

How Self-Esteem Works:

Small steps to build self-respect through awareness, compassion, and boundaries

BINYAMIN RUTSTEIN

Founder, NextSelf

Self-esteem is not built by thinking better thoughts. It is built by how safe you feel inside yourself.

Many people learn awareness first.

- 🍃 They notice their patterns.
- 🍃 They see their triggers.
- 🍃 They understand their behavior.

But awareness without **compassion** can turn into self-criticism or criticism.

And awareness without **boundaries** can send you back into survival mode.



Survival mode looks like:

People-pleasing, shutting down, overthinking, trying to control everything, avoiding conflict.

Self-esteem grows when three skills work together:



Awareness



Compassion



Boundaries

helps you see what's happening.



Compassion helps you stay calm instead of attacking yourself or others through thought, speech or action.



Boundaries help you protect your energy so you don't collapse.



These 52 pieces of wisdom come from my own journey learning how self-esteem actually works.



I studied more than 18 books to understand my nervous system and emotions well.



Over time, I healed enough to no longer need a wheelchair and to reduce my medication significantly.



I learned that self-esteem isn't built by confidence tricks.



It's built by small daily choices that move you from survival mode into relationship mode, with yourself.



For my personal recommendations and story, visit: nextself.ai/about

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Part 1: Self-awareness

Self-awareness means clearly seeing what you feel and knowing how to talk about them, and why you act the way you do. It helps you understand why you struggle with saying “no” or “yes.”.

What are boundaries?

Boundaries are simple rules that protect your time, your body, and your feelings. A boundary sounds like: “I can do this much,” “I need a break,” or “Please don’t talk to me that way.”

Sometimes our boundaries are **too loose** (people can push past them or you don't care for and protect your time, energy, space, emotional well-being), and sometimes they are **too intense** (we keep everyone far away).



These 12 tips help you notice what’s happening inside you without judging yourself.



01. Trying to please everyone shows you need connection.

Notice when you agree even though you don't really want to. That "yes" can happen for different reasons:

1. Validation: you want them to like you, approve of you, or praise you.

Basic guidance: pause and ask, "Do I mean yes, or do I want approval?"

2. A favor back: you say yes hoping they'll owe you a favor later.

Basic guidance: ask, "Would I still do this if nothing came back? Let them know"

3. Fear of anger or conflict: you say yes to keep peace or avoid someone being upset.

Basic guidance: ask yourself, "Is this yes coming from fear?" Then take a slower step.

People-pleasing reveals different fears or patterns you learned about connection/relationship. Even noticing which one it is helps you make better choices.

02. Feeling overwhelmed often means you're secretly upset or doing too much.

Overwhelmed often means you're carrying too much inside. You may not have the words yet, but your body feels it.

Try this awareness practice: name it in one simple sentence: "I'm overwhelmed because ____."



03. Saying “yes” too fast, or as a reflex, could mean parts of you fear conflict.

Sometimes you say “yes” before you even think.

That can be from wanting approval, wanting something back later, or avoiding anger.

Try this: take one slow breath before answering, or say, “Let me think.”

04. If you’re giving more than you have, your body will tell you (tightness or chronic pain).

Your body/nervous system often speaks and knows before your mind. If you feel tight, drained, or in pain, it may mean you’re giving too much.



Basic guidance: notice it sooner, not later, so you can choose a smaller “yes.”

05. Stopping and noticing helps you respect yourself instead of quickly agreeing just to keep the peace.

When you pause, you give yourself a chance to be honest. Saying “no” can be hard. It’s okay if “no” is easier by text at first.



Basic guidance: “I can’t today,” or “I need time to think.” I also found it helpful to have phrases ready like: “I have a rule for myself that I don’t say yes without giving myself time and space to consider”

06. Body tension says what you can’t say with words.

If you feel stress/tightness in your shoulders, chest, or stomach, it may mean you’re not feeling safe to be honest.

It may mean your boundaries are unclear.



Basic guidance: ask, “What do I wish I could say right now?”

07. Compassion starts with making space for your feelings, giving words to them and listening.

Even tough feelings help you learn.

