

## Self-Esteem

Self-esteem is a way of thinking, feeling, and acting that implies that you accept, respect, trust, and believe in yourself. When you *accept* yourself, you can live comfortably with both your personal strengths and weaknesses without undue self-criticism. When you *respect* yourself, you acknowledge your own dignity and value as a unique human being. You treat yourself well in much the same way you would treat someone else you respect. *Self-trust* means that your behaviors and feelings are consistent enough to give you an inner sense of continuity and coherence despite changes and challenges in your external circumstances. To *believe* in yourself means that you feel you deserve to have the good things in life. It also means that you have confidence that you can fulfill your deepest personal needs, aspirations, and goals. To get a sense about your own level of self-esteem, think of someone (or imagine what it would be like to know someone) whom you *fully* accept, respect, trust, and believe in. Now ask yourself to what extent you hold these attitudes toward yourself. Where would you place yourself on the following scale:



A fundamental truth about self-esteem is that it needs to come from *within*. When self-esteem is low, the deficiency creates a feeling of emptiness that you may try to fill by latching on—often compulsively—to something external that provides a temporary sense of satisfaction and fulfillment. When the quest to fill your inner emptiness by appropriating something from outside becomes desperate, repetitive, or automatic, you have what is called an *addiction*. Broadly defined, addiction is an attachment to something or someone outside yourself that you feel you need to provide a sense of inner satisfaction or relief. Frequently, this attachment substitutes preoccupation with a substance or activity for healthy human relationships. It may also substitute a temporary feeling of control or power for a more lasting sense of inner confidence and strength.

A healthy alternative to addiction is to work on building your self-esteem. Growing in self-esteem means developing confidence and strength from within. While still enjoying life fully, you no longer need to appropriate or identify with something or someone outside yourself to feel okay. The basis for your self-worth is internal. As such, it is much more lasting and stable.

## Ways to Build Self-Esteem

There are many pathways to self-esteem. It is not something that develops overnight or as a result of any single insight, decision, or modification in your behavior. Self-esteem is *built gradually* through a willingness to work on a number of areas in your life. This chapter considers—in three parts—a variety of ways to build self-esteem:

- Taking care of yourself
- Developing support and intimacy
- Other pathways to self-esteem

Most fundamental to your self-esteem are your willingness and ability to take care of yourself. This means first that you can *recognize* your basic needs as a human being and then *do* something about meeting them. Taking care of yourself also involves cultivating a relationship with that part of yourself known as the “inner child.” Your inner child is a place deep inside that is the origin of your

needs. It is the playful, spontaneous, and creative side of you—yet it also carries any emotional pain, fear, or sense of vulnerability you acquired from your childhood. By becoming a good parent to your own inner child now, you can overcome the limitations and deficiencies of your upbringing years ago. A popular saying these days aptly states, “It’s never too late to have a happy childhood.”

Part I of this chapter focuses on this theme of taking care of yourself. It begins by enumerating a variety of dysfunctional family situations that can cause low self-esteem. Following this is a discussion of basic human needs to help you identify those needs that are most important to address in your life right now. Finally, a variety of methods for cultivating a relationship with your inner child are offered. Learning to meet your needs—to care for and nurture yourself—is *the most fundamental and important thing you can do to build your self-esteem.*

Part II of this chapter is an extension of part I. Finding support and intimacy in your life is obviously a major part of taking care of yourself. Other people can’t give you self-esteem, but their support, acceptance, validation, and love can go a long way toward reinforcing and strengthening your own self-affirmation. This part is divided into four sections. The first addresses the importance of developing a support system. The second presents ten conditions that I feel are -critical to genuine intimacy. The third section offers a discussion of interpersonal boundaries. Having boundaries in your relationships is essential both to intimacy and to self-esteem. A final section underscores the relevance of assertiveness to self-esteem.

Part III presents four additional aspects of self-esteem:

- Personal wellness and body image
- Emotional self-expression
- Self-talk and affirmations for self-esteem
- Personal goals and a sense of accomplishment

Although these pathways to self-esteem are diverse among themselves, they can all be viewed as an extension of the basic idea of taking care of yourself.

## Part I: Taking Care of Yourself

Taking care of yourself is the foundation on which all other pathways to self-esteem rest. Without a basic *willingness* and *ability* to care for, love, and nurture yourself, it is difficult to achieve a deep or lasting experience of self-worth.

Perhaps you had the good fortune to receive the love, acceptance, and nurturing from your parents that could provide you with a solid foundation for self-esteem as an adult. Presently, you are free of any deep-seated feelings of insecurity and your path to self-esteem is likely to be simple and short, involving certain changes in attitude, habits, and beliefs. For those who have carried a lifelong sense of insecurity, though, the way to self-worth involves developing the ability to give yourself what your parents could not. *It's possible to overcome deficits from your past only by becoming a good parent to yourself.*

### Some Causes of Low Self-Esteem

What are some of the childhood circumstances that can lead you to grow up with feelings of insecurity or inadequacy?

1. **Overly Critical Parents** Parents who were constantly critical or set impossibly high standards of behavior may have left you feeling guilty; that somehow you could “never be good enough.” As an adult, you will continue to strive for perfection to overcome a long-standing sense of inferiority. You may also have a strong tendency toward self-criticism.
2. **Significant Childhood Loss** If you were separated from a parent as a result of death or divorce, you may have been left - feeling abandoned. You may have grown up with a sense of emptiness and insecurity that can be restimulated very intensely by losses of significant people in your adult life. As an adult, you may seek to overcome old feelings of abandonment by overdependency on a particular person or addiction to food, drugs, work, or whatever works to cover the pain.
3. **Parental Abuse** Physical and sexual abuse are extreme forms of deprivation. They may leave you with a complex mix of feelings, including inadequacy, insecurity, lack of trust, guilt,

and/or rage. Adults who were physically abused as children may become perpetual victims or may themselves develop a hostile posture toward life, victimizing others. Adults—especially men—who were sexually abused as children sometimes express their rage by turning to rape and abuse as adults. Or they may turn that rage inward in deep feelings of self-loathing and inadequacy. Survivors of abusive childhoods often, and understandably, have difficulty with intimate relationships in their adult lives. While less flagrant, constant verbal abuse can have equally damaging effects.

4. **Parental Alcoholism or Drug Abuse** Much has been written in recent years on the effects of parental alcoholism on children. Chronic drinking or substance abuse creates a chaotic, unreliable family atmosphere in which it is difficult for a child to develop a basic sense of trust or security. The attendant denial of the problem, often by both parents, teaches the child to deny his or her own feelings and pain connected to the family situation. Many such children grow up with poor self-esteem or a poor sense of personal identity. Fortunately, support groups are presently available to help adult children of alcoholics heal the adverse effects of their past. If one or both of your parents were alcoholic, you may wish to read the following books: *It Will Never Happen to Me* by Claudia Black, *Adult Children of Alcoholics* by Janet Woititz, and *Recovery: A Guide for Adult Children of Alcoholics* by Herbert Gravitz and Julie Bowden. You may also want to join a support group or therapy group for adult children of alcoholics in your area.
5. **Parental Neglect** Some parents, because they are preoccupied with themselves, their work, or other concerns, simply fail to give their children adequate attention and nurturing. Children left to their own devices often grow up feeling insecure, worthless, and lonely. As adults, they may have a tendency to discount or neglect their own needs.
6. **Parental Rejection** Even without physical, sexual, or verbal abuse, some parents impart a feeling to their children that they are unwanted. This profoundly damaging attitude teaches a child to grow up doubting his or her very right to exist. Such a person has a tendency toward self-rejection or self-sabotage.

