

## The Role of Self-Esteem in Individuals Experiencing Toxic Relationships

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### ABSTRACT

A toxic relationship is an interpersonal relationship characterized by unhealthy interaction patterns and the potential for negative psychological impacts on individuals such as low self-esteem. This study aims to systematically examine the role of self-esteem in individuals experiencing toxic relationships through a systematic literature review (SLR). The review process followed the PRISMA guidelines, with planning, implementation, and reporting stages. A literature search strategy was conducted in several scientific databases, namely Ebsco, ERIC, SagePub, ResearchGate, Taylor & Francis Online, and Wiley Online Library using the keywords self-esteem, self-worth, and toxic relationships. Of the 286 articles identified, 10 met the inclusion criteria for further analysis. The synthesis results show that self-esteem has three main roles: as a factor in an individual's vulnerability to involvement in toxic relationships, as a psychological consequence of unhealthy relationship experiences, and as a protective factor that increases an individual's resilience and psychological well-being. Individuals with low self-esteem are more vulnerable to maintaining detrimental relationships, while high self-esteem contributes to adaptive coping skills, psychological recovery, and the formation of healthier relationships. These findings emphasize the importance of psychological interventions based on strengthening self-esteem as a preventive and curative strategy for victims of toxic relationships.

**Keywords :** *Self-esteem, Toxic Relationship, Psychological Well-being*

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## INTRODUCTION

In everyday life, every individual requires interaction with others to fulfill their social needs. This occurs because humans are known as social creatures (Ismail, 2019). Social interactions usually begin with relationships with family members, schoolmates, coworkers, and partners. The presence of a partner can motivate individuals to engage in activities and serve as a positive motivator. However, conversely, individuals can feel restricted, stressed, and threatened by their partners if the relationship is unhealthy romantically (Setianingrum & Kelly, 2023). Creating good and healthy relationships can be achieved through open communication, empathy, and social support. However, not all relationships are ideal; a lack of empathy, inconspicuous communication, and inadequate social support can lead individuals to become trapped in toxic relationships (Safinatunnaja et al., 2025).

Relationship patterns that involve too much conflict can be categorized as toxic. A toxic relationship is considered undesirable, one that no longer provides comfort for

both parties. This disturbing discomfort can lead to mutual harm (Saskia et al., 2023). A toxic relationship refers to a relationship in which at least one party, or even both, feels unloved, unsupported, frequently belittled, misunderstood, or even experiences physical or emotional discomfort (Agustini & Musslifah, 2024). Toxic relationships cannot be ignored (Setiawan C Milati, 2022). Relationships that fall into the toxic relationship category can stem from minor issues but have long-term impacts (Nabila et al., 2024). The previous description supports that individuals experiencing toxic relationships are quite disadvantaged.

Based on data from SIMFONI-PPA (Online Information System for the Protection of Women and Children) and reports from the Ministry of Women's Empowerment and Child Protection and the National Commission on Violence Against Women (Komnas Perempuan) for 2024-2025, the rate of physical and sexual violence against unmarried women reached 42.7%. This data shows that violence in dating relationships is a significant percentage. And of the 42.7% of the data, it is explained that 34.4% of the violence is dominated by sexual violence (KemenPPPA, 2024). Violence in dating, often known as toxic relationships, generally creates a damaging psychological dynamic where victims experience various forms of violence ranging from verbal, physical, to sexual, which systematically erode their mental well-being. Individuals in these toxic relationships are often trapped in a manipulative cycle; the perpetrator provides false affection after committing violence, which triggers the victim to continue to tolerate the bad treatment in order to maintain the relationship. As a result, continuous psychological pressure such as strict activity control and sexual harassment causes victims to experience trauma, stress, and deep feelings of self-blame. This condition ultimately destroys the self-esteem and self-worth of the victims, making them feel helpless, inferior, and even have difficulty concentrating in their academic life (Khotimah et al., 2023; Tisyara & Valentina, 2024).

