



## Change Your Life View, Change Your Life!

Optimism Isn't an Accident — It's a Learnable Skill that Can Greatly Improve Life

Barbara's struggles seem daunting. Her husband just lost his job two months after the birth of their first child. She is responsible for her elderly mother, who is becoming increasingly frail. To make things worse, her best friend and main support is moving to another state and the landlord just raised the rent by \$200. Despite all this, Barbara gives her life a strong B+ and knows there are some A+ days ahead.

Anthony, on the other hand, would give his life an F. His new job is stressful, his teenage daughter is struggling with depression, he and his wife are fighting a lot lately, and he hates himself for the extra 50 pounds he's carrying.

He feels hopeless and his life seems depressing and dark. Every setback reinforces his pessimism and grim certainty that nothing will ever get better.

Unlike Anthony, Barbara sees her setbacks as temporary obstacles to be overcome. To her, crises are part of life, opportunities for her to gain in wisdom and courage.

Put simply, some people are optimists and others are pessimists. However, optimism isn't an accident—it's a skill that can be learned, one that can help us feel better, resist depression and greatly improve our lives.

Psychologist, clinical researcher and bestselling author Martin Seligman has spent 25 years studying optimism and pessimism. In his book, *Learned Optimism*, he states that pessimistic thinking can undermine not just our behavior but our success in all areas of our lives.

"Pessimism is escapable," he writes. "Pessimists can learn to be optimists."

By altering our view of our lives, we can actually alter our lives, he says.

First, he says we must recognize our "explanatory style," which is what we say to ourselves when we experience a setback. By breaking the "I give up" pattern of thinking and changing our interior negative dialogue, we can encourage what he calls "flexible optimism." He believes that focusing on our innate character strengths (wisdom, courage, compassion), rather than our perceived failures, boosts not just our moods, but our immune system. Research has shown that optimistic people tend to be healthier and experience more success in life; therefore, he encourages parents to develop the patterns of optimism in their children.

Practicing "spiritual optimism" is another way to improve the quality of our lives, writes Joan Borysenko, psychologist, speaker and author of several books, including *Fire in the Soul*. She encourages people who experience feelings of despair and hopelessness in times of crises to remember it takes courage to live, and that we can find that courage by facing our fears, finding support and using prayer or meditation.

Similar techniques outlined by Dr. David Burns in his book *Feeling Good: The New Mood Therapy*, have been effective in treating depression. He believes that changing our thinking has a profound effect on our moods, including cases of severe depression. It's not our lives that depress us, he writes, but our thinking about our lives.

So unless Anthony begins to change his thinking, his life's outlook may remain bleak and dismal. Barbara, however, is likely to graduate to even more satisfying and fulfilling years ahead because she believes her life is filled with challenges and opportunities. \*

## 10 Actions to Take for Better Self-Esteem

*Self-esteem is an inside job — not a gift bestowed by those outside of us or something that can be taken from us by others. We need to take action, rather than wait passively for good self-esteem to happen. Here are 10 great to-do's.*

- 1. Make a list.** What's good about you? What's wonderful? Hang your list near your bed so that you see it at night and in the morning.
- 2. Forgive yourself.** Acknowledge mistakes, but let go of self-recrimination. Recognize that you are human and "allowed" to fail.
- 3. Do one thing you've been putting off.** It's amazing how clearing clutter of all kinds can clear a space for better self-esteem.
- 4. Relax!** Meditate, exercise, take a bath. When you're relaxed, negative things don't seem so big.
- 5. Do something you're good at.** Competence and accomplishment are great antidotes to low self-esteem.
- 6. Learn something new.** When we commit to learning, we commit to growth as a way of life.
- 7. Get absorbed in a project.** Taking the focus off yourself can help when you feel low, anxious or lacking in confidence.
- 8. Assert yourself.** Learning this skill goes a long way to improving your self-image.
- 9. Remember what you've achieved.** Take a step back and look at the whole of your life.
- 10. Do a self-esteem "workout."** In a private place and with complete abandon, shout all the things you're good at and why you matter. It's surprising how instantly effective this exercise is. \*

## A Letter From

*Caroline MacLean*



*Pessimist or optimist...which are you?*

*The bad news is that pessimistic thinking can undermine success in all areas of our lives. It can even affect the immune system.*

*Optimism, on the other hand, helps us resist depression and improve our lives in so many areas.*

*The good news, as the page 1 feature notes, is that optimism is actually a learnable skill, and for parents, a teachable skill that can help children develop lifelong patterns of optimism.*