Adults with such pasts must learn to love and care for themselves if they are to overcome what their parents didn't give them.

7. **Parental Overprotectiveness** The child who is overprotected may never learn to risk independence and trust the world - outside of the immediate family. As an adult, such a person may feel very insecure and afraid to venture far from a safe person or place. Through learning to acknowledge and care for their own needs, overprotected individuals can gain the confidence to make a life of their own and discover that the world is not such a dangerous place.
8. **Parental Overindulgence** The "spoiled" child of overindulgent parents is given insufficient exposure to deferred gratification or appropriate limits. As adults, such people tend to be bored, lack persistence, or have difficulty initiating and sustaining individual effort. They tend to expect the world to come to them rather than taking responsibility for creating their own lives. Until they are willing to take personal responsibility, such people feel cheated and very insecure because life does not continue to provide what they learned to expect during childhood.

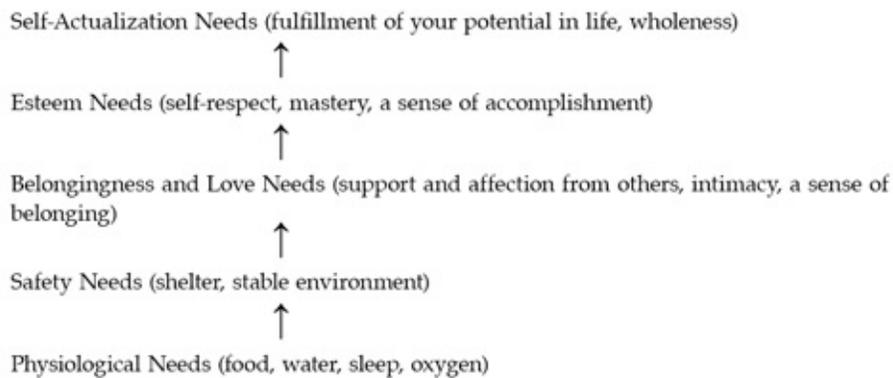
Do any of the above categories seem to fit you? Does more than one? You may initially find it difficult to acknowledge problems in your past. Our memory of childhood is often hazy and indistinct—especially when we do not *want* to recall what actually happened. The point of remembering and acknowledging what happened to you as a child is not so that you can blame your parents. Most likely, your parents did the best they could with their available personal resources, which may have been severely limited as a result of deprivations they experienced with *their* parents. The purpose of remembering your past is to *release* it and *rebuild your present*. Old "tapes" or patterns based on fear, guilt, or anger will tend to interfere with your present life and relationships until you can identify and release them. Once you acknowledge and ultimately forgive your parents for what they were unable to give you, you can truly begin the journey of learning to care for yourself. In essence, this means becoming a good parent to yourself. The balance of this section will consider three important ways in which you can learn to take better care of yourself:

1. Acknowledging and meeting your basic needs

2. Discovering and cultivating a relationship with your inner child
3. Making time for small acts of self-nurturing on a daily basis

### **Your Basic Needs**

*Basic human needs* conjures an association with shelter, clothing, food, water, sleep, oxygen, and so on—in other words, what human beings require for their physical survival. It was not until the last few decades that higher-order *psychological needs* were identified. While not necessary for survival, meeting these needs is essential to your emotional well-being and a satisfying adjustment to life. The psychologist Abraham Maslow proposed five levels of human needs, with three levels beyond primary concerns for survival and security. He arranged these levels into a hierarchy, as follows:



In Maslow's scheme, taking care of higher-level needs is dependent on having satisfied lower-level needs. It's difficult to satisfy belongingness and esteem needs if you're starving. On a subtler level, it's difficult to fulfill your full potential if you're feeling isolated and alienated for lack of having met needs for love and belongingness. Writing in the 1960s, Maslow estimated that the average American satisfied perhaps 90 percent of physiological needs, 70 percent of safety needs, 50 percent of love needs, 40 percent of esteem needs, and 10 percent of the need for self-actualization.

Although Maslow defined esteem narrowly in terms of a sense of accomplishment and mastery, I believe that self-esteem is dependent on *recognizing and taking care of all of your needs*.

How do you recognize what your needs are? How many of the following important human needs are you aware of?

1. Physical safety and security
2. Financial security
3. Friendship
4. The attention of others
5. Being listened to
6. Guidance
7. Respect
8. Validation
9. Expressing and sharing your feelings
10. Sense of belonging
11. Nurturing
12. Physically touching and being touched
13. Intimacy
14. Sexual expression

15. Loyalty and trust
16. A sense of accomplishment
17. A sense of progress toward goals
18. Feeling competent or masterful in some area
19. Making a contribution
20. Fun and play
21. Sense of freedom, independence
22. Creativity
23. Spiritual awareness—connection with a Higher Power
24. Unconditional love

Now go back over the list carefully and ask yourself how many of these needs you are actually getting fulfilled at this time. In what areas do you come up short? What concrete steps can you take in the next few weeks and months to better satisfy those needs that are going unmet? Working up your exposure hierarchies to overcome your phobias will help you meet needs 17 and 18. Going dancing or to a movie tonight will help in a small way with your need for fun and play. The point is that learning to take care of yourself involves being able to 1) *recognize* and 2) *meet* your basic needs as a human being. The above list may give you ideas on areas of your life that need more attention. Use the following chart to plan what you will actually do in the next month about five (or more) of your needs that could be better met.

| <i>Need</i> | <i>What I'm willing to do in the next month to better meet this need.</i> |
|-------------|---|
|             |   |

## **Cultivating a Relationship with Your Inner Child**

The concept of the *inner child*—the childlike part of yourself—has been around for many decades. The psychologist Carl Jung referred to it as the “divine child,” while the religious thinker Emmet Fox called it the “wonder child.” But what is it? How would you recognize your own child within? Some characteristics of the inner child include

- That part of you which feels like a little girl or boy.
- That part of you which feels and expresses your deepest emotional needs for security, trust, nurturing, affection, touching, and so on.

- That part of you which is alive, energetic, creative, and playful (much as real children are when left free to play and be themselves).
- Finally, that part of you that still carries the pain and emotional trauma of your childhood. Strong feelings of insecurity, loneliness, fear, anger, shame, or guilt—even if triggered by present circumstances—belong to the inner child. Actually, there are very few new feelings. Especially when they are strong, most of our feelings reflect ways we reacted or failed to react a long time ago as a child.

How do you feel about the little child within you? If you are willing to allow the little girl or boy inside some freedom of expression, you'll find it easier to be more playful, fun loving, spontaneous, and creative. You'll find it natural to give and receive affection, to be vulnerable, and to trust. You'll be in touch with your feelings and free to grow. On the other hand, to the extent that you suppress and deny your inner child, you will likely find it difficult to be playful or have fun. You may tend to be conventional and conforming and act out painful patterns repeatedly. You may feel constricted and inhibited, unable to let go and expand. It will be hard to be vulnerable or trusting, hard to give and receive affection. Finally, you will likely be out of touch with your feelings, inclined to be overly logical or overly in need of keeping everything under tight control.

