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Rhena Branch
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Cognitive behavioural therapists



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by Rhena Branch and Rob Willson



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Introduction

Low self-esteem probably brings more people to therapy than any other problem. Many people are aware that the opinion they have of themselves could be better. In our clinical practice we see people from all walks of life, from different personal and professional backgrounds, and of all races, ages and creeds, complaining of the same thing: low self-esteem. In fact, low self-esteem is such a commonly reported problem that we've written a whole book about defining what *healthy* self-esteem is and telling you how to get it.

Unfortunately self-doubt and poor self-appreciation seem to go hand-in-hand with being human. Even if you have generally healthy and good self-esteem, you probably have times in your life when you feel down and have denigrating ideas and thoughts about yourself. It seems to us that very few people (if any) escape feelings of low self-esteem at some point in their lifetimes. So, even if you think that you're the only person on the planet who feels as badly about him or herself as you do, we can reassure you: that's most certainly not the case.

Self-esteem is frequently misunderstood. You may think that it's all about being successful and confident or being able to make your mark on the world. But that doesn't account for the swathe of individuals in the world who have little wealth or power and yet still manage to think well of themselves. Healthy self-esteem isn't about what you have, what you've achieved or even about what you can do; it's an internal understanding of yourself as a complex, unique and intrinsically valuable person regardless of external factors.

This book helps you to better understand what low self-esteem really is and how it may be affecting your life. We aim to give you a better understanding of the nature of healthy self-esteem and how you can achieve it. Whether you suffer from chronic low self-esteem or just seem to get occasional bouts of it, we believe that the information in this book can benefit you.

About This Book

This book can be used as a form of self-help on its own or in conjunction with seeing a therapist or other type of mental health professional. You can use the information in this book to help yourself develop healthy self-esteem or to understand and support a loved one. If you're a psychology student or even a fully trained therapist, you're likely to find something of use to you in these chapters.

This book includes the following information:

- ✔ Definitions of low self-esteem and descriptions of the many different ways it can manifest in your life.
- ✔ Explanations of common emotional and behavioural problems that people with low self-esteem typically experience.
- ✔ Cognitive behavioural techniques to help you change your negative thoughts and take on board more helpful ways of thinking and behaving.
- ✔ Lots of practical exercises that you can do to help improve your self-esteem, your overall mood and your day-to-day functioning.
- ✔ Examples and case studies that represent the actual problems and circumstances of people we have treated. The names, however, are entirely fictional and not direct reflections of any particular clients.
- ✔ Additional information that can help you to understand yourself better and improve the ways in which you relate to other people in your life.

The methods outlined throughout this book are based on *cognitive behavioural therapy* (CBT) principles. CBT is a popular, effective, scientifically researched and well-respected psychotherapeutic method used in the treatment of many different kinds of emotional and psychological problems. So you can rest assured that the advice we offer has scientific validity and has been proven to work.

We wrote this book to give you hope that you can find a way out of the trap of low self-esteem. No matter how severe your self-image problems are, you can do a lot to make meaningful improvements. We also hope you find using this book at least a little bit interesting and entertaining. So we ask you to read on and urge you to keep an open mind about new ideas and techniques.

Conventions Used in This Book

To make this book easier to read and to highlight key points, we use the following conventions:

- ✓ *Italics* introduce new terminology, highlight differences in meaning between words or underline key aspects of a sentence or an example.
- ✓ We attempt to use a roughly equal number of male and female examples throughout the book in the interests of gender equality.
- ✓ **Bold** text is used to show the action part of numbered lists and practical exercises.

What You're Not to Read

This book is yours, you paid for it, so you can read whatever you like. Right down to the fine print on the opposite side of the title page if you feel so inclined (may be a bit dull, however). Seriously though, this book is written in such a way that you can dip in and out of it as the mood takes you. Each chapter is self-contained and so you don't need to read them in sequential order. If the information in a particular chapter is enhanced in another chapter, we make a reference to that chapter.