It's okay to notice you're hurt, sad, or upset without blaming anyone.

Compassion means noticing your pain and treating it like it matters.

08. Noticing when you're anxious helps you take your power back.

It's normal to worry about upsetting others.

Asking yourself: Is this really the same situation as when I've been hurt in the past. If it actually is, what can I do that's new?

But awareness helps you become calmer and more steady by helping you notice,

step by step: What am I scared of? What do I need? What set off this worry?



Basic guidance: name the fear and take one small step towards 'safety'.

09. Your “yes” means less when you don’t really mean it.

It’s hard to trust someone’s yes when they never say no.

A real “yes” is strong. A fake “yes” makes you tired.

Paying attention helps you choose to be generous on purpose, not out of habit.



Basic guidance: if you feel tight inside or notice negative thoughts, your “yes” might not be real.

10. Inner conflict happens when part of you wants one thing, and another part wants something different.

Ask yourself: “What does each side want or need?”

Be curious about both sides.

Each part of your personality needs curiosity and kindness from you. Imagine two kids inside you. Each one wants something different. Instead of yelling at one kid, you try to understand both.

If one side feels nervous, ask: “What would help you feel safe right now?”

You can name the nervous feeling out loud, or ask a friend to support you.

11. Your negative patterns don't mean you're weak, they mean you learned to survive.

Becoming aware of your patterns (like avoidance, aggression, pleasing) helps you honor why they formed, and choose healthier ways now.



Basic guidance: you can thank the part of you that tried to protect you through avoidance, etc, and still choose a new way.

12. You're allowed to notice when you're tired.

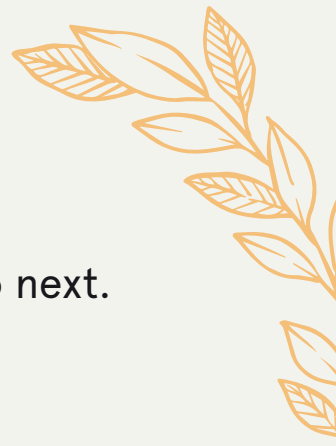
Being tired is an important signal from your mind and body. Rest is sacred. Your capacity matters, your needs matter.

It's okay, even important, to care for yourself sometimes first.








Basic guidance: tired is information. Listen to it.

Part 2: Beliefs & Mindset Shifts



Your beliefs are the stories your brain repeats.
They shape how you feel, what you expect, and what you do next.
A belief is like a pair of glasses.
If the glasses are dark, everything looks scary or hopeless.
If the glasses are clear, you can see choices.

When your beliefs shift, your personality becomes better in real ways:

-  you feel calmer inside
-  you get less stuck in negative thinking
-  you speak up more honestly
-  you bounce back faster after mistakes
-  you choose kinder actions because you feel safer



These 12 pieces of wisdom will guide you toward new ways of thinking that make life feel easier and more meaningful.



01. Hope isn't pretending things are perfect, it's believing they can get better.

Hope is brave. It's not fake smiling.

It's telling your brain: "This pain is real, and I can still grow."



Basic guidance: look for one small sign of good inside you today (effort counts).

02. Boundaries protect your ability to keep being kind.

When you have no limits, you get tired and annoyed.

Then your kindness becomes forced.

A boundary keeps your kindness real.



Basic guidance: choose one small limit that protects your energy. (You'll go deeper on boundaries in Part 3, this is just the mindset shift.)

03. Real positivity is facing problems honestly and believing they can change.

Real positivity sounds like: “This is hard... and I can take one step.”

Fake positivity says: “It’s fine,” when it’s not.



Basic guidance: tell the truth about discomfort, then choose one small action.

04. Your worth doesn't depend on keeping other people happy.

A common belief is: “If they’re upset, I did something wrong.”

But people can be upset even when you’re doing the right thing.



Basic guidance: ask, “Did I act with respect?” If yes or no, you’re allowed to breathe.

Things don't always land the way you intend, and you can acknowledge impact without shaming yourself.

05. Every small step matters.

Big change usually comes from small choices repeated.

