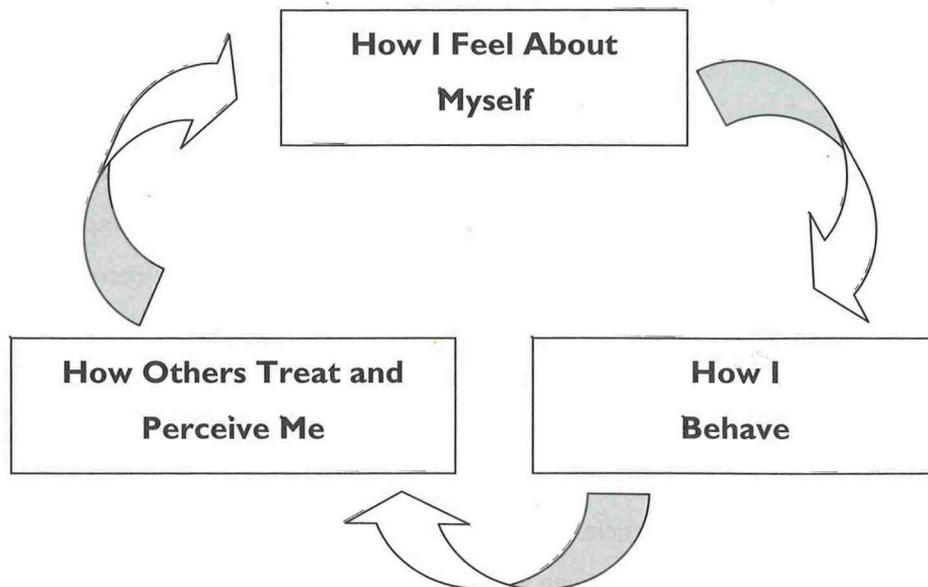


Exercise 2.1 - The Cycle Of Self-Esteem



This cycle is simple to explain and easy to complete. It offers girls the opportunity to reflect on the relationship between their feelings, their behaviour and how they are perceived and treated by others when their self-esteem is high, and when it is low.

So, when we are feeling good about ourselves, confident, strong, positive and valuable, we are likely to behave in healthy and self-loving ways. For example, we may keep physically fit by going to the gym or swimming, we may seek out the company of good friends or make sure we look after ourselves well and give ourselves regular treats. In turn, people then are likely to observe our positive behaviour and to perceive us as though we are worthy of respect. The cycle spins round again, because being perceived and treated in this way is going to result in our feeling even better about ourselves. And so it goes on, hopefully in a continuing upwards spiral.

