

## Chapter 3

# Self-Esteem and How It Develops

What leads to self-esteem? The research is very clear. If you want to have self-esteem, it helps to choose your parents well. Children with self-esteem tend to have parents who model self-esteem. These parents consistently are loving toward their children, expressing interest in the child's life and friends, giving time and encouragement. I am reminded of the man who said to his neighbor, "Why did you spend all day with your son fixing that bike, when the bike shop could have fixed it in an hour?" The neighbor replied, "Because I am building a son, not fixing a bike."

Parents of children with self-esteem have high standards and expectations, but the expectations are clear, reasonable, consistent, and given with support and encouragement. The disciplinary style is democratic, which is to say that the child's opinions and individuality are respected, but the parents make the final decisions on matters of importance.

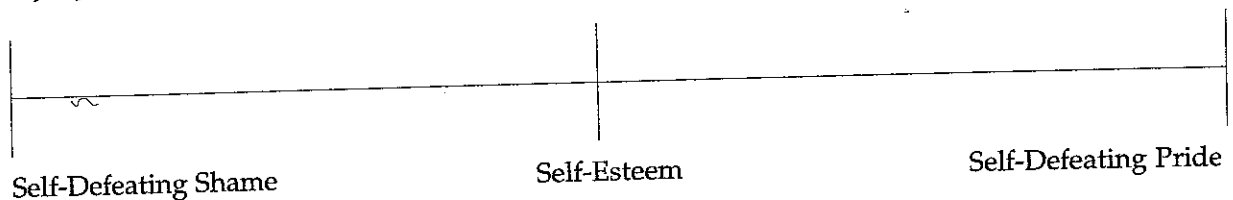
In short, the parents give messages that say, in effect, "I trust you, but I also recognize that you are not perfect. Still, I love you, and therefore will take time to guide you, set limits, discipline you, and expect the best of you because I believe in you and value you." These messages are far different from the distrust conveyed by the authoritarian parent, or the lack of caring conveyed by the permissive parent.

Some individuals have none of these parental antecedents, yet still have self-esteem. So this leads to a most important question: In the absence of these antecedents, how does one build self-esteem? Most assume we get value from what we do, from skills, character traits, talents, or acceptance of others. Again, I suggest that none of these make a good starting place for self-esteem building. Where, then, do we start? Let's begin by examining what self-esteem is.

## What Is Self-Esteem?

In principle, self-esteem is generally stable, but it can fluctuate, even from day to day, according to thought patterns, which can be influenced by, among other things: physical health, chemistry, appearance, and relationships. The fact that self-esteem can fluctuate is reason for optimism, because it suggests that self-esteem can change.

The definition of self-esteem is central to our journey. *Self-esteem* is a realistic, appreciative opinion of oneself. *Realistic* means accurate and honest. *Appreciative* implies positive feelings and liking. Some speak of high and low self-esteem, but this makes self-esteem seem like a numbers game that is competitive and comparative. It's preferable to say simply that people possess self-esteem when they have a realistic and appreciative opinion of themselves. The figure below clarifies the meaning of self-esteem. Self-esteem is squarely between *self-defeating shame* and *self-defeating pride*.



People with *self-defeating pride* are trying to be more than human. They are arrogant, and narcissistic, which means that they think they are better and more important than others as a person. Their view of others is vertical, or comparative, which is to say that to be on top means others must be below them. Self-defeating pride is often rooted in insecurity. Explore the lives of famous dictators, and you often find a complete lack of the parental antecedents that were discussed earlier.

People with *self-defeating shame*, or *self-defeating humility*, believe that they are less than human. They view people vertically, and see themselves as the dust of the earth. They hold an unrealistic and unappreciative opinion of themselves.

By contrast to the above views, people with *self-esteem* believe they are neither more or less than human. Knowing their faults and rough edges, they still are deeply and quietly glad to be who they are (Briggs 1977). They are like the good friend who knows you well and likes you anyway because they recognize the goodness, excellence, and potential that coexist alongside imperfections. People with self-esteem view others as equals, on a level or horizontal plane.

## Concepts Related to Self-Esteem

Self-esteem is often ignored because it and its related concepts can be somewhat confusing and complex. Let's disentangle some of this confusion by clarifying concepts that are related to self-esteem.

## Identity

Identity answers the questions: "Who am I? What defines me and my essential character?" Identity provides a sense of oneself and one's individuality (e.g., a woman's identity derived only from her role as a wife; a paraplegic's identity defined, not by a crippled body, but by the real or inner self).

## Appreciate

To think well of, to value, and to enjoy; to recognize gratefully; to *rightly* estimate the quality or worth of someone or something.

## Accept

To receive (i.e., to take in as one's own) favorably and with pleasure; approve; believe in; respond to favorably. *Self-acceptance* is believing in oneself, and receiving oneself favorably and with pleasure. One may accurately acknowledge one's weaknesses, be determined to improve, and still accept oneself. The internal dialogue might be, "I acknowledge my faults. I love myself, though not necessarily all of my behaviors. As I improve my behavior, then I can feel good about me *and* my behavior."

## Self-Confidence

Usually refers to a belief in one's abilities; related to competence and self-efficacy. As one's competence increases, one's confidence increases. In the broader and deeper sense, *self-confidence* is a belief in oneself as a person, leading to a general sense of "I can do it." Self-confident people might say to themselves: "Because anyone can do just about anything—given the time, practice, experience, resources, etc.—why can't I? I may not succeed completely or quickly, but the direction will be desirable." Demonstrating competence is satisfying, but it is an outgrowth of self-worth, not a way to establish it.

Competence and confidence correlate with self-esteem, but are not causal. If we base feelings of worth on competence and achievements, then if we fail there is no worth.

## Pride

English minister Charles Caleb Colton (1780–1832) wrote: "Pride makes some men ridiculous but prevents others from being so." There are two sides to pride as it relates to self-esteem: self-defeating and healthy.

As discussed previously, *self-defeating pride* is the attitude that one is superior, more valuable, or more important as a person than others. Such people also perceive themselves as more capable, self-sufficient, or infallible than they actually are. Synonyms for self-defeating pride include: haughtiness, arrogance, conceit, pretentiousness (i.e., trying to impress), vanity (i.e., excessive desire or need to be admired), narcissism (i.e., selfish; grandiose sense of self; exploitive). Self-defeating pride is typically rooted in fear (as in fear of being vulnerable) and/or the need to defend oneself.

*Healthy pride* is a realistic sense of one's own dignity or worth; self-respect; gratitude and delight in one's achievements, talents, service, or membership (i.e., in family, race, etc.).