Furthermore, there are several other real impacts of toxic relationships, including making it difficult for couples to develop, making the relationship unhealthy and tending towards harm, discomfort, and a decreased sense of security due to intense psychological pressure (Parinsi & Huwae, 2022). Other studies have shown that toxic relationships contribute to decreased self-esteem, which further worsens psychological well-being (Putri & Huwae, 2025). Toxic relationships can lead to internal conflict, which can negatively impact psychological health. This is reinforced by previous research that suggests that individuals experiencing toxic relationships tend to have decreased self-esteem and life expectancy (Julianto et al., 2020). Several previous descriptions indicate that toxic relationships have the potential to significantly impact a person's psychological well-being.

Further review reveals that several factors contribute to unhealthy or toxic relationships. Among the internal factors that strongly motivate individuals in toxic relationships are self-esteem, personality, and sexual drive (Setianingrum & Kelly, 2023). Self-esteem is the result of self-evaluation expressed through one's attitude (Pantjo'u & Kusumiati, 2024). Previous research has found that self-esteem is an important predictor of toxic relationships. Individuals with low self-esteem are often affected by past violence or by family disharmony, making them susceptible to becoming trapped in toxic relationships. Low self-esteem can lead individuals to engage in toxic relationships

due to feelings of unworthiness for a healthy relationship or fear of losing their partner (Setianingrum & Kelly, 2023).

Several previous research findings support the influence of self-esteem on toxic relationships. These results indicate that higher self-esteem leads to lower levels of toxic relationships, and vice versa (Setianingrum & Kelly, 2023). Self-esteem also has a significant positive relationship with psychological well-being. Previous findings indicate that the higher a person's self-esteem, the higher their perceived psychological well-being, even among those involved in toxic relationships (Putri & Huwae, 2025). This is evidenced by worsening emotional states and obstacles to self-development, as well as decreased self-esteem caused by feelings of unappreciation and loss of direction in life (Kurniawati et al., 2025).

Self-esteem is the key to recovery and growth in toxic relationships. With strong self-esteem, a person is able to accept the past, focus on their potential, and ignore negative influences for the sake of personal growth. This not only triggers positive emotions and confidence in decision-making but also shapes a more courageous, flexible, and active individual in building healthier social relationships (Pantjo'u & Kusumiati, 2024). Based on the previous discussion, it is known that the benefits of self-esteem for individuals involved in toxic relationships are quite significant. This review aims to examine the role of self-esteem in individuals experiencing toxic relationships. To achieve this goal, this review uses a systematic literature review (SLR) to obtain a comprehensive synthesis of previous research findings. This review also has a specific objective to examine in more depth the contribution of self-esteem to individuals when facing social problems such as toxic relationships.

