

Enhancing Self-Esteem of the Soldier

Samir Rawat*

This paper attempts to address the increasing challenges faced by the Army -both individually for the soldier and collectively as an organization. It is an attempt to balance the soldier's individual need for personal growth and development, optimizing his potential, as well as the military's need for mission effectiveness.

“Unlike the virtuous, far removed from mediocrity, men of action, whose happiness resides in standing out, seek honour only to convince themselves of their own worth.”

– Aristotle

Apparently, the self-esteem of the soldier has taken a dip in the recent past, and as leaders of men, it is imperative that we address this issue, so as to prevent the accumulation of unwanted stress that appears to be building up in the military environment.

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Of all the judgments that we pass in life, none is perhaps as important and crucial as the one we pass on ourselves, for that judgment touches the very core of our existence. This is true for soldiers too and self-esteem plays a crucial role in relating to others, to the environment, and to the mission. However, the most intimate, powerful and demanding of all relationship is the one we have with ourselves and this is something every soldier has to learn to live with since there is no escaping from it. Our self-evaluation affects every significant aspect of our emotions, thinking, feeling, motivation or behaviour.

Soldiers are humans too and it is only natural for them as well to monitor, assess and ask questions like who am I? What do I want? Where am I going? Why am I? What is the purpose of my mission? Of my life? Am I proud of myself? Am I proud of my unit? Of being given an opportunity to serve the nation in uniform?

* Lt Col (Dr) Samir Rawat is presently posted as a psychologist in National Defence Academy, Khadakvasla. He is a combat veteran with operational experience in Siachen as well as Kargil.

Whether or not we choose to address these questions or put them on the back burner, they cannot be dispensed and prop up at most inappropriate times and set us thinking.

What is Self -Esteem?

Self-esteem is absolutely necessary for happiness and depends to a large extent on what every soldier does with his life based on, and a result of his personal appraisal of life itself. As such, the real moral task is to optimize one's potential and become whatever one is capable of becoming and as Abraham Maslow would say, achieve self -actualization.

Maslow defined self-esteem as an important need of intermediate priority, preceded only by the basic need of safety and affective links, and ahead of self- realization. White defined it as experiencing one's own competence and the feeling of self-efficacy which arises from it,¹ while Coopersmith considered it an appraisal made by an individual regarding the degree to which the individual considers oneself capable, important, successful and valuable.² According to Dolan, Garcia & Diez-Pinol, it is the conviction of how worthy a person is of his own love and, as a result, of others' love, independently of what one is or possesses. It is the capacity to feel intrinsic self-worth, independently of their personal characteristics, circumstances and achievements that in part, also define and identifies the individual.³

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According to Branden, self esteem links the feeling of personal efficacy to a sense of personal merit; it is the conviction that one is competent to live and merit living. Self-esteem consists of two components:⁴

- To consider oneself effective, to trust in one's ability to think, train and acquire competence in one's chosen field, choose and make correct decisions; and overcome challenges and produce effective changes.
- To respect oneself, the confidence in the right to be happy and the confidence that one is worthy of respect, dignity and self -fulfilment.

Branden further reiterated that self-esteem involves an individual's choice to consciously think independently and have an awareness of the outward world as

well as to follow one's own mind and to have the courage of conviction of one's own perceptions and judgment. As such, self-esteem involves the willingness to know not only what we think but also what we feel, what we want, need, desire, suffer over, are apprehensive of, or angered by-and to accept our right to experience such feelings. The opposite of this attitude would be living in a state of denial, disowning or repressing one's thoughts.⁵ Therefore, self-esteem for a soldier would translate into an ability of self-acceptance. In other words, the soldier would need to accept himself for what he is, without casting any aspersions or having any pretensions about the truth of his own being, pretension aimed at deceiving either oneself or others.⁶

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The level of self-esteem varies from one soldier to another and this explains their different capacities and risk factors in terms of being stressed. Lack of self-esteem probably produces more stress due to the insecurity that goes along with it and is an unwanted and frivolous drain on the soldier's energy. In addition, a highly demanding military environment in itself may often damage a soldier's self-esteem or lead to emotional conflicts, which may lead to unwanted stress. Soldiers with healthy self-esteem are more likely to cope better in these circumstances.⁷