How can you bring out and cultivate a healthy relationship with your inner child? In my experience there are four steps to this process:

1. Overcoming attitudes of criticism, rejection, and/or denial of your child within
2. "Bringing out" your inner child
3. Reevaluating negative feeling states in terms of positive needs of your inner child
4. Nurturing your inner child on a daily basis

### **Overcoming Negative Attitudes Toward Your Inner Child**

A basic truth is that you tend to treat your own inner child in much the same way that your parents treated you as a child. For better or worse, you internalize your parents' attitudes and behaviors. If they were overly critical toward you, you likely grew up overly self-critical, especially of your "childish" or less

rational, impulsive side. If they neglected you, you likely grew up tending to ignore or neglect the needs of your own inner child. If they were too busy for you as a child, you're likely to be too busy for your inner child as an adult. If they abused you, you may have become self-destructive as an adult or else may be abusive of others. If your parents placed a taboo on acknowledging and expressing your feelings and impulses, you may have grown up denying your feelings. The list goes on. To cultivate a healing, caring relationship with your own inner child—to become a good parent to yourself—you need to overcome any internalized parental attitudes that cause you to criticize, abuse, neglect, or deny the needs and feelings of your child within.

## **Bringing Out Your Inner Child**

While learning to overcome negative patterns internalized from your parents, you may wish to begin bringing out your inner child. It's useful to begin this even *before* you work through all of the limitations you've imposed on your child within. There are a number of good ways to go about doing this, including 1) visualizations, 2) writing a letter to your inner child, 3) using photos as a reminder, and 4) real-life activities that give your inner child expression. You may be surprised to find that caring for your own inner child is a lot less time and energy consuming than bringing up a real one!

### **VISUALIZATION**

Below is a detailed visualization to help you foster a closer relationship with your own inner child. Record this visualization, pausing for a few moments between each sentence and for ten to twenty seconds when the instructions say "Pause." You can do this yourself, or find a friend whose voice you like to prerecord the script for you. Make sure that you give yourself ten to fifteen minutes to deeply relax before beginning the visualization, since your capacity to remember and see yourself as a child will be greatly enhanced by deep relaxation. (You can use progressive muscle relaxation, meditation, or any deep - relaxation technique you wish. See chapter 4.)

### **HEALING YOUR INNER CHILD\***

*Imagine sitting down in a rocking chair and getting very comfortable. Feel yourself rocking easily back and forth. As you continue rocking, you might find*

*yourself starting to drift ... drifting more and more. Rocking back and forth you might find yourself gently drifting back into time. Rocking gently and drifting ... slowly drifting back into time. Year by year you might imagine yourself getting younger and younger. The years are going by ... back through the 1990s ... back through the 1980s ... gently drifting back ... feeling younger and younger. Back into time long ago. Drifting back to a time when you were perhaps very young. You're imagining now that you can see the little child you were a long time ago. Very soon you can imagine seeing yourself as a little child. Perhaps you can see her [him] there now. What does she look like? What is she wearing? About how old is she? Can you see where she is? Indoors or outdoors? Can you see what she's doing? Perhaps you can see her face, and, if you look carefully, you can see the expression in her eyes. Can you tell how this little child is feeling right now? (Pause.) As you look at this little girl, can you recall anything that was missing in her life? Is there anything that kept her from being fully happy? (Pause.) If there was anyone or anything that got in the way of this little girl being completely happy and carefree, perhaps you can imagine seeing that person or situation. (Pause.) If no one is there yet, perhaps you can imagine your dad or your mom or whoever you would like standing in front of you right now. (Pause.) What does your little girl feel toward Dad, Mom, or whoever is standing in front of you right now? ... Is there anything that your child would like to say to that person right now? If so, it's okay to go ahead and say it right now ... you can go ahead and say it. (Pause.) If your little child is feeling scared or confused about saying anything, imagine that your present-day, adult self enters the scene right now and goes up and stands next to your little child. (Pause.) Now when you're ready, imagine your adult self, standing next to your little child, speaking up on your little child's behalf to whoever is there. Your adult self can say whatever she wants. Tell your parent—or whoever is there—whatever you need to say ... whatever it was that never got expressed. (Pause thirty seconds or longer.) If you wish, you might complete the sentence "How do you think it makes me feel that ..." (Pause twenty seconds or longer.) Or you might complete the sentence "I wish you had ..." (Pause twenty seconds or longer.) Tell your parent or whoever is there anything you wish they had done but didn't. When you speak up, speak loud and clear so you can be sure that whoever is there really hears you. (Pause twenty seconds or longer.) Does the person you're facing have any response? Listen to see if they have a response. (Pause twenty seconds or longer.) If so, you can respond to what they say. If not, you can just finish what you need to say. (Pause.) When you're finished speaking, you can ask whoever is there either to go away and leave you alone ... or to go away for a while until you're ready to talk again ... or else to stay ... and you're going to accept them*

*as they are and give them a hug. (Pause.)*

*Now go back and see your present-day, adult self standing next to your little child. (Pause.) If you're willing, pick that little girl up in your arms this very second and love her. Wrap your arms around her and tell her that it's okay. Tell her that you know how she feels. Tell her that you understand. You're here and you're going to help her and you love her very much. (Pause.) If you could give a color to the love you feel, what color comes to mind? (Pause.) Surround your little child with a light of that color and let her feel the peace of being in your arms. (Pause.) Tell her that you think she's a great little girl ... that you love the way she talks, walks, laughs ... and does everything. Tell her that you care and that she's precious ... (Pause thirty seconds or longer.)*

*Optional: Now sit your child on your lap and talk to her. She's got a good mind, and if someone would only explain things, she would understand. Tell her that because of the problems Mom and Dad had in their own childhood, they couldn't care for her and love her in the way she deserved to be loved. It wasn't that they didn't want to love her ... it was because of their own difficulties that they couldn't love her the way she wanted. This little child simply needs someone to explain to her ... nobody ever explained to her about the problems her parents had when they were growing up. (Pause.) Can your little child understand that because of their problems, Mom and Dad weren't able to love or take care of her in the way she truly deserved? Is your little child ready to forgive Mom and Dad for what happened? (Pause.) If she's not ready right now, perhaps she'll be ready later. If she is ready now, go ahead and picture Mom and Dad standing in front of you. (Pause.) Now tell them, in whatever way you wish, that you forgive them. You're willing to forgive them for their shortcomings because you know that their own problems interfered with their being the best parents they could. Go ahead and forgive them now ... (Pause thirty seconds or longer.)*

*(Give yourself instructions to wake up. Move your arms and legs, then take a few deep breaths. Then, as you start to feel more alert, say to yourself a few times, "Wake up.")*

