

## **Six Ways to Improve Your Self Esteem**

We have identified the primary causes of low or challenged self-esteem. We have explored the power in being real, genuine and authentic. We have addressed the four tethers that hold us back: impress, pretend, shame and fear. With our awareness heightened there is one more critical question to explore. How do we improve or even heal self-esteem?

For some it may be necessary to begin this journey in the hands of a licensed therapist trained to assist in processing childhood traumas, addictions and other difficult challenges that can keep us stuck in an emotional cocoon. Others may be ready to move forward with self-determination perhaps at times with a gentle nudge of direction and encouragement from a personal coach. As you listen to or read the techniques offered, ask yourself, “Can I do this? Not perfectly at first, but can I start doing this?” If so, begin. If not, seek therapeutic assistance. You are worth it!

Improving self-esteem can be a lifetime journey. We do not live in a vacuum and crazy life experiences seldom wait for us to be whole and complete. Your task may be doubly difficult if you are in a committed relationship or are a caregiver for a child or children. You have the added responsibility of lifting and building your partner and building the next generation so they will be better equipped to face the challenges of life whole and complete. This can be difficult if you are in need of healing.

We have identified six specific practices that can assist you in improving self-esteem. If the practices to follow are too difficult or painful, immediately seek professional assistance. You do not have to do this alone.

### **Practice #1: Love yourself:**

Self-love is more about reverence for the infinite and intrinsic gift of life starting with our own. It is more about honoring and magnifying the gifts that have been given than lamenting the ones that seem to be missing. It is more about focusing on contribution to the world than the endless accumulation of things. The opposite of self-love is exemplified by the narcissistic Gaston in the classic Beauty and the Beast. This pathetic character was so self-absorbed that his obnoxious antics repelled Belle, a self-respecting, self-confident and deeply grounded woman.

Dr. Robert Hartman poignantly punctuates the need for this practice. He writes, "Unless you like yourself you cannot like anybody else. Unless you feel that you are of importance nothing can be important to you. You must feel that you are important. You must take yourself seriously. If you take yourself as an accident that just as well might not of happened, if you dislike your own self, then you are lost. You are a loss to the universe. You cannot enrich the world. You have been created to enrich the world."

We do not want to gain the whole world – fame and fortune - and yet lose our own soul. We do not want to miss the mission for which we

have been uniquely prepared. We do not want to look to titles, possessions and performance as the primary means of determining our worth. These things can be taken away in a flash.

In his writings, Dr. Hartman concludes that liking oneself is not an easy matter. In truth, philosophers have tried to give a method of how to do this from Socrates to Kierkegaard. If a healthy self-esteem requires that we first love ourselves unconditionally and intrinsically, and it does, Dr. Hartman suggests that there are four critical steps: Know Thyself, Choose Thyself, Create Thyself and Give Thyself. Let's explore each of these steps:

**Know Thyself:** In Quality #1: Connecting with People, there is a section entitled, Awakening Empathy and Intuition. In this section, I share a very personal experience - The Chicago Dream. Go back there with me for just a few moments.

In this dream I am dragging my life experiences behind me. Some are painful; other experiences shameful; all are tinder for the fire of shame, blame and fear that rages in my soul. I am instructed to empty the sack, pick up the most painful experience and examine it. It is critical to note that first "I am instructed."

There is a power greater than me instructing me to take certain actions - actions I was unwilling or unable to take on my own. To know ourselves we will want to first surrender and submit to this power even if it seems too difficult or even impossible at the time.

Next, in partnership with that power – our greatest cheerleader - we will want to engage in a truthful and introspective evaluation of our life – past and present. We will want to find out how we think and what impact these thought might be having on our life decisions and actions. Are these thoughts supporting or sabotaging our life. We will want to take a personal inventory of illnesses and addictions. We will also want to identify our gifts, talents, physical capacities, spiritual believes, finances and the condition of our current relationships.

When we drag our past behind us we are attempting to avoid what is real. We have tried to forget it – put it behind us. We have tried to pretend that it was different, that it did not happen. We have blamed others. We have tried in vain to justify our actions and explain away the results. And lastly we have blamed ourselves. Unwilling or unable to face the truth of it, we drag it behind us.

Facing the truth about our lives is not about self-condemnation. It is about shedding light on the truth. What comes is a sense of peace. The truth will set us free. It is denial that keeps us in an emotional prison. This is a great secret.

Og wrote, “I have surrendered my free will to the years of accumulated habits and the past deeds of my life have already marked out a path which threatens to imprison my future. My actions are ruled by appetite, passion, prejudice, greed, love, fear, environment, habit, and the worst of these tyrants is habit. Therefore, if I must be a slave to habit

let me be a slave to good habits. My bad habits must be destroyed and new furrows prepared for good seed.”