Need for Self -Esteem

The greatest barrier to accomplishment and success in a mission or task in a military environment is neither lack of competence, ability or potential but probably due to a soldier's belief that achievement above a certain threshold is beyond his capability. The greatest barrier to competence is the secret fear that one is not good enough, not trained well enough. For e.g. a soldier at the rifle ranges during annual range classification may think that being a marksman or having a grouping size of 2cms. is not in his destiny. In simple terms, this is the relevance of self-esteem in a soldier.

I asked three junior leaders what they understood by self-esteem. One said, "I feel competent and sure of myself" while the second said, "I love myself". The third asserted, "I think I am better than other junior leaders." The first two assertions may not be incorrect but would be incomplete and would require to be further qualified, the third sentence would obviously be way off the mark and grossly incorrect.

As a tank commander, a leader who does not feel competent enough to navigate by stars and reach a given location without use of navigational devices like GPS may not necessarily suffer from low self-esteem. However, a soldier who feels happiness is not his cup of tea, feels unworthy of any joy or reward in life surely has a low self-esteem.

Self-esteem is a concept that pertains to a fundamental sense of efficacy, a fundamental sense of self-worth, to competence and worthiness in principle. "I trust my decision making capabilities that will ensure success of the mission even under highly demanding and ambiguous situations" is a very different statement, in terms of self-esteem, from "I feel very confident that I can put every round in the bull's-eye even from 100 yards at the rifle ranges." A high self-esteem can best be understood as an integrated sum of self confidence and self-respect.⁸

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Self-esteem protects a soldier against fear. It is the extent to which one feels valuable and is an indicator of the measure in which one is appreciated and thus will be remembered by others. It has been reported that a soldier whose self-esteem is high or whose faith in his own world view is strong would have less fear of death than soldiers with low self-esteem. Moreover, it is probable that soldiers whose self-esteem is lowered are likely to show more fear of death.⁹ This would mean that self-esteem acts as a buffer against fear of death. Besides,

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high self-esteem, i.e. a high confidence in the importance of one's own contribution to the sub-unit/unit, formation or armed forces to which one belongs is of great relevance for the serving soldiers to insulate themselves from fear of death. In the light of the above, there is a need to attach more value to the military culture and traditions in threatening situations. Unfortunately, the soldier is remembered by civil society only in times of crisis, be it for dealing with natural or manmade disasters or when internal security is threatened or during attacks made by state sponsored terrorists or non-state actors. Lack of recognition by the society at large for all the sacrifices made by the soldier, indifferent and insensitive politicians and bureaucrats who make no efforts to address their problems related to land disputes and harassment of their families by local hooligans while the soldier

is away serving the nation does little to bolster his pride and respect for uniform that made him join the services in the first place. This is further compounded by an irresponsible seeking sensation media at the cost of causing irreparable damage to soldier self-image by unbalanced reporting-highlighting aberrations of discipline and minimising heroic acts to a mere mention. Besides, incidences of corruption amongst senior officers give the soldiers a feeling of being led down and compromised. However, the fact that those who have tarnished the uniform while adorning it are immediately taken to task and dealt with severely is the only saving grace in redeeming soldier self esteem.¹⁰

Self-evaluation by an educated thinking soldier is not only inevitable but desirable and important for his own health and that of the armed forces. A soldier's self-esteem can be considered to be the integrated sum of self-confidence and self-respect. The need for self-esteem is the need to know that the choices one exercises are in consonance with reality and that the decisions that one makes are based on the conviction that one is right in unique application of mind in taking decisions and right in principle, values and beliefs.¹¹

One of the best sources of self-esteem for a soldier is having role models in the sub-unit/unit who exemplify good self-esteem.¹²

Factors Affecting Soldiers Self-Esteem

Availability, accessibility, credibility, empathy, stimulus and appropriate reinforcement by significant others are essential for a soldier's self-esteem. One of the best sources of self-esteem for a soldier is having role models in the sub-unit/unit who exemplify good self-esteem.¹² Leaders who generate self-esteem adopt the following values and conduct with respect to their soldiers:

- Appropriate, rigorous, and progressive physical training and mental conditioning during recruit training and formative years in the sub-unit/unit.
- Identity and pride in belonging to an organization.
- Emotional recognition of work efforts.
- Emotional assertiveness and connection with oneself.
- Openness to others, friendliness, initiative and creativity.