Just to give you a few basic guidelines on what you may not need or want to read, here's a little extra advice:

- ✓ Our acknowledgments are important to us but very possibly not to you. We tried to resist being sentimental but they may well make you sick if you've just had a large dinner.
- ✓ *Sidebars*, those grey boxes full of text, contain some interesting and useful information that isn't an essential part of the topic at hand. So if you aren't drawn in by them, you don't miss anything critical if you give them a miss.
- ✓ The index makes for pretty boring reading; however, it can be very useful if you want to know where to find information on a specific topic. Otherwise you can read it straight through as a possible strategy for combating insomnia.

Foolish Assumptions

Oh, if we had but a penny for every foolish assumption we ever made in our lives. Well, we can tell you that we'd be rich enough not to need to write books for a living!

In the process of writing this book, we made some assumptions about the people (like your good self) who are going to read it:

- ✔ You suffer from low self-esteem or you know someone who does and are interested in finding out ways to overcome it.
- ✔ You're willing to take in new information and to try out new techniques in the interests of improving your self-esteem.
- ✔ You have healthy self-esteem and are interested in finding out how to keep it that way.
- ✔ You're a human being and therefore will find something within this book that's useful and resonates with your personal experiences.
- ✔ You're a *For Dummies* junkie and have collected every title in the series.

If any of these assumptions apply to you, then read on...

How This Book Is Organised

This book is divided into 6 parts and 19 chapters. The table of contents includes subheadings for each chapter that clarify which subjects you can expect each chapter to deal with. We lay out the main points contained in each part of the book in the next sections.

Part 1: Understanding Self-Esteem

This part gives you a basic understanding of what both low self-esteem and healthy self-esteem are and how to spot the differences. These chapters explore common but often unhelpful ways people assess their own worth and offer more useful alternatives. Some of the more common psychological problems associated with low self-esteem are defined and explained.

Part II: Acknowledging That You're Okay As You Are

This part is all about discovering how to appreciate yourself just as you are. We look at some of the ways that you may be undermining your own self-esteem and how you can strive to accept yourself as a complex, vibrant and ever-changing human being.

This part also deals with negative self-focus and provides practical exercises to help you take control of your attention. We explore body image problems and suggest ways to become more comfortable and content with how you look and with who you are. Finally, we look at goal-setting and personal development as a way of enhancing your enjoyment of life and appreciation of yourself.

Part III: Taking On New Techniques

Roll your sleeves up and apply some elbow grease. In this part of the book we help you explore your past with a view to finding out how it continues to inform your personal beliefs today. We also offer some advice and practical exercises that encourage you to treat yourself with care and compassion. In Chapter 11 we urge you to behave like a scientist and get busy with the business of proving your own worth to yourself. Doing so may sound easy, but it involves a fair amount of effort on your part.

Part IV: Looking at the Ripple Effects of Low Self-Esteem

Your poor self-esteem obviously has some very negative effects on you. Low self-esteem also has implications for the people in your life who love and care about you. In this part, we examine the effects of your low self-esteem on your personal and professional relationships. We look at how you can stop the rot and make your love, work and family life relationships more fulfilling.

Part V: Living Like You Mean It

If you want to feel better about yourself, you need to act in better self-enhancing ways. This part is all about getting to grips with personal commitments and values. Living in accordance with how you want to feel and think about yourself is extremely important to improving your self-esteem. In this part we help you to identify what's truly important to you and to make plans about how to reflect your values through action.

Part VI: The Part of Tens

This part of the book acts like a quick 'ready reckoner' for how to recognise healthy self-esteem in yourself and in others. This recognition is useful because it leads you towards actions and ways of thinking that you can benefit from. In Chapter 19 we discuss ten ways to boost your self-esteem and coax you further along the path towards embracing healthy self-esteem.

Appendix

The Appendix gives you a list of organisations through which you can find professional help from a CBT therapist. It also has recommended additional reading and some useful websites that you may want to have a closer look at.

Icons Used in This Book

We use the following icons throughout this book to highlight certain types of information.



