

Finding Happiness Through Self-Acceptance

My one regret in life is that I am not someone else.

Woody Allen

Do you make assessments of your worth based on such things as how well you perform at work? Or perhaps you consider yourself worthwhile because you have loving relationships with family and friends? Do you measure your value based on your wealth and fame? Or perhaps your acceptability is based on how others judge you.

Bookshops are packed with a plethora of self-help books each recommending that we build up our own sense of self-worth, recognise our inner strengths and focus on our accomplishments.

At first this might seem like good advice. After all, to value oneself is worthwhile and helps people to prosper. Are we not constantly being told that in order to be happy we need high self-esteem?

To esteem yourself means to rate yourself. A person's self-esteem will seem to be high when he is performing well and feeling competent. However, it is all too easy for self-esteem to plummet when a person falls short of his goal, is rejected by a potential partner or feels unworthy when not living up to expectations.

This is how self-esteem becomes conditional and brief, leading people to feel good one minute while condemning themselves the next.

For example, when you achieve success, you may think to yourself: *"I am a good person,"* and when you face a setback you say: *"I failed, and I am a bad person."* We also base self-esteem on how others react to us.

So when you win the approval of significant people in your life, your self-esteem is high and when they reject you it is low.

It is natural to feel good when you perform well. For example, let us suppose that a salesperson gives an excellent presentation to a group of potential buyers. His boss not only congratulates him for closing a lucrative deal but also rates his presentation as one of the most effective he has ever seen.

The salesman feels this makes him a highly capable person and superior to his colleagues. He believes he has earned his high worth and feels good; the better he performs, the better he feels and the higher his self-esteem. The problem with this approach is that our salesman will eventually run into trouble because all people fail at their work some of the time, and our salesman is no exception. As the legendary psychologist Albert Ellis noted: *"When you succeed in getting what you want, you say, 'that is good. Great!' But you also rate yourself and say, 'I am a good person for succeeding!' When you fail to achieve your goals, you say, 'that is bad and I am bad.'"*

According to Ellis, self-esteem is probably the greatest emotional disturbance known to the human race.

So if you make your worth as a person depend on your achievements, your feelings of self-worth will be temporary. Measuring your self-worth in this way will frequently lead to depression and self-loathing whenever you fail to live up to your goals.

In my previous example, the salesperson felt good because his boss congratulated him on giving one of the most effective sales presentations he had ever seen. Winning the approval of his boss can be seen as a good thing – nothing wrong with that; the problem arises when the salesman concludes that because his boss thinks well of him that makes

him a good and worthy person. He ties up his worth as a person with his boss's opinion of him.

The following month our salesman gives another sales presentation that fails to secure a deal. This time his boss is very critical, stating that the lack of a sale was primarily due to his inadequate performance.

The salesman's feelings of self-worth plummet. Before even taking the time to think about his boss's opinion, he concludes that because his presentation was inadequate he is inadequate. So our salesman confuses "*an inadequate performance*" with "*being an inadequate person.*"

Other examples of this confusion include equating making a mistake with being a mistake; having a failure with being a failure; and doing something that is bad with being a bad person.

This denigration of the self is wrong and a prescription for further failure. If people define themselves as a total failure then they minimise their chances for success in the future. The salesman told himself that he was "*inadequate as a person*" for giving an inadequate presentation. But how could an inadequate person have ever given a presentation that was adequate let alone excellent?

The more people put themselves down, the less likely they are to perform well because they are quite literally prescribing failure for themselves.

How Samantha began to accept herself

A few years ago, a client consulted me with a view to raising her self-esteem. Samantha was due to attend an old school-friend's wedding. She knew that a lot of her old classmates would be there and this was causing her considerable anxiety. Samantha explained that she had been bullied by some of these classmates. She suffered from dyslexia and had considerable difficulty with her reading and writing. This had set her back and she had been placed in a

class with students two years below her age. Consequently, these classmates had labelled her the “*school dunce*” and she had felt like one. It had been a struggle, and Samantha took many years to build up her self-esteem.

This articulate and intelligent 39-year-old woman was scared that a meeting with old classmates would bring back these feelings of inadequacy. She thought it unlikely she would again be called a dunce, but would the inference be there? Just the thought of a conversation with them sent waves of anxiety through her body.

I asked Samantha what specifically it was about the reunion that was causing her anxiety.

Samantha worried that her classmates would bring up the subject of their school days. *“What if they start talking about the difficulties I had at school? What if they get drunk and start calling me a dunce again? I couldn’t stand that.”*

I asked Samantha whose idea it was that she was a dunce?

Samantha: *“I know they used to think I was stupid; they used to bully me about it every day.”*

Michael: *“So they used to call you stupid, but does that mean you are stupid?”*

Samantha: *“At the time I used to think it did. I have dyslexia and found reading and writing difficult; it has improved but I still think of myself as a bit thick.”*

Michael: *“It sounds like as a child your feelings of confidence and self-worth were low; the bullying and name calling was unacceptable. It must have been difficult to resist agreeing with their idea that difficulty with reading and writing equals stupidity.”*

“The good news is that together we can both prove beyond a shadow of a doubt that continuing to hold the view that you are stupid is untrue and self-defeating. Would you like to do that?”

We can see that, at the time, Samantha agreed with her classmates – she had thought of herself as a dunce and still held on to this view today. A popular therapeutic approach to helping Samantha would have been to rehash the trauma of the bullying she experienced in the past and to then focus on her positive qualities in order to raise her feelings of self-worth. To some extent this may have proven helpful. But to focus on her good qualities without addressing the erroneous view she held of herself as stupid would probably have left Samantha with continuing feelings of inferiority. I thought it important to show Samantha that not only were her classmates totally wrong but, more importantly, she was wrong to agree with them.