Small steps teach your brain: "I'm someone who shows up, I have some power and agency here."



Basic guidance: choose one tiny action you can do today, even if it's 2%.

06. You become strong the moment you question the beliefs that hold you back, write down your questions.

It means thinking: What do I believe about this? Write that down. Now write, "Is this really true?"

Beliefs can sound like rules in your head:

🍃 "I must make everyone happy."

🍃 "If I say no, they'll leave."

🍃 "If I make mistakes, I'm unfair."

🍃 "Questioning is power."



Basic guidance: when you notice a harsh or unhelpful belief, ask: "Is this always true?"

07. Optimism is believing hard times won't last forever.

Optimism doesn't mean "everything is great."

It means: "This season can change."



Basic guidance: remind yourself, "Feelings come and go. This is not forever."

08. Discomfort can be a sign you're growing.

Sometimes growth feels like: awkward, shaky, embarrassed, or scared.

That doesn't mean you're doing it wrong.

It can mean you're learning a new way.



Basic guidance: if it's discomfort, go slower. If it's overwhelm, maybe you went too far, stop and take care of yourself.

09. Putting yourself first isn't selfish, it's healthy.

"The oxygen-mask" principle, as an adult you have primary responsibility over your well-being, who else is going to do that for you?

Self-care is not "I only care about me." It's "I matter too."

This belief helps your personality become steadier, not burnt out.



Basic guidance: ask, "What do I need so I don't crash later?"

10. Negative feelings don't mean you're failing, they're trying to teach you something.

Sadness, anger, and fear are signals.

They often point to: "I need more care," "I need a boundary," or "Something feels unsafe."



Basic guidance: instead of judging the feeling, ask: "What is it trying to protect?"

11. You can always learn and get better, no matter how stuck you feel right now.

A powerful belief is: "I'm allowed to practice."

Practice means you don't have to be perfect to improve.



Basic guidance: try one new way of handling something, just once.

12. Being kind to yourself is something you always deserve.

Self-kindness isn't something you earn by being perfect.

It's how you help your brain and body feel safe enough to change.

A kinder inner voice, self talk, helps you become more honest, brave, and consistent.

Part 3: Boundaries & Protection



Boundaries protect your time, your body, and your energy. They are the rules that help you stay honest and kind without getting drained.

A boundary is not a punishment.

It is a way of saying, "This is what works for me."

When you do not set limits, you may feel tired, resentful, or shut down.

When you do set limits, you may feel guilt at first or fear b/c you may have been punished for asserting boundaries as a child.

That guilt is often just your brain learning something new.



These 10 pieces help you say no without shame, protect your energy, and build healthier relationships.



01. Boundaries are not “mean.” They protect your relationships.

A clear limit is often more loving than a fake yes b/c you show up with no resentments or unspoken assumptions.

Without boundaries, people can get the best of you at first, then the worst of you later.



Basic guidance: a calm limit keeps love cleaner.

02. Saying “no” makes your “yes” real.

When you say yes only when you mean it, people trust you more.

You trust yourself more too.



Basic guidance: practice one small no this week, even if it is by text.

03. Choose times to focus on yourself first.

Protecting your energy is not selfish. It is how you stay steady.

If you never choose yourself, you eventually have nothing left to give.



Basic guidance: pick one time today to rest, eat, or breathe before helping.

04. You teach people how to treat you by what you accept.

If you accept rude words, last minute demands, or pressure, people learn that is okay.

If you speak up, people learn the new rules.



Basic guidance: choose one thing you will not accept anymore, write it, and say it simply.

05. Saying “no” does not break real relationships. It can strengthen them.

Healthy people respect honesty.

people that don't respect your boundaries don't deserve close access to you.

Some people may not like your limits, but that does not mean your limits are wrong.



Basic guidance: a strong sentence is enough, “I cannot do that.”

06. Feeling guilty does not mean you did something wrong.

Guilt often shows up when you stop an old habit, it may mean you want connection.

Especially if you learned to keep peace by pleasing others.

Your guilt can often reflect the way you were treated in the past. You could ask the question, what do I think I actually did wrong here? Is that actually out of line with my new understanding of boundaries, self-respect, etc?