This is a very poetic way of discussing how we create a new neuropsychological pathway in our brain. We are creating a new furrow, we are plowing a new way of thinking we are planting seeds and growing a new neuropsychological pathway. What we know about the brain is that when it is grown it will prune off the old bad thought. It is called synaptic pruning. We will think differently and act differently – thus a new habit is born.

Take courage. Don't let fear keep you from looking. As you so acutely know, the effort and energy expended to avoid the truth about our past and current life is both exhausting and damaging. These events have already or are currently happening. We do not create them by looking at them, we are just facing the truth about it – old habits of thinking and acting - and seeing it for what it is. One of the most sacred gifts of human life is that when we finally shed light on our lives, we somehow know what is good and we know what needs to be amended.

Og sums it up this way, “Within me burns a flame which has been passed from generations uncounted and its heat is a constant irritation to my spirit to become better than I am, and I will. I will fan this flame of dissatisfaction and proclaim my uniqueness to the world.”

**Choose Thyself:** Let's go back to The Chicago Dream. I have emptied the sack, am holding a painful life experience in my hands and I am instructed to engrave it on my heart.

This act of engraving an experience on our heart is significant. It is in essence the transition from being a victim to becoming a victor. As a victim we drag these experiences around dwelling on OUR pain and the damage it had done to US. We want to be someone else, somewhere else, doing something different. In doing so, we become self-absorbed and self-focused on how the world and all of our challenges are negatively impacting us.

We can engage in a truly endless and futile attempt to pursue the unachievable – a life that is different, free from pain and stress, one in which this is not happening or did not happen. As a victor we make the conscious choice to own these experiences and they become part of our character – part of who we are. We choose us. These experiences are small Gethsemanes that have uniquely prepared us to fulfill our purpose on this planet.

When I use the word Gethsemane, I mean that this is a moment when we really don't want to take upon ourselves the ownership of these experiences yet we willingly surrender and do so, so that we can more fully fulfill our mission. So that we can have empathy and more clearly see the pain that another may be suffering. This is not about owning the burden and guilt from the experience. That's what happens when we are dragging it behind us. It is about owning the feelings and impact that such an experience can cause - we've been there and lived to tell about it. We have also lived to more effectively feel what another person may be feeling.

Here is a silly example. My college football playing weight was 175 lbs. Coming out of high school I was converted from a linebacker to a free safety. I was just fast enough to make third team. My real position was bench warmer. And in those brutal Idaho winters, we needed the benches to be warmed.

It didn't take long for my sub-par athleticism to catch up with my vivid mental image of being a professional football player and dogged determination. All the steroids in the world wouldn't make me three inches taller – maybe fifty pounds heavier – but not taller. The strain of competing at the college level took its toll. A series of nagging injuries that remain to this day and my football career came to an unceremonious end.

It was time to re-evaluate. Where am I? What assets do I have? This is what I had to work with. All the wishing, lamenting, complaining, pleading with God and ultimately anger could not change what was. I had to choose what I had. I had to choose me – warts and all. Football was over. Was my life over? Was this the end of everything? It easily could have been and is for too many.

Once we have identified the kind of person we have been and the assets with which we have to work, we will want to accept ourselves. This is clay that we have to work with, the cards we have been dealt, the circumstances of our life. Too often and in fantasy we make vain attempts to imitate others creating unrealistic expectations that when unmet leave us feeling less than, worthless or unworthy.

Do we often wish that things could have turned out differently? Of course we do. Who wouldn't? But the past cannot be changed. What is, is. These experiences can burden and canker our soul, destroy our worth, negatively impact others and in short, impede our mission and purpose or they can be used as reference points by which we can better understand and serve others.

We cannot start building our lives on fantasy or a false premise. There is no limit to the bottom at which we may have to start rebuilding. Quoting Dr. Hartman, "But no matter how despicable you are to yourself you must choose yourself, accept yourself as the one you are. I am the one I am." This is the truth. This is the foundation on which we can begin to re-build our lives. The truth is, there is also no ceiling to the growth we can achieve when we start from here.

With ownership came one more surprise. There was the immediate sense of relief – peace of mind – that came when all of these experiences were owned and engraved on my heart. It was not burdensome to carry them in the heart. It had an unlimited capacity – room and to spare. This was a welcomed discovery.

Og writes, "I am nature's greatest miracle. I have been given eyes to see and a mind to think and now I know a great secret of life for I perceive, at last, that all my problems, discouragements, and heartaches are, in truth, great opportunities in disguise. I will no longer be fooled by the garments they wear for mine eyes are open. I will look beyond the cloth and I will not be deceived."