#### **WRITE A LETTER TO YOUR INNER CHILD**

After having done the preceding visualization or as a result of looking at photos of yourself (see next section) as a child, you may wish to write a letter to your inner child. You can tell your child about 1) how you feel about her or him, 2) how you feel about what happened to her or him as a child, 3) how you would like to get to know her or him better, and 4) what you would like to learn from

her or him. When you've completed this letter, open your mind and see if you can take the role of the little child. Then write a child's letter back to your adult self, saying how you feel about your adult self and what you would like from her or him. You might even try using a child's handwriting for this letter to help get more in touch with how your little child feels. You will be surprised at how well this works in opening up communication between your adult and inner child "selves." Here is an example of such a letter from an adult to her inner child:

*Dear Little Child, I have long wanted to reach back in time to tell you how much I love you and how much I want to protect you from all the pain and suffering you've been going through. You're much too small and vulnerable to be facing such pain by yourself. I want you to know that you'll have me beside you from now on, and whenever you're frightened you can run to me. I'll be there to hold you and comfort you and protect you. I know that seeing your daddy lose his temper is very, very frightening. He makes as much noise as he can, and sometimes he hits your mommy or your brother. He doesn't hit you and in a way this just makes you feel guilty. It makes it seem as if you're on his side, and that every time he hits one of them, it's your fault too. I wish you could tell me more about how you feel, about yourself, your daddy, your mommy, and your brother. I think that a lot of things have happened to you that you just can't remember—either because they didn't make sense at the time or they were just too horrible to remember. It's hard to remember things that don't have any pictures, words, or even concepts attached to them—it's like trying to remember dreams. As you remember more, I'll be able to understand more about who I am and how I act and what I feel. I know that it's painful trying to remember, and I want you to know how grateful I am to you for trying. Remember that from now on we'll always be there for each other. Love, (sign your name)*

## **PHOTOGRAPHS**

Carry a photo of yourself as a child in your purse or wallet and take it out periodically as a reminder of your child within. Reflect on what was going on and how you felt in your life around the time the photo was taken. After a week or so with one photo, pick another from a different age and repeat the process.

## **REAL-LIFE ACTIVITIES**

A number of real-life activities can foster increased awareness of and closeness to your inner child. Spending ten minutes daily doing any of the

following may help:

- Hugging a teddy bear or another stuffed animal
- Going to a children's playground and using the swings or other playground equipment
- Playing with your own child as if you were a peer rather than an adult
- Having an ice cream cone
- Going to the zoo
- Climbing a tree
- Engaging in any other activity you enjoyed as a child

Try to get into the spirit of being a child as you do any of the above. Your feelings in doing so will tell you a lot about your attitude toward your own inner child.

### **Reevaluating Negative Feelings as Positive Needs of Your Inner Child**

If you were to encounter a small child who appeared scared, confused, or abandoned, you would likely do everything in your power to nurture and comfort him or her. Yet how do you treat yourself when you feel insecure, scared, lonely, abandoned, or otherwise needy? Too often we simply deny these feelings; or else we become critical or rejecting toward ourselves for having them. One of the most profound transformations you can make along the road to greater self-esteem is to *re-perceive feelings of insecurity and inadequacy as pleas for attention from your inner child rather than as signs of weakness to be gotten rid of*. You will heal yourself faster by acknowledging and nurturing the needy child behind your negative feeling states instead of trying to push away your inner child's needs.

The next time you feel frightened, insecure, inadequate, vulnerable, or angry, frustrated, and fed up, try asking yourself, "What is the need behind this feeling? What is it that my inner child needs right now?" Then take the time to give your child within the attention, caring, or nurturing she or he needs, and you'll be surprised by how much better you feel.

Learning to re-perceive negative feelings as pleas for attention from your inner child will transform your life and contribute greatly to your self-esteem. This is what "becoming a good parent to yourself" is all about.

## **EXAMPLES OF DISGUISED PLEAS FOR HELP FROM YOUR INNER CHILD**

You've just come home from a hard day at work. You see yourself in the bathroom mirror and you can't stand the way you look. Your makeup looks too heavy and it's smeared besides. You look and feel like an old floozy. You begin to think, "What's the use." You could choose to sink into a depression, but instead you ask your inner child what she wants at that very moment. Instead of fixing your makeup, you decide to fill the bathtub with warm bubbly water. You feel a little silly doing it, but you put some bath toys in the tub with you—a little rubber ducky and a child's teapot. You had similar tub toys when you were a child. You soak in the warm water and play with the toys, pouring pretend cups of tea and making the duck talk, just as you did when you were little. You stay in the tub as long as you feel like it, letting your fingertips and toes get wrinkled like prunes. When you look in the mirror again, you look pink and warm. You feel more forgiving of the way you look—after all, you've had a hard day!

You've spent two hours preparing a special meal for your sister, who was coming over to spend the evening with you. But at the last minute, she calls and says she can't come because she's not feeling well. You suspect it's because she's been asked out on a date. Suddenly you feel a mixture of sadness and anger. You could indulge in these negative feelings, but instead you ask what your inner child needs. Instead of getting angry and throwing the food away, you decide to pretend that you're your own guest of honor, and you've just prepared this beautiful meal for yourself. You make yourself a paper tiara and sit at the head of the table between two candles. Several times during the meal, you raise your glass and make toasts to yourself. You eat slowly, enjoying every bite and noticing the texture, color, and taste—after all, you're in a good position to appreciate it. At the end of the meal, you thank yourself for providing such splendid company.

## **Nurturing Your Inner Child on a Daily Basis**

How do you go about caring for and nurturing your child within? Earlier in this chapter, I talked about recognizing and meeting twenty-four basic human needs. Meeting these needs would certainly be a good start. If you were to meet all of those needs you would go a long way toward developing a healthy - relationship with your inner child. The exercises described above for bringing out the inner child will also foster a closer and more supportive relationship with this important part of yourself. Beyond this, there are hundreds of small acts of

self-nurturing that can serve to cultivate a more caring relationship with yourself and ultimately a much improved sense of self-worth. Just as you would offer small gestures of caring and nurturing to deepen your relationship with your spouse, your child, or a friend you love, you can do the same for yourself. The list below suggests fifty-one small ways in which you can nurture yourself on a daily basis.

### **Self-Nurturing Activities**

The following list has been very helpful to many of my clients who suffer from anxiety disorders or depression. By performing at least one or two items from the list every day, or anything else you find pleasurable, you will grow in the important skill of becoming a good parent to yourself. You have nothing to lose but your sense of insecurity and inadequacy—and nothing to gain except increased self-esteem.

1. Take a warm bath.
2. Have breakfast in bed.
3. Take a sauna.
4. Get a massage.
5. Buy yourself a rose.
6. Take a bubble bath.
7. Go to a pet store and play with the animals.
8. Walk on a scenic path in a park.
9. Visit a zoo.
10. Have a manicure or pedicure.
11. Stop and smell some flowers.
12. Wake up early and watch the sunrise.
13. Watch the sunset.
14. Relax with a good book and/or soothing music.
15. Go rent a funny video.
16. Play your favorite music and dance to it by yourself.
17. Go to bed early.
18. Sleep outside under the stars.
19. Take a “mental health day” off from work.
20. Fix a special dinner just for yourself and eat by candlelight.
21. Go for a walk.
22. Call a good friend—or several good friends.