## *Humility*

There also are two sides to humility: self-defeating humility and healthy humility. *Self-defeating humility* is an abject lack of self-respect (e.g., "dust of the earth"); spineless submissiveness; and contemptibility.

*Healthy humility*, on the other hand, involves an absence of self-defeating pride; the recognition of one's imperfections or weaknesses; consciousness of one's own shortcomings and ignorance; teachable. It is the realization that all are of equal worth. Healthy humility relates to meek behavior (in the positive sense), meaning mild, patient, and not easily stirred to anger.

Healthy humility and healthy pride coexist in the person with self-esteem. Humility because one realizes how much one still has to learn; pride in recognizing the dignity and worth one shares with all other humans.

The following amusing story (De Mello 1990) relates to one lacking in healthy humility:

A guru advised a scholar: "Go out in the rain and raise your arms upward. That'll bring you a revelation."

The next day the scholar reported back. "When I followed your advice, water flowed down my neck," he told the guru. "I felt like a complete fool."

"For the first day, that's quite a revelation," replied the guru.

## *Selfishness*

Some mistakenly equate selfishness with self-esteem. So let's state an important principle: The purpose of self-esteem is to transcend the self. Self-consciousness is a painful situation that keeps one's focus inward. Healing the pain with love enables one's focus to expand outward, making one freer to love others and enjoy life. The person with self-esteem loves by choice from a secure base (as opposed, say, to a codependent individual who possesses neither self-esteem nor choice). Thus, building self-esteem warrants our best efforts.

## **Cost/Benefits Analysis**

Some people do not build self-esteem because they don't know how. But others resist building self-esteem, as difficult as that may be to believe, because there are apparent advantages to self-dislike. Before investing the time to build self-esteem, let's do what an effective manager would do before considering a new plan: a cost/benefits analysis. First, list all of the advantages of self-dislike you can think of. When you are finished, list all of the disadvantages. Some examples follow, and then there is a space for you to fill in a list of your own.

### *Examples of Advantages for Self-Dislike*

- No risk. I have no expectations of myself, nor do others. I can be lazy and set low goals. I'll rarely disappoint myself or others.
- The world is predictable. I understand when people don't accept me because I don't accept myself. I understand not having to try.
- Sometimes I get pity and attention, at least initially.
- Self-dislike is a family norm. When I follow the pattern, I feel like I fit in.

- Self-dislike keeps me from developing self-defeating pride.
- It justifies my poor dressing/grooming habits.

### *Examples of Disadvantages of Self-Dislike*

- It is very painful.
- Life is no fun.
- It leads to psychosomatic symptoms and disease.
- It creates a vicious cycle: Because I have a low opinion of myself, I don't try. Then others treat me poorly. They interpret my pessimism and apathy as indicators of incompetence. Their poor treatment of me confirms my low opinion of myself.

### *Your Personal Advantages and Disadvantages*

#### **Pros/Advantages**

(The good thing about self-dislike is ...)

#### **Cons/Disadvantages**

(The bad thing about self-dislike is ...)

### *Benefits of Emotional Change*

This analysis raises some very important questions. The ultimate question, of course, is: Is self-dislike a problem for me in terms of emotional, physical, or social costs? Others are: Are there ways to build self-esteem and still get my desires for attention, help, security, etc., met? Am I willing to risk losing some of the payoffs of self-dislike in order to get the gains of self-esteem? Progress is likely to begin as soon as one decides to count the cost of growth and pay its price.

Some find it helpful to test the waters before beginning to change. Try answering the question: What would be the positive consequences of my having a realistic and appreciative opinion of myself?

Some sample responses include:

- I'd be less susceptible to persuasion.
- I'd be less driven by fear.
- I'd be more motivated by enjoyment and personal satisfaction.
- I'd be happier.

- I'd try/risk more.
- I'd be more at ease with my rough edges and more willing to work on them.
- I'd be happier with my relationships and less likely to stick with partners who aren't worth it.
- I'd be more comfortable with expressing my feelings.
- I'd be less selfish and self-protecting.
- I'd be less questioning of myself and my actions when things go wrong.
- I'd worry less.
- I'd be more likely to be respected and treated well.
- I'd be considered more attractive.
- I'd enjoy life more.
- I'd make better, more objective decisions.
- I'd feel liked for who I am, and not for some phony person I wish I were.

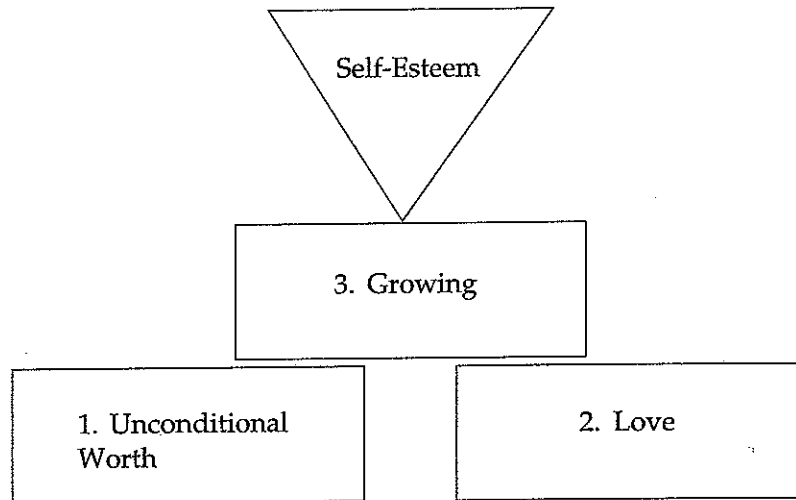
Write your answers below:

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## How to Build Self-Esteem

To change self-esteem is to first understand the factors on which it is built. Self-esteem is based on three sequential factors: (1) unconditional human worth, (2) love, and (3) growing.

### The Foundations of Self-Esteem



While all three factors are essential in building self-esteem, the *sequence* is crucial. Self-esteem is based first on unconditional worth, then love, and then growing. "Growing" (or "coming to flower") refers to moving in the desired direction. Too many people become frustrated because they try to start with growth, and neglect the first two important factors: unconditional worth and love. Without a secure base, self-esteem topples. The process cannot be short-circuited.

The remainder of this book deals sequentially with building the skills necessary to master each of the essential factors of building healthy self-esteem: the section called Factor I in Part II focuses on unconditional human worth, Factor II addresses love, and Factor III focuses on growing.

