

10 Ways Low Self-Esteem Affects Women in Relationships

If you can't see your own worth, how can you believe a partner will?

Nothing interferes with the ability to have an authentic, reciprocal relationship like low self-esteem. If you can't believe you're good enough, how can you believe a loving partner could choose you? Low self-esteem can make you test or sabotage relationships that have potential, or settle for relationships in which you're treated in a way that matches your beliefs about yourself. That said, low self-esteem doesn't always look the same way in relationships. The following are 10 of the many ways that low self-esteem can manifest in your romantic relationship. (Note that adult manifestations of earlier emotional, physical or sexual abuse are way too complex to be characterized in this post. Trying to do so would not do service and so those pathways to low self-esteem will be omitted from this article.)

1. Bring the Bling

You feel wretched and fantasize that a knight in shining armor will take you out of your circumstances and make everything better. This longing may have formed from falling in love with the fantasy of a father. Maybe yours was unavailable enough that you could idealize him without ever testing his fallibility. You may think you know why your father never "saved" you: it was your fault, not his. Or maybe he did, over and over and your relationship has to make you feel just like that again. Therefore, you may feel compelled to hold tight to the fantasy of perfection as the bar you set for your romantic partners to live up to. Of course, they can't. Even if your partner turns out to be solid, consistent, and loving (though not in a flashy way), you may disqualify the efforts, and find ways to sabotage the relationship.

2. Testing

How could he really love me? He doesn't really love me, does he? Below the surface these insecurities guide your emotions and actions. You can't believe you could be truly loved and so you test your partner every chance you get so that he can demonstrate his value (which you don't believe or trust anyway). You may even sabotage the relationship because you know your partner will inevitably leave anyway. The end of every relationship allows you to say, "See, I told you so. I'm unlovable." More often than not, there is intense regret in the aftermath when you lose a partner this way.

3. Guarded

If your parents experienced a painful divorce or betrayed each other, you might feel unable to trust a partner now, whether you are conscious of your guardedness or not. You may be hesitant and afraid of allowing yourself to love so that you either abandon your partner before you can be abandoned or you won't allow yourself to get fully into a relationship in the first place. Without trusting that maybe you won't be betrayed, you are deeply afraid of exposing yourself to the possibility of being hurt.

4. Resilient

Despite circumstances that could contribute to low self-esteem, some women are just built to be resilient. They're born that way or work really hard to acquire the ability – despite negative experiences – to engage in a positive, substantive relationship as they mature. Maybe there was a figure somewhere in her life that provided guidance and support and helped her to offset her low self-esteem with resilience. Resilience enables women to be more measured in their approach to men, rather than hysterical about it.

5. Boy-Crazy

With low self-esteem, it can seem as if nothing comes easily or naturally to you. Instead, because you don't see yourself as naturally lovable, you feel like you have to fight and claw and strive for a mate. It's as if unless you go nine million extra miles for something, you're not going to get it. Unfortunately, this can make you obsessed,

consumed and infatuated with your object of affection in a way that ruins the ability to have a viable trajectory. You're already so far ahead. When the relationship doesn't develop easily or on your timeline, it's hard to tolerate. Instead, this is your cue to work even harder. Just know that it is hard for the boy to sustain that level of intensity right along with you, and it may be a more intense experience than he is ready for.

6. Seeking Financial Safety

Are you willing to surrender your hopes for an authentic connection with a partner to guarantee wealth and "financial safety"? This category manifests as the need to trap a mate with looks or sex or your other physical resources while hiding what you see as a shameful inner part of yourself. This also allows the emotional safety of control: you're in control of your ability to please a man without having to give away your heart. This is different than the rescue fantasy in that you don't expect to be swept off your feet by a fantasy, but to guarantee financial safety, at the expense of other feelings you may have.

7. Seeking Insecurity

Because you are familiar with situations that create low self-esteem – being left, being cheated on, etc. – you gravitate toward relationships in which you're able to feel this familiar insecurity. When it's not there, you may even create it. If the relationship becomes too secure, you may become disinterested and bored and you may stray. You're so used to having to work to save an insecure relationship that these types of relationships become the only ones you gravitate toward. But, at the same time, a deeper part of you tries to push your relationship to the brink and then back again so you can artificially create an experience of insecurity.

8. Settlers

You're willing to commit yourself to the person who expresses interest in you. You become much less discriminating about who you choose. You may even be willing to put up with behavior that doesn't satisfy you, because you feel lucky to have anyone at all, even though you are aware you are not happy.

9. Scared of Intimacy

Were intimacy and connection in your repertoire growing up? If not, these experiences may feel uncomfortable now. You may get really scared as the relationship progresses because authentic connection feels so foreign and fake. Instead of allowing this connection, you may back away and become more distant emotionally and shut down sexually.

10. Disbelief

It can be hard to imagine and even harder to believe that you can create and sustain authentic connections. As a means of protecting yourself, you assume dishonesty even from an honest partner, which in turn sours the relationship as it goes on. Then, as you disbelieve your partner so often, maybe even relentlessly that he may begin to consider lying a viable option – he is already “doing the time”, why not commit the crime? This in turn reaffirms your belief that no one can be trusted.

We all know there are far more ways women express low self-esteem in relationships. But sometimes the self-knowledge gained by evaluating a list like this can help you understand not just pieces of who you are, but also pieces of who you are not. Self-knowledge can help you steer away from some of these patterns of low self-esteem in relationships toward understanding, accepting and integrating your emotions, beliefs, and behaviors. Appreciating how your actions have been impacted by your history can help you create an authentic connection in the here and now.

About the Author

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