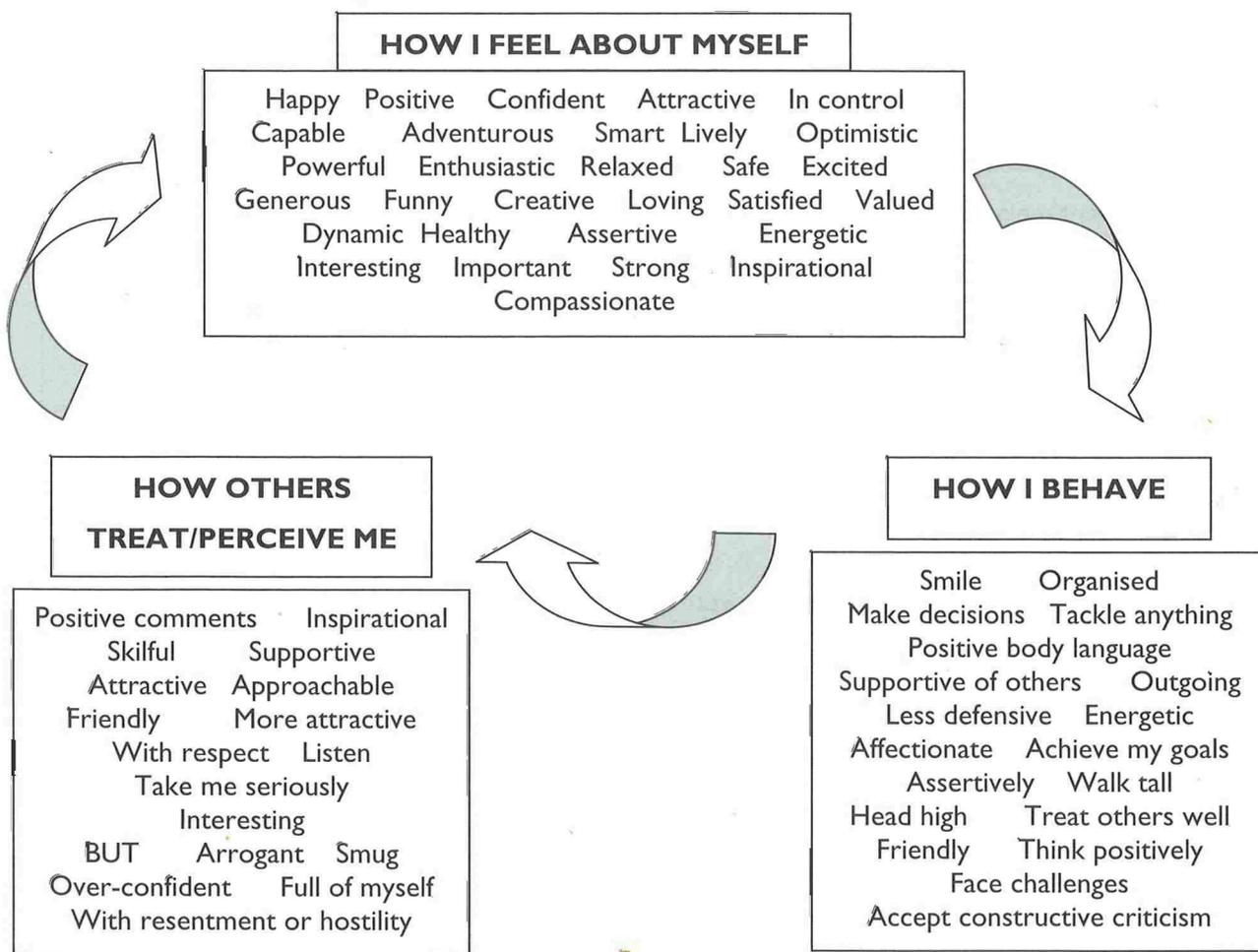
If on the other hand we feel bad about ourselves - full of self-loathing and negative thoughts, self-blaming, weak and pathetic - then we are going to act this out in our behaviour. Maybe we will be aggressive to others, or morose and withdrawn, or we may take self-destructive and reckless risks perhaps related to using alcohol or drugs, or sex or smoking. On the same cyclical model, people are then probably going to perceive us as chaotic and problematic, hostile and difficult and will treat us accordingly. Or they may take advantage of our weakness and vulnerability by using, manipulating, exploiting and abusing us - which will in turn make us feel bad about ourselves, and so the negative downward spiral continues.

Understanding our own dynamics and being clear how our high and low self-esteem cycles spin round means that we are not simply victim and prey to these forces. It gives us some control over them, so that we can proactively start taking charge of our lives in more positive ways. So for girls this exercise can provide a vital first step in understanding the links between how they *feel* and how they *behave*, and getting to know this dynamic will be a key stage in their emotional development.

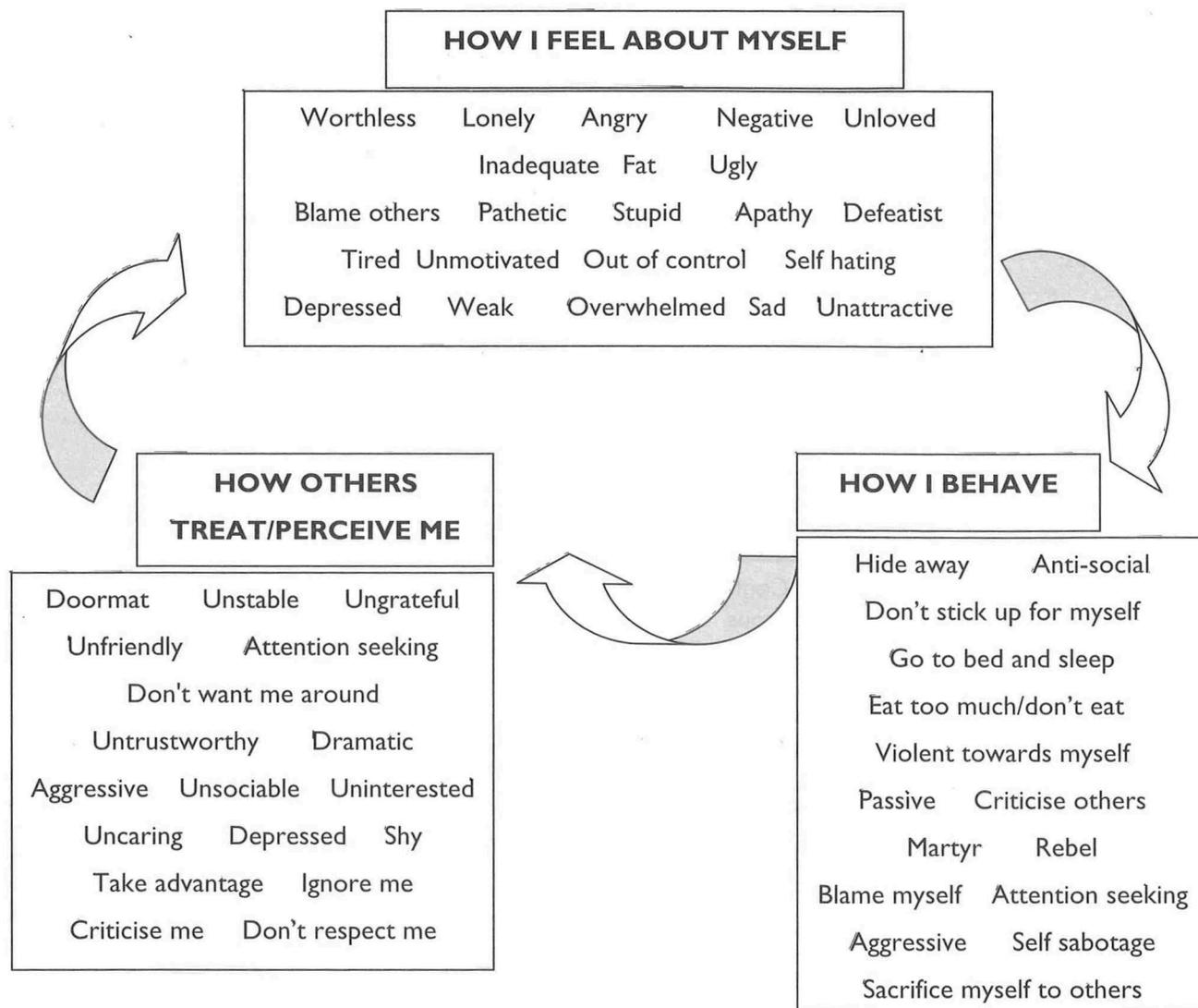
In getting girls to complete their 'cycle', you can either provide the bare bones of its outline on a piece of paper (as above) and ask them to fill in their words and phrases in. Or you can do it on a flip-chart if this is a collective effort.