## Chapter 4

# The Basics of Human Worth

*Unconditional human worth* means that you are important and valuable as a person because your essential, core self is unique, precious, of infinite, eternal, unchanging value, and good. Unconditional human worth implies that you are as precious as any other person.

### Howard's Laws of Human Worth

Unconditional human worth is beautifully described by five axioms, which I call Howard's Laws, based on the work of Claudia A. Howard (1992).

1. All have infinite, internal, eternal, and unconditional worth *as persons*.
2. All have equal worth as people. Worth is not comparative or competitive. Although you might be better at sports, academics, or business, and I might be better in social skills, we both have equal worth as human beings.
3. Externals neither add to nor diminish worth. Externals include things like money, looks, performance, and achievements. These only increase one's *market* or *social* worth. Worth as a person, however, is infinite and unchanging.

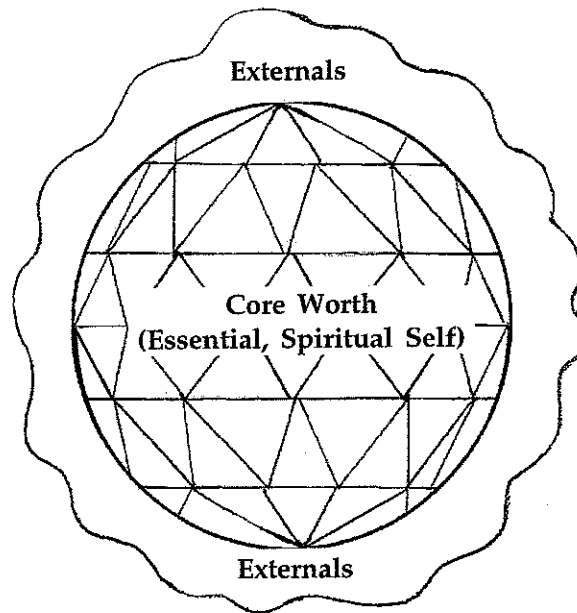


4. Worth is stable and never in jeopardy (even if someone rejects you).
5. Worth doesn't have to be earned or proved. It already exists. Just recognize, accept, and appreciate it.

## The Core Self

The *human core*, sometimes called the essential, spiritual self, is like the European crystal, whose facets so beautifully reflect the sunlight.

### The Core Self



Much like a newborn baby, the core is fundamentally right and whole—complete, but not completed. *Completed* means fully developed and finished. A person is *complete* in the sense that each has every attribute, in embryo, that everyone else has—every attribute that is needed. The core is beautiful, lovable, and full of potential. The inner quality of the core self is demonstrated by this anecdote told by George Durrant (1980), a kind and loving teacher.

One man was wrestling on the floor with his children and he decided he was tired so he faked like he was dead. That's one way you can get a rest. And the little boys were very concerned and one was a little older than the other and pried open his daddy's eye and he said to his little brother with some reassurance, "He's still *in there*."

What's *in there* is the core self. Over time, the core becomes surrounded with externals. Like a dirty film, some externals can hide the core. Other externals, like a halo, can brighten the core and allow its light to be seen or experienced. For example, mistakes or criticism may camouflage the core, making it difficult for one to see and experience one's worth. The love of others helps us feel our worth. A talent shared is one way to express worth. These change the way worth is experienced, not the worth itself.

Some spend their lives trying to look good on the outside to cover up shame, or a feeling of worthlessness, on the inside. If, however, we use externals to fill the empty feeling at the core, we will remain unfulfilled, perhaps always seeking approval, perhaps becoming cynical. Psychiatrists tell us that their offices are filled with people who ask, "Doctor, I am successful. Why am I unhappy?"

It is impossible to earn core worth through personal performance or any other external. It already exists. Consider the following list of externals.

## Worth As a Person Is Independent of Externals

Energy level	Family image
Appearance/Looks	Parents' status or character
Strength	Personality traits
Intelligence	Marriage status
Education	Dates
Gender	Power
Race/Ethnicity/Skin color	Being right
Scholastic achievement/Grades	State of the economy/stock market
Skills	Inexperience
Friendliness	<b>Present Functioning Level</b>
Talents	Attitudes
Creative ability	Daily self-evaluations
Handicaps	Performance
Material advantages	Hygiene/Grooming
Wealth	Sickness/Health
Mistakes	Productivity
Behavior	Resilience
Decisions	Confidence
Positions, Status	Control over events
Physical fitness	Selfishness or selflessness
Manners	Feelings
Net/Market worth	<b>Comparisons</b>
Voice	Competence relative to others (e.g., in sports, salary)
Clothes	<b>Judgments of Others</b>
Car	How many people like you
Spirituality	Others' approval or acceptance
Church activity	How others treat you
Worthiness	
Blessings	

### *Illustrative Examples*

The person with self-esteem beholds and appreciates the core self. This person sees flaws as external to the core, which require attention, developing, nurturing, and/or acceptance when change is not possible. The following four examples illustrate the idea of core worth.

#### **A Spirited Young Boy**

I take courage from a spirited young boy's example. Confined to a wheelchair, he matter-of-factly explained, "A tumor broke the nerve that tells my legs what to do." He knew how to separate worth from externals.

#### **A Former Student**

Another who radiated a quiet inner gladness is Ken Kirk, a former student of mine. He created this poem:

##### **If I Could Be**

If I could be a tree I would  
provide shade for all mankind.

If I could be the sea I would  
be calm for all to travel.

If I could be the sun I would  
provide warmth for all living things.

If I could be the wind I would  
be a cool breeze on a hot summer day.

If I could be the rain I would  
keep the earth fertile.

But, to be any one of these things would be to miss out on all the rest. And this is why,  
if I could be anything I would be nothing more than me.

