

Improve Your Self Esteem and Confidence by Looking After Your Primal Needs



Life needs certain things to flourish

If you left a plant in the dark with no water and poor soil, you wouldn't be surprised if it struggled. Plants need certain things to thrive like sunlight, water and nutrients. And you have innate or 'primal' needs too. Getting better at consistently meeting them helps you flourish and be in the best position to handle problems when they come up.

Think of it like emotional nutrition. If your diet lacked certain vitamins and minerals, you might feel fine for a while but you would be more likely to suffer colds when they went around. You could focus on trying to treat the colds. The real solution, though, would be to eat better so your immune system could ward off the colds in the first place.

The same goes for your emotional nutrition. Meeting your primal needs is like getting emotional vitamins. It's easy to not notice if you're missing some because you can skip them for a while without much difference. However, when difficult situations come up, you'll be more likely to struggle. Meet them, and you'll feel better about yourself and be more resilient and effective.

So what are your primal needs?¹

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Become as good a friend to yourself as you are to everyone else

Your Emotional Vitamins

Safety and Security

If you feel physically or emotionally unsafe, your body and brain go on alert and shut down non-urgent processes. Physically, that can lead to problems with digestion, sleep and immune function. Emotionally, it can make you anxious, easily triggered and more prone to losing your cool.

You need to have spaces where you feel safe.

If you think you are in physical danger, seek help. Regardless of someone's promises, past behaviour is a strong predictor of future behaviour. Getting out of a potentially violent situation can be a flashpoint.

Physical Functioning

"Take care of your body. It's the only place you have to live."
Jim Rohn

Your body is the water you swim in. It is so obvious it is easy to miss. Drinking lots of caffeine will make you feel on edge. Alcohol will make you feel first happy and relaxed then sad and irritable. Poor sleep impairs your judgement²³. Touch is soothing⁴. Exercise improves your mood.⁵

Your body needs good enough nutrition, hydration, sleep and movement. If you put the wrong kind of fuel in your car, you wouldn't be surprised if it started playing up. The same goes for you.

Connection

There's a reason why in fairy tales the mad old witch lives alone in the middle of the forest. It's the same reason why prisoners suffer in solitary confinement. Isolation hurts. Loneliness can be as harmful to your health as obesity or smoking.⁶

We are social animals. We are strong together and weak apart. In the wild, we could not survive alone so we have an in-built drive to connect with others. To our primal brain, connection with others is literally a matter of life and death.

That is one reason why people get stuck in damaging relationships. The primal part of our brains is so desperate to avoid isolation it will take damaging relationships over none at all. The solution is to cultivate a wider range of healthy relationships so you are not dependent on one unhealthy source of connection.

Status & Respect

Not all connection is healthy. We also have a need to be treated with respect, to be shown that we matter. Criticism and contempt are so damaging to relationships because they communicate that their recipient doesn't matter.⁷

We absorb the messages we are repeatedly given. Repeatedly being criticised and diminished can leave you feeling worthless. On the other hand, consistently being treated with respect even during disagreements helps rebuild your self worth.

You can choose who to spend more time with based on the kinds of messages you want to absorb.

Intimacy

We all need to have some relationships that are safe havens where we can be accepted 'warts and all.' If you keep parts of yourself permanently hidden, you can accidentally send yourself the message that *even you* don't accept them, which can foster feelings of shame. Being accepted as you are soothes those feelings.⁸

That doesn't mean it's healthy to share everything with everyone. It's natural to not share everything with people we don't know that well. That's not being fake. It's respecting the current level of the relationship. When a passing acquaintance asks "How are you doing?" they don't want every detail of your inner life, just a flavour, one that they can process appropriately in the situation.

If *all* your relationships involve projecting an image or hiding how you really feel, though, you're likely to struggle. It's important to find and nurture at least some relationships in which you can feel safe.

Contribution

Individualistic modern society cuts us off from our wider communities. We have an innate desire to help others and feel useful.