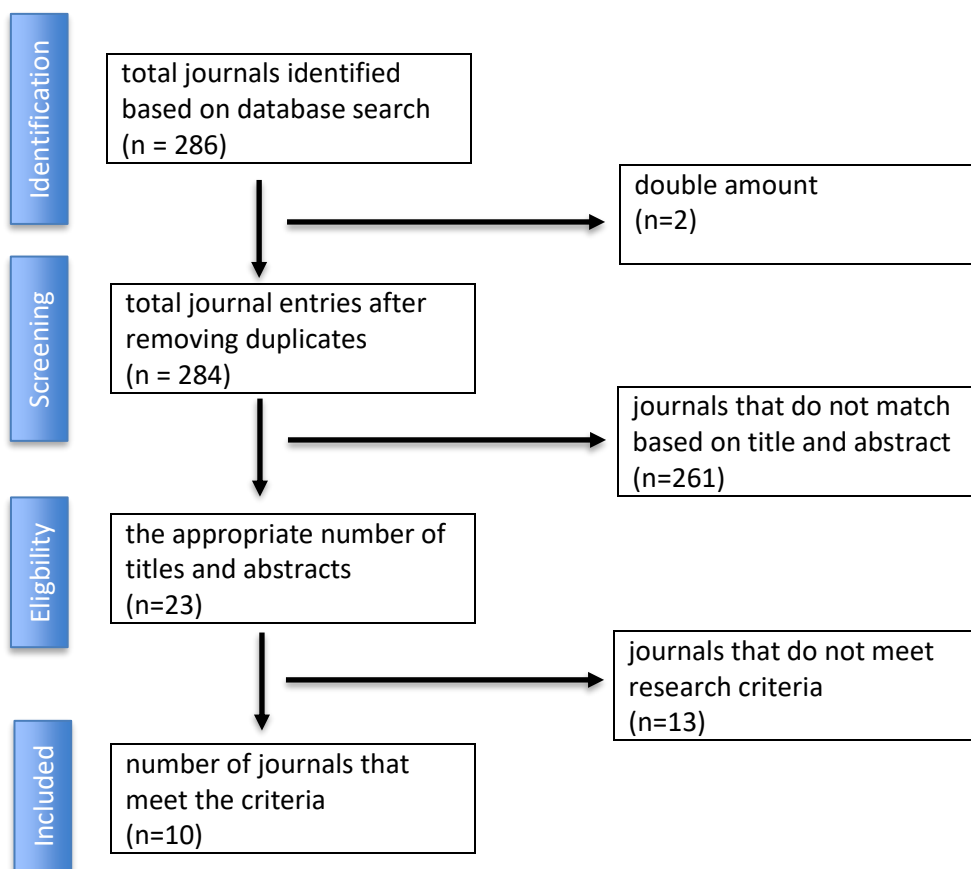
## **METHOD**

The systematic review process generally involves three main stages: planning, implementation, and reporting. The planning stage includes the formulation of objectives and the preparation of the review protocol. Furthermore, the implementation stage includes the identification and search of literature, selection of relevant studies, quality assessment, and data extraction and synthesis. The final stage is reporting, which is the presentation of the review results systematically and transparently according to scientific standards (Page et al., 2021). The author's review planning began by creating a review question using the systematic review question formulation, namely SPIDER (Sample, Phenomenon of Interest, Design, Evaluation, Research Type). The review question in this review was, "What is the role of self-esteem in individuals experiencing toxic relationships?" Next, the author determined the search terms and designed the search protocol. The author obtained terms taken from the review question and expanded them to create a comprehensive search term list. The search words used were, "Self-esteem," "role," "self-esteem," "victim of toxic relationship," and "relationship." These search words were used to search for articles in the databases Ebsco, Eric, Sagepub, ResearchGate, Taylor & Francis Online, and Wiley Online Library. The next stage is that all journals are checked for duplication by the authors using Mendeley and Rayyan.

The author screened all journals that had passed the duplication check based on the title and abstract. Journals that had passed the title and abstract screening were

then analyzed based on the full version of the journal. After selecting from 286 journals found, 10 journals were obtained that discussed the role of self-esteem in individuals experiencing toxic relationships. The journal selection flow chart can be seen in Figure 1. The author determined the limitations in this review, namely: (1) journals discussing self-esteem in individuals experiencing toxic relationships (2) quantitative and qualitative research types (3) Indonesian and English language journals, and (4) research conducted between 2025 and 2026. Journals that were not included in the criteria were: (1) journals discussing self-esteem but not with the subject of toxic relationships (2) articles with the type of review, report, book, literature review, and research whose methods were not clearly described. This review will be explained in depth by paying attention to the writing guidelines.

**Figure 1 PRISMA Graph for Journal Selection Flow**



**Table 1. The role of self-esteem in individuals experiencing toxic relationships**

No	Author	Subject	Findings
1	(Sari C Widjanar ko, 2025)	Individuals aged 18 to 24 who have experienced toxic dating relationships	There is a significant positive relationship between social support and self-esteem with resilience in victims of toxic relationships so this hypothesis is accepted.