*Being able to "look on the bright side" also helps in dealing with life's inevitable mistakes, failures and regrets. This issue's quiz helps us discover how well we handle those and includes a few suggestions that may be helpful to us.*

*It's good to remember that underlying optimism is a healthy self-esteem—and that we can actually take steps (see the Top 10 on the front page) to improve our self-esteem.*

*The page 3 feature explores how taking a further step—accepting ourselves as we are right now—can actually lead to a greater sense of self-esteem, as well as an enhanced ability to alter our life view to one that supports our positive personal growth. A healthier life finds deeper meaning and greater satisfaction in self-love, compassion, intuition, taking responsibility and forgiveness (particularly of ourselves).*

*And finally, the page 4 article looks at how we can put intuition to work in service of healthier relationships and greater success.*

*If you would like to discuss any of these topics, don't hesitate to call.*

## The Mistakes, Failures & Regrets Quiz

*Mistakes are a given, so is failure. We make mistakes at work. We lose relationships. We parent in ways we later regret. We fail to win or succeed at all we do. But how we handle mistakes and failures makes all the difference in the world to our ability to learn and be effective in our work and personal lives. Take the quiz below to see how you tend to handle your mistakes and failures.*



### True False Set 1

- 1. I make realistic (safe) choices about what to do. If I'm unsure whether I can succeed at something, I don't do it.
- 2. I feel so ashamed after losing a job that I can't bear to see colleagues from that workplace again.
- 3. If I fail at something, I give up and take it as evidence that I'm not "meant" to do that.
- 4. I gave up thinking about what I want long ago, because I know I'm never going to get it.
- 5. I'm better off by myself; experience proves that I'm a failure at relationships.
- 6. I act as though failure means nothing to me. I don't want people to see my pain and humiliation.
- 7. Failure does nothing but point out my deficiencies and flaws. I do everything I can to avoid it.

### Set 2

- 1. I work hard on self-forgiveness after failing at something. I replace "if only..." with "next time..." so that I keep focused on the future.
- 2. I know what I want, and no failure will stop me from getting there.
- 3. I expect to make mistakes. I incorporate the possibility for failure into everything I do so that I'm not devastated when it happens.
- 4. I may feel inferior and humbled when I fail, but I use that to point the way to where I need to change or grow.
- 5. I try to see the humor in a situation. It helps me accept failure with more grace and self-acceptance.
- 6. If I've made a mistake, I take responsibility for it and work to fix it. Guilt doesn't become part of the equation.
- 7. Rather than beat myself up for failing, I get curious. I reflect on the experience and ask myself questions such as: What have I learned and gained? How can this failure serve me? What am I really trying to accomplish?

*If you answered true to more questions in Set 1 than in Set 2, you are missing excellent opportunities to learn from your mistakes, improve your feelings about yourself and live more courageously. These lessons allow us to retain hope and the instinct for joy, and make us better prepared for life's journey. Please call if you'd like to explore your response to failure. \**

## What to Do When Self-Help Becomes Self-Hell

Mary thinks she'd be happy if she could just change her weight, her looks and her job. Sean believes that he's an okay person except for certain personality traits, such as anxiety, impatience and his quick temper. Yolanda's shelves are bulging with self-improvement books; she's read them all but she still hates herself.

Who among us doesn't believe that with a little tweaking, we could be just right—self-realized, self-actualized and self-helped to just short of perfection? But, the problem for many is that all the books, self-improvement tips and positive affirmations don't seem to make us any happier. Worst of all, the minute we "fix" one ugly piece of ourselves, another nasty monster rears its head and starts screaming for attention.



When does self-help become self-hell? What would happen if we simply started by realizing how wonderful we already are?

As the pioneering psychologist Carl Rogers once wrote, "The curious paradox is that when I accept myself just as I am, then I can change."

"Believing that something is wrong with us is a deep and tenacious suffering," writes Tara Brach, in her book, *Radical Acceptance*. "The more we anxiously tell ourselves stories about how we might fail or what is wrong with us or with others, the more we deepen the grooves—the neural pathways—that generate feelings of deficiency." She lists common ways people try to manage this pain of inadequacy:

- Anxiously embarking on one self-improvement project after another.
- Holding back and playing it safe rather than risking failure.
- Withdrawing from our experience of the present moment.
- Keeping busy.
- Becoming our own worst critics.
- Focusing on other people's faults.