—Ken Kirk, student

#### **The State of Virginia**

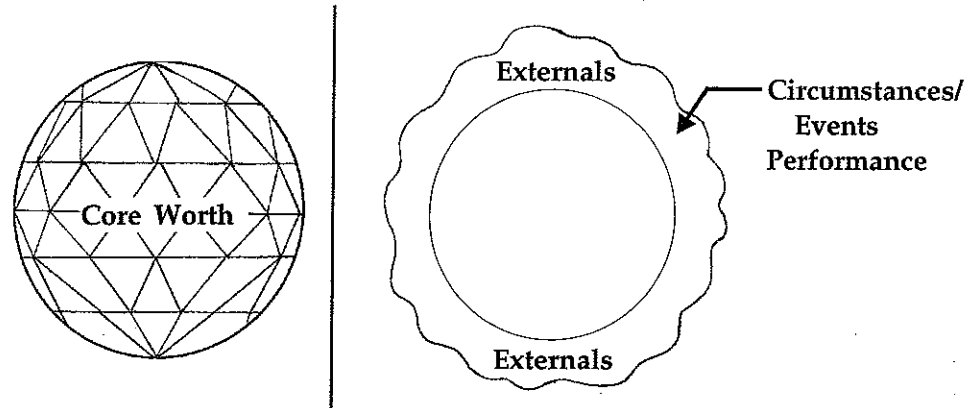
The state of Virginia has several beautiful colonial bed and breakfast inns. Staying in one with a lovely stone fireplace, I beheld an antique wooden duck. Large, plain, unpainted, carved perhaps by a colonial farmer, it added a simple touch of class to the homey room. Near the fireplace was a large log, which was appreciated because the night was chilly. I asked my students which has more worth, the wooden duck or the wooden log? One woman thoughtfully answered, "Their worth is the same. They are just different."

#### **Through the Eyes of a Schoolteacher**

A friend, a schoolteacher, was in a bus with her students. The bus was struck by another bus, resulting in a number of injuries. Afterward, she reflected, "After the accident, I watched the children running around assuming leadership and caring for each other, and then I could truly see their worth." Events can help us to *see* worth, but they neither add to nor diminish core worth.

## Separating Worth from Externals

This is the goal: Separate core worth from externals.

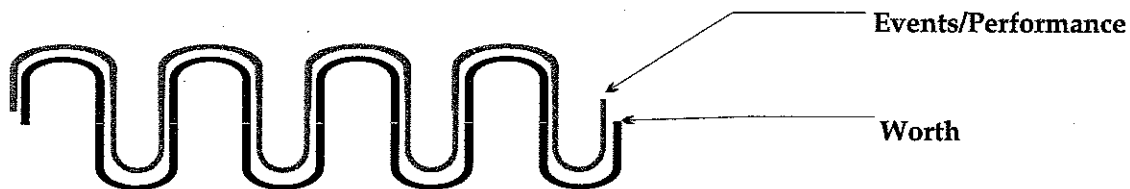


Used by permission Claudia A. Howard, Individual Potential Seminars, as are the next two diagrams.

The goal of separating worth from externals can be difficult in today's culture. The emphasis of today's television programming can convey the message that you are not worthwhile if you are not young, bold, beautiful, or wealthy. Fast-lane living in today's cities conveys the message that you must be high powered and successful to be somebody. Taken to the unrestrained extreme, today's work ethic can suggest that one loses worth if one is sleeping, vacationing, or not producing.

Let's consider two ways to look at human worth: Proposition one: Worth equals externals. Proposition two: Worth is separate from externals.

### *When Worth Equals Externals*

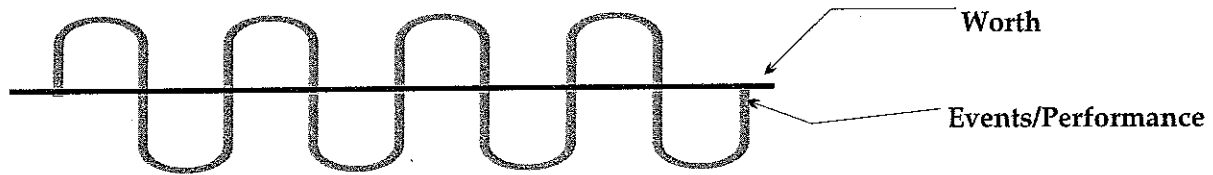


When worth equals externals, self-esteem rises and falls along with events. For instance, a high school student explained that she feels less worthwhile when she looks in the mirror and notices her complexion. Then she feels better when that cute guy says hello; when he fails to ask her for a date, she feels depressed. A compliment on her dress, she feels great; a math exam, she feels bad. She feels great when she and that guy begin dating, miserable when they break up. She is on an emotional roller coaster.

For adults, the highs may come with promotions, awards, or entrance to medical school. The lows may come with criticism, poor performance, or when your team loses.

If your worth equals your job or your marriage, how will you feel if you realize you have already gotten your last promotion or if you divorce? Your feelings would probably go beyond the normal and appropriate sadness and disappointment. When worth is in doubt, depression usually follows. If human worth equals market worth, then only the rich and powerful have worth. By this line of thinking, a Donald Trump or Hitler would have more human worth than a Mother Teresa.

## When Worth Is Separate from Externals



When worth is separate from externals, human worth is intrinsic and unchanging, irrespective of outside events or circumstances. Here, we distinguish feeling bad about events or behaviors (guilt) from feeling bad about the core self (shame). Guilt for foolish behavior is a healthy motivation for change. Condemning the core, however, saps motivation.

The idea is to judge behavior, but not the core. One can be reasonably objective in judging behaviors and present skill levels. It is difficult to be reasonable or objective when one has condemned the self at the core.

It is also wise to separate uncomfortable feelings arising from disappointment, illness, fatigue, chemical fluctuations, anger, anxiety, etc., from feeling bad about the core self.

Let's take an example of a difficult situation. Say that a promotion you desired was awarded to someone else. You tell yourself, "Perhaps some of my skills are not up to par yet for this job." This is a statement of fact that judges your skill level, experience, or training. This would result in appropriate disappointment and perhaps the decision to improve your skills. On the other hand, if you told yourself, "I'm not good enough as a person," this is a statement of worth that means you are inferior as a person. Obviously, this self-destructive choice of thoughts would lead to self-dislike and perhaps depression. So judge your present skills and performance, never the core.

## Why Individuals Have Worth

*I dedicate this section to people who struggle with the notion of unconditional worth. I think of a man who was attending a self-esteem class. Intellectual and bright, he listened to the axioms of human worth. He was struggling, looking like he wanted to believe them, but unable to grasp why all human beings could have worth, despite their imperfections and foolish behaviors. The light went on eventually, to his great pleasure.*

I'd like to start by posing some questions: Why do people spend millions of dollars to extricate from a well a two-year-old girl who has never done anything of note? Why do we love a baby? How are we like a dog or an inanimate object? How are we different?

