

Teaching Current Directions in Psychological Science

C. Nathan DeWall and David G. Myers

Aimed at integrating cutting-edge psychological science into the classroom, Teaching Current Directions in Psychological Science offers advice and how-to guidance about teaching a particular area of research or topic in psychological science that has been the focus of an article in the APS journal Current Directions in Psychological Science. Current Directions is a peer-reviewed bi-monthly journal featuring reviews by leading experts covering all of scientific psychology and its applications, and allowing readers to stay apprised of important developments across subfields beyond their areas of expertise. Its articles are written to be accessible to non-experts, making them ideally suited for use in the classroom.

Does Low Self-Esteem Feed Depression? by David G. Myers

[Orth, U., & Robins, R. W. \(2013\). Understanding the link between low self-esteem and depression. *Current Directions in Psychological Science*, 22, 455–460.](#)

It will come as no surprise to students, much less teachers of psychology, that low self-esteem predicts greater depressive tendencies. But why? Ulrich Orth and APS Fellow Richard Robins's essay, which crisply identifies and assesses possible explanations, offers an opportunity for teaching critical thinking.

To show students how psychologists measure self-esteem and depressive tendencies, invite students to respond to accessible self-esteem and depression measures — such as the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (tinyurl.com/RosenbergSE) and the Zung Self-Rating Depression Scale (tinyurl.com/ZungDepr). Or perhaps in class, simply invite students to respond to a few sample items of each scale (explaining the reverse scoring of half the items).

First, Rosenberg's self-esteem scale: Do you strongly disagree (SD), disagree (D), agree (A), or strongly agree (SA) that

I feel that I have a number of good qualities: ___SD ___D ___A ___SA

I feel I do not have much to be proud of: ___SD ___D ___A ___SA

I wish I could have more respect for myself: ___SD ___D ___A ___SA

I certainly feel useless at times: ___SD ___D ___A ___SA

Second, Zung's depression scale: How often have you felt these ways in the past several days? A little of the time (Little)? Some of the time (Some)? Good part of the time (Good part)? Most of the time (Most)?

I feel down-hearted and blue: ___Little ___Some ___Good part ___Most

My life is pretty full: ___Little ___Some ___Good part ___Most

I get tired for no reason: ___Little ___Some ___Good part ___Most

I feel hopeful about the future: ___Little ___Some ___Good part

It's one of psychology's most consistent findings: People who score low on such self-esteem scales tend to score high on depression scales. Self-esteem correlates negatively with depression.

Using this opportunity to illustrate that correlation does not imply causation, invite students to speculate *why* low self-esteem scores associate with depressive tendencies. See if their brainstorming can produce the alternatives Orth and Robins identify:

1. *Vulnerability*: Low self-esteem causes depression.
2. *Scarring*: Depression causes low self-esteem.
3. *Reciprocal vulnerability and scarring*: In a vicious circle, low self-esteem might be both a source and a result of depression.
4. *Underlying precursor*: Perhaps low self-esteem is a manifestation of depression, with both caused by underlying factors such as a broken relationship, failure, victimization, job loss, or neuroticism.
5. *Diathesis–stress*: Low self-esteem is a diathesis — a predisposing factor that causes depression only when combined with a significant life stress.

To sift these possibilities, Orth and Robins meta-analyzed 77 longitudinal studies that followed 35,000 lives through time. Cross-lagged regression analyses, which explore the sequence of low self-esteem and depression, reveal both vulnerability and scar effects. “But the vulnerability effect is twice as large.” Vulnerability — the emotionally toxic effect of low self-esteem — appears across both genders, all age groups, and various cultures. Moreover, the vulnerability remains even when controlling for underlying third factors. And low self-esteem predicts depression risk with or without stressful life events.

To alleviate depression, it would help to know what mediates the relationship between low self-esteem and depression. The evidence indicates that negative rumination and social withdrawal bridge low self-worth to negative affect.

We need more research on the development, stability, and mediation of the relationship between self-esteem and depression, note Orth and Robins. But, they say, we can now discount the argument “that self-esteem is an empty construct that has no long-term impact.” And we can hope that this research might lead to interventions that lighten the burden of depression.

References

- Bossard, J. H. S. (1932). Residential propinquity as a factor in marriage selection. *American Journal of Sociology*, 38, 219–224.
- Byrne, D. (1961). Interpersonal attraction and attitude similarity. *Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology*, 62, 713–715.
- Huber, J., Payne, J.W., & Puto, C. (1982). Adding asymmetrically dominated alternatives: Violations of regularity and the similarity hypothesis. *Journal of Consumer Research*, 9, 90–98.
- Lavner, J. A., Karney, B. R., & Bradbury, T. N. (2012). Do cold feet warn of trouble ahead? Premarital uncertainty and four-year marital outcomes. *Journal of Family Psychology*, 26, 1012–1017.

December 31, 2013