

STAGE - SEVEN

SELF CONCEPT From Feeling Bad to Knowing I am Worthy

It is OK to feel good about yourself. You can learn to feel better about yourself and gain strength to help you adjust better to a crisis in your life. As you successfully adjust to this crisis, you will feel even better about yourself. For some people it as if they are experiencing a personal identify crisis, you may be seriously creating strains on your current relationship now with friends and also in the future.

When I was a child, my father continually warned me about getting a 'big head' and becoming 'stuck on myself.' Then I went to church and learned that I had been born sinful. At school it was big boys and those with all the brains who got all the attention. Finally I married so there would be someone who thought I was worthwhile. It made me feel good that someone cared. But then she started to point out my faults to me. I finally reached a point where I began to believe I was truly worthless. It was then that I decided to leave the marriage. Carl.

Your self concept is the skeleton which support your personality. Here we can see that when the self-concept becomes fractured, the whole personality begins to fragment.

Apparently we learn much of how we feel about ourselves at an early age from the significant people around us including our

parents as well as siblings, relatives and teachers. This basic level of self-concept is later influenced by our peers especially during our impressionable teenage years. You can read more about this process in the articles section of my main website. As an adult your partner becomes a primary source of validation and feedback and greatly affects your feelings of self-worth.

Many relationships that end in separation developed a pattern of interaction which was destructive to the self-concept of both parties. In fact some become so destructive that the people may not be able to end the relationship due to feelings of worthlessness (I shall be covering this later in terms of dependent relationship structures).

For example the battered wife thinks that she deserves the emotional and physical abuse. She is unable to leave the relationship because she does not believe she would make it on her own. Many people have suffered the erosion of their self-concept in bad relationships before and may consequently seek relief in separation and ending the current relationship but only when they realise, on reflection, how this was a positive step to take.

However for many, until they realise this all important fact, the paradox is that when the physical separation comes and the relationship ends, self-concept hits an all-time low. When the relationship 'fails the identity suffers.

Studies have shown that people with a good self-concept were better able to adjust to end of a relationship and this research endorses what common sense tells us: a good self-concept makes adjustment to a crisis in our life easier. During this period it is reassuring to know that your concepts about self can be enhanced

because we can see this as period where we can relearn, grow and change.

Step One seems obvious but often understated. You must make the decision to change and to find that inner source of emotional energy which can be called a soul, a psychological ego or a life force connection to do this. Everything in our life is often affected: our work, relationships with other people; the way you parent your children; your choices about a future partner and most of all the way we feel about ourselves.

Enormous changes may occur in your personality as you improve your concept of self. The decision is the first and perhaps the most difficult step but if your commitment is firm then the steps that you follow become easier to explore and integrate into your day to day life.

Step two is to change the way we look at ourselves. For example most people can easily list say twenty things they do not like about themselves so now we need to list twenty things we do like about ourselves. Easy? Go ahead and spend five minutes with pen and paper. During the seminars I have run over the last twenty years many said 'how about two things I like about myself instead of twenty?'

I once received a phone call late at night from one of the seminar members and there were groans and comments such as 'Steve, when I came home from teaching at the school earlier this evening and started the list of things I like about myself it took me an hour to come up with the first one. It took almost that long for the second one and now it is 10.30pm and I only have five things on my list!' Clearly this was the most important homework in the ten week seminar for this person and given this is such an important

task so take time to do it so you can complete the list and move on to.

Step three which is to say positive things about yourself aloud to others. Good things may be easier to write to ourselves privately than to say out loud. All the old messages inside our head start with 'Don't act stuck up and conceited!' Work hard at ignoring such messages and take your list and share with a good friend. Get the courage in place to break this negative pattern and realise that it is normal to make good comments about yourself. However it does take courage to say them out load.

Often the reason for this anxiety is that the voice, what I term the internal critical parent, links to statements directly or indirectly made to you during your formative stages of childhood and teenage years. In one seminar Charlie said that he could not do step two because his parents had told him 'not to get a big head'. He was a good athlete in school and the exercises could have helped him build confidence in himself but the parent voices were louder and he had learned to be 'humble'.

As an adult he could not say good things about himself because he still felt his parent's voice in his mind. The statement may sound ridiculous to your but it certainly was not to Charlie

Step four is a tough one for many: re-examine your relationships with others, and make changes which will help you break destructive patterns and develop a new you.

Much of your self concept is validated by feedback from others. Which of your relationships, be they friendships, family relationships, work relationships are constructive and which are negative? (Take a look at the articles I have written on Life

Transitions to learn more about the key dynamics.) Changing your relationships may be very difficult due to our tendency to follow old patterns and find relationships that reinforce your present level of self-concept. But I believe that if you sincerely want to feel better about yourself, you will need to invest in positive relationships and those are the ones where they help you feel good about being you.