A human has worth for at least four reasons:

1. *Present endowments.* A human's innate nature is enjoyable. It is fun to watch a child play in the leaves or respond to the beauty of nature. It is fun to love children and see them respond with a smile, joy, a sense of play, affection, or the security to take on the world with enthusiasm.
2. *Capacities.* When people behave obnoxiously, it is fun to ponder their potential to beautify life with art, craftsmanship, or other creations; with emotions of pleasure, acceptance, and encouragement; with laughter, work, and love. Capacities are innate, and able to be discovered and developed. When we err, we have the capacity to correct our course. Thus, we observe that human beings are fallible but infinitely perfectible and have an

"ability to convert not just their food, but also their hopes, into vital energy" (Cousins 1983). When theologians point to the notion that humans are created in God's image and likeness, they refer to the concept that a person is like a seed—whole; complete, but not completed—possessing in embryo every conceivable capacity: to think rationally, to emote, to sacrifice, to love, to make ethical choices, to recognize truth and worth, to create, to beautify, to be gentle, patient, or firm.

3. *Past contributions.* If one ever contributed to the well-being of others or self—in any way, large or small—then that person is not worthless.
4. *The craftsmanship of the body.* Although it is an external, the body is a nice metaphor for the core self. A number of influences in today's culture tend to "thing-ify" the body. The media glorifies using others as pleasure objects. Many individuals have been sexually or physically abused. When a body is mistreated, a person can come to see the body as disgusting. The greater danger is that they will come to devalue the core self. On the other hand, considering the marvelous intricacies of the body with respect can help a person appreciate the worth of the core self. (We shall return to this important concept in chapters 15 and 16.)

Sometimes people ask, "What if I am ugly or crippled—how can I feel worthwhile?" I challenge them to pretend they are crippled and to come up with ways by which they could still assert and experience their worth. The responses are often illuminating:

- I could convey love through my eyes
- I could learn to allow people to help me and to enjoy their service
- I could change my thoughts; I could learn to define myself as more than my body
- I could demonstrate my will (e.g., by appreciating what I see, by trying to move even a finger, by improving my mind)

We repeatedly return to the underlying concepts. Worth is already there. It is there whether you are sleeping or producing. The core is more than behavior, position, or any other external. Our challenge is to experience and enjoy that core worth.

Worth is neither comparative nor competitive, as is demonstrated by the experience of this father:

Three of my children were swinging at a park and two of them had learned to pump themselves in the swing and that's always a happy day for a father when his children learn to pump themselves in a swing. And two of them were going real high and Devon says, "I'm keeping up with Katherine," and Katherine looked across and said, "I'm keeping up with Devon" 'cause they were swinging right together. And little Marinda was in the middle and she was just barely moving because there was a breeze. And little Marinda, hearing them saying they're keeping up with each other . . . said, "I'm just keeping up with myself" (Durrant 1980).

Even at a young age, a child can understand the concept of intrinsic worth that is not comparative or competitive, and will be better off for it.

## Reflections on Unconditional and Equal Human Worth

Please ponder the reflections on human worth below. When you finish you'll be ready to begin the human worth skill building activities, which are found in chapters 5 through 9.

*We (are) equal inhabitants of a paradise of individuals  
in which everybody has the right to be understood.*

—Richard Rorty (1991)

*We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal,  
that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights,  
that among those are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.*

—The Declaration of Independence,  
July 4, 1776

*We are all basically the same human beings,  
who seek happiness and try to avoid suffering.*

*Everybody is my peer group.*

*Your feeling "I am of no value" is wrong. Absolutely wrong.*

—The Dalai Lama

*You're as good as anybody.*

—Spoken to Martin Luther King  
by his father.

*All men are alike when asleep.*

—Aristotle

*(We) are made in the image of God—a good God, a God of beauty  
... God declared his creation good.*

—Rebecca Manley Pippert (1999)

*We need to see ourselves as basic miracles.*

—Virginia Satir

*Men can be human, with human frailties, and still be great.*

—Stephen L. Richards (1955)

*Heroes don't need lettermen jackets. We know who we are.*

—Evil Knievel

*Letting circumstances or others determine worth  
gives them inappropriate control and power.*

—Anonymous

*When our value as human beings depends on what we make with  
our hands and minds, we become victims of the fear tactics of  
our world. When productivity is our main way of overcoming  
self-doubt, we are extremely vulnerable to rejection and criticism  
and prone to inner anxiety and depression.*

—Henry J. M. Nouwen (1989)

*Problems are weaknesses (which respond to strengthening),  
not illnesses (which need removal of causal agents).*

—William Glasser

*Every cliché you've ever heard about babies is true, it seems to me.  
They are soft and warm, fascinating, cute, and lovable. I never met  
one that wasn't, and it's a good thing too, because if babies weren't  
so cute and lovable maybe we wouldn't so gladly put up with  
the fact that they're so demanding and so much trouble.*

*Babies are pure potential. You pick up a little baby and you're  
amazed by how light it is, but you feel also that you're holding the  
future, the earth and the sky, the sun and the moon, and all  
of it, everything, is brand new.*

*Babies help us to put the changing world into perspective too.  
Changing the world has to wait, when it's time to change the baby.*

—Charles Osgood



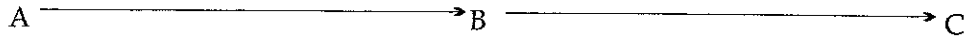
## Chapter 5

# Recognize and Replace Self-Defeating Thoughts

Although all humans are infinitely worthwhile, all do not necessarily have a sense of their own worth. One reason is that negative, depressing thought patterns can erode one's sense of worth. Note: We're not saying that worth is eroded, only one's ability to experience it.

Consider this situation. The boss scowls as he passes John and Bill in the hall. John begins to feel down on himself as he thinks, "Oh, no! He's upset with me." Bill only gets concerned, not disturbed, as he tells himself, "The boss is probably having another battle with the front office." What is the difference between the two? Not the event, but the way John and Bill thought about the event.

A branch of psychology called cognitive therapy has identified specific thought patterns that attack self-esteem and lead to depression. These thought patterns have been learned. They can be unlearned. Cognitive therapy provides an effective, straightforward way to eliminate these self-destructive thoughts and replace them with more reasonable thoughts. The model, developed by psychologist Albert Ellis, is simple:



A stands for the Activating (or upsetting) event. B is the Belief (or automatic thoughts) that we tell ourselves about A. C is the emotional Consequences (or feelings, such as worthlessness or depression). Most people think A causes C. In reality, it is B, our self-talk, that has the greater influence.

## Automatic Thoughts and Distortions

Whenever an upsetting event occurs, automatic thoughts (ATs) run through our minds. Although we're each capable of thinking reasonably about upsetting events, sometimes our automatic thoughts are distorted—or unreasonably negative. Distorted ATs occur so rapidly that we hardly notice them, let alone stop to question them. Yet these ATs profoundly affect our moods and our sense of worth. In this section, you'll learn to catch these distortions, challenge their logic, and replace them with thoughts that more closely align with reality instead of thoughts that depress.