23. Go out to a fine restaurant just with yourself.
24. Go to the beach.
25. Take a scenic drive.
26. Meditate.
27. Buy new clothes.
28. Browse in a book or record store for as long as you want.
29. Buy yourself a cuddly stuffed animal and play with it.
30. Write yourself a love letter and mail it.
31. Ask a special person to nurture you (feed, cuddle, and/or read to you).
32. Buy yourself something special that you can afford.
33. Go see a good film or show.
34. Go to the park and feed the ducks, swing on the swings, and so on.
35. Visit a museum or another interesting place.
36. Give yourself more time than you need to accomplish whatever you're doing (let yourself dawdle).
37. Work on your favorite puzzle or puzzlebook.
38. Go into a hot tub or Jacuzzi.
39. Make a recording of affirmations.
40. Write out an ideal scenario concerning a goal, then visualize it.
41. Read an inspirational book.
42. Write a letter to an old friend.
43. Bake or cook something special.
44. Go window shopping.
45. Buy a meditation CD or download one.
46. Listen to a positive, motivational recording.
47. Write in a special diary about your accomplishments.
48. Apply fragrant lotion all over your body.
49. Masturbate.
50. Exercise.
51. Sit and hold your favorite stuffed animal.

## Part II: Developing Support and Intimacy

While self-esteem is something we build within ourselves, much of our feeling of self-worth is determined by our significant personal relationships. Others cannot give you a feeling of adequacy and confidence, but their acceptance, respect, and validation of you can reaffirm and strengthen your own positive attitude and feelings about yourself. Self-love becomes narcissistic in isolation from others. Let's consider four pathways to self-esteem that involve relationships with others:

- Close friends and support
- Intimacy
- Boundaries
- Assertiveness

### **Close Friends and Support**

When surveys of human values have been done, many people rank close friends near the top, along with career, a happy family life, and health. Each of us needs a support system of at least two or three close friends in addition to our immediate family. A close friend is someone you can deeply trust and confide in. It is someone who comfortably accepts you as you are in all your moods, behaviors, and roles. And it is someone who will stand by you no matter what is happening in your life. A close friend allows you the opportunity to share your feelings and perceptions about your life outside your immediate family. Such a person can help bring out aspects of your personality that might not be expressed with your spouse, children, or parents. At least two or three close friends of this sort, whom you can confide in on a regular basis, are an essential part of an adequate support system. Such friends can help provide continuity in your life through times of great transition, such as moving away from home, divorce, or death of a family member.

How many close friends of the type just described do you have? If you don't have at least two, what could you do to cultivate such friendships?

### **Intimacy**

While some people seem content to go through life with a few close friends, most of us seek a special relationship with one particular person. It is in intimate relationships that we open ourselves most deeply and have the chance to discover the most about ourselves. Such relationships help overcome a certain loneliness that most of us would eventually feel—no matter how self-sufficient and strong we may be—without intimacy. The sense of belonging that we gain from intimate relationships contributes substantially to our feelings of self-worth. I want to reemphasize, however, that self-worth cannot be derived entirely from someone else. A healthy intimate relationship simply reinforces your own self-acceptance and belief in yourself.

Much has been written on the topic of intimacy and on what ingredients contribute to lasting intimate relationships. Some of the most important of these are listed below (not ranked in any order):

1. Common interests, especially leisure time and recreational interests. (A few differences in interests, though, can add some novelty and excitement.)
2. A sense of romance or “magic” between you and your partner. This is an intangible quality of attraction that goes well beyond the physical level. It’s usually very strong and steady in the first three to six months of a relationship. The relationship then requires the ability to renew, refresh, or rediscover this magic as it matures.
3. You and your partner need to be well matched in your relative needs for togetherness versus independence. Conflict may arise if one of you has a much greater need for freedom and “space” than the other, or if one of you has a need for protection and coziness that the other doesn’t want to provide. Some partners may hold a double standard—in other words, they’re unwilling to allow you what they require for themselves (such as trust and freedom).
4. Mutual acceptance and support of each other’s personal growth and change. It is well known that when only one person is growing in a relationship, or feels invalidated in their growth by the other, the relationship often ends.
5. Mutual acceptance of each other’s faults and weaknesses. After the initial romantic months of a relationship are over, each partner must find enough good in the other to tolerate and accept the other’s faults and weaknesses.

6. Regular expressions of affection and touching. An intimate relationship cannot be healthy without both partners being willing to overtly express affection. Nonsexual expressions such as hugging and cuddling are just as important as a sound sexual relationship.
7. Sharing of feelings. Genuine closeness between two people requires emotional vulnerability and a willingness to open up and share your deepest feelings.
8. Good communication. Entire books and courses are devoted to this subject. While there are many different aspects to good communication, the two most important criteria are that
  - The partners are genuinely willing to listen to each other, and
  - Both are able to express their feelings and ask for what they want directly (as opposed to complaining, threatening, demanding, and otherwise attempting to manipulate the other to meet their needs).
9. A strong sense of mutual trust. Each person needs to feel that he or she can rely on the other. Each also trusts the other with his or her deepest feelings. A sense of trust does not come automatically; it needs to be built over time and maintained.
10. Common values and a larger sense of purpose. An intimate relationship has the best opportunity to be lasting when two people have common values in important areas of life such as friendships, education, religion, finances, sex, health, and family life. The strongest relationships are usually bound by a common purpose that transcends the personal needs of each individual—for example, raising children, running a business, or commitment to a spiritual ideal.

How many of the above ten characteristics are present in your intimate relationship? Are there any, in particular, that you would like to work on?

## **Boundaries**

Just as important as intimacy is the need for each of us to maintain appropriate boundaries within both intimate and other relationships. Boundaries simply

mean that you know where you end and the other person begins. You don't define your identity in terms of the other person. And above all, you don't derive your sense of self-worth and self-authority by attempting to take care of, rescue, change, or control the other person. The terms "women who love too much" and "codependency" have been used to define those people who, because they lack a solid, internal basis of self-worth, attempt to validate themselves through taking care of, rescuing, or simply pleasing another person. The classic case of this is the person who attempts to organize his or her life around "rescuing" an alcoholic or otherwise addicted spouse or close relative. But loss of boundaries can occur in any relationship in which you attempt to gain self-worth and security by overextending yourself to take care of, control, rescue, or change someone else. Your own needs and feelings are set aside and discounted in the process. A good indication of loss of boundaries is when you spend more time talking or thinking about another's needs or problems than your own.

Two excellent books are recommended if you want to further explore boundary issues in your own relationships. In her best-selling book *Women Who Love Too Much*, Robin Norwood advocates the following steps in overcoming codependency in a close relationship:

1. Going for help—giving up the idea you can handle it alone
2. Making recovery from codependency your highest priority
3. Finding a support group of peers who understand the problem
4. Developing a personal spiritual life that allows you to let go of self-will and rely on a Higher Power
5. Learning to stop managing, controlling, or "running the life" of another or others you love
6. Learning to let go of playing the game of "rescuer" and/or "victim" with the other person
7. Facing and exploring your own personal problems and pain in depth
8. Cultivating yourself: developing a life of your own and pursuing your own interests
9. Becoming "selfish," not in the unhealthy sense of egoism but instead putting *your* well-being, desires, work, play, plans, and activities first instead of last
10. Sharing what you have learned with others

Another excellent book which carefully defines codependency and provides a series of steps for overcoming the problem is *Codependent No More* by Melody

Beattie. Some of her recommendations include

1. Practicing “detachment”—letting go of obsessively worrying about someone else
2. Letting go of the need to control someone else—respecting that person enough to know that he or she can take responsibility for his or her own life
3. Taking care of yourself, which includes finishing up “unfinished business” from your own past and learning to nurture and cherish the needy, vulnerable child within
4. Improving communication—learning to state what you want and to say no
5. Dealing with anger—giving yourself permission to feel and express anger at loved ones when you need to
6. Discovering spirituality—finding and connecting with a Higher Power. Is codependency an issue for you? Have you considered joining a support group that focuses on codependency issues, such as Al-Anon or Codependents Anonymous?

