

FITTING IN AND SELF-ESTEEM

Everyone feels awkward, insecure, or alone at times – especially during adolescence. Between how media depicts growing up, mean kids at school, and puberty, it's unfortunately common to not feel great about yourself sometimes. The secret is: Most of your peers feel this way too – even the ones who seem to have it all.



WHY IS IT SO HARD TO FEEL GOOD ABOUT MY SOCIAL LIFE?

From around ages 10 to 24, you're in a stage of life where you feel social stressors more intensely – it's just part of how the human brain works.¹ These days, young people are also feeling lonelier than any other age group, and about twice as many adolescents worldwide are experiencing loneliness than just 10 years ago.²

Some experts think kids and teens have lower self-esteem nowadays in part because of technology³ – there are big differences between socializing online and in-person, and things like miscommunications, social comparisons, and fear of missing out (FOMO) can end in hurt feelings. Or maybe you're getting bullied or being excluded by your peers, or have been in the past, and can't stop worrying about it happening again. Keep in mind that at this age, your social circle is likely still limited to people in your school or hometown – depending on where you live, there simply might not be many people around you who have the same interests, hobbies, or values for you to be friends with. And even if you do have plenty of friends to hang out with, it's still possible to feel lonely or like others don't accept the real you.

TIPS FOR BUILDING SELF-ESTEEM

Self-esteem refers to your overall sense of worth – how much you like and respect yourself! Healthy self-esteem can help you feel empowered to reach your goals, express your needs, and have a more positive outlook on life.

Remember: You can't read people's minds.

It's easy to assume how someone feels about you – based on a text they never replied to, a weird look they gave you in the hall, or just the fact that you've never really interacted. None of these things mean they don't like you – so try to stop your brain when it starts creating a story about what they must be thinking.

Notice your negative thoughts and challenge them.

When you catch yourself thinking in extremes (nobody likes me, I'll never have any friends), try to challenge them or find the middle ground. Does nobody like you, or do you feel unwanted by a few people at school? Will you never have friends, or are you just surrounded by the same classmates you've been with for years or people who aren't like you? Most of us are our own worst critics.

Use positive self-talk.

Everyone has strengths and (many!) good qualities. What do you like or appreciate about yourself? Write these things down so that you have a running list to add more to as you think of them! If coming up with specific things feels too hard right now, try repeating basic affirmations, like "I am strong" or "I matter." You can also ask a friend or loved one what they think are your best qualities to get you started.

Practice self-compassion.

There's a lot of talk about the importance of loving yourself, but that doesn't always feel doable and even just liking yourself can feel too hard. Start with trying to not hate or dislike yourself. Can you think of reasons why you deserve some kindness and patience? There's a lot going on in the world right now – the best you can do is good enough.

BUILDING COMMUNITY

There are a lot of different ways to form and be in a community. A community is a group of people who usually share interests, neighborhood, school, religion, or other things in common.

••• Chat with a classmate you think you'd get along with. •••

Just because you haven't hung out with someone before doesn't mean they wouldn't be interested in being friends. Talking to or making plans with someone new can be intimidating, but all new friendships have to start somewhere.

Get involved outside of school.

If you don't relate to other students around you, it's easy to feel alone and isolated at school. Luckily, school isn't your only option for connecting with peers. Look into local clubs, volunteer opportunities, library teen programs, sports, or community classes to meet people that you already have something in common with.

▶ Try to start a conversation with one new person every day. ◀

It might feel weird at first, but nothing has to come of it. Not all conversations turn into friendships, but getting used to interacting with new people will help you feel more prepared when you do meet someone who could be a great friend.

Be friendly to people you see in passing.

Quick interactions with people, like a Starbucks barista, the grocery store cashier, or your bus driver, wouldn't seem like they'd make a difference, but it plays a pretty big role in helping you feel connected to your broader community. Your community isn't just your friends – it's also the people you recognize as you go about your days.

YOUNG PEOPLE SAY THEY STRUGGLE TO FEEL ACCEPTED BECAUSE...

"EVERYONE ELSE SEEMS TO HAVE AN EASIER TIME GETTING THROUGH LIFE"

"IT'S HARD TO RELATE AND TRUST PEOPLE"

"I DON'T HAVE THE SAME INTERESTS AS OTHERS MY AGE"

"THERE'S BEEN A LONG HISTORY OF BRUTALIZATION OF MY PEOPLE"

"SOME OF US DON'T BELIEVE IN THE SAME THINGS"

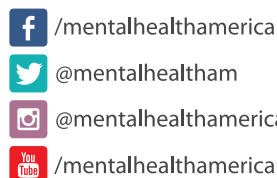
"I OVERTHINK AND IT MAKES ME FEEL DISCONNECTED"

"PEERS MIGHT NOT LIKE HOW I ACT"

"I'M NOT POPULAR AND AM AUTOMATICALLY SEEN AS WEIRD, EVEN TO PEOPLE WHO DON'T KNOW ME YET"

It can be hard to know if your insecurities or troubles with friends are just a part of growing up or if they're signs of a mental health condition, like anxiety or depression.

If you're putting yourself out there and still feel disconnected from your peers or unhappy with your social life, take a mental health screen at www.mhascreening.org.



IN CRISIS?

If you or someone you know is struggling or in crisis, help is available. Call 988 or chat at 988lifeline.org. You can also reach Crisis Text Line by texting MHA to 741741.

SOURCES

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³Ehmke, R. *How using social media affects teenagers*. Child Mind Institute. <https://childmind.org/article/how-using-social-media-affects-teenagers/>