Basic guidance: notice guilt, breathe, and ask, “Did I say it with respect?”

07. Boundaries show people that you value yourself.

A boundary is you saying, “My time matters. My body matters. My feelings matter.”

This helps you feel safer inside, and your personality becomes steadier.



Basic guidance: start with a small limit you can keep.

08. If you are exhausted, your kindness loses strength.

When you are drained, you may help, but you do not feel love while doing it.

Then you may get annoyed, cold, or disappear.



Basic guidance: rest is part of being kind.

09. Not everyone will like your boundaries, and that is okay.

Some people benefit from you having no limits.

When you change, they may push back.



Basic guidance: their reaction is information, not an obligation, what you do with that information is your choice..

10. Protecting your energy is not rude. It is respectful to you.

You do not have to explain a lot.

You can be warm and still be clear.

Basic guidance, simple scripts:

- 🍃 "I can do 10 minutes."
- 🍃 "I cannot today."
- 🍃 "I need time to think."
- 🍃 "Please do not talk to me that way."
- 🍃 "I am not available for that."

Part 4: Self-Compassion & Self-Forgiveness

Self-compassion, listening, means treating yourself like someone you care about. Not because you “earned it,” but because you’re human.

Self-forgiveness means you stop using shame as your teacher.

You can still learn and change, without hating yourself.

Many people think being hard on themselves will make them better.

But harshness usually makes you scared, stuck, or exhausted.

Compassion helps your brain and body feel safe enough to grow.

The harsh voice we hear in our heads is almost always copying a voice we heard when we were growing up I can help to see that that person might have been passing on their pain and confusion.

According to neuroscience, when you are a threat, your brain shifts away from cortical processing into survival, so it is neurologically much harder for you to connect, learn and grow in that moment.



These 10 pieces help you let go of shame, learn from mistakes, and move forward with more peace.



01. If you can't give yourself care, it's hard to give it to anyone else.



Basic guidance: start where you have the most power, inside.

02. Being hard on yourself doesn't fix mistakes. It often keeps you stuck.

Shame says: "I'm bad."

Growth says: "I did something that didn't help. I can learn."



Basic guidance: name what happened without calling yourself names.

03. You deserve the same kindness you give to others.

If a friend was struggling, you wouldn't attack them.

You would help them.



Basic guidance: speak to yourself like you would speak to someone you care about.

04. Mistakes don't mean you're bad. They mean you're human.

Mistakes are how learning happens.

A better belief is: "I'm practicing."

Someone learns a difficult skill, like walking, or skiing, or a new language etc.. of course you make thousands of mistakes, and that's totally normal, except when you have someone harsh or judgmental who tries to make it not normal.



Basic guidance: ask, "What did this teach me?" (one sentence is enough)

05. Anger at others often mirrors anger at yourself.

When you're harsh inside, it's easier to feel harsh outside.

Self-forgiveness can soften your reactions.

Also, when we try to deny our own feelings and needs over and over, eventually it can explode.



Basic guidance: when you feel big anger, ask, 'Where am I judging myself too?'

06. Compassion doesn't run out when you use it on yourself but there is a limited amount of compassion you can have per day as it requires energy.

Being kinder to yourself does not make you lazy.

It makes you steadier and more honest.



Basic guidance: kindness is not weakness, it's support.

07. You can't fully heal pain caused by others until you care for the shame inside you.

Shame often comes from being judged, rejected, controlled, or abandoned.

It is not proof that you have no worth, it is evidence that others treated you without care, respect, and love.



Basic guidance: shame is a feeling, not a fact.

08. Being gentle with yourself makes you stronger, not weaker.

Gentleness helps you face hard feelings without running away.

That is real strength.



Basic guidance: say, "This is hard," instead of "What's wrong with me?"

09. Your harshest critic is usually inside you and sometimes we direct it towards ourselves or others.

That voice may be trying to protect you from rejection or failure.

But it often hurts you instead.



Basic guidance: Say something like "I see you're trying to protect me, and I choose to be kinder to myself". Then ask yourself "What do I need, what's the next step?"

