

## Research Project

### Understanding the Link Between low Self-Esteem and Depression

#### Third-party funded project

**Project title** Understanding the Link Between low Self-Esteem and Depression

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**Organisation / Research unit**

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**Department**

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There is an ongoing debate about whether individuals with low self-esteem have worse prospects for their life than individuals with high self-esteem. Whereas some authors doubt that self-esteem affects the individual trajectories of psychological health, social adjustment, academic achievements, and economic welfare, others conclude that self-esteem has significant impact on many important life outcomes. With regard to depression—a key indicator of poor psychological health—a growing body of research suggests that self-esteem is consequential. Yet, little is known about the specific nature of the relation between self-esteem and depression. This research program addresses this gap through several longitudinal studies. One study will test alternative models of the mediating pathways through which low self-esteem contributes to depression. For example, low self-esteem likely motivates social avoidance, thereby impeding social reinforcement and social support, which has been linked to depression. A second study will examine short-term effects between low self-esteem and depression. Most previous prospective studies examined effects across long periods of time (e.g., years). However, from a theoretical perspective, it is also important to understand how the processes linking self-esteem and depression play out over shorter periods (e.g., days and weeks). A third study will target the effects of another characteristic of self-esteem, besides its level, namely the degree to which it fluctuates over time and is contingent on external feedback. The results of previous studies suggest that the variability of self-esteem predicts subsequent level of depression, even when controlling for the effect of level of self-esteem. A likely mechanism that causes variability of self-esteem is that an individual's self-esteem is contingent on events in relevant life domains, such as academic achievements, morality, social approval, and physical appearance. In sum, the results of this research program will inform both theory (personality and social psychology) and applied fields (education and clinical psychology). The overall aim is to better understand how, when, why, and for whom low self-esteem serves as a risk factor for the development of high levels of depressive symptoms and, possibly, depressive disorders.

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**Add publication**

**Add documents**

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