or the other, and if you don't favor inculcating a high self-esteem into someone, there must be something wrong with you; you just want them to be depressed or something.

All right, so when you're inevitably faced with a critic who says, all right, Dr. Edelstein, I hear what you're saying, but look, I know people who have low self-esteem, and I know they probably — you know, maybe they'll feel better if I make them have high self-esteem. So I think the implication is since you don't favor this gospel of self-esteem, you must favor just leaving the situation as is. But there's another way to think about it completely, and what is it?

EDELSTEIN: Yes, that's exactly right, and that's what I teach my clients. And the alternative to rating yourself is just rating your behavior. It's important rate what you do, because if you rate what you do and you're doing well, then continue that, figure out how to maintain it, and if you see that you're doing poorly, then figure out where you're making mistakes and how you can change. So that's really the alternative to rating your total self, and I call that unconditional self-acceptance, accepting yourself unconditional as the fallible, mistake-making, error-prone human you are who is going to screw up and do poorly at times and do well at times and have people love you and have people hate you, but through all that, you're still the same imperfect human.

Piaget showed as children develop cognitively, they get conservation of volume, and they see that the volume doesn't change of something even though the shapes of the liquid are different — still the same amount of liquid — and this I would call conservation of the self. Even through it all, through your best times and your worst times, you're still the same person. You're still the same Michael or Tom as you were before you got viciously criticized or you fell flat on your face while giving a talk. You're still the same person.

So if you see that, that's the reality of it. You're never a good person better than other people, with a halo, and you're never a devil, no matter how poorly you do, with horns and a pitchfork. You're still the same human and the same as everyone else. Some people are more imperfect than others, of course, but we're still imperfect humans who were born and are going to die, and that's our basic essence, not our goodness or badness.

WOODS: As I read your article — and of course I'm going to link to the article on today's show notes page — I was immediately reminded of a study, and then I encountered the study in your article, because I've always thought this is such a great illustration of what you're talking about. The study about looking at students across a host of countries and asking them what is your own self-assessment of your own mathematical ability, and then testing it against their actual mathematical ability. Well, the Americans, two-thirds of them say that, yes, I am good at mathematics, but they scored dead last on the test, so what good is it?

EDELSTEIN: Exactly, and the reason that that is is largely because of the self-esteem curriculum taught in the public schools, and that is you're a good person no matter

what and teaching high self-esteem. So since they are good people, of course they're great at math, but then they did the worst, as you said, Tom, in the test. The other students were from Britain, Spain, Ireland, Canada, and Korea. And in Korea, I think the Korean students did best, and they rated themselves lowly, so they may be on the other side of the coin. They rated themselves lowest in ability, but they did the best, so that's another disadvantage of the self-esteem idea, that you have an unrealistic view of yourself and your abilities, so why practice? If you're good at math, why study hard and practice math? You'll do well. And this is what happens.

WOODS: Now, in taking this position against the self-esteem movement, you positioned yourself against a figure well known in objectivist circles — and by extension in libertarian circles — Nathaniel Branden, who wrote numerous works on the subject of self-esteem. Where did he go wrong, and what did he think was the connection between self-esteem and the objectivist philosophy?

EDELSTEIN: Well, I think he thought and indicated in his numerous books that having high self-esteem is the cornerstone of the objectivist philosophy, because you have good values. And he enumerated in many of his books what leads to self-esteem, and he called it the choices we make concerning awareness, the honesty of our relationships to reality, the level of our personal integrity. And in his book, *The Six Pillars of Self-Esteem*, he breaks that down even more into six things that you can do well in that you must do well in if you're going to be a good objectivist and have high self-esteem: living consciously, having self-acceptance, acting responsibly, being assertive, living purposefully with objectives and goals in life that you implement, and having personal integrity. But if you notice — and he calls this authentic self-esteem, and he criticizes a lot of the self-esteem ideas, not on the fundamental grounds that I criticize it on in terms of self-rating being unimperial, illogical, and unpragmatic, but just in terms of what you're basing self-esteem on. So he largely reinforces the idea that high self-esteem is good, but it's his kind of self-esteem that you get from doing these things well.

And there are many problems in that. First of all, it assumes that by doing well, that gives you self-esteem, but that's more of a stimulus-response model, that you do something well, and all of a sudden self-esteem springs from that. But that's not how our emotions work. Feeling good or bad doesn't come from events, but rather they come from our thinking of events, about events. And you could do very well in some ways, but you could put yourself down because you're not doing well enough or because you're not getting the love of the person you love or other reasons. That's subjective. Emotions are subjective. They're not objective; they don't come from events. So apparently he didn't see that.