10. Forgive yourself creates a ripple effect, inside and out.

When you respect yourself, you show others how to respect you.

And you make it safer to be honest in relationships.



Basic guidance: practice one small forgiveness each day. Example: "I made a mistake today. I'm learning. I can try again."

Part 5: Practical Daily Actions & Small Steps



Small daily actions can make big changes in your life.

Because your brain and body learn through practice, not pressure.

Small steps help you break old habits gently.

They help you feel safer inside, think clearer, and act with more choice.

**You don't need perfect days.
You need repeated "tiny wins."**



These 8 tips help you build healthier patterns one small step at a time.



01. Take a few slow breaths before saying “yes.”

A fast “yes” is often a reflex.

A slower “yes” is a choice.



Basic guidance: breathe a few times, then ask, “Do I mean yes?”

02. Every day, pick 3 small things that remind you: “I matter.”

They can be tiny: a snack, a short walk, clean water, 5 quiet minutes.

These teach your brain self-respect.



Basic guidance: choose things that help you feel steady, not just distracted.

03. Spend 5 minutes writing your thoughts or feelings.

Writing helps you understand yourself instead of carrying everything in your head.

It lowers stress because it turns a foggy feeling into clear words.



Basic guidance: Start with a single sentence: "Today I feel ____ because ____."

04. Say 1 kind thing to yourself each morning.

Your inner voice shapes your whole day.

A kind thing can be like "I'm proud of a choice I made yesterday".







Basic guidance: use simple words like: "I'm trying." "I matter." "I can learn." "I'm allowed to rest."

05. Practice a kind “no” at least once a day.

A small “no” teaches your body: “I’m safe when I’m honest.”

Basic guidance: try one of these:

-  “Not today.”
-  “I can’t.”
-  “I need time to think.”
-  “I can do a smaller version.”

Text is allowed if it’s easier.

06. Notice 5 good things each day, even tiny ones.

This trains your brain to see reality more fully, not only problems.

It doesn’t erase hard feelings. It adds balance.



Basic guidance: include effort, not just outcomes:
“I took a chance” or “I made an effort” or
“I attempted something challenging, or new, etc”
“I paused.” “I was honest.” “I rested.”
“I asked for help.”

07. Check your body twice a day for tension.

Your body is an early warning system.

Tension can mean: “I’m stressed,” “I’m holding something in,” or “I need a boundary.”



Basic guidance: relax your jaw, shoulders, and stomach. Then ask, 'What do I need?'

08. End each day by forgiving yourself for one small mistake.

This teaches your brain: “Mistakes don’t mean danger.”

It helps you grow without shame.



Basic guidance: say:
“I’m learning. It’s okay. I can try again tomorrow.”

Learning about your patterns, emotions, and personality is not about judging yourself.

It is about understanding how you were shaped so you can grow beyond survival habits and build healthier relationships with yourself, with others, and with The Creator.



This guide is only a starting point.



If you want deeper explanations, practical reflections, and more tools for developing self-awareness, explore the NextSelf blog where these ideas are expanded step by step: nextself.ai/wisdom/daily

THANK YOU



Thank you for making it this far.

Most people stay busy. They avoid looking inward. They keep moving, keep reacting, keep surviving, and never stop long enough to ask:

“What is really happening inside me?”

But you did.

You slowed down.

You reflected.

You became more honest about your inner world.

That matters.

Real change usually does not come from doing everything at once. It comes from small honest steps, repeated with patience.


You do not need to become perfect. You need to stay present. You need to keep learning. You need to return again when you fall back into old patterns. Awareness, compassion, and healthy boundaries can change the direction of a life.

Not all at once.

Not through pressure.

Not through shame.

But through small choices that teach your nervous system a new way to live.





And remember:

You do not have to do this alone.

Healing grows faster when you have the right support, the right guidance, and the right kind of community.

You were not meant to heal by pretending you never need help.

You were meant to become honest enough to receive it.

I am grateful you are here.

Thank you for letting NextSelf be part of your journey.

With care,

- NextSelf