2	(Mediasari et al., 2025)	Individuals aged 18 to 25 who are or have been in an unhealthy dating relationship	These findings suggest that despite being in unhealthy relationships, many individuals maintain a positive self-perception (self-esteem). Furthermore, cognitive coping strategies such as reinterpretation and social support from friends and family play a significant role in maintaining self-esteem.
3	(Islami & Rini, 2026)	Active UMS students aged 18 to 25 years and have been in a toxic relationship	The results of the analysis show that there is a very significant relationship between self-esteem and social support with the resilience of victims of toxic relationships in students.
4	(Nurhidayati, 2025)	35 Subjects who experienced verbal violence (toxic relationship)	A partner's trust and confidence diminish with the level of verbal abuse. The lack of confidence caused by verbal abuse from a partner leads to self-doubt and decreased self-esteem.
5	(Noviyanti & Roswiyani, 2025)	10 young adult women aged 20-40 years who have experienced verbal violence in relationships with their partners (toxic relationships)	This study confirms that verbal violence in unhealthy relationships can significantly lower the self-esteem of young adult women.
6	(Pertiwani & Scarynovi, 2025)	A total of 116 victims of domestic violence were aged 18 to 25 years	The results of the study indicate that self-esteem plays a mediating role in the influence of spirituality on the resilience of young adult victims of OGBV (0.8463 $p < 0.05$ ). Practically, strengthening spiritual aspects can be an effective intervention to increase self-esteem and resilience in OGBV survivors.
7	(Wahyuni et al., 2025)	142 students who have characteristics of being in a toxic relationship	There is a significant negative relationship between the variable self-confidence and toxic relationships
8	(Kurniawati et al., 2025)	Adult women who experience toxic relationships	Research shows that toxic relationships negatively impact life satisfaction and self-esteem.

	al., 2025)		This is evidenced by a decline in emotional well-being and obstacles to self-development, as well as a decrease in self-esteem caused by feelings of unappreciation and a loss of direction in life.
9	(Putri & Huwae, 2025)	A total of 71 students have experienced toxic relationships	The findings showed a significant positive relationship between self-esteem and psychological well-being ( $r=0.615$ ; $p<0.01$ ). Self-esteem was also found to be significantly and positively related to all dimensions of psychological well-being. These results indicate that the higher the level of self-esteem an individual has, the higher their perceived psychological well-being, even when they are involved in an unhealthy relationship. This study underscores the importance of strengthening self-esteem and increasing social support as important strategies to maintain and improve the psychological well-being of students who are victims of toxic relationships.
10	(Ananda et al., 2026)	A total of 392 respondents aged 18 to 25 years who had been in a toxic relationship	The results of the study showed a significant negative influence between self-esteem and toxic relationships. This finding emphasizes the importance of strengthening self-esteem to prevent involvement in toxic dating relationships.

## FINDING AND DISCUSSION

### RESEARCH RESULT

Studies of self-esteem consistently show that low self-esteem, in particular, can make it difficult for individuals to cope with themselves. This not only harms individuals in their personal lives but also significantly impacts social relationships if they are unable to manage self-esteem effectively. Poor self-esteem generally leads to individuals becoming entangled in toxic social relationships. In general, individuals experiencing toxic relationships will experience psychological problems. These problems can range

from simple issues to complex ones such as loss of self-confidence or feelings of inferiority. Literature consistently shows that individuals with low self-esteem are more likely to engage in unhealthy romantic relationships. Low self-esteem is associated with negative self-evaluations, a strong need for external validation, and a fear of interpersonal rejection. These conditions make individuals more tolerant of manipulative behavior, emotional control, and psychological abuse in relationships.

