

Jeanne Brown, Ph.D.
Human Development Specialist
Extension Home Economics Program
Michigan State University

WOMEN TODAY AND SELF-ESTEEM

While women at national conventions may be able to get up and say exactly what they want in terms of equal rights for women, and other women can protest and declare what they don't want, there are many women somewhere in the middle, trying to find out where they stand.

These women, perhaps like yourself, can appreciate the issues involved, but first have to deal with a houseful of kids and support them. Or maybe they have to deal with a house without kids and the loneliness and lack of purpose they feel.

This may be an exciting time for women, but it is also a frightening one. Women are facing situations and opportunities they have never before encountered. It is a time that demands women to take action in their lives.

Women Keeping Up with Themselves

Although expanding opportunities have resulted in more alternatives for women, they have also produced some dilemmas. Women must now make more conscious career decisions. Homemaking, motherhood and volunteer work are no longer preordained roles.

Women must also come to terms with ideas behind the alternatives. On one side, women are told that their lives should extend beyond their families and homes and that they should contribute to the society at large.

On the other hand, tradition and those fearing its loss are telling women that their families, especially young children, need them to provide what no one else can. Seeing truth in both, women may feel caught in a no-win situation. In choosing a career, they may feel they are forfeiting quality family life. In choosing their families, they may feel they are denying their potentials in the larger society. Trying to side-step this dilemma, women may attempt to do it all—exhausting themselves and failing at their tasks.

The solution, of course, is for a woman to find herself—what she really wants and her priorities among all the alternatives. Once a woman knows herself and acts on that knowledge, then she can like herself and what she does. All of this takes some doing, however.

The Need for a Plan

Women must consider the span of their entire lives in making career choices today. The cycles in a woman's lifespan include situations for which they should be prepared. The facts of some of these situations may surprise you:

- ▶ Women are living longer, with an average life span of 75 years, compared to 55 in 1929.
- ▶ The average wife outlives her husband by 5 to 15 years.
- ▶ Half of the average woman's life remains once her youngest child has gone to school.

These facts indicate that a woman's self-worth and purpose in life should not be centered entirely on her family. As time passes, her role in caring for her family diminishes as her children grow up. Chances are that she will be without her husband in her later years. She needs to realize her value outside the home.

Making the Decision

Taking the steps to create a purposeful and fulfilling life is a real challenge. A woman has to believe in herself and in what she's doing. Many women may have to overcome unconscious attempts to remain dependent and immobilized. They may use such excuses as:

- ▶ "I've been 'out of it' for too long."
- ▶ "My family needs me and my husband wouldn't like it."
- ▶ "How do I do it? Who exactly do I call?"

Many women may also worry about the commitment they must make—commitment of time, money, a career, a lifestyle—in developing a plan for their lives. Yet the decision must be made because it will give women control over, and freedom in their lives.

Focusing Your Desires

To help you bring your desires and capabilities into focus, and eventually into alignment, you might try the following suggestions from Mary Search, an Extension home economist in Michigan:

- ▶ List your strengths in one column and your limitations in another column. Be honest about both (some women find it hard to even identify their strengths!), so you will have an accurate listing.
- ▶ On another sheet, list "Things I'd like to do with my life." Once you have a good idea of what you can do and what you want to do, you can work to bring the two into alignment.

A Guide for Decision-Making

To help you make major decisions, you might consider using the following process:

Assess the current situation. What do you want and what are your resources? How much change is involved?

Explore relevant alternatives. Are there different ways of bringing about the desired change? What are the risks involved?

Consider the decision. Is the decision yours or does it depend upon or affect someone else? If it is a partial or tentative decision, what is the larger, more important decision?

Strategies for carrying out the decision. What do you do first? Next? What are your alternatives if the outcome is not satisfactory?

Effects of Role Changes

It is important to remember that while you're undergoing role changes, so are those close to you. When a wife and mother also becomes a financial provider, for instance, her husband and children must also adjust to that change. This experience may result in role strain—the stress caused when a person has trouble understanding or doing what the new roles require.

To reduce the effects of role strain, it is important for all family members to understand the reasons for the role change and the expected benefits from it. Once everyone understands and appreciates the value of the change, it will be much easier for a woman to succeed. The support of her family, especially that of her husband, will make the woman's job much easier.

Nearly all studies of married women who have careers have found that the husband's attitudes are strongly associated with whether the wife works outside the home.

Basic Human Rights

Amid all the change that a woman may be experiencing and that she may be causing others to experience, it may be helpful to consider these basic rights of all people!

- ▶ Right to feel proud about what's good about one's self.
- ▶ Right to refuse requests and not feel guilty or selfish.
- ▶ Right to have one's opinions given the same respect and consideration that others are given.
- ▶ Right to feel and express a healthy competitiveness and achievement drive.
- ▶ Right to use one's own judgement in deciding what needs are the most important.
- ▶ Right to strive for self-actualization through whatever channels one finds natural using one's talents and interests.

References

- Branden, Nathaniel. *Honoring the Self*. Bantam Books, 1983.
- LeShan, Eda. *The Wonderful Crisis of Middle Age*. David McKay Company, 1974.
- Mitchell, J. S. *Be a Mother and More*. Bantam Books, 1980.
- Newman, Mildred and J. Berkowitz. *How to Take Charge of Your Life*. Bantam Books, 1977.
- Sanford, L. T. and M. Donovan. *Women and Self-esteem: Understanding and Improving the Way We Think and Feel About Ourselves*. Donnelly and Sons, 1984.



MSU is an Affirmative Action/Equal Opportunity Institution. Cooperative Extension Service programs are open to all without regard to race, color, national origin, sex, or handicap.

Issued in furtherance of Cooperative Extension work in agriculture and home economics, acts of May 8, and June 30, 1914, in cooperation with the U.S. Department of Agriculture. W. J. Moline, Director, Cooperative Extension Service, Michigan State University, E. Lansing, MI 48824.

This information is for educational purposes only. Reference to commercial products or trade names does not imply endorsement by the Cooperative Extension Service or bias against those not mentioned. This bulletin becomes public property upon publication and may be reprinted verbatim as a separate or within another publication with credit to MSU. Reprinting cannot be used to endorse or advertise a commercial product or company.

2:88-5M-REP-SDC/UP Price: 20¢ - Single copy free to Michigan Residents