The distortions fall into only thirteen categories. Learn them well. Using them will be a very powerful tool in building self-esteem.

### *Assuming*

In these circumstances, we assume the worst without testing the evidence. For instance, in the example above John assumed that the boss' scowl meant he was angry with John. John could have tested this assumption by simply asking, "Boss, are you angry with me?"

Assuming self-talk would also be when you tell yourself, "I know I won't enjoy myself," or "I know I'll do a lousy job even though I'm prepared." More reasonable self-talk would be: "I might or might not enjoy myself (do a good job, etc.). I'm willing to experiment and see what happens."

### *Shoulds (Musts/Oughts)*

Shoulds (musts/oughts) are demands we make of ourselves. For example: "I should be a perfect lover"; "I must not make mistakes"; "I should have known better"; or "I should be happy and never depressed or tired." We think that we motivate ourselves with such statements. Usually, however, we just feel worse (e.g., since I *should* be so and so, and I'm not that way, I then feel inadequate, frustrated, ashamed, and hopeless).

Perhaps one of the only reasonable "shoulds" is that humans "should" be fallible, just as we are, given our background, our imperfect understanding, and our present skill levels. If we *really* knew better (i.e., if we clearly understood the advantages of certain behaviors, and were perfectly capable of behaving that way), then we *would* be better. One solution, then, is to replace "shoulds" with "woulds" or "coulds" (It *would* be nice if I did that. I wonder how I *could* do that). Or replace "shoulds" with "want to's" (I *want to* do that because it is to my advantage, not because someone is telling me I *should* or *must*).

### *The Fairy-Tale Fantasy*

The fairy-tale fantasy means demanding the ideal from life. This is really a special type of "should." "That's not fair!" or "Why did that have to happen?" often means "The world shouldn't be the way it is." In reality, bad and unfair things happen to good people—sometimes randomly, sometimes because of the unreasonableness of others, and sometimes because of our own imperfections. To expect that the world be different is to invite disappointment. To expect that others treat us fairly, when they often have their own ideas about what is fair, is also to invite disappointment. Again, a "would" or a "could" is a wise substitute for a "should" (e.g., "It *would* be nice if things were ideal, but they're not. Too bad. Now, I wonder what I *could* do to improve things").

### *All or Nothing Thinking*

With all or nothing thinking you hold yourself to the impossible standard of perfection (or something close to it). When you fall short of this standard, you conclude that you are a total failure as a person. For example, "If I'm not the best, I'm a flop"; "If I'm not performing perfectly, I'm a loser"; "If I score below 90 percent, I am a failure"; "A rough edge means I'm all bad." This is unreasonable because such absolute, black and white extremes rarely exist. Even if it were possible to perform perfectly (it isn't), performing below some standard usually means we've performed at 80 percent or 35 percent—rarely at 0 percent. And poor *performance* never makes a complex *person* worthless, just fallible. Ask yourself, "Why *must* I bat one thousand?"

### *Overgeneralizing*

Overgeneralizing is deciding that negative experiences describe your life completely. For example, "I *always* ruin *everything*"; "I *always* get rejected in love"; "No one likes me; *everybody* hates me"; "I *never* do well at math." Such global statements are unkind, depressing, and usually inaccurate to some degree. The antidote is to use more precise language: "Some of my skills are not *yet* well developed"; "I'm not as tactful in *some* social situations as I'd like"; "Sometimes people don't approve of me (*sometimes some* people do)"; "Although *some* aspects of my life haven't gone well, that doesn't mean I never do reasonably well." Be a healthy optimist: expect to find small ways to improve situations and notice what's going well.

### *Labeling*

Here you give yourself a label, or name, as though a single word describes a person completely. For example: "I'm such a loser"; "I'm stupid"; "I'm dumb"; "I'm boring." To say, "I *am* stupid" means I *always*, in every way, am stupid. In fact, some people who behave quite stupidly at times, also behave quite intelligently at other times. Because humans are too complex for simple labels, confine labels to behaviors (e.g., "That was a silly thing to do."), or ask, "Am I *always* stupid? Sometimes, perhaps, but not *always*."

### *Dwelling on the Negative*

Suppose you go to a party and notice that a guest has dog poop on his shoe. The more you think about it, the more uncomfortable you get. In this distortion, you focus in on the negative aspects of a situation, while ignoring the positive aspects. Soon the whole situation looks

negative. Other examples: "How can I feel good about the day when I was criticized?"; "How can I enjoy life when my children have problems?"; "How can I feel good about myself when I make mistakes?"; "The steak is burnt—the meal is ruined!" A solution to this habit is to re-examine your options: "Would I enjoy things more (and feel better about myself) if I chose a different focus?"; "What pleasing things could I still find to enjoy?"; "What would I think on a good day?"; "How would someone with sound self-esteem view this situation?"

### *Rejecting the Positive*

Dwelling on the negative overlooks positive aspects. Here we actually negate positives so that our self-esteem remains low. For example, someone compliments your work. You reply, "Oh, it was really nothing. Anyone could do that." You discount the fact that you've worked long and effectively. No wonder accomplishments aren't fun. You could just as easily have replied, "Thanks" (and tell yourself, "I do deserve special credit for doing this difficult and boring task"). You would give a loved one or friend credit where it's due. Why not do yourself the same favor?

### *Unfavorable Comparisons*

Suppose you had an unusual magnifying glass that magnified some things (like your faults and mistakes, or the strengths of others) and shrunk others (like your strengths, and the mistakes of others). In comparison to others, you would always seem inadequate or inferior—always coming out on the short end of the stick.

For example, you think to yourself: "I'm only a housewife and mother" (minimizing your strengths). "Jan's a rich, bright lawyer" (magnifying another's strengths). Your friend replies: "But you're an excellent homemaker. You've been great with your kids. Jan's an alcoholic." To which you respond: "Yes, but (minimizing another's faults and your accomplishments) look at the cases she's won! She's the one who really contributes! (Magnifying another's strengths.)"

A way to challenge this distortion is to ask, "Why must I compare? Why can't I just appreciate that each person has unique strengths and weaknesses? Another's contributions are not necessarily better, just different."

### *Catastrophizing*

When you believe that something is a catastrophe, you tell yourself that it is so horrible and awful that "I can't stand it!" In telling ourselves this, we convince ourselves that we are too feeble to cope with life. For example, "I couldn't stand it if she were to leave me. It would be awful!" Although many things are unpleasant, inconvenient, and difficult, we can really stand anything short of being steamrolled to death, as Albert Ellis has said. So one might think, "I didn't like this, but I certainly *can* stand it."

