The Real-Life Facts About

Self-Esteem & Women with Disabilities

Results of an Intervention Pilot Test in the Virtual World of Second Life

by the Center for Research on Women with Disabilities

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Margaret A. Nosek, Ph.D., Principal Investigator
Rosemary B. Hughes, Ph.D.
Susan Robinson-Whelen, Ph.D.
Thomas M. Nosek, Ph.D.
Rebecca Goe, M. A.
Giselle M. Davidson, B.S.

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Nearly 20 years ago, Dr. Margaret A. Nosek, founder and executive director of the Center for Research on Women with Disabilities (CROWD), was quoted as saying, “If you truly believe you are a woman of value, you gain tremendous strength to overcome the most stubborn of barriers.” She was talking about self-esteem and her own lifelong journey with an extensive physical disability.

**History of self-esteem studies**

Since the 1800s, philosophers and psychologists have observed that self-esteem is connected with many aspects of being human. Our attitude toward ourselves is reflected in our health promoting behaviors, our motivation to learn and work, our relationship with others, our sexuality and sexual behaviors, and our quality of life. That attitude is strongly influenced by our family of origin and the environment in which we are raised. Social attitudes, religious beliefs, political leanings, and the economic realities all help define how individuals contribute to the fabric of society.

Since women with disabilities often confront negative messages from the family and society they face extra challenges when it comes to keeping their self-esteem positive. For women with extensive limitations, there are few expectations that they will ever work or be financially independent or marry or have a family. Women who undergo years of medical procedures and appointments sometimes feel they don’t have control or ownership of their bodies. This may weaken their sense of value. Additionally, social isolation can make women feel like they are the only ones dealing with these problems.

**The original self-esteem workshop**

About 15 years ago, researchers at CROWD worked with staff at centers for independent living (CILs) to develop a program to help women with physical disabilities enhance their self-esteem. The resulting program included weekly meetings for small groups of women with physical disabilities such as arthritis, multiple sclerosis, post polio, cerebral palsy, and spinal cord injury. It was amazingly successful. Women attending the workshops showed not only more positive self-esteem but also more self-confidence and fewer symptoms of depression.
Groups of 10 women met at the CILs once a week for seven weeks, with each session lasting about two hours. Topics included self-esteem concepts, skills building, connecting to self, caring for self, relationships, communication, and planning. The women did exercises, like listing things that make them happy, naming what they can do well, changing the wording of “should” messages, remembering things that make them feel comfortable, creating new habits in relationships, and exploring a personal bill of rights. The women created weekly action plans of something they would do to reach one of their personal goals and shared their action plan with the group. The next week they talked about their progress or barriers they ran into and listened to suggestions from the group. This part of the workshop was often reported as the most valuable.

While women who attended this program enjoyed it and benefited from it, others encountered barriers that kept them from attending, like transportation problems, child care responsibilities, pain, and fatigue. We looked for a way around these barriers, and the Internet came to the rescue.

Self-esteem workshop in Second Life

The Internet brings people together. In addition to email, Facebook, Twitter, and live chat, people are meeting up in Internet-based virtual reality sites. These are simulated environments where users interact with other users through graphic representations of themselves called “avatars” and use text chat, voice, or video to communicate in real time. One of the most popular sites is Second Life (available for free download at www.Secondlife.com).

CROWD investigators and a team of collaborators created a simulated island environment in Second Life. They adapted the self-esteem program so it could be offered in Second Life and take advantage of its social networking possibilities, the feeling of being present in a new and exciting environment, and the sense of being part of a community. Women who participated in the program could modify their avatars to look like themselves or take on a totally new appearance. It was their choice whether or not to have a disability. Virtual reality also allows some new elements of entertainment that would rarely be possible in real life, such as travel to exotic lands, wild adventures, and risky games.

"I am fairly isolated so it was nice to hear other folks' ideas and views. I never would do the traveling, shopping, going to Paris, flying over the ocean, riding whales…"

~Workshop Participant
Results of early testing of the self-esteem program in Second Life

Nineteen women with a variety of physical disabilities participated in the program, attending most of the sessions. About three times that many wanted to participate, but the graphics cards on their computers were not advanced enough to run the Second Life program.

Significant improvements were seen on the measures of depression and self-esteem, with a trend toward significance on self-efficacy but no improvement on social support. The women enjoyed being able to participate in the program from the comfort of their own homes. Most said that doing the workshops in Second Life was just as good as doing them face-to-face, but they wanted more information about each other’s disabilities. Others said they felt freer to express themselves because they were anonymous. Problems with computers and the Internet often caused delays, making some women feel stressed and frustrated.

"Self esteem is an ongoing process. And it can be fun. The last meeting, about self-esteem and the power of it, was profound."
~Workshop Participant

Next steps

Further testing of the Self-Esteem in Second Life program will involve a larger number of women and examine more closely how it compares to face-to-face workshops. The whole concept of social support is very different in virtual worlds, with a greater focus on emotional support and information. This causes researchers to take a new, more critical look at the methods they have traditionally used. The question of how each woman makes decisions about creating her avatar, including whether or not to have a disability, is very interesting and deserves more attention. The virtual world of Second Life offers exciting opportunities to experiment with a new identity and new ways of relating to others. There may be new techniques that could be developed for helping women with disabilities improve their self-esteem, and this could be the ideal place to test them.