- High tolerance to stress.
- High self-efficacy i.e. expectations of tasks they are able to perform.
- Openness to unlearn, relearn and change.
- Feeling cared for and respected is essential for knowing how to respect others and to be able to respect oneself. It is very difficult for soldiers to trust themselves if they have not first trusted their leaders.
- Leaders treat soldiers with regard and respect.
- Leaders allow soldiers to have a coherent and benevolent acceptance of themselves
- Leaders offer a support structure that includes reasonable rules and adequate expectations.
- Leaders do not make conflicting demands and create ambiguous roles for their command.
- Leaders do not resort to sarcasm, ridicule, and humiliation, verbal or physical abuse to control or punish soldiers.
- Leaders demonstrate that they believe in their soldier's competence, trust and responsible autonomy.

Physical Indicators of a Soldier's High Self-Esteem

Soldiers with high self-esteem shoulder responsibility for what they say and stand by their word. They speak in a clear and concise manner as they are willing to be heard and understood. Some physical indicators would include:

- Smart appearance and military bearing.
- Sparkle in the eyes-alert, bright and lively.
- Radiant and relaxed face

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- Relaxed, well-balanced and erect posture.
- Well modulated, measured and controlled voice which is appropriate to the given situation.

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Relation between a Soldier's Defence Mechanisms and Self-Esteem

Defence mechanisms are unconscious strategies used to avoid anxiety, resolve conflicts and enhance self-esteem. When our feelings and impulses are unacceptable to us, we tend to use defence mechanisms in an effort to reduce our anxieties. These mechanisms are some of the ways in which we cope with problems and manage stressful situations and conflicts.¹³ We all use defence mechanisms from time to time as they help us in reducing tension. However, they may be harmful if we were to depend on them too much since they do not solve the problem but merely relieve the anxiety about it. Some of the defence mechanisms that we use to ward off anxiety, either knowingly or unknowingly are as follows.

Compensation: Creating perceived negative self-concepts, or of developing positive self-concepts to make up for the perceived negative self-concepts. For example, if a soldier is not successful in qualifying in the Commando's course, he may work at becoming physically more fit than others to make up for the shortcoming.

Denial: This is the subconscious or conscious process of blinding one-self to negative self-concept that we believe exist, but that we do not want to deal with. For example, an old soldier who is a very good sportsman may pretend and act as if he can play the full ninety minutes in an inter-battalion football match when the reality is that he is no longer as fit as he used to be in his younger days.

Displacement: This is when a soldier expresses feelings to a substitute target because he is unable or unwilling to express them to the target. These are based on the soldier's negative self-concepts about the real target. "Crooked anger or dumping" on another are example of displacement. For example, we vent our anger and frustration into a safer target: such as a subordinate below us who cannot retaliate, someone dependent on us as our family, or someone under our control.

Identification: This is the identification of oneself with our war heroes, gallant unit history and traditions, organizations, causes, religions, or whatever we perceive as good self-concepts. For example, soldiers identify with the onerous task of ensuring the safety and security of the country and incorporate into their ego some of the good self- concepts associated with the pride, honour and privilege of wearing uniform.

Projection: This is the attribution to others of our own negative self-concepts. This occurs when we want to avoid facing negative self-concepts about our behaviours or intentions and do so by seeing them, instead, in other people. For example, a soldier might be furious and angry with a senior but think, instead, that the senior is very angry with him

Rationalization: Explaining your behaviours or intentions to others to justify your actions. It is sometimes referred to as “sour grapes” when, for example, a soldier may rationalize that he anyway did not want the promotion, he did not get because “he is going to get a better pay package when he now decides to quit and quality of life in the army is not what it used to be anyway.” Rationalization can also take the opposite form of “sweet lemon.” In this case, a company commander might justify, for example, an inadequately prepared inspection by extolling or praising some of the insignificant good points of the inspection.