And there are many examples in history of people who did very, very well, yet apparently had low self-esteem. For example, Beethoven, the great composer, had suicidal ideation and was considering committing suicide before he wrote the Third Symphony when he noticed he was becoming deaf. He was depressed much of the time. He had mood swings; he often had difficulty getting along with people, so even

though he did very, very well in the area of music and is still known for that, he seems to have low self-esteem.

And similarly with Darwin, the brilliant naturalist, had severe depression, panic attacks, general anxiety, agoraphobia. So he had problems. Much of these types of problems come from low self-esteem and condemning oneself, but yet he did very, very well.

And then there was Ayn Rand herself, who was obviously a brilliant novelist. Her books still sell very well many years after she wrote them, and some people thought she was a really great philosopher and converted a lot of people to the libertarian objectivist movement politically, yet she had her problems, addictions to nicotine and Dexedrine and caffeine. She was offensive to many people. She wanted to be friends with Frank Lloyd Wright, but he found her too obnoxious to want to associate much with her. And in 1974, she had surgery for lung cancer, and then she was ashamed of the fact that she had lung cancer and instructed her inner circle to keep that a secret. And because she was a heavy smoker, she died about eight years later from lung cancer.

So would she be rated as a good person or a bad person? Should she have high self-esteem or low self-esteem? Well, it just shows that the whole concept really doesn't make that much sense and is riddled with internal conflict. So that is another problem with the objectivist idea of self-esteem.

But the bottom line, if you think of the main place that self-esteem comes from, self-rating, and you give up all self-rating – not trait-rating, don't give up rating your behaviors, but give up self-rating, then you've overcome the self-esteem problem.

Now, another question that people ask about this, in addition to yours, Tom, about an alternative to high self-esteem, is how are you going to enjoy life? If you're not working to be a good person, you don't have that goal, and you don't experience being a good person or having high self-esteem, how are you going to enjoy life? And the way to enjoy life is by setting goals and then working hard toward achieving your goals. So rather than self-esteem, work toward self-discipline, working hard conscientiously and regularly to try to achieve your larger goals in life.

WOODS: Can you see a link between the self-esteem movement – if not a direct link then certainly a way that the self-esteem movement could be used by egalitarian ideologues? If the most important thing, for example, among children is to foster self-esteem, then the most important thing, therefore, is not to cultivate excellence in the best students, because that might foster envy in the other students and therefore harm their self-esteem, because they can't possibly achieve at the level of these other students. So instead, we make sure that the top notch students don't get the special books, the special field trips, the special whatever, because we're all on the same level, because we're all people, and we're all special. Can you see – it seems to me that's how they use it.

EDELSTEIN: Yes, I can see that link, and also I've seen that in schools among girls and blacks where they tell girls, don't excel because people won't like you, or blacks, if you excel then you're really white, not black, those kinds of things, and you're spurned. So when you're worried about your image and how you look in order to have high self-esteem, then you're less likely to think out of the box, be a non-conformist, take risks, risk disapproval, and risk questioning authority just so you can fit in and be liked and be able to respect yourself as a person.

WOODS: Dr. Edelstein, how can people find out more about what you do?

EDELSTEIN: They can go to my website, ThreeMinuteTherapy.com – and ThreeMinuteTherapy is one word – and I have a book called *Three Minute Therapy*, which is available hard cover and on Kindle, and I have many YouTubes where I talk about these ideas. So some of those ways people can reach me and find out more about these ideas. By the way, as far as these ideas go, I just wanted to mention that I learned all of this from Albert Ellis. Albert Ellis was a pioneering psychologist in the 20th century and developed a school of therapy, of which this is a large part, and it's called rational emotive behavior therapy, REBT, and all the cognitive behavior therapies came from the original rational emotive behavior therapy.

WOODS: I'm going to link to a lot of this material. I'll link to your *Three Minute Therapy* book; I'll link to your website. If there's a particular YouTube you're especially pleased with, send it along to me; I'll link to that. This will all be up at TomWoods.com/543. I love topics like this that are, although you can see how they fit into the message of the show, they're a little bit off the beaten path, because I can talk about interest rates only so much, so I'm always glad to be able to talk about a really interesting and engaging topic like this. Thanks so much for your time today, Dr. Edelstein.

EDELSTEIN: Thanks again for inviting me, Tom. It was great speaking with you.