A Ask each girl, or each group working together, to do two separate 'brainstorms' or 'thought-showers' of all the different words and phrases they can think of to describe their feelings, behaviours and how others treat them; the first one for when their self-esteem is high, and second for when it is low. The results are likely to look something like this:

When My Self Esteem is High



When My Self-Esteem Is Low



Once they have done their cycles discuss them together and draw out some of the following questions:

- Were there any surprises in these for them?
- Which cycle was easier to do? Why do they think that was?
- What was the effect on their mood, emotions and body language of dealing with high and with low self-esteem? For example, people often become more animated and upbeat as they discuss the state of high self-esteem and conversely become low-key, muted and slightly depressed when focusing on low self-esteem. This may tell us something useful about the positive effects of focusing on high self-esteem, which gives us knowledge that we can usefully apply in other settings.
- Did some Backlash creep in? For example, sometimes 'How people perceive/treat me' in the High Self-Esteem cycle includes 'Backlash' terms such as 'pushy', 'arrogant', 'over-confident' and 'threatened by me'. If this happened, it may be helpful to discuss the concept of 'envious attack'. This happens when people resent or

are covertly envious of some aspect of our behaviour or lives. Their response can be to attack and criticise, fuelled by envy rather than appreciating us, which is fuelled by generosity.

- Is there anything they can do to protect themselves from this Backlash or envious attack?
- Will understanding what their feelings and behaviours are like when their self-esteem is low make it more possible for them to identify when this is happening to them? Beginning to get a grip of this dynamic means they will be less likely simply to be steamrolled by a sense of their low self-worth. They can then actually do something to change this state of affairs. Low self-esteem is not inexorable, it can be addressed and raised. So they can use this cycle model like a thermometer, taking their 'temperature' or their 'pulse' in relation to their self-esteem, and making any necessary adjustments.

A Then ask girls to identify some elements from their high self-esteem behaviour, which they could use as 'interrupters' when they realise their self-esteem is low and work on further developing these with them. Pick one or two things from how they behave when their self-esteem is high. So they may know that at this time they are more likely to ring friends, or go swimming or talk to their mum about their feelings, perhaps. If they are aware that these things help them feel good, then encourage them to use them consciously when they're feeling bad, to reverse the spiral and send it spinning back up towards high self-esteem. As Carol Painter says – 'There's nothing like high self-esteem behaviour to beat low self-esteem feelings!'

- Does this cycle give girls any insight into other people's self esteem as manifested by their behaviours? In all of these processes, part of the emotional development work we need to do with girls lies in helping them to gain a sense of 'how other people tick' as well as themselves. This is not to compound the problem of girls taking on a compulsively caring role for others at the expense of their own needs and concerns, but because such activities increase their emotional vocabulary. And this, in turn, will pay positive dividends in terms of their self-esteem.

And Remember.....

"We don't see things as they are, we see things as we are"

Anais Nin