Reaction formation: This is the process of developing conscious positive self-concepts in order to cover and hide opposite, negative self-concepts. It is the making up for negative self-concepts by showing off their reverse. For example, a soldier might cringe at the sight of a particular JCO, but go out of his way to show respect or care and concern for him.

Regression: This is the returning to an earlier time in one’s life when we were not so threatened with becoming negative self-concepts. We return to thoughts, feelings, and/or behaviours of an earlier developmental stage in order to identify ourselves as we used to back then.

Repression: This is the unconscious and seemingly involuntary removal from awareness of the negative self- concepts that the ego finds too painful to tolerate. For example, a soldier may completely block out thoughts of killing an enemy soldier. This is not the same as suppression, which is also the removal from consciousness of intolerable negative self-concepts, but a conscious choice.

Ritual and undoing: This is the act of trying to undo negative self-concepts of oneself by performing rituals or behaviours designed to offset the behaviours that the negative concepts were based on. For example, a commanding officer

may declare an 'Administrative holiday' for troops after pushing them hard for a senior officer's visit or inspection for which he got a 'good chit'... Or, a soldier may buy an expensive gift for his wife and child to make up for not spending time with them.

Sublimation: This is the process of diverting feelings about the negative self-concepts one might have of oneself or others into more socially acceptable activities. For example, a soldier who is very angry with himself or some one else may join the unit boxing team and in this way can get some approval for the feelings that he otherwise disapproves of.

Creating Positive Self-Esteem for the Soldier

Since the need for self-esteem arises from the fact that the function of our consciousness is volitional, it follows that a soldier should judge himself by that which is in his volition – for example, his rationality, honesty, integrity. As soldiers who take pride in the role of protecting the nation, to judge ourselves by that which is beyond our volitional control – for example, that which depends on the will and choices of others – is subversive to healthy self-esteem.¹⁴

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We need to recognize that self-esteem pertains to the issue of our fundamental appropriateness to life and, therefore, to our mental operations. We can readily appreciate the error of measuring our worth by such standards as our military bearing, influence and power over others, perks and privileges of rank or appointment, material possessions, or smartly turned out appearance.

Since we are social beings, some measure of esteem from others is necessary; but to tie our self-assessment to the good opinion of others is to place ourselves at their mercy in the most humiliating way. And what are we to do when the persons whose esteem we desire have different expectations, so that to gain the approval of one of our significant others, is to risk the disapproval of another?

A soldier may take pleasure in exhibiting excellent soldierly skills in BPET or SA firing, but to tie one's self-esteem to our physical prowess is to be in growing terror with every passing year as the telling effects of age inevitably advance upon us and impact performance as we begin to live in our past glory.

Improving the positive self-esteem of the soldier could begin by laying a sound foundation on the central pillars of self-esteem i.e. a commitment to awareness, independent thinking, integrity, self-responsibility and self-acceptance.¹⁵

Commitment to Awareness

The soldier who retains his commitment to awareness trains and acquires skills, accomplishes tasks – reaches goals. These successes validate and reinforce the choice to think and feel good.¹⁶

A commitment to awareness is both a source and an expressions of positive self- esteem, but often we associate positive self-esteem only with the final result –with knowledge, success, the admiration and appreciation of others – and miss the cause: all the choices that, cumulatively, add up to what we call a commitment to awareness, the will to understand.

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This emphasis on the aspect of perseverance in the face of difficulties: continuing to seek understanding when understanding does not come easily, pursuing the mastery of a skill or the solution to a problem in the face of defeats, maintaining a commitment to goals while encountering many obstacles in the way. The will to be efficacious is the refusal of a trained soldier to accept momentary feelings of defeat and helplessness as a permanent and unalterable condition.