## **Assertiveness**

Cultivating assertiveness is critical to self-esteem. If you’re unable to clearly get across to others what you want or do not want, you will end up feeling frustrated, helpless, and powerless. If you do nothing else, the practice of assertive behavior in and of itself can increase your feeling of *self-respect*. Honoring your own needs with other people in an assertive manner also increases *their* respect for you, and quickly overcomes any tendency on their part to take advantage of you.

The concept of assertiveness, along with exercises for developing an assertive style of communication, are presented in chapter 13 of this workbook.

## Part III: Other Pathways to Self-Esteem

The first two parts of this chapter focused on taking care of your needs through honoring your inner child and developing support and intimacy in your relationships. In this final part, I want to emphasize four other pathways to self-esteem that involve different levels of your whole being.

- Body: physical well-being and body image
- Feelings: emotional self-expression
- Mind: positive self-talk and affirmations for self-esteem
- Whole self: personal goals and a sense of accomplishment

Although these areas have been considered elsewhere in this workbook, they are discussed briefly here for their relevance to self-esteem.

### **Physical Well-Being and Body Image**

Physical health and a sense of personal wellness, vitality, and robustness compose one of the most important foundations of self-esteem. It's often difficult to feel good about yourself when you're feeling physically weak, tired, or ill. Current evidence points to the role of physiological imbalances—often caused by stress—in the genesis of panic attacks, agoraphobia, generalized anxiety, and obsessive-compulsive disorder. Upgrading your physical well-being will have a direct impact on your particular problem with anxiety, as well as contribute substantially to your self-esteem. The chapters on relaxation, exercise, and nutrition relate directly to physical well-being. Reading them and putting into practice the suggestions and guidelines offered will go a long way toward upgrading your personal wellness. The questionnaire below is intended to give you an overview of how you are doing in this area.

### **Personal Wellness Questionnaire**

1. Are you exercising for at least one half hour three to five times per week?
2. Do you enjoy the exercise you do?
3. Do you give yourself the opportunity to deeply relax each day

- through progressive muscle relaxation, visualization, meditation, or some other relaxation method?
4. Do you give yourself at least one hour of downtime or leisure time each day?
  5. Do you manage your time so that you are not perpetually rushed?
  6. Do you handle stress, or do you feel that it has control of you?
  7. Do you give yourself solitary time for personal reflection?
  8. Do you get at least seven hours of sleep every night?
  9. Are you satisfied with the quality and quantity of your sleep?
  10. Are you eating three solid meals each day, including a good-sized breakfast?
  11. Are you minimizing your consumption of stress-producing foods (those containing caffeine, sugar, salt, or processed “junk” foods)?
  12. Do you take vitamin supplements on a regular basis to augment your diet—such as a multivitamin tablet and extra vitamin B-complex and vitamin C when you’re under physical or emotional stress?
  13. Do you like your living environment? Is the place where you live comfortable and relaxing?
  14. Does smoking tobacco interfere with your physical well-being?
  15. Does excessive use of alcohol or so-called recreational drugs compromise your well-being?
  16. Are you comfortable with your present weight? If not, what can you do about it?
  17. Do you value your personal appearance through good hygiene, grooming, and dressing in a way that feels comfortable and attractive?
  18. Do you like your body and the way you appear?

## **Emotional Self-Expression**

When you’re out of touch with your feelings, it’s hard to know who you are. You tend to feel internally detached from yourself and often fearful. By identifying and expressing the full range of your feelings, you can become better acquainted with your unique needs, desires, and yearnings. Literally you begin to *feel* yourself—your whole self—rather than walking around in a cloud of

worried thoughts, fantasies, and anticipations. Learning to own and express your feelings takes time, courage, and a willingness to be vulnerable in the presence of others whom you trust. If you haven't already, read chapter 12 for suggestions on how to increase your awareness and ability to express your feelings. This is a very important pathway to self-esteem.

## **Self-Talk and Affirmations for Self-Esteem**

What you tell yourself, and your beliefs about yourself, contribute in an obvious and literal way to your self-esteem. If you are feeling inadequate and powerless, it's very likely because you *believe* that you are. By the same token, you can raise your self-esteem *simply* by working on changing your self-talk and basic beliefs about yourself.

Exercises for identifying and altering your negative self-talk and mistaken beliefs have been presented in chapters 8 and 9. At this point, I'll simply highlight certain parts of those chapters that are relevant to self-esteem. First, I want you to consider two types of self-talk that are most damaging to your self-worth. Second, I will cover the use of affirmations to overcome negative beliefs and assumptions about yourself.

Of the four types of self-talk described in chapter 8—the Worrier, the Critic, the Victim, and the Perfectionist—the Critic and the Victim are the most potentially destructive to your self-esteem. Indeed, it has been my experience that people with low self-esteem invariably have a strong Critic, a strong Victim consciousness, or both. It's the Critic's specific function to talk you down into feeling inadequate, inferior, and incompetent. Then Victim self-talk may add insult to injury by telling you that you're hopeless and powerless.

First, go back to chapter 8 and review the section "Types of Negative Self-Talk" and the exercise "What Are Your Subpersonalities Telling You?" with particular attention to the Critic and Victim. Complete the worksheets for countering the destructive self-talk of each of these subpersonalities, if you haven't already. Then use the *Daily Record of Dysfunctional Thoughts* (make several copies) to track the occurrence of negative self-statements from your Critic and Victim as they occur spontaneously during a two-week time period.

When you catch yourself engaging in self-critical or self-victimizing inner dialogues, follow these three steps:

1. *Disrupt* the chain of negative thoughts with some method that

diverts your attention away from your mind and helps you to be more in touch with your feelings and body. Any of the following may work:

- Physical activity—for example, household chores or exercise
- Taking a walk outside
- Abdominal breathing
- Five minutes of progressive muscle relaxation
- Shouting “Stop!” aloud or silently
- Snapping a rubber band against your wrist

The point is to do *something* that slows you down and gives you a bit of distance from your negative thoughts. It’s difficult to counter negative self-talk when you’re tense and your mind is racing.

2. *Challenge* your negative self-talk with appropriate questioning, if necessary. Good questions to raise with your Critic or Victim might be “What’s the evidence for this?” “Is this *always* true?” and “Am I looking at both [or all] sides of this issue?” Review the list of Socratic questions in chapter 8 for other examples of questions.
3. *Counter* your negative inner dialogue with positive, self-supportive statements. You may want to design your own positive statements specifically tailored to refute your Critic’s or Victim’s statements, one by one. Alternatively, you can draw positive counterstatements from the following list of affirmations.

