

Self-esteem that's based on external sources has mental health consequences, study says

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People who base their own self-worth on what others think and not on their value as human beings might pay a mental and physical price, according to research by Jennifer Crocker, PhD, a psychologist at the University of Michigan's Institute for Social Research.

Crocker, who has worked on a series of self-esteem studies, found in her latest research that college students who based their self-worth on external sources--including appearance, approval from others and even their academic performance--reported more stress, anger, academic problems, relationship conflicts, and had higher levels of drug and alcohol use and symptoms of eating disorders.

For the study, Crocker surveyed more than 600 college freshmen three times during the year--before they left for college and at the end of the fall and spring semesters. Overall, students were found to have a high level of self-esteem. When students were asked about what they base their self-worth on, more than 80 percent said academic competence, 77 percent said their family's support, 66 percent said doing better than others, and 65 percent--70 percent of which were women--said their appearance.

College students who based their self-worth on academic performance did not receive higher grades despite being highly motivated and studying more hours each week than students who did not rate academic performance as important to their self-esteem, Crocker found. Students who based their self-worth on academic outcomes also were more likely to report conflicts with professors and greater stress.

"They feel motivated to do well in academics, but having their self-worth on the line doesn't help their performance," Crocker says. She speculates that students who base their self-worth on academic performance might become anxious and distracted and threatened by feelings of failure, and, as such, their anxiety might then interfere with their memory.

Students who based their self-esteem on internal sources--such as being a virtuous person or adhering to moral standards--were found to receive higher grades and less likely to use alcohol and drugs or to develop eating disorders.

"We really think that if people could adopt goals not focused on their own self-esteem but on something larger than their self--such as what they can create or contribute to others--than they would be less susceptible" to some of the negative effects of pursuing self-esteem, Crocker says. "It's about having a goal that is bigger than the self."

Crocker's research appeared in a recent issue of the *Journal of Social Issues* (Vol. 58, No. 3).

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