Know thyself and chose thyself and build from here and a few years from now you will look back in amazement how all of the painful pieces became foundational to the success you are enjoying.

**Create Thyself:** As creation from this bedrock of truth commences miracles happen.

We will want to make the most out of the clay we have been given, the cards we have been dealt, the circumstances in which we find ourselves. Dr. Hartman writes, "You must start as early as you can, but it is never too late."

Once we know ourselves, warts and all, and choose ourselves, warts and all, we turn our focus to creating the most we can with what we have been given. We are only impeded in creation when we want to be someone else, somewhere else, doing something different and attempt to use this baseless desire as a foundation for creation. When we begin creation from a bedrock of truth the sky is the limit.

Og encourages us with these words, "Nevermore will I be satisfied with yesterday's accomplishments nor will I indulge, anymore, in self-praise for deeds which in reality are too small to even acknowledge. I can accomplish far more than I have, and I will, for why should the miracle which produced me end with my birth? Why can I not extend that miracle to my deeds of today? I am nature's greatest miracle."

It is time to fully realize your full potential.

I am nature's greatest miracle. Vain attempts to imitate others no longer will I make. Instead will I place my uniqueness on display in the market place. I will proclaim it, yea, I will sell it. I will begin now to accent my differences; hide my similarities...and proud of the difference.”

**Give Thyself:** In the Chicago Dream the crowning principle came was when I turned and for the first time noticed that the man standing before me was also dragging a sack behind him. In other words, I finally saw that he, too, was in pain. Feeling what he was feeling, I knew the questions to ask. In asking, he knew that I knew where he was and didn’t need to fix him. I was accepting. Acceptance did not require agreement, just a willingness to ask, listen and understand. Walls came down because I had become a safe place. This awareness healed my torn soul.

Dr. Hartman writes, “This means, forget all limitations, be generous with your own self. Give your own self to your fellow man and to the world. Love your neighbor as yourself. Throw your bread on the water.” It is in the giving of ourselves to others that we finally find our true self, our true worth, our true capacity. Our pain and suffering will finally have meaning and purpose.

Dr. Hartman concluded, “To love yourself and within yourself, your fellow man, is thus the end result of a chain of self-discoveries from self-knowledge (know thyself) to self-choosing to self-creation to self-giving.”

This may all seem a little technical. Take a deep breath while I simplify for both of us. When we seek to know our real selves and become increasingly transparent – no more secrets, no more lies, no more pretending – we become “real.” When we choose ourselves we focus on what we have, we stop trying to imitate and impress others and more freely uncover and develop and magnify our own natural strengths - our natural genius. We become “genuine.” When we begin to create ourselves using the clay we have been given, we grow into the person we were meant to become. In doing so, we become authentic – our real self.

Og says it this way, “I am not on this earth by chance. I am here for a purpose and that purpose is to grow into a mountain, not to shrink to a grain of sand. Henceforth will I apply all my efforts to become the highest mountain of all and I will strain my potential until it cries for mercy.”

The more honest and transparent we become with ourselves, the more we are able to get out of our own way. We grow unfettered by fear and shame. Our cup runs over. We have more and enough to spare. We give of ourselves freely and are fed instead of feeling depleted. We find our power to love ourselves and love others growing exponentially – we have tapped into an infinite reserve. Prior to tapping into our natural genius we were “looking for love in all the wrong places.” We discover that the power to love ourselves and others has always been in our own back yard.

I vividly remember a dream from my childhood. At the time we were living in a small town just a few miles away from a Thiokol solid fuel rocket engine test plant. In this dream, I remember sneaking out of the house one night. I was in the backyard. It was dark. I had a shovel in my hands. I remember this powerful feeling that there was a treasure buried in my backyard. I selected a space that spoke to my heart and began to dig. About three feet down I hit something hard. Clearing away the dirt I found a treasure chest. I opened it to find a bottomless chest filled with mounds and mounds of quarters.

I was a six-year-old coin collector at the time and a quarter was a really big deal. Something I was paid for an entire day of pulling weeds. This was truly a priceless treasure.

I have reflected on that dream many times throughout my life. Whenever I am tempted to go “out there” in search for treasure, I look inside me and in my life. It has never failed. The greatest treasures have always been found in my own backyard even in the darkest night. Often the sunlight of success needs to be removed so that we can see these treasures.

When we have the courage to dig deep and know ourselves and then choose ourselves, we will discover a very real treasure. With this treasure we can create the most that we can and are often surprised at the extend of the creation. As we do this, we will begin to discover that we have just tapped into an infinite supply of power – power to love yourself and others. This is a great secret.