

Make Every Session Count: A Coping Skills Manual

Strengthening Your "Self"



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"I yam what I yam."—Popeye

Strengthening Your "Self"

CITIZENS IN COASTAL regions of the Southeastern United States occasionally must prepare for the onslaught of a hurricane. With a day or two of warning, people in their communities place boards on windows, tie down trees, and secure other possessions, bracing for the storm. No amount of human action can lessen the force of the hurricane winds, but the preparation can make a significant difference in how well people weather the storm.

Similarly, during times of emotional crisis people can take steps to ride out emotional storms more successfully. These actions, we believe, have one thing in common: They strengthen a person's *sense of self*.

But what exactly is this notion of sense of self? Maybe it can best be described by giving examples of an underdeveloped sense of self and in contrast, a solidly developed sense of self. (See list Underdeveloped Sense of Self)

A childhood in which a person is truly loved, valued, and nurtured is the foundation for a solid sense of self. Yet many, many people did not have an idyllic childhood; for lots of us, growing up was difficult (sometimes extremely difficult). Fortunately, there are a number of things you can do to discover and strengthen your sense of self. Regardless of the emotional stresses you may be encountering, you can likely benefit from the suggestions that follow.

Underdeveloped Sense of Self¹

- You're easily manipulated by others.
- In the presence of powerful others, you lose sight of how you really feel and what you want. Readily changing your needs and opinions to please others.
- You're unclear about your own preferences and priorities.
- You often act out of compliance or an over-readiness to compromise or please others.
- You're unable to clearly define and pursue important life activities (job, hobbies, social causes).
- You are living your life for others, not out of your own unique, inner self.

- You easily lose your good mood if you encounter someone who is depressed or irritated.

A More Solidly Developed Sense of Self

- You trust your own values, beliefs, and feelings.
- You believe you are the only person who really knows you.
- You're reasonably clear about how you really feel and what you truly want.
- You're able to maintain your relationships with others in difficult times.
- You're able to take positions on things that matter.
- You live by your own personal values, beliefs, and limits.
- You're able to acknowledge and benefit from your strengths and your weaknesses.
- You trust your intuition, hunches, and "gut feelings."
- You have compassion for yourself (without feeling guilty).

"I yam what I yam."—Popeye

One of the most emotionally damaging experiences a person can encounter is *invalidation*. Many of us have been told (in one way or another) "You *shouldn't* be so emotional," "You *should* stop acting so childish," "You *should* be ashamed of yourself," "Who the hell do you think you are?!"

You are who you are. Yet all of us are sometimes greeted with such statements of criticism, shame, and invalidation. The message that comes through is, "Who you are (how you act or feel) is not okay. You should be *ashamed*." These reactions from others can have a powerful impact on the self, especially in childhood. In the wake of a shaming and critical comment, many young people turn inward, grit their teeth, ignore inner feelings and comply. The *true self* is stifled, and may remain underdeveloped.

Conversely, acceptance, validation, and affirmation from others act powerfully to relieve suffering. To feel accepted, to feel believed, to have others understand—all these provide tremendous emotional support at times of despair, helping us to recognize and develop our own "true selves."

One of the reasons therapy can be of such value is that good therapists provide acceptance, belief, and

understanding—validation of who you are. Validation, however, comes not only from others, but also from within yourself. A crucial aspect of strengthening your "self" is to *allow yourself to believe your inner experiences*. Many people may think, "I shouldn't feel this way," or "I'm making mountains out of mole hills," when the simple truth is that they hurt. Self-validation is *acknowledging* your inner feelings and *accepting* them as real and understandable. It certainly does not mean that in any way you *like* the experience, that you choose to wallow in the pain, or that you accept the pain as your "lot in life." It is merely an open and honest acknowledgment of your emotional reality. Awareness and acknowledgment of inner truths can serve as an anchor during hard times. "I yam what I yam."

Speak Up!

A second step to take in strengthening your sense of self is to find outlets for *honest self-expression*. Weak muscles can gradually become strengthened by exercising. Self-expression is the type of emotional exercise that gradually builds and strengthens the self. Another major benefit of psychotherapy comes from your ability to clarify your inner feelings, needs, and beliefs and to voice these out loud with your therapist. This single experience can leave you feeling more real and solid about yourself.

Honest self-expression also means open verbal communication with others in your life; assertively expressing your opinions, beliefs, values, needs, taking a stand, saying "no," asking for change in others' behavior (see chapter 13).

Keep Track

Many people have found tremendous value in keeping a *personal journal*. Writing down feelings, thoughts, hopes, and dreams can be a powerful way to clarify inner emotional experiences and find an outlet for self-expression.

Take Care of Yourself

The self flourishes best in a healthy atmosphere, which you can create by giving yourself permission to *care for basic physical and emotional needs*: adequate rest, good nutrition, exercise, fresh air, surrounding yourself with things of beauty; making a place in your home that can be a haven of warmth, comfort, and peace; making time for recreation, humor, or relaxation; establishing a reasonable balance between work and play; setting realistic

expectations for yourself and, from time to time, splurging. All of these sound incredibly simple and obvious, but these issues often go unnoticed (even by psychologists who write self-help books) and can contribute to an underlying sense of dis-ease. Some people may think these ideas sound selfish. If so, it's a smart kind of selfishness since it helps people feel better, more alive, and in the long run, affects the lives of others in a positive way, too.

Get Involved

Finally, and as important as any of the ideas in this chapter, you may strengthen your sense of self by *becoming involved in life activities* that express and affirm your own inner beliefs and values. You may accomplish this through your choice of career. Many people realize this goal through involvement in churches, organizations, and causes that have personal meaning. Dozens of volunteer agencies and support programs in every community offer hundreds of opportunities for each of us to give something back to the world. Not only can these activities help the community, but they also can become an important vehicle for your own self-expression. Making a positive contribution to others, connecting with the world beyond yourself, is arguably the best way to begin to feel better about yourself.

Your journey through difficult times—with or without therapy—is easier when you feel a more solid sense of yourself.

Notes

¹ A number of these are drawn from *The Dance of Intimacy*, a highly recommended book by Harriet Goldhar Lerner (1989).