Thinking about yourself too much makes you less happy⁹, a problem with some forms of therapy. Focusing *away* from yourself and onto what you can do for others helps you avoid overthinking and makes you feel good. That's a big reason people enjoy volunteering.

If you tend to always put yourself last, though, this innate need might be getting out of proportion. Your desire to contribute is perfectly healthy but you might be doing it too much or in the wrong situations. Sometimes that is to compensate for other needs not being met. Take a look at where your contributions might be less welcome than you would hope and at what of your other needs you could meet better.

Autonomy and Control

"Don't do it like that. Do it like this!" You know how annoying it is when someone tells you what to do all the time? Even if what they're telling you is right.

Doing something because you have been told to is a very different experience to doing it because you have chosen to. We need a sense of control in our lives, to make choices and be the authors of our destinies.¹⁰

How much freedom to make decisions do you feel you have? None of us can control everything in our lives, but where could you find a bit more freedom?

Stimulation, Challenge and Learning

Lack of stimulation drives us nuts. Think of old-fashioned zoos. A chimpanzee alone in a bare cage with a concrete floor and just a rubber tyre to swing on. With too little stimulation, zoo animals start obsessively pacing, pulling their fur or become listless and depressed.

Sadly, if we're not careful, some modern living can become not so far removed from those bare cages. Get up, squeeze into the bus or train to work by the same route every day, stare at the computer screen under unchanging fluorescent lights, return home the same way, stare at the TV and, go to bed.

Your brain and body are wired for challenge - to learn, explore, be stretched and stimulated. Without challenge and stimulation, their processing power can turn inwards into rumination, worry and obsessive thinking.

What new experiences, stimulation or learning could you seek out? For example: Going outside in nature, dancing, going to a new yoga or exercise class, visiting a new place, learning a new recipe, or learning something new just for fun.

Purpose & Goals

Projects and goals give you structure while you're working on them and satisfaction after you've achieved them. They can be big or small - to train for a fitness goal, write a blog post, complete a course in Spanish, promote a cause you believe in, or finish all your admin by lunchtime.

Beware, though, of the "I'll be happy when" trap - feeling unhappy now in the vague hope that things will come right when you reach your goal. It's sometimes worthwhile to delay gratification for a bigger aim, but a good goal should make your life better now, not just in the future.

Privacy

Positive connection with others is important, but if it never stops, you can lose track of your own perspectives and feelings. We all need some quiet time away from social influences to process the events of the day or week, reconnect with ourselves and consider the future without being open to scrutiny.

That could be writing a journal, going for a walk, having a bath, driving without talk radio on or staring out of a train or bus window.

Primal Needs Check List

Check your primal needs now to see how well you feel each of your needs is being met at the moment.

This is not the time to beat yourself up about areas that aren't going so well. Or to ignore them either. You'll best help yourself by seeing where you are right now so you can choose what to do next.

	Not at all ←————→ Completely				
Safety and Security					
I feel physically safe*	1	2	3	4	5
I feel emotionally safe	1	2	3	4	5
Physical Functioning					
I am looking after myself physically in terms of sleep, nutrition, hydration and movement	1	2	3	4	5
Connection					
I feel connected to a wide group of people	1	2	3	4	5
Status and Respect					
People in my life treat me with respect	1	2	3	4	5
Intimacy					
I have at least one or two people I can be myself around	1	2	3	4	5
Contribution					
I feel like I contribute to the wider community	1	2	3	4	5
Autonomy and Control					
I feel like I can make choices in my life	1	2	3	4	5
Stimulation, Challenge and Learning					
I have enough new experiences & challenges	1	2	3	4	5
Purpose & Goals					
I have goals I am working towards	1	2	3	4	5
Privacy					
I regularly have enough quiet time to myself to process how I'm feeling and plan what I want	1	2	3	4	5

*If you don't feel physically safe - pause everything else and ask for help

Meeting Your Primal Needs

If you're meeting all your primal needs well - great! Sit back and enjoy the moment :-). And reflect on what is helping you succeed. Remembering that will help you one day.