I recall an NCO once telling me, “I can’t understand why I’m always relying on the opinions of other people.” I asked him, ‘Ever since your recruit training, did you ever want to be independent, did you ever think of learning to be independent –did you ever make independence your goal? He thought for a moment, then replied, ‘No. I said, ‘No need to be surprised, then that you didn’t arrive there.’

Thinking Independently

Thinking independently –about our work, our relationships, the values that will guide our life, the goals we will set for ourselves—enhances self-esteem and results in an inclination to think independently.

Like every other psychological trait, independence is matter of degree. Although no one is perfectly independent and no one is hopelessly dependent all of the time,

the higher the level of our independence and the more willing we are to think for ourselves, the higher the level of our self-esteem¹⁷.

Part of thinking independently is learning to differentiate between facts on one hand and wishes and fears on the other. The task is sometimes difficult because thoughts themselves are invariably touched or even saturated with feeling.

Integrity

As we rise in rank and service and develop our own values and standards, the maintenance of personal integrity assumes increasing importance for our self-evaluation. Integrity means the integration of convictions, standards, beliefs and behaviour. When our behaviour resonates with our professed values, and thoughts and actions are integrated, we have integrity¹⁸,

When we behave in ways that conflict with our judgments of what is appropriate, we lose face in our own eyes and respect ourselves less. If it because habitual, we trust ourselves less or cease to trust ourselves at all.

The truth is human beings cannot successfully regress to a lower level of evolution. We need values to guide our action.

Sometimes, a soldier seeks to escape from the burden of integrity by giving up all values and standards.¹⁹ The truth is human beings cannot successfully regress to a lower level of evolution. We need values to guide our action. We need principles to guide our lives. Our standards may be appropriate to the requirements of our life and well-being but to live without standards of any kind is impossible. So profound a rebellion against our nature as the attempt to discard all values,

principles, and standard is itself an expression of impoverished self-esteem and a guarantee the impoverishment will be ongoing.

Once we see that living up to our standards appears to be leading us toward self-destruction, we must summon up the courage to challenge of our deepest assumptions concerning what we have been taught to regard as the good.

Self-Responsibility

Each one of us is responsible for choices and actions that we take. Self-responsibility means acceptance of responsibility for the attainment of one's own goals²⁰. Self-responsibility can be an empowering experience which places our life in our own hands

Further, we need to remember that the self is dynamic and continually evolving, an unfolding of our potentialities, expressed in our choices, decisions, thoughts, judgments, responses, and actions.²¹ To view our self as basically and unalterably good or bad – independent of our present and future manner of functioning – is to negate the facts of freedom, self-determination, and self-responsibility. We always contain within ourselves the possibility of change; we need never be prisoner of yesterday's choices.

Self Acceptance

This is especially pertinent to those soldiers who are unhappy with the way they experience themselves and are seeking a change in self-concept. If we are to grow and change, we must begin by learning self-acceptance. However, we tend to equate self-acceptance with approval of every aspect of our personality (or physical appearance) and with the denial that any change or improvement might be desirable.

To be self-accepting does not mean to be without a wish to change, improve, evolve. It means not to be at war with ourselves- not to deny the reality of what is true of us right now, at this moment of our existence. An attitude of self-acceptance is precisely what an effective military leader needs to appeal to or strives to awaken in a soldier of even the lowest self-esteem.²² This attitude can inspire a soldier to face whatever he most dreads to encounter within without collapsing into surrendering the will to live.²³ Thus, a soldier might be unhappy about experiencing poor self-esteem yet accept it along with the self-doubts and feeling of guilt. I accept them as part of how I experience myself right now.²⁴ If I can accept that I am who I am, that I feel what I feel, that I have done what I have done. If I can accept it whether I like all of it or not then I can accept myself. I can accept my shortcomings, my self-doubts, my poor self-esteem. And when I can accept all that, I have put myself on the side of reality rather than attempting to fight reality.