"Convinced that we are not good enough, we can never relax," Brach writes. "We stay on guard, monitoring ourselves for shortcomings. When we inevitably find them, we feel even more insecure and undeserving. We have to try even harder."

Accepting ourselves does not mean self-indulgence or being passive. Rather it means turning off the

shameful, negative, self-loathing tapes within ourselves and just relaxing.

The blaring voices of our culture certainly don't help, with promises that buying something, owning something, achieving something will make us better people, that success is measured by looks, wealth or possessions. A healthier life finds deeper meaning and greater satisfaction in self-love, compassion, intuition, taking responsibility and forgiveness (particularly of ourselves).

Sometimes it is our so-called faults that can actually lead us to a healthier life. Pioneering psychologist Carl Jung called it our "shadow side," that part in all of us we are ashamed of and that we often reject. Understanding and accepting that shadow side can lead to enormous freedom and self-acceptance.

Science and research has revealed much about what we can and cannot change about ourselves, according to Martin Seligman, Ph.D., author and Director of Clinical Training in Psychology at the University of Pennsylvania. "Some of what does change is under your control, and some is not," he writes in his book, *What You Can Change and What You Can't: The Complete Guide to Self-Improvement*.

Seligman lists some characteristics that are easier to change, such as everyday anxiety, specific phobias, panic, anger and certain beliefs about life. He advises people to discard the notion of changing that which hurts the most (for example, your extra weight) and instead concentrating on those parts of yourself that will respond most successfully to your efforts to change them (for example, your shyness or impatience with your spouse).

In the end, all the energy we put out to change ourselves may just take us back to where we started—to ourselves. And if we can truly accept ourselves as we are, that's the best place to be. \*

### 5 Ways to Love Imperfect You

- 1. Stop criticizing yourself.** When you criticize yourself, your changes are negative. When you approve of yourself, your changes are positive.
- 2. Be gentle with yourself.** Praise and support yourself.
- 3. Love your negatives.** Acknowledge that they fulfilled a need and now you don't need them anymore.
- 4. Take care of your body** in the ways that please you.
- 5. Do it now.** Don't wait until you get well, or get sick, or lose the weight, or get the new job or the new relationship. Begin now. Do the best you can.

—from *Heal Your Life*, by Louise Hay

# Intuition: Our Early Warning System

Tom has had a rough year. His mother died, leaving him with the care of his elderly father. He was promoted at his company, but the price tag was high: more stress with not much more pay. His teenage daughter has been angry and sullen, often coming home late at night. Tom thinks he can handle it all, but he's not sleeping well, and every so often, he finds himself shaking for no reason.

Susan's partner is everything she's ever wanted in a relationship. He's funny, warm, a good listener and he puts her first. Sure, he also has a problem with his temper—but nobody's perfect, right? At least he's taking his anger out on the furniture and not on her, she reassures herself.

Early warning signals are being transmitted to us all the time. It's up to us to pay attention. Unfortunately, too often we ignore these signs that something is wrong, and by the time we sit up and take notice, the problems have multiplied.

We've all experienced these red flags that something's not right in our

lives. These are emergency "flares" set off by something deep and rich found in all of us—our intuition. If we learn to pay attention to this inner wisdom, we can gain extraordinary guidance, especially when it comes to our relationships.

"No matter how many facts we gather, if we cling to logic, we're using only a small percentage of our capacity to know," writes Penney Peirce in her book, *The Intuitive Way: The Definitive Guide to Increasing Your Awareness*. "Intuition, I'm convinced, is where the other 90 percent of our brainpower lies. Through intuition we get the big picture."

Most relationships—especially romantic ones—exist in a world of overpowering emotions and hidden expectations, many of them mysterious and unconscious. We want something so badly, we don't listen to our inner voice that tells us something is wrong. As well, we live in a culture that rewards facts and proof, and downplays what we cannot see or touch. But, like love and



faith, intuition is something we all possess and can learn to use to make our lives richer and more satisfying.

"Intuition isn't mystical. It's a sort of background sense of how things should work," writes bestselling author Laura Day, who calls herself an "intuitive." In her books, *Practical Intuition* and *Dynamic Intuition: Creating a Joyous and Successful Life*, Day offers guidelines on ways to access this important faculty.

In the cases above, if Susan and Tom were listening to their intuition's red flags—rather than their fears—they would move quickly to deal with their problems before they got out of control. Like them, we can also tap into our intuition to help guide us in making healthy and effective decisions in relationships and life. \*



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