Scientifically, achieving self-esteem is achieved through a harmonious integration of self-efficacy, positive social support, and individual competency, enabling individuals to have a high subjective evaluation of their self-worth. From a social psychology perspective, a stable level of self-esteem serves as an internal defense mechanism that enhances self-adjustment and coping with stress, enabling individuals to resist deviant behavioral urges and prevent various social problems such as depression, aggression, and other unwise actions such as becoming entangled in toxic relationships. (Ariyanti & Purwoko, 2023; Nabilla et al., 2024; Widad & Arjanggal, 2021) In this review, the authors synthesize ten empirical studies showing that self-esteem functions not only as an individual variable but also as a psychological mechanism that plays a role in the stages of vulnerability, relational experiences, and the individual recovery process.

The research results of Ananda et al. (2026) confirmed a significant negative relationship between self-esteem and toxic relationships. This finding indicates that low self-esteem reduces an individual's ability to set interpersonal boundaries and objectively assess relationship quality. In other words, self-esteem functions as an initial psychological factor that determines an individual's vulnerability to dysfunctional relationships. Conceptually, these results support self-evaluation theory, which states that an individual's perception of their own worth influences social relationship patterns and decisions to maintain interpersonal relationships. In addition to being a vulnerability factor, toxic relationships also act as a source of chronic interpersonal stress that contributes to decreased self-esteem. The reviewed studies indicate that experiences of verbal abuse, emotional invalidation, and partner dominance result in the internalization of negative self-criticism.

The problem of unhealthy relationships or dating violence (DV) experienced by female students covers a wide spectrum of violence, from verbal abuse and possessive behavior that controls activities, to physical and sexual violence. Perpetrators often dominate relationships by imposing their will and making threats if their wishes are not met, which creates tremendous psychological stress for the victims. Ironically, victims are often trapped in these relationships because of the perpetrator's apparent "good side," such as giving affection after a conflict or closeness to the perpetrator's family, so that the victim tends to tolerate the bad treatment and continues to endure the detrimental situation.

This toxic psychological dynamic slowly erodes an individual's mental health, causing anxiety disorders, stress, trauma, and even depression. Based on Galtung's theory, the incompatibility of goals (contradiction) responded to with negative emotions (attitude) and aggressive behaviors (behavior) leaves victims feeling constantly depressed and insecure. As a result, victims begin to blame themselves for the violence they experience, ultimately undermining their self-confidence and lowering their self-

esteem to rock bottom. This loss of self-esteem not only disrupts their personal quality of life but also hinders academic productivity as victims lose their ability to concentrate.

Research by Nurhidayati (2025) and Noviyanthi & Roswiyani (2025) shows that exposure to verbal abuse leads to decreased self-confidence and the emergence of doubts about one's identity. Meanwhile, Kurniawati et al. (2025) found that toxic relationships are associated with decreased life satisfaction and obstacles to self-actualization. These findings demonstrate a bidirectional relationship between self-esteem and toxic relationships. Low self-esteem increases the risk of involvement in toxic relationships, while the experience of toxic relationships simultaneously strengthens the degradation of self-esteem. This dynamic creates a maladaptive psychological cycle that is difficult to break without psychological intervention and social support.

From a theoretical perspective, the findings of this study reinforce the view that self-esteem serves as a protective factor against the negative impacts of unhealthy interpersonal relationships. Individuals with high self-esteem tend to be better able to set relationship boundaries, make independent decisions, and maintain positive self-evaluations when faced with pressure from their partners. Conversely, individuals with low self-esteem are more susceptible to emotional dependence, seek validation from their partners, and tolerate harmful behaviors to maintain the relationship. Longitudinal research suggests that self-esteem and romantic relationship quality are reciprocal, with low self-esteem increasing relationship conflict, while prolonged conflict can also decrease an individual's self-esteem (Richter & Finn, 2021).

Furthermore, the synthesis results show that self-esteem not only acts as a risk factor and consequence of toxic relationships but also contributes to an individual's ability to recover from these experiences. Individuals with high self-esteem tend to demonstrate greater adaptability in the face of psychological stress resulting from unhealthy relationships. Self-esteem helps individuals maintain confidence in their abilities, making it easier to develop adaptive coping strategies and rebuild a healthy social life after experiencing a toxic relationship (Pantjo'u & Kusumiati, 2024; Sari & Widjanarko, 2025).

