

The following article was written by Steve Barrett, an American Legion lifetime member (Chapter 201), a member of the VFW (Post 9143), and a Clinical Social Worker at the Atlanta VA Medical Center. He works primarily with Vietnam veterans, and Steve is a Vietnam veteran himself. He was stationed in the Central Highlands in 1967. Steve is also a retired military social worker.

There has been some recent concern about an increase in the number of suicides among our active-duty and veteran population. Suicide is a very preventable tragedy, and we must look at how to control depression; to control suicidal behavior. People who are depressed, have very low self-esteem. I hear a lot of veterans talk about their lack of self-esteem. Let's look at this thing call self-esteem, and how we can nurture a positive self-esteem for ourselves. Our goal is to reverse this high number of suicides among our brothers and sisters.

Basically, self-esteem as our image, or how we feel about ourselves. Our self-esteem is usually described in terms of worth, or worthlessness; and in our successes or failures. If we have a high self-esteem, then we see ourselves in a positive and realistic light. We are flexible, able to accept life's difficulties, place them in to a proper perspective, and continue on with life.

On the other hand, if we view ourselves and a negative in unrealistic light, then we have low self-esteem. This means we feel ineffective, worthless, incompetent, hopeless, and unloved. In other words, we don't like ourselves. This can turn into a vicious cycle: we have a distorted and negative view of ourselves and others, which makes us feel unhappy and depressed. This develops into a lack of self-confidence, and we end up being poor performers. This confirms our negative and distorted view of ourselves. I call this "stinking thinking." The ultimate act of a depressed person is suicide.

Fortunately, this cycle can be broken. It does require some basic motivation, and desire to feel better. Anyone reading this article now has been through basic training in the military, so I know that you have the basic motivation to change.

Not all people have a positive view of themselves all the time. That's almost asking too much. Even the most confident people, at times, may tend to focus on their shortcomings. That's good! By attending to our shortcomings, we have the opportunity to evaluate ourselves and seek improvement. We are able to keep our shortcomings in a realistic perspective, and not devote our life to them.

But how do we start to feel more confident about ourselves? There's something we all have, regardless if we have a positive or negative view of ourselves. It's called our silent conversations, inner voice, thoughts, or self-talk. It is that "little person" inside us that is always talking to us, usually in sentence form. If we can change some of the sentences from the negative to the positive, then we have started to feel better about ourselves.

You have heard the saying "you are which you eat." I think our self-image is based on the saying "you are what you think." If we think we are worthless and unloved, then this self-fulfilling prophecy is usually fulfilled. Conversely, if we think we're basically good people, and realistically acknowledge some of our positive qualities, than our self view has been enhanced.

How can we start focusing on our positive aspects about ourselves? Start by listing six of the qualities you like about ourselves. Can't think of six? Then try for five. If you cannot think of any, ask a trusted friend or family member why he or she likes you. This should get you started.

Be objective. Your "like list" about yourself may initially be why others like you, but soon you may start to believe it yourself. A key element is to be realistic. Don't sell yourself short. On the other hand, don't give yourself abilities that you don't realistically have. Remember the old Army slogan "Be All You Can Be." Don't be more than you can be, and certainly don't be less than you can be.

Once should have your list, keep reading it to yourself, or read it out loud. We cannot think something positive and negative at the same time. By reading the positive and realistic aspects about ourselves, we are not focusing on the negatives. If we do this continually, we are starting to change our self-concept about ourselves.

Remember, I said it takes motivation in courage to change our self-esteem. It takes motivation to practice this on a regular basis. Go ahead - take the "can-do" attitude. An important thing for us to remember is to give ourselves credit when we accomplish something positive, regardless of how big or small it is. Reward yourself. We can always expect others to reward us, so give yourself up out on the back and smile. If we can regain control of our self-esteem and depression, then the statistics about veteran suicides will hopefully decrease significantly.