Girls cannot break the damaging cycle of self-criticism alone



Dr. Saima Rana, Chief Education Officer, GEMS Education and CEO/principal, GEMS World Academy, Dubai. 1 / 4

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Updated 08 March 2023

ARAB NEWS

March 08, 2023
09:05

A study conducted by youth mental health charity stem4 found that three out of four children as young as 12 dislike their bodies and are embarrassed by the way they look. Fourteen percent are experiencing eating difficulties such as extreme restrictive eating, binge eating and vomiting. The study analyzed the impact of social media on the mental health of youths. As an educator for over 15 years, I've had a front row seat to the consequences of these evolving challenges facing our young girls. I've witnessed how they are affected academically, socially and personally.

And although schools cannot offer the complete solution, there is much we can and should do better to support, alongside families. Part of that is being able to identify and prevent side-effects of these insecurities as and when they manifest.

One such consequence, one that needs urgent attention, is negative self-talk. The harmful influences of our heavily digitized and interconnected world — where reality is filtered and comparison is rife — are not shrugged off when girls put down their devices. Instead, they can lead girls and young women to fall into damaging cycles of self-criticism. This negative self-talk and low self-esteem can follow women for life, dragging down their confidence and holding them back from reaching their full potential. And often, the negative thought patterns women carry with them take root in childhood, when they're still developing their sense of self, are more impressionable, and are especially vulnerable to external criticism.

Once again, girls and women are more susceptible to negative self-talk than boys and men.

Women are more susceptible to negative self-talk

In studies, women report greater repetitive negative thinking when compared to men and have been found to criticize themselves 1,460 times per year — an average of four times every day. Meanwhile, given the power thoughts exert over us, the damage of negative self-talk extends far beyond our emotional state. Results from a survey showed 50 percent of women believe self-advocating would have advanced their careers. Just as some are gifted with the enviable ability to talk themselves into fortuitous positions, others are prone to talking themselves out of pursuing rewarding opportunities.

Thankfully, it is possible for society to short-circuit the habits and thought patterns that lead to negative self-talk early in a girl's life. Education — in school and at home — is the key to this.

Breaking the cycle

Certain hurdles do compound the challenge of addressing negative self-talk among girls. To understand this, we commissioned a survey of more than 2,300 girls across GEMS Education schools. The survey found that just 4.1 percent admit to engaging in negative self-talk publicly. However, 77.5 percent of respondents state they've heard their friends saying negative things about themselves in public. Meanwhile, more than one quarter of respondents (27.8 percent) haven't discussed the long-term benefits of self-advocating, and almost one quarter (21.5 percent) said they believe self-advocating would help them to feel more confident in the future.

There is evidently a need across society to continue teaching the importance of recognizing, contextualizing, and preventing negative self-talk so we can all help each other to break out of harmful cycles of self-criticism. Sometimes, we are not even aware we're caught in these cycles.

Recognizing negative self-talk and low self-esteem requires parents, peers and teachers to identify the red flags that signal an entrenched lack of self-esteem in a certain area of life. Meanwhile, contextualizing takes specific moments of negativity and reframes them to create healthier reflections. For example, when sporty girls compare their athleticism to their peers, contextualizing is to remind them that everyone's path to success is different, and that consistent progress toward a defined goal is what's most important. Prevention, meanwhile, is a consequence of sustained identification and contextualization of damaging self-talk, where positive thought patterns are built and negativity is replaced by affirmations.

The role of education

The negative consequences of our digitized and interconnected world cannot be reversed overnight, but they are now being confronted. Although education cannot fix these consequences, it can address one of their most damaging outcomes — negative self-talk. As the CEO and principal of a school following the International Baccalaureate — a learning pathway that prioritizes the holistic growth of students — I'm reminded each day of the importance of transforming negative self-talk into powerful self-advocacy. Educating young girls, in the classroom and at home, is the surest way of achieving the same, so they learn how to move through life as confident and assured individuals equipped with the resilience to weather life's challenges.

- By Dr. Saima Rana, Chief Education Officer, GEMS Education and CEO/principal, GEMS World Academy — Dubai.