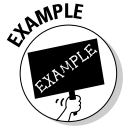
This bulls-eye flags up useful tips to help you get the most out of the practical exercises and information in the book.



This icon is a gentle but persistent signal to bear important points in mind.



This icon alerts you to possible traps and pitfalls along your path to developing healthy self-esteem.



This icon means that we're about to give you an example to illustrate a point or principle that we just discussed.



This icon indicates a chance for you to put new techniques into action. It may involve putting pen to paper or may indicate more direct behavioural action.

Where to Go from Here

Reading this book from cover to cover will probably be very good for your self-esteem; it would certainly be good for ours! Just kidding. As we explain in Chapter 1, that's not really how it works (still, it got a chuckle out of us). In fact, healthy self-esteem comes not from what you do or achieve necessarily, but from how you fundamentally think of yourself. Your sense of personal worth can be very solid and robust, even if you're not setting the world on fire every day. Your achievements may give your confidence a boost (and make you feel good) but your intrinsic worth is a constant that you can learn to appreciate even when you're not busy doing great things.

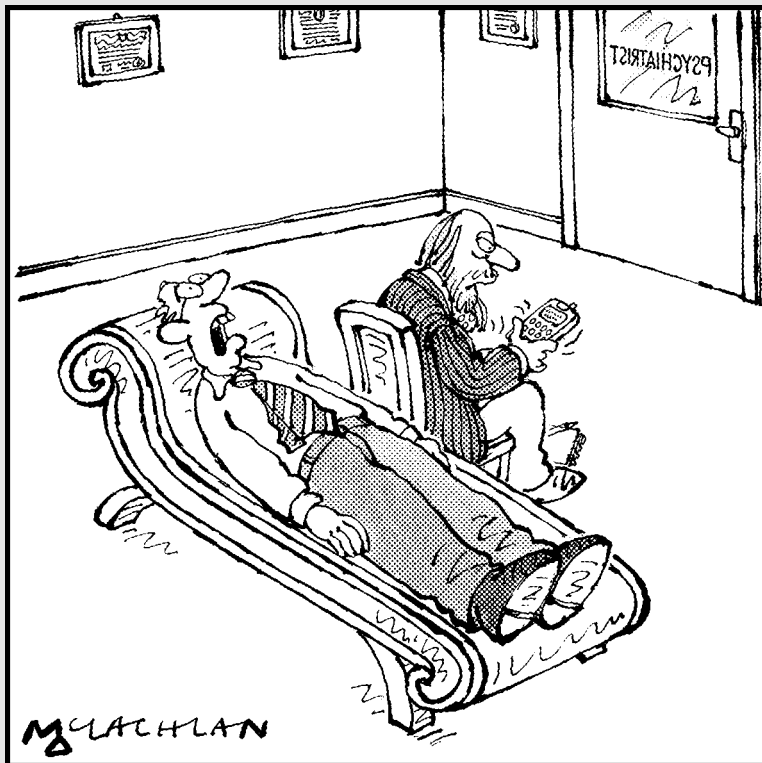
You're probably best advised to meander through the table of contents and turn to the chapters that interest you the most or seem to address your particular low self-esteem difficulties. Or both, why not? In for a penny, in for a pound.

When you've used this book, you may want to get even more help with improving your self-esteem by seeing a skilled and qualified CBT therapist for a few sessions. If your difficulties with poor self-esteem are mild to moderate, this book may be enough to help you overcome them. If you have very severe and chronic low self-esteem this book helps put you on the right track, but you may also benefit from some professional input and support. Turn to the appendix for information on where to find a qualified CBT therapist.



Part I

Understanding Self-Esteem



'Nobody takes any notice of me or
of anything I say.'

In this part . . .

You get a clear understanding of the nature of healthy self-esteem and how it differs from low self-esteem. We help you identify thoughts and ideas that can perpetuate feelings of low self-esteem and point you towards healthier ways of thinking about your self-worth. We also discuss some of the more common psychological problems associated with poor self-esteem and suggest strategies for tackling them.