

# Working your way through self-esteem

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## Impact paragraph

This dissertation aimed to investigate the transdiagnostic concept of self-esteem in the course of psychopathology and act upon a need for interventions targeting transdiagnostic mechanisms focusing on the crucial developmental period of 12-25 years.

### Main findings and conclusions

The results of this dissertation indicate that help-seeking youth present high co-morbidity and fluctuations in (sub-threshold) symptoms of psychopathology across a variety of mental health conditions. Based on findings regarding the negative impact of low self-esteem on mental well-being, self-esteem is a promising mechanism to target in a transdiagnostic intervention for youth to prevent the development of (more severe) mental disorders. Further, there is an abundance of research proposing self-esteem to play a modifying role between childhood adversity and psychosis. Thus, we concluded that targeting self-esteem in an intervention has significant potential to prevent the development and maintenance of psychopathology later in life. The SELFIE trial aimed to test the efficacy of such an intervention by targeting self-esteem in youth who had experienced childhood adversity. The findings of our process evaluation suggest that the SELFIE intervention was experienced as being a low threshold and easily accessible ecological momentary intervention (EMI) by its users. Further, the working mechanisms of the SELFIE interventions have been coined, in short, as exercises leading to cognitive restructuring and subsequently positive affect.

### Scientific impact

As described in this dissertation, adolescence is seen as a period of high risk for the emergence of serious mental disorders, with the majority of mental disorders emerging before the age of 25. This underscores the need for early prevention as well as early intervention in youth mental health. This dissertation contributes to research in this field by examining the transdiagnostic mechanism of self-esteem in relation to psychopathology. There is limited experience sampling research regarding self-esteem as a putative mechanism on the pathway (from childhood adversity) to psychosis and this dissertation adds to the existing knowledge by researching self-esteem and psychotic experiences in daily life (Chapters 3 and 4).

Additionally, this dissertation adds to research on EMI. Firstly in the form of the SELFIE trial, as a high-quality trial (Chapter 5). Secondly, since limited theories on EMI are available to date, our process evaluation aimed to add to this gap of knowledge by investigating, within the SELFIE intervention, mechanisms of EMI, and under what circumstances these mechanisms do or do not come into play. Moreover, reflecting on the methodological

aspects of this dissertation, we conclude that conducting mixed methods in EMI research will enhance this field and fill gaps in the current literature (Chapters 6 and 7).

### **Clinical relevance**

This dissertation previously stated that there is a gap between those in need of mental health interventions and those who actually receive care. Chapter 2 describes the working method of an innovative Youth Mental Health team in the Netherlands, thereby strengthening available knowledge on this specifically relevant population, and proposing clinical implications to improve youth mental healthcare to meet the needs of those in need of care. In line with previous findings, the population of this youth mental health team showed high rates of co-morbidity, and the results argue for obtaining a flexible approach to adjust interventions to the varying complexity and changing needs of this patient group.

The knowledge obtained in this dissertation does not only apply to specialized mental healthcare. The SELFIE intervention, if proven (cost-)effective, seems to be equipped for prevention and/or early intervention, since this dissertation points towards the transdiagnostic components to be best applicable to youth experiencing less severe mental disorders. This would imply offering the SELFIE intervention to youth (not yet) in aid of specialized mental healthcare, through for example @ease, an easy-access service for youth (based on the Australian headspace) in the Netherlands. The aforementioned findings are highly relevant in the prevention of mental disorders and the effective timing of interventions. Further, an important finding of clinical relevance is the supportive context of the intervention delivered as guided by a SELFIE therapist. Therefore, when implementing the SELFIE intervention in the context of public mental healthcare (rather than specialized mental healthcare), the guided principle should stay intact and not be discarded due to for example costs. It could be inferred that this does not solely apply to the SELFIE intervention, however, this remains to be examined in different types of EMIs in future research. These findings may guide the implementation of alternative interventions effectively in the coming years, enhancing efficiency and cost-effectiveness in reforming youth mental healthcare.

### **Target group**

Due to its scientific impact, it seems reasonable to argue that the findings of this dissertation are relevant to researchers, both in the field of early intervention and transdiagnostic mechanisms, as well as in the field of developing and implementing EMIs. The clinical implications are in themselves relevant for clinicians and patients in proposing clinical directions and further, by presenting intervention components and their mechanisms, potentially enhancing one's therapeutic reasoning. In addition, individuals seeking ways to improve their mental health might also take interest in the results since these underscore

the role of self-esteem in mental well-being in general. Lastly, policymakers on (youth) mental healthcare may find relevance in the results providing insights applicable to choices regarding content, timing, and mode of delivery of mental healthcare interventions.

### **Dissemination of knowledge**

The findings of this dissertation have been presented and shared nationally during for example the Dutch annual conference of Transition Psychiatry (Jaarcongres Transitiepsychiatrie). Concerning the training of clinical psychiatrists, the presented results have informed the publication of a module on transitional psychiatry (AccreDidact). As far as the SELFIE study is concerned, participants, the SELFIE therapists, and the involved mental health centers were and continue to be updated by annual newsletters and social media updates. In addition, a Dutch actress in a youth television series was attracted as an ambassador for the SELFIE study. In that role, she recorded several podcasts on mental health and the SELFIE study and disseminated our research updates to her 27,5k social media followers. Items on the SELFIE study have been published on paper in local freely available magazines, such as 'Hecht' (a magazine from the MUMC+ that is delivered to all home addresses in South Limburg), 'Observant' (an independent university magazine of Maastricht University), and orally presented at collaborating mental health care institutions such as at a research symposium at Mondriaan.

Presentations at several international scientific conferences (such as the International Conference on Early Intervention in Mental Health (IEPA) in 2023, Lausanne, European Society of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry (ESCAP) meetings in 2019 (Vienna) and 2022 (Maastricht), the DGPPN Kongress in Berlin in 2019, or the International Association of Youth Mental Health (IAYMH) conferences in 2019 (Brisbane) and 2022 (Copenhagen) facilitate dissemination of the research findings internationally and open up potential future collaborations.