

**KW:** contingent self esteem; i am what i do

**SUGGESTED SLUG:** /contingent-self-esteem

**PAGE TITLE:** I Am What I Do: When Contingent Self-Esteem Lets Us Down

**META DESCRIPTION:** Contingent self-esteem and work-contingent self-esteem can get in the way of a happy, healthy life – and even keep you from performing at your best.

# I Am What I Do: When Contingent Self-Esteem Lets Us Down

Most of us have a generally good understanding of the concept of self-esteem, or the way we look at and value ourselves.

We know that low self-esteem is problematic because it causes us to have a low opinion of ourselves, leading to depression, social avoidance and a host of other not-great things. Very high self-esteem, on the other hand, can be equally as troublesome; if you're overly full of yourself, you'll turn off friends, family and other potential relationships.

So a middle-of-the-road self-esteem seems to be the safest place to land.

While it's easy to say, it can be really difficult to strike the balance between a too-low and too-high level of self-esteem – especially when you consider that the *basis* for your self-esteem has to matter, too.

## What is contingent self-esteem?

Consider these three examples of different kinds of motivation:<sup>1</sup>

- *Intrinsic*, where you do something because you enjoy it
- *Identified regulation*, or doing something because you see value in it
- *Introjected regulation*, where you've internalized outside expectations and do something to meet those expectations or maintain your reputation

It's likely clear that the first two – intrinsic and identified regulation – are preferable; they aren't dependent on the whims of others, and they'll lead to greater, more sustained happiness and satisfaction in the long run.

But for some people, even an appropriate level of self-esteem can be tied to being or doing certain things – the idea that “I am what I do.”

This is called **contingent self-esteem**, and it means that how good you feel about yourself is *contingent* on what usually amounts to someone else's estimation.

Contingent self-esteem is found in *introjected regulation*. A constant battle to maintain your status in someone else's eyes – as the best, the brightest, the most reliable – means that you'll find yourself aiming for goalposts that keep moving as the world and its metrics evolve.

When this kind of self-esteem shows up in a professional setting, it's called **work-contingent self-esteem**, and it can be a tricky thing to mitigate. Especially for high-performers.

## What does work-contingent self-esteem look like?

Work-contingent self-esteem (WCSE) is not the same as enjoying and taking pride in your work – those are both good and healthy things.

The difficulty comes when an individual with WCSE experiences a setback. Someone with a healthy level of self-esteem might feel down about a bad day at work, but they don't start to think they have *less value* because of it.

With WCSE, however, the reaction is very different: you might feel *great* when you've received a promotion, been given new responsibilities or gotten significant praise from your boss.

But in the absence of those things – or if you've made a mistake, missed a deadline or received criticism – your self-esteem will take a significant hit, and you'll have a lot of difficulty bouncing back.

Athletes and other high-performers are especially prone to WCSE because it can be a kind of self-fulfilling prophecy: self-esteem that's tied to your performance can make you work harder and longer and leave you hungrier for results and praise, getting you further along the way toward your goals.<sup>2</sup>

But the inevitable crash is harder, too, and because it's an inherently unstable thing – with lots of changing expectations – WCSE leaves you vulnerable to exhaustion and burnout.

## Self-esteem, stress and identity loss

A recent Gallup poll says that two out of every three employees experience chronic stress and burnout, leading to headaches, sleep troubles, poor immune function and other symptoms – even an ultimate feeling of “detachment” from their jobs.<sup>3</sup>

And a common lament of the dying has long been, “I wish I hadn't worked so much<sup>4</sup>,” telling us that being overly wrapped up in what we do from 9am to 5pm is a common and often regrettable occurrence.

In cases of WCSE, there can come a certain loss of identity with retirement, job loss or a performance-altering injury. There's a forced realization that the professional identity was only one piece of who they are – and maybe they've been neglecting the other, arguably more important pieces.

## “I am what I do” and the trouble with productivity

Contingent self-esteem is like a drug. With every new accomplishment or piece of praise, you're riding a high for an hour, a day, maybe a couple of weeks. Before long, though, you'll come down and begin searching for another milestone to make you feel good about yourself.

**WCSE leaves your self-esteem vulnerable to things you can't control.** Even though you may be a high-performer and a successful professional, you remain fragile as long as your

sense of self is tied to how well you think you're reaching others' ever-changing and often unrealistic standards.

WCSE keeps you believing that you're either wildly productive or you're a "slacker." Aside from that dichotomy simply being a false one, it's also a fickle idea – you'll just keep upping your own threshold for what "productive" actually means, making it more and more difficult to satisfy your own expectations.

If it sounds stressful, it's because it is. People with WCSE often experience stress, exhaustion and burnout as a result.

And the never ending quest to feel good about yourself can crowd out relationships, hobbies, your health – all of the things that make up the work/life balance so critical to being happy and successful.

At the end of the day, a fragile, contingent self-esteem keeps you performing at a lower level than you could be without it.

## Overcoming contingent self-esteem

Your best bet for overcoming low self-esteem is to [work with a qualified clinical psychologist](#) who can help you identify the roots of your belief system and the most effective way to alter your perception of yourself. If you're concerned that contingent self-esteem might be negatively impacting your ability to succeed as a high-performing executive, then [targeted coaching is another great idea](#).

But in the meantime, here are a few things you can start doing to overcome your contingent self-esteem right now:

1. **Understand that someone else's opinion of you is none of your business.** When we've been taught that we should always be likable and accommodating, this can be a really difficult concept to accept. But the reality is that not everyone will like you, *and that's okay*. When you find yourself concerned with the opinions of others, remind yourself that their thoughts are their own, and as long as they're treating you with common courtesy and respect, then that's all that matters.
2. **Practice saying "no" – and letting go of the outcome.** If you've spent enough time agreeing to things you'd rather not do out of a sense of guilt or obligation, you might even struggle to identify what you'd actually like to say "no" to. Come at it from another direction: identify something you *do* want to do, and gracefully decline anything that might prevent it. Planning on starting that new Netflix series with your partner tonight, but your coworker asks you at the last minute to stay late and work on a project? "Sorry, Bob – I'm needed at home. Let's connect again tomorrow."
3. Most importantly, **be kind to yourself**. Chances are, as someone with contingent self-esteem, you've already spent enough time beating yourself up – *don't spend any more*. Overcoming contingent self-esteem will take time, and caring for yourself will be key to your success. And since contingent self-esteem is a common occurrence, you can rest assured that you'll be in great company as you take the journey!

## Good self-esteem will improve your performance

A consistent level of self-esteem can *improve* your performance. Through trial and error, failure and success, you'll gain the resilience you need to consistently pick up and try again after a setback.

Setbacks will come, even for the highest performers. With self-esteem not contingent on outside factors, however, you'll trust yourself more.

When you overcome your contingent self-esteem, you'll enjoy mental flexibility and the ability to bounce back quickly, having learned valuable lessons along the way.

### Endnotes

1. <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC7344159/>
2. <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/pdf/10.1002/job.2408>
3. <https://www.gallup.com/workplace/237059/employee-burnout-part-main-causes.aspx>
4. <https://www.forbes.com/sites/kathycapriano/2019/12/13/the-top-regrets-of-the-dying-and-what-we-need-to-learn-from-them/#5812ffdd7ce7>

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