Asking the following questions will challenge the belief that something will be a catastrophe:

- What are the odds of this happening?
- If it does happen, how likely is it to do me in?
- If the worst happens, what will I do? (Anticipating a problem and formulating an action plan increases one's sense of confidence.)

- One hundred years from now, will anyone care about this?

### *Personalizing*

Personalizing is seeing yourself as more involved in negative events than you really are. For example, a student drops out of college and the mother concludes, "It's all my fault." A husband takes full responsibility for his spouse's fatigue or anger, or for a divorce. Here the ego is so involved that each event becomes a test of worth. There are two helpful antidotes to this distortion:

- Distinguish *influences* from *causes*. Sometimes we can influence others' decisions, but the final decision is theirs, not ours.
- Look realistically for other influences outside of ourselves. For example, instead of thinking, "What's wrong with me? Why can't I do this?" one might say, "This is a difficult task. The help I need isn't here, it's noisy, and I'm tired." Instead of thinking, "Why is he snapping at me?" one might say, "Maybe I'm not the central character. Maybe he's mad at the world today."

### *Blaming*

Blaming is the opposite of personalizing. Whereas personalizing puts all the responsibility on yourself for your difficulties, blaming puts it all on something outside of yourself. For example:

- He make's me so mad!
- She has ruined my life and my self-esteem.
- I am a loser because of my crummy childhood.

The problem with blaming, much like catastrophizing, is that it tends to make us think of ourselves as helpless victims who are too powerless to cope. The antidote to blaming is to acknowledge outside influences, but to take responsibility for your own welfare: "Yes, his behavior was unjust and unfair, but I don't have to turn bitter and cynical. I am better than that."

Notice that the person with self-esteem is free to assume realistic responsibility. He will acknowledge what *is* his responsibility and what is *not*. However, when one takes responsibility, it is for a behavior or a choice, not for being bad to the core. Thus, one might say, "I performed poorly on that exam because I did not study enough. Next time I'll plan better." There is no judging the core self here, only behaviors.

### *Making Feelings Facts*

Making feelings facts is taking one's feelings as proof of the way things really are. For example:

- I feel like such a loser. I must be hopeless.
- I feel ashamed and bad. I must be bad.
- I feel inadequate. I must be inadequate.
- I feel worthless. I must be worthless.

Remember that feelings result from our thoughts. If our thoughts are distorted (as they often are when we're stressed or depressed), then our feelings may not reflect reality. So question your feelings. Ask, "What would someone who is 100 percent inadequate (or bad, guilty, hopeless, etc.) be like? Am I really like that?" This challenges the tendencies of labeling or all or nothing thinking. Remind yourself that feelings are not facts. When our thoughts become more reasonable, our feelings become brighter.

## The Daily Thought Record

Now that you know about distortions, the next step is to use them to help you with your self-esteem. When we're stressed or depressed, thoughts and feelings can swirl in our minds and seem overwhelming. Putting them down on paper helps us sort it all out and see things more clearly. The Daily Thought Record (on the following pages) takes about fifteen minutes each day. It is good to do it after you notice yourself feeling upset. Or it can be done later in the day, when things calm down. Here's how it works:

### *The Facts*

At the top of the record briefly describe an upsetting event and the resulting feelings (sad, anxious, guilty, frustrated, etc.). Rate the intensity of these feelings (10 means extremely unpleasant). Remember, getting in touch with disturbing feelings is a way to stop them from controlling us.

### *Analysis of Your Thoughts*

In the first column of the Analysis Section, list your Automatic Thoughts (ATs). Then rate how much you believe each. 10 means it's completely believable.

In the second column, identify the distortions (some ATs might be rational).

In the third column, try to respond, or talk back, to each distorted AT. Realize that your first AT is only one of several possible choices. Try to imagine what you would say to a friend who said what you did, or try to imagine yourself on a good day saying something more reasonable. Ask yourself, "What is the evidence for the reasonable response?" Then rate how much you believe each response.

### *Results*

After all this, go back to the Initial Responses column and rerate your ATs. Then at the top rerate the intensity of your emotions. If the process leads to even a slight drop in your upset feelings, feel satisfied. With this process, upsetting events will still probably be upsetting, just not as disturbing.

Remember, work out your thoughts on paper. It is too complex to do it in your head. Be patient with yourself as you learn how to do this. It usually takes a few weeks to become good at this skill.

Each day for the next two weeks, select an upsetting event and do a Daily Thought Record. At the end of the two weeks, proceed to the next section, Getting to the Bottom of Things.

## Daily Thought Record

### The Facts

<b>Event</b> (Describe the event that "made you" feel bad/unpleasant)	<b>Impact of Event</b> (Describe the emotions you felt)	<b>Intensity</b> (Rate the intensity of these emotions from 1-10)

### Analysis of Your Thoughts

<b>Initial Responses</b> (Describe the Automatic Thoughts or Self-Talk. Then rate how believable each is from 1-10)	Ratings	<b>Thought Fallacies</b> (Find and label the distortions)	<b>Reasonable Resonances</b> (Talk back! Change the distortions to more reasonable thoughts. Rate how much you believe each from 1-10)	Ratings

### Results

Based upon your Thought Analysis, re-rate how much you believe your initial responses. Then re-rate the intensity of your emotions.

Here's an example of a simplified Daily Thought Record.

Event	Impact	Intensity
Bill and I broke up	Depressed Worthless	9→6 8→5

### Analysis

Automatic Thoughts		Distortions	Reasonable Responses	
It's all my fault	8→5	Personalizing	We both made mistakes, even though we did as well as we were able	8
I feel so rejected. I'm worthless	9→8	Making Feelings Facts Labeling	As long as I have ever, or could ever, make a difference to someone (including myself) I'm not worthless	7
He hates me	7→3	Assuming	He might just feel I'm not his cup of tea	9
I'll never find another as suitable	10→8	Assuming	I don't know that. It's possible that I could find someone more accepting and, therefore, more suitable	7
Without him nothing will be fun	10→5	Assuming	I won't know this unless I test it out. Probably there are things I could enjoy both alone and with others	7
That guy has ruined my life	9→5	Blaming	Nobody but me can ruin my life. I'll rebound from this and find ways to enjoy myself	9

On the following page is another blank Daily Thought Record to practice on or to copy.