You are not your problems

Samantha can now see that her dyslexia has been and to some extent still is a problem in her life. It held her back and she left school without any formal qualifications. The mistake Samantha makes is to label herself a dunce.

I asked Samantha to give me a definition of a dunce.

Samantha: *“A stupid person.”*

Michael: *“Well that’s a definition that we may find in the dictionary; however, I would argue that there is no such thing as ‘a stupid person’ – just a person who does stupid things. Everyone does stupid things; in fact, I doubt if there is a person in this world who has never done anything stupid.”*

Samantha: *“But my classmates thought I was stupid.”*

Michael: *“But does that make you stupid?”*

Samantha: *“I believed that dyslexia made me stupid.”*

Michael: *“Yes, you did. However, dyslexia is a learning difficulty and having a learning difficulty hardly makes you stupid. Would you consider a person who is colour-blind to be stupid? How about someone who stutters?”*

Samantha: *"If a person says something bad about me I tend to agree."*

Michael: *"That's right – some people will label you; they put you down if you get things wrong, call you all sorts of names, but that's their problem. You can choose not to agree with them."*

Samantha: *"So how do I do that?"*

Michael: *"By never rating yourself as stupid, bad or mad. Rate your traits by all means. For instance, if you were to make a mistake at work you would be correct to think, 'I made a stupid mistake but I am not a stupid person. I am a fallible person who made a stupid mistake.' If I called you an octopus would that make you an octopus – no, of course not. You're a human being, not an octopus, and you're not stupid but a fallible human being who sometimes makes stupid mistakes."*

Samantha was now able to see that rating herself was not only inaccurate but a guarantee of unhealthy emotions such as anger, fear, shame and guilt. You cannot rate people; you can only rate their acts.

The antidote to self-esteem

Self-esteem is a rating game; you rate yourself, your essence and your whole being. This seems fine when life is going well; you have a good career, satisfying relationships and enough money. The problem arises when you tell yourself you're a good person for having these things, because sooner or later life bites you in the bum and things go wrong. You may lose your job, get rejected by your loved one or lose some money; then your feelings of self-worth plummet. The mistake you make is to tie your self-worth up with your success and achievements; and being fallible, like all people, there will be times when you fail.

Surprisingly, the antidote to this trap does not come from some new-age mumbo jumbo but is, in fact, rooted in history. Centuries ago, Greek and Roman philosophers developed the

concept of self-acceptance. They saw that in order for a person to be fully self-accepting, it was vital to never rate yourself or other people. The psychologist Dr Albert Ellis has termed this 'unconditional self-acceptance'.

When you refuse to rate yourself, you avoid feelings of anxiety, guilt and inferiority. By recognizing that everyone has shortcomings and that nobody is perfect, you're in a better position to accept your weaknesses along with your strengths. It is healthy to rate your performance, and if you can change something or improve it then so much the better. But if you cannot change it, then accept it and still do as well as you can.

If I was to offer you a £50 note, but before I gave it to you crumpled it up in my hand, would you still want it? Of course you would, because despite being crumpled, it would still hold its true value. However much you may feel crumpled by life, you will always hold your value. So when you fail at something, don't put yourself down and make yourself miserable.

What this book can offer you

The ideas underpinning this book mainly derive from an approach to therapy called Rational Emotive Behaviour Therapy — R.E.B.T. for short. The revolutionary psychologist Dr Albert Ellis developed this highly effective therapy back in the 1950s. R.E.B.T. gets to the heart of emotional problems by showing that unhealthy beliefs cause emotional problems.

Most people believe that when an unpleasant event occurs, that event is responsible for the way they feel. The next chapter shows that this is false. I will show you that it is not events but the rigid and unhelpful way in which you view events that is largely responsible for emotional pain. You will learn to change the way you feel by changing the way you think.

Later in the book, I look at the problem of perfectionism and show you how to free yourself from the prison of perfectionism and how to develop the courage to be imperfect. I then tackle three of the most debilitating emotional conditions in society, which are anxiety, fear and depression. I will teach you how to use self-hypnosis and to relax the mind and body. Once fully relaxed, it's possible to prompt yourself with autosuggestions that will move you forward to greater self-acceptance. I will show you how to set and achieve your goals and how to avoid the pitfalls that block you from getting what you want out of life. Finally, I give you ten ideas that can help you remain positive and enable you to enjoy a successful and emotionally happy life.

At the end of each chapter, you will find some positive statements, or affirmations if you prefer to call them that. If you repeat these to yourself, either silently or out loud, you will move from an intellectual understanding of the ideas to a state where you can believe in them.

My goal in this book is to help you move from self-condemnation to unconditional self-acceptance, and if there is one thing I would like to prove to you beyond all doubt, it is that you never were, never are and never will be a worthless individual.

Major Points

- Never rate yourself. Instead, rate things about yourself. This way you will avoid feelings of anxiety, guilt and shame.
- Your worth as a person does not depend on other people's opinions.
- You can never be a failure: only a person who sometimes fails.
- Never tie your self-worth up with success and achievement, because when things go wrong, your feelings of self-worth will plummet.
- By accepting yourself unconditionally, your emotions will be healthy.

From Head to Heart

Repeat these affirmations to yourself, with conviction either silently or out loud, and you will move from an intellectual understanding of the ideas to believing them.

I do not have to agree with other people's opinions of me.

I will never rate myself, only things about myself.

If I make mistakes, it is not because I am bad or sad but because I am a human being.