An attitude of self-acceptance is precisely what an effective military leader needs to appeal to or strives to awaken in a soldier of even the lowest self-esteem.²²

Recommendations for Developing Individual Self-Esteem and Avoiding Stress amongst Soldiers

While there are no universal methods of boosting self-esteem and lower stress amongst soldiers, some recommendations²⁵ are given below:

Train the soldier to be aware of what is going on within: The habitual practice of contemplative meditation allows us to be in touch with the never changing essence of ourselves. This is important for leaders at every level since they have influence over others. The aim is to reflect on oneself, looking in from the outside in order to truly see our inner self and contemplate our feelings, ideas and actions. Being aware of what we think, feel and do is very important in order to adopt the position of neutral observer with respect to our self-esteem, thereby changing it rationally and effectively for our own happiness and that of others around us.

Build as much confidence and trust in leaders during training: A soldier's life is worth what their confidence and trust is worth. One could add, a soldier's life is worth what their confidence and trust is worth, just as they perceive, remember and continuously rebuild upon it each and every day while training. It is very important for soldier's self-esteem to try and retain scenes, dialogues and other memories during training which continuously remind them that they have the confidence and trust of their senior commanders.

Try to have honourable and coherent professed values, while living wholesome and consistent lives: Congruity or integrity between what we say and what we do is essential for self-esteem. This is especially true regarding moral values. The problem often lies in the fact that the values we profess to hold are, at times, relegated to merely "lip service".

Without a goal and without celebrating the results of the tasks, there is no self-esteem. It is very important to celebrate both quantitative and qualitative achievements.

Set realistic and attainable goals: We have to pursue our aims with perseverance and determination until we achieve psychological success. Without a goal and without celebrating the results of the tasks, there is no self-esteem. It is very important to celebrate both quantitative and qualitative achievements. We must reward ourselves on the basis of real events, both quantitative and qualitative. It is impossible to lie to one's deeper- most inner-self.

Transcend, go well – beyond yourself: Real self-esteem goes well- beyond one's material and emotional achievement. We need to give back a part of what we receive, and share our good fortune with others.

Go beyond conventional beliefs and values: Self-esteem is based on judgments and behaviour which arise from one's own conscience, well beyond the prevailing cultural beliefs and military values of the unit we belong to.

In order to build healthy self –esteem, we have to grant ourselves the freedom to:

- a) Be ourselves, we have to dare to discover our own reality, our weakness and strength.
- b) Come out of the emotional closet; we have to express ourselves, be spontaneous, show our feelings, pains and joys, as well as our own principles. We have to be give ourselves the freedom for an adequate expression of these emotions and rights. We have to overcome the fear of making a fool of ourselves and adopt an expressive style which is neither passive nor aggressive
- c) Really achieve what we visualize: By maintaining our intention over time and transferring energy where we want to project it. We have to get rid of the fear of failure.
- d) Enjoy learning about everything from everyone.
- e) Savour what life offers every single moment.
- f) Accept our own body and self –image; the body manifests the ego to the world. For example, one of the best indicators of self-esteem and mental health is to gracefully accept those little extra kilos or receding hairlines.
- g) Be happy.

Dare to trust: We have to truly believe in ourselves and in our own potential. We have to believe that our mental processes work correctly (analysis, comprehension, sequencing, learning, choice and decision). We have to believe in our ability to objectively observe the facts, and we have to believe in our own intuitive abilities. We have to trust that other are going to help us achieve our goals, which we have set honestly and passionately.

Make adequate comparisons: Satisfaction in life is subjective, depending on the comparisons we make with our own and others' references. past, present and future

Develop pride in belonging: We have to love the unit/corp into which where we were 'born' and take pride in belonging to the Indian army. The colour of our beret

or the role that we play should not be seen as a source of arrogant identity, but as a valued root and source of legitimate pride with unique and differentiated military culture. Each one of us in uniform has to do our bit to make this a reality.

We have to be the one who decides to live life with a purpose and be ourselves, with all of the consequences that may entail.

Decide to have time: The decision to have time to dedicate to essential human tasks, such as playing, reading, thinking, putting ideas in order, having friends, living or “simply” being, is necessary to make life human.

We need to understand that no one will magically appear to make us happy and rescue us from our existential void. We have to be the one who decides to live life with a purpose and be ourselves, with all of the consequences that may entail. 

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