Other findings suggest that self-esteem is closely linked to psychological well-being. Individuals who are victims of toxic relationships but have high self-esteem tend to maintain self-acceptance, a clear sense of purpose, and more positive social relationships. This suggests that self-esteem functions as an internal psychological resource that helps individuals cope with emotional distress and restore their psychological well-being (Putri & Huwae, 2025).

Practically, the results of this study indicate that intervention programs oriented towards strengthening self-esteem, such as psychoeducation, cognitive-behavioral counseling, self-compassion training, and increased social support, have the potential to help individuals reduce their vulnerability to toxic relationships and accelerate the psychological recovery process after leaving an unhealthy relationship. These findings align with the view that the quality of interpersonal relationships and self-esteem mutually influence each other, so that improving self-esteem can be both a preventive and curative strategy in addressing the impact of toxic relationships (Wood et al., 2024; Richter & Finn, 2021).

## **DISCUSSION**

Literature synthesis shows that self-esteem plays a key protective role for victims of toxic relationships. Research by Sari & Widjanarko (2025) and Islami & Rini (2026) demonstrates a positive relationship between self-esteem and psychological resilience. Individuals with high self-esteem tend to have more stable emotional regulation, use adaptive coping strategies, and are able to constructively reinterpret negative experiences. Mediasari et al. (2025) show that social support and the process of reinterpreting relational experiences help individuals maintain self-esteem even in unhealthy relationships. This confirms that self-esteem is dynamic and can be strengthened through supportive social interactions. Thus, self-esteem functions not only as an individual factor but also as a result of the interaction between relational experiences and an individual's social context.

The analyzed literature consistently shows that self-esteem contributes significantly to the psychological well-being of individuals who are victims of toxic relationships. Putri & Huwae (2025) found a positive relationship between self-esteem and all dimensions of psychological well-being. Self-esteem acts as an internal psychological resource that enables individuals to maintain a sense of self, reduce emotional distress, and increase hope for the future. Furthermore, research by Pertiwi & Scarvanovi (2025) shows that self-esteem functions as a mediator between spirituality and resilience in victims of relationship-based violence. These findings broaden the understanding that enhancing self-esteem can be an effective intervention pathway in the psychological recovery process of victims of toxic relationships.

Although the literature demonstrates consistent findings, several methodological limitations should be noted. First, most studies utilize cross-sectional designs, so the causal relationship between self-esteem and toxic relationships cannot be elucidated longitudinally. Second, the predominance of young adults and college students in the sample limits the generalizability of the findings to other age groups. Third, the use of self-report instruments has the potential to bias respondents' subjective perceptions. Furthermore, studies examining cultural factors in toxic relationships are still relatively limited, despite the important role cultural context plays in shaping individuals' perceptions of romantic relationships and tolerance for unhealthy behaviors.

## **CONCLUSION**

The synthesis results show that self-esteem has three main roles: as a factor in an individual's vulnerability to involvement in toxic relationships, as a psychological consequence of unhealthy relationship experiences, and as a protective factor that increases an individual's resilience and psychological well-being. Individuals with low self-esteem are more vulnerable to maintaining detrimental relationships, while high self-esteem contributes to adaptive coping skills, psychological recovery, and the formation of healthier relationships. These findings emphasize the importance of psychological interventions based on strengthening self-esteem as a preventive and curative strategy for victims of toxic relationships.

Overall, the evidence synthesized in this review demonstrates a consistent pattern across studies, showing that self-esteem is both a predictor and an outcome of

relationship quality. This reciprocal relationship suggests that efforts to improve self-esteem may contribute to healthier interpersonal relationships, while preventing toxic relationship experiences may simultaneously preserve and enhance individuals' self-esteem over time.

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