If you have some areas on the low side, here are some ideas and tips to help you begin to meet your needs in the best way.

Make It Easier with "Multivitamins"

Just like one meal might contain many vitamins, one activity might go towards fulfilling many needs. Volunteering in a conservation project might help meet your needs for connection, contribution, purpose and physical functioning. Going to a dance class might help meet your needs for physical movement, connection and stimulation.

Spread Your Bets

Having all your eggs in one basket can be risky. If anything happens to that basket, you're in trouble. If one group or person is meeting the majority of your needs, you will feel less free to make choices if, for example, they start treating you badly.

- You can build more security by spreading your bets. Take the pressure off each individual person or activity by meeting your needs from a variety of sources. That way, if anything goes wrong in one area, you can respond healthily with your 'emotional nutrition' from other areas.

Action Time

If some areas that are lower than you'd like, pick three actions you could take to improve them this week. And get bonus 'autonomy' points for becoming pro-active :-)

- You will probably get the biggest benefit by improving the lowest-scoring areas, but do what's practical. Improving in one area this week will give you more resources for improving in another area next week.
- Remember, one activity might help meet several needs in one go.
- Think more about establishing habits rather than dramatic one-off measures. Think practical, sustainable and enjoyable. It's all about creating the kind of life you want, after all.
- Put a note in your diary now to come back and check again in a week's time. Next week, scan the list and decide on another three actions. As you become familiar with actively meeting your needs, you might use the primal needs check list less often but it can still be useful to refer back to, especially if problems come up in life and you want to check you're properly resourced to deal with them.
- Notice how your self esteem, confidence and efficacy improve simply by providing yourself with the right nutrition.

Endnotes

- 1 People from Abraham Maslow to Tony Robbins have articulated basic human needs in different ways, all pointing to similar underlying ideas. The ones here are based on work done by the Human Givens Institute <https://www.hgi.org.uk/>
- 2 Court judges, whose whole job is to be impartial and consistent, were found to be much more likely to grant parole after they had had a break and something to eat. <http://www.economist.com/node/18557594>
- 3 Three nights of restricted sleep led to increases in anxiety, depression and stress, also increases in paranoia and feelings of mistrust about other people <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/health-41816398>
- 4 "A wave of studies has documented some incredible emotional and physical health benefits that come from touch." <https://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/wired-success/201503/8-reasons-why-we-need-human-touch-more-ever>
- 5 *Exercise can treat mild to moderate depression as effectively as antidepressant medication* - <http://www.rcpsych.ac.uk/healthadvice/treatmentswellbeing/physicalactivity.aspx> *The exercise effect*, American Psychological Association <http://www.apa.org/monitor/2011/12/exercise.aspx>
- 6 *Social Relationships and Mortality Risk: A Meta-analytic Review* - <http://journals.plos.org/plosmedicine/article?id=10.1371/journal.pmed.1000316> cited along with other data at the Campaign to End Loneliness here <https://www.campaigntoendloneliness.org/threat-to-health>
- 7 Known as "The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse" John Gottman identifies the four communication patterns that very accurately predict whether a couple will split up. <https://www.gottman.com/blog/the-four-horsemen-recognizing-criticism-contempt-defensiveness-and-stonewalling/>
- 8 Brené Brown in her books *The Gifts of Imperfection* and *Daring Greatly* or various TED talks
- 9 How too much self-focus relates to a range of emotional problems - <https://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/evolution-the-self/201608/self-absorption-the-root-all-psychological-evil>
- 10 For example, a well known UK study of civil servants found that those lower down the hierarchy often suffered more stress than those higher up, partly because they had less control. Summary in *Demands and Control* chapter here <https://www.ucl.ac.uk/whitehallIII/pdf/wii-booklet>