## **Affirmations for Self-Esteem**

### **What I Am**

I am lovable and capable.

I fully accept and believe in myself just the way I am.

I am a unique and special person. There is no one else quite like me in the entire world.

I accept all the different parts of myself.

I’m already worthy as a person. I don’t have to prove myself.

My feelings and needs are important.

It's okay to think about what I need.

It's good for me to take time for myself.

I have many good qualities.

I believe in my capabilities and value the unique talents I can offer the world.

I am a person of high integrity and sincere purpose.

I trust in my ability to succeed at my goals.

I am a valuable and important person, worthy of the respect of others.

Others perceive me as a good and likable person.

When other people really get to know me, they like me.

Other people like to be around me. They like to hear what I have to say and know what I think.

Others recognize that I have a lot to offer.

I deserve to be supported by those people who care for me.

I deserve the respect of others.

I trust and respect myself and am worthy of the respect of others.

I now receive assistance and cooperation from others.

I'm optimistic about life. I look forward to and enjoy new challenges.

I know what my values are and am confident of the decisions I make.

I easily accept compliments and praise from others.

I take pride in what I've accomplished and look forward to what I intend to achieve.

I believe in my ability to succeed.

I love myself just the way I am.

I don't have to be perfect to be loved.

The more I love myself, the more I am able to love others.

### **What I Am Learning**

I am learning to love myself more every day.

I am learning to believe in my unique worth and capabilities.

I am learning to trust myself (and others).

I am learning to recognize and take care of my needs.

I am learning that my feelings and needs are just as important as anyone else's.

I am learning to ask others for what I need.

I am learning that it's okay to say no to others when I need to.

I am learning to take life one day at a time.

I am learning to approach my goals one day at a time.

I am learning to take better care of myself.

I am learning how to take more time for myself each day.

I am learning to let go of doubts and fear.

I am learning to let go of worry.

I am learning to let go of guilt (or shame).

I am learning that others respect and like me.

I am learning how to be more comfortable around others.

I am learning to feel more confident in \_\_\_\_\_ (name situation)

I am learning that I have a right to \_\_\_\_\_ (specify)

I am learning that it's okay to make mistakes.

I am learning that I don't have to be perfect to be loved.

I am learning to accept myself just the way I am.

There are several ways you might want to work with the above list. The chapter on mistaken beliefs contains a number of suggestions for working with affirmations. The following two methods have been especially popular with my clients:

- Select your favorite affirmations from the list and write them down individually on 3 by 5 index cards. Then read through the stack slowly and with feeling once or twice a day. Doing this while alternately looking at yourself in a mirror is an excellent idea. You may also want to reword each affirmation in the second person: "You are lovable and capable" (rather than "I am lovable and capable") when repeating the phrases to your mirror image.
- Alternatively, you can record the affirmations. Repeat each affirmation twice and leave about five to ten seconds between different statements. Listen to the recording once a day when

you feel relaxed and receptive. You are most likely to internalize affirmations when you focus your attention on them fully while in a relaxed state. (Note that you may wish to construct your own list of self-esteem affirmations, drawing on those that are most meaningful to you from the above list; or make up new ones of your own.)

## **A Sense of Accomplishment**

Accomplishment of personal goals always adds to your self-esteem. If you look back over your life to the times when you felt most confident, you'll find that they often followed the accomplishment of important personal goals. Although external achievements can never be the *sole* basis of a sense of self-worth, they certainly contribute to how you feel about yourself.

If you are dealing with phobias or panic attacks, a most significant accomplishment is the ability to enter into and handle situations that you previously avoided. An even more unassailable sense of achievement is reached when, in addition to confronting phobic situations, you become confident that you can handle any panic reaction that might arise. The mastery of phobias and panic reactions is a main theme of this book and is dealt with in detail in chapters 6 and 7. If you have fully recovered from agoraphobia, social phobias, or panic disorder through conscientiously facing the very things you feared most, you know how much self-confidence and inner strength there is to be gained. Facing your phobias (including the phobia of panic itself) through a process of gradual exposure will, *in and of itself*, add considerably to your self-esteem.

Beyond the important goal of overcoming phobias and panic, however, are all the other goals you might have in your life. Your sense of self-esteem depends on the feeling that you're making progress toward *all* of your goals. If you feel "stuck" and unable to move toward something important that you want, you may begin to doubt yourself and feel somewhat diminished.

Beyond the issue of recovery from phobias and panic, then, you might ask yourself two questions:

1. What are the most important things I want out of life—now and in the future?
2. What am I doing about these goals right now?

Let's consider each of these. To answer the first question, you need to define what your goals are. If this is presently unclear, thinking about what you want in each of the areas below might help you to be more specific:

Physical health, Friends, Psychological well-being

Career, Finances and money, Education

Intimate relationships, Personal growth, Family

Recreation and leisure, Living environment, Spiritual life

Give yourself some time—up to several days if necessary—to clarify what your most important goals are in these areas over the following time intervals: the next month, the next six months, the next year, and the next three years. You may find the *Personal Values Inventory* in chapter 20 to be helpful in making an exploration of your lifelong goals. The focus of the present section is on your more immediate goals.

Write down your most important goals for each time period, using the chart below. You may wish to talk with a close friend or perhaps a counselor to assist you with the process of clarifying your specific personal goals.

The second question involves honestly evaluating what steps you're currently taking—or not taking—toward attaining your immediate and longer-range goals. Are you genuinely working toward what you want? Or are you making excuses and setting up obstacles to the attainment of what you want? The popular phrase “taking responsibility for your life” simply means that you take full responsibility for working toward your own goals. Avoiding self-responsibility is to not do anything about what you want and/or to expect someone else to do it for you. Avoiding self-responsibility will guarantee that you'll have feelings of powerlessness, inadequacy, and even hopelessness. A sense of personal self-worth is dependent on taking responsibility for yourself.

### **Your Most Important Personal Goals**

For the next month:

For the next six months:

For the next year:

For the next three years:

What are some of the obstacles you might be putting in the way of going after

what you want? *Fear* is the greatest impediment to doing something about your goals, just as it is in the case of overcoming phobias. If you don't see yourself moving toward what you want, ask whether you're letting any of the following fears get in your way:

- Fear of losing present security
- Fear of failure
- Fear of personal rejection or the disapproval of others
- Fear of succeeding (*then* what would you have to deal with!)
- Fear of your goal involving too much work
- Fear of your goal involving too much time
- Fear of your goal involving too much energy
- Fear that your goal is too unrealistic—for example, that others will discourage you
- Fear of change itself

The solution to any of these fears about taking action on your life goals is exactly the same as the solution to dealing with a phobia: *face the fear and go forward in small steps*. There is no way to eliminate some risk and discomfort, but breaking a goal down into sufficiently small steps (much like an exposure hierarchy) will enable you to go forward.

While fear is the biggest obstacle to moving forward on goals, guilt can also be an impediment. You may wish to consider whether any of the following beliefs are keeping you from seeking what you want:

“I'm not good enough to have \_\_\_\_\_.”

“I don't deserve to have \_\_\_\_\_.”

“No one in my family has ever done something like that before.”

“Others won't approve if I go after \_\_\_\_\_.”

“No one will accept this idea if I try to put it into practice.”