Step five get rid of the negative self-thoughts in your head. We all hear messages in our head - nurturing and critical parent to use terms I work with from Transactional Analysis and these voices can be from our parents, significant adults during our formative years such as grandparents, aunts and uncles, teachers, such as 'be careful and don't let success go to your head. Remember it is wrong to be conceited and selfish. You think you're so clever, don't you?'

Such messages are destructive and prevent you from improving your concept of self. They were originally designed to discipline and control but unfortunately for many they turn out be neither helpful nor productive in our adult life. As adults we can make the decision to choose whether we want to continue to listen to such messages. In transactional analysis we take these messages from your parent or child and analyse them with your adult to see if they are rational and appropriate messages at this time in your ADULT life. Then we hold on to accurate valued statements and dispel inappropriate messages and beliefs.

We will work on these feelings so write or record some of these messages so you can work with me on preventing them controlling your current and future life.

Step six may sound like a stupid activity but it worked well for Jane in a seminar. I suggest that you write positive notes to yourself and pin them up around a private space in your home. Notes that compliment or reflect positive things about you. A week later at the seminar discussion she reported how this exercise grew to 100 notes to herself, even placing one on the toilet! She became a different person, herself concept improved one hundred fold and so writing notes to herself appeared to make the difference. Such a dramatic change is rare but shows the power of active effect.

Step seven is to open yourself up to hearing positive comments from others. People tend to hear only what they want to hear. If you have a low self-concept, you will hear only negative comments that people make. When someone praises you, you deny it; you ignore it, or rationalise it by saying 'Oh, they're just saying that but they don't really mean it.'

Some people protect themselves from positive comments because their basic self-concept says that positive comments don't fit with their view of themselves. So the next time someone praises you or compliments you then try to let the compliment soak in rather than defending yourself against hearing it. When you can hear positive comments then you will feel better about yourself.

Step eight Make a specific change in your behaviour. Determine a part of your personality which you want to change. Maybe you would like to say 'hello' to more people or to be on time for work or to stop putting off small jobs. Decide to change the chosen behaviour every day for a week.

Make the change easy so that you can accomplish it and feel a measure of regular success. In essence do not set yourself up for

failure by deciding to make an impossibly big change in the first week. Perhaps you will want to write out your progress on a calendar to reward yourself each day and then at the end of the week you can look back and realise what you have practically accomplished. The first week is step one the second week is step two which focuses on another small change and so after a few weeks you will notice significant changes in improving your self concept.

Step nine is great fun and I practice it all the time. Give and get more hugs! Break through the isolation which has grown around you and a warm, meaningful hug from a friend reinforces far than spoken words can. A hug heals us and improves our self-concept more rapidly and it frees us, makes us warm inside and immediately improves feelings of self-worth.

Step ten suggests you work hard at meaningful communication with another person. Some of the most significant growth people were able to experience after the ending of a relationship was whilst communicating with friends. So ask for and give honest feedback about each other and say things that you have never said to anyone before.

Step eleven has to do with therapy. As we work together we create a safe space and guidance from someone like me who has over thirty five years professional experience shortens the time it takes to change your self concept. Thankfully now, in 2014 as I write, therapy does not have the stigma that it once did when I started out at the beginning of 1980 because most therapy now is personal growth whereas in the past therapy usually meant mental illness.

As we work at these exercises we are focusing on losing the poor view you have at present of yourself as this rebuilding block will probably affect more aspects of your life than any of the others in the rebuilding programme.

Please give yourself adequate time to deal with this important area. When you are comfortable with most of these items you have moved through to the next stage of rebuilding.

CHECKLIST So for our next session we will focus on the following to discuss and explore.

1. I am willing to work hard to improve myself concept.
2. I want to improve myself concept even though I understand that it will change many aspects of life.
3. I like being the person I am,
4. I feel I am an attractive person.
5. I like my body.
6. I feel attractive and sexually desirable.
7. I feel confident most of the time.
8. I know and understand myself.
9. I no longer feel like a failure because my relationship has ended.
10. I feel capable of building deep and meaningful relationships.
11. I am the type of person I would like to have for a friend.
12. I am attempting to improve myself concept by using the 11 steps listed in this section of the rebuilding programme.
13. I feel what I have to say is important to others.
14. I feel I have an identity of my own.
15. I have hope and faith that I can improve myself concept.
16. I'm confident that I can solve the problems facing me.
17. I am confident that I can adjust to this crisis in my life.
18. I can listen to criticism without becoming angry and defensive.