## Daily Thought Record

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

### The Facts

<b>Event</b> (Describe the event that "made you" feel bad/unpleasant)	<b>Impact of Event</b> (Describe the emotions you felt)	<b>Intensity</b> (Rate the intensity of these emotions from 1-10)

### Analysis of Your Thoughts

<b>Initial Responses</b> (Describe the Automatic Thoughts or Self-Talk. Then rate how believable each is from 1-10)	Ratings	<b>Thought Fallacies</b> (Find and label the distortions)	<b>Reasonable Responses</b> (Talk back! Change the distortions to more reasonable thoughts. Rate how much you believe each from 1-10)	Ratings

### Results

Based upon your Thought Analysis, re-rate how much you believe your initial responses. Then re-rate the intensity of your emotions.

## Getting to the Bottom of Things: The Question and Answer Technique

So far you have learned to use the Daily Thought Record to identify and replace distorted ATs. While replacing distorted ATs can strengthen self-esteem, uprooting core beliefs provides an even greater lift. Core beliefs are deeply held beliefs. Because they are usually learned early in life, they are rarely challenged. We discover core beliefs by starting with an AT and using the Question and Answer Technique. In this approach, you take an AT and until you reach the core belief you keep asking the following questions:

"What does this mean to me?"

Or

"Assuming that's true, why is that so bad?"

For example, on one Daily Thought Record, Jane has expressed a feeling of helplessness and worthlessness because her daughter refused to clean her room. Jane decided to apply the Question and Answer Technique to the AT: "The room is a mess." It went like this:

*Automatic Thought:* The room is a mess.

*Question:* What does that mean to me?

*Answer:* She's a slob!

*Question:* Assuming that's true, why is that so bad?

*Answer:* My friends will come over and see her messy room.

*Question:* Why would that be so bad?

*Answer:* They'll think I'm an inadequate mother.

*Question:* Assuming that's true, why would that be so bad?

*Answer:* I can't feel worthwhile if my friends disapprove of me. = CORE BELIEF!

In reaching this core belief, you've assumed that each answer along the way is true. Now go back and look for distortions among your answers, responding reasonably at each step. The following shows what the whole process looks like, using the three columns from the Daily Thought Record. The "Q" represents questions, which need not be written down.

Initial Responses (ATs)	Distortions	Reasonable Responses
This room is a mess		
Q She's a slob	Labeling	Actually she's quite neat in areas that matter to her, like her appearance
Q My friends will come over and see her messy room		Even if they do, lots of worthwhile people have daughters with sloppy rooms
Q They'll think I'm an inadequate mother	Assuming All-or-Nothing Thinking	They might just think I'm fallible, just like them
Q I can't feel worthwhile if my friends disapprove of me	CORE BELIEF!	I don't have to be perfect or have everyone's approval to be happy, or to consider myself worthwhile. It <i>would</i> be nice if everything I did was beyond reproach. But since no one is perfect, I'd better decide to feel worthwhile anyway

## Some Common Core Beliefs

Research has found that a number of core beliefs identified by the psychologist Albert Ellis are consistently linked to self-dislike and depression. These deserve special mention, along with their rational replacements (Bourne 1992):

1. Core Belief: *I must be loved or approved by everyone I consider significant.*

Rational response: I want to be loved or approved by most people, and I will try to act in a respectful manner so they will. But it is inevitable that some people, for their own reasons, will not like or accept me. This is not catastrophic; my self-esteem can't depend on the whims of others.
2. Core Belief: *I must be thoroughly competent and adequate in everything I do. I should not be satisfied with myself unless I'm the best or excelling.*

Rational response: I will strive to do *my* best rather than to be *the* best. I can enjoy doing things even if I'm not particularly good at them. I'm not afraid to try things where I might fail; I'm fallible, and failing does not mean I'm a lousy person. Rather, taking risks is courageous and is a necessity if I'm to grow and experience life's opportunities.
3. Core Belief: *If something is or may be dangerous or fearsome I must be terribly concerned about it and keep on guard in case it happens.*

Rational response: It is probably in my best interest to face this thing and render it less dangerous, and, if that is impossible, I will stop dwelling on it and being fearful. Worry will not stop it from happening. Even if it happened I could cope with it.

4. Core Belief: *It is easier to avoid than face life's difficulties and responsibilities.*

Rational response: I'll do those necessary things no matter how much I dislike them. Living is just that; resting and avoiding are often legitimate intervals in a full life, but they are counterproductive if they occupy the major part of my life.

Please note: The last two irrational beliefs address how we deal with worries. They are consistent with other research that shows that extremes are generally self-defeating. That is, both obsessing about worries and denying/avoiding them tend to have negative consequences. As a rule, the middle ground approach of *efficient* worry has the healthiest consequences: Focus on worries for a limited time, with a problem-solving approach. For a portion of the day (some research suggests about 30 minutes), gather facts, consider alternatives, acknowledge feelings, write or talk about your concerns, take appropriate action. After that, allow yourself to shift your focus to life's loveliness.

## Examining Unproductive Core Beliefs

Below is a list of commonly held, yet unproductive core beliefs. As an exercise, circle those that you hold. Then try to dispute them. You might further discuss rational responses with a respected friend or mental health professional.

1. It's bad to think well of myself.
2. I can't be happy unless a certain condition—like success, money, love, approval, or perfect achievement—is met.
3. I can't feel worthwhile unless a certain condition is met.
4. I'm entitled to happiness (or success, health, self-respect, pleasure, love) without having to work for it.
5. One day when I make it, I'll have friends and be able to enjoy myself.
6. Work should be hard and in some way unpleasant.
7. Joy is *only* gained from hard work.
8. I am inadequate.
9. Worrying insures that I'll be prepared to face and solve problems. So the more I worry the better. (Constant worrying helps prevent future mistakes and problems and gives me extra control.)
10. Life should be easy. I can't enjoy it if there are problems.
11. The past makes me unhappy. There's no way around it.
12. There's a perfect solution, and I must find it.
13. If people disapprove of (reject, criticize, mistreat) me, it means I'm inferior, wrong, or no good.
14. I'm only as good as the work I do. If I'm not productive, I'm no good.
15. If I try hard enough, all people will like me.
16. If I try hard enough, my future will be happy and trouble free.

17. Life must be fair.

Notice how many of these core beliefs directly affect self-esteem! Notice how many of these core beliefs make an external condition a requirement of worth or happiness. For one week, use the Question and Answer Technique once a day to find your core beliefs. Use previously completed Daily Thought Records, or a newly completed Thought Record.