The latter two beliefs really could have been listed under fears, but they also involve guilt. To overcome the feeling of not deserving to achieve your goal, I suggest that you work intensively with the simple affirmation “I deserve \_\_\_\_\_.” or “I deserve to have \_\_\_\_\_.” Don't be sparing in the use of repetition with this particular affirmation. Continue to work with it until you develop an emotional conviction that it is true. Developing the belief that you deserve what you truly want will add significantly to your self-esteem.

After you've worked through your specific obstacles to taking action on your

goals, it's time to develop a plan of action. Just as you would with a desensitization hierarchy, break down your goal into a series of small steps. Remember that this is a long-range plan. As an option, you may wish to specify a time frame for accomplishing each step. Be sure that you reward yourself after the accomplishment of each step, just as you would with a phobia hierarchy. You might ask family or friends for their support in your undertaking, much as you would rely on a support person in tackling a phobia.

For example, you might be feeling increasingly dissatisfied with your present line of work and would like to be doing something else. Yet you're not quite sure about what you want to do, let alone how to go about training for it. The broad goal of "getting into another line of work" might seem a bit overwhelming, taken as a whole. But if you break it down into its component parts, it becomes more manageable:

1. Find a career counselor you respect (or take a course in exploring career options at a local college).
2. Explore different options by
  - Working with the counselor or taking an appropriate course
  - Reading about different vocations in such books as *What Color Is Your Parachute?* and the *Occupational Outlook Handbook*
  - Talking to people who hold positions in vocations you feel drawn to
3. Narrow down vocational options to one particular type of work (obtain whatever help you need to do this)—focus is extremely important in achieving goals.
4. Obtain education or training for the line of work you've chosen.
  - Find out where training is available in your area (your local library is a good resource for doing your research).
  - Apply to appropriate schools or training programs.
  - Apply for an educational grant or loan if your education or training will require a full-time commitment.
5. Complete your education or training (if possible while maintaining your current job).

6. Search for an entry-level position in your new career.
  - Obtain resources that tell you where jobs are available (professional or trade newsletters, journals, alumni organizations, newspapers, and job hotlines and websites are all good resources).
  - Prepare a professional-looking resume.
  - Apply for jobs.
  - Go for interviews.
7. Begin your new career.

Provided it's physically possible, you can make any major goal manageable by breaking it down into sufficiently small steps. Use the worksheet below to list specific steps you might take to progress toward an important personal goal. Make photocopies of the sheet if there is more than one goal you want to pursue. You may find that you can clarify specific steps more easily by talking about them with a friend or counselor.

The advantage of developing a plan of action is that you then have a map to follow in going after what you want; you can refer to it as you monitor your progress or if you get stuck at any time along the way. If you have trouble with any particular step, you may need to investigate once again any sense of guilt or fears that are getting in your way.

Taking personal responsibility for achieving the things you want most out of life—and making tangible progress toward obtaining them—will add greatly to your sense of self-esteem. An excellent book for getting started that I've often recommended to my clients is Susan Jeffers' *Feel the Fear and Do It Anyway*.

### **Plan of Action: Steps Toward Your Goal**

1. Your goal (be as specific as possible):

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2. What small step can you take right now to make some progress toward achieving this goal?

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3. What other steps will you need to take to achieve this goal?  
(Estimate the time required to complete each step.)

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### **REMEMBERING PREVIOUS ACCOMPLISHMENTS**

In identifying goals for the future, it's important not to lose sight of what you've already accomplished in your life. It's common to forget about past attainments at those times when you're feeling dissatisfied with yourself. You can raise your self-esteem in a few minutes by thinking about your life and giving yourself credit for those goals you've already achieved.

The following exercise is designed to help you do this. Think about your entire life as you review each area and make a list of your accomplishments. Keep in mind that while it's gratifying to have external, "socially recognized" achievements, the most important attainments are more intangible and internal. What you've given to others (for example, love, assistance, or guidance) and the life lessons you've gained on the road to maturity and wisdom are ultimately your most important accomplishments.

### **List of Personal Accomplishments**

For each of the following areas, list any accomplishments you've had up to the present. Use a separate sheet of paper if you need to.

*School*

*Work and career*

*Home and family* (for example, raising a child or taking care of a sick in-law)

*Athletics*

*Arts and hobbies*

*Leadership*

*Prizes or awards*

*Personal growth and self-improvement*

*Charitable activities*

*Intangibles given to others*

*Important life lessons learned*

*Other*

## Summary of Things to Do

So many different strategies for raising your self-esteem have been presented in this chapter that it would be impractical to summarize each one of them here. The following worksheet is intended to help you organize what you've learned from this chapter and decide which particular strategies for building self-esteem you want to try out in the immediate future.

### **Strategies for Building Self-Esteem**

Go back through the chapter and decide which of the following strategies you want to implement in raising your self-esteem over the next month. I recommend that you stick with no more than three or four strategies and devote at least one week to each. In the spaces provided below, or on a separate sheet of paper, write out specifically what actions you'll take with respect to each intervention. When you're finished, design your own four-week self-esteem program by writing down which strategy you'll work with over each of the next four weeks.

1. Identify no more than three or four needs from the list of needs mentioned earlier in this chapter that you'd like to give special attention to. Then take action to do something about meeting those needs you've singled out. What specifically will you do?
2. Work on bringing out your inner child.
  - Record and listen to the inner child visualization.
  - Write a letter to your inner child.
  - Carry around a photo of yourself as a child.

Engage in playful activities that give expression to your inner child. What activities will you practice?

- Work on redescribing negative feeling states as pleas for attention from your inner child. Describe examples of when you do this over a period of at least one week.
- Do one or more things from the list of self-nurturing activities. What will you do for each day of a given week?
- Work on building your support system. How will you specifically do this?
- Work on cultivating or enhancing an intimate relationship (for example, spending quality time with your partner, taking a course in communication skills, attending a marriage enrichment weekend). How will you do this?
- Work on improving your understanding and ability to maintain appropriate boundaries (for example, read the suggested books by Robin Norwood and Melody Beattie, attend Al-Anon or Codependents Anonymous meetings, attend a workshop on codependency). How will you specifically do this?
- Learn and practice assertiveness skills (see chapter 13). What specifically will you do?
- Work on upgrading your personal wellness and body image (for example, implement relaxation, exercise, and nutritional improvements in your life—see chapters 4, 5, and 15). What are you willing to do in the next month?
- Work on identifying and expressing your feelings (see chapter 12). What specifically will you do?
- Counter negative self-talk of your Critic or Victim subpersonalities (use the *Daily Record of Dysfunctional Thoughts* in chapter 8).
- Work with self-esteem affirmations by
  - Writing one or two of them out several

- times each day
- Reading them daily from a list
  - Putting them on a recording that you listen to daily.

Which one will you do?

- Define your important personal goals over the next month, six months, year, and three years using the goals worksheet in this chapter. Then take action on one or more goals. What specifically will you do?
- List personal accomplishments you've achieved to date, using the worksheet in this chapter.

### **Four-Week Self-Esteem Program**

Which of the above interventions will you implement over the next four weeks?

Week 1:

Week 2:

Week 3:

Week 4:

## Further Reading

Beattie, Melody. *Codependent No More*. San Francisco: Harper/Hazelden, 1987.

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