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Foreword by Craig Malkin, PhD

when
depression
hurts your
relationship

How to
Regain
Intimacy and
Reconnect
with Your
Partner
When You're
Depressed

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How You See Yourself

Your self-perception has to do with your thoughts and views about yourself and how competent you generally feel. Your sense of self is shaped by your past experiences and the types of messages you received about your value, how family members treated you as you were growing up, and how you were treated by other kids in school and by the larger community.

Your self-perception also has to do with how well you believe you're able to cope with adversity or difficulties. When you have a strong sense of self-efficacy, you believe you can handle the difficulties life that sends your way. This shapes your beliefs about yourself and contributes to a feeling of being able to influence your own direction in life. When you struggle with low self-esteem, however, it feels like you're constantly disappointed in yourself and have little influence over your direction in life. You have trouble with identifying your good qualities.

If you've struggled with low self-esteem, you know it can be difficult to move past negative thoughts and feelings about yourself. You may have tried positive self-statements, affirmations, or positive mantras and found they don't always work. Thinking of yourself as *not good enough* may have become a part of your identity, so it feels like you're lying to yourself when you try to convince

yourself that you feel otherwise. Alternatively, when you focus on your strengths, you may find that you do get a boost in how you feel about yourself, but it's only temporary because you're ignoring the root of the problem, which is accepting flaws within yourself.

While there is no silver bullet that will magically improve your self-esteem, you can approach the feelings that you have about yourself in more helpful ways. These include fostering self-compassion (Lincoln, Hohenhaus, and Hartmann 2013), working on self-acceptance, and living by your values (Hayes, Strosahl, and Wilson 1999), even in the face of making mistakes, feeling flawed, and being imperfect.

Fostering Self-Compassion

Self-compassion is about seeing yourself as *good enough* and treating yourself with kindness. Rather than evaluate yourself based on your body, your status, or job title, you can learn to appreciate the value that is inherent with simply being who you are. This means not grading, judging, or rating yourself on any external measure but rather learning to unconditionally accept yourself. Instead of denying or feeling ashamed about your flaws, you can learn to recognize that having flaws and dark moments is simply a part of the human experience.

Exercise: Describing Yourself Inside and Out

Begin with two clean sheets of paper and a pen or pencil.

On the first piece of paper, write down all of the traits and characteristics that other people would be able to see in you based on outward appearances. This list might include such specific details as your occupation or being a mom or dad, as well as language such as “kind,” “generous,” “stylish,” or however others might see you.

On the second piece of paper, use different language to describe who you are on the inside—the traits that other people can't see. Be as honest as you can with yourself. No one will see this but you.

Now compare the two lists. What do you notice? There probably is not a 1:1 correlation between them. After all, we all have thoughts about ourselves that we keep to ourselves.

Here is something else to consider. As you were writing the second list, what was your experience? Was there any sense of shame? Confusion? Distress? Pride? Lastly, did you hear any other people chime in to the conversation? Were there internal voices from your past, repeating messages you heard about yourself growing up?

The mind is like a tape recorder, where you can almost hear what you imagine someone would say about you—or at some point really did say to you. These old tapes replay and add to your sense of self. If you did hear any of those tapes, what did they say? Who was speaking? And most importantly, do you believe what they said about you?

How others view you, or what the world sees from the outside, is often a gauge people use for their sense of self-worth. Unfortunately, seeking approval from others can be a superficial quest, since your sense of self can easily be diminished by one naysayer who views you negatively or criticizes your accomplishments. In this way, it's very difficult to build a sense of self-worth based on external markers. When you care too much about what others think about you, you're more vulnerable to feeling judged, devalued, and inferior.

It's more helpful to focus on how you view yourself on the inside. Look back at the list in the last exercise in which you described yourself based on who you are on the inside. This list is the one that holds more weight and is the core self you need to explore further. The next exercise will help you practice finding acceptance for yourself—including the parts of yourself that you may keep hidden or feel ashamed of, as well as the parts of which you're proud—through practicing compassion (Gilbert 2009).

Exercise: Listening to Yourself with Compassion

Use the powers of your imagination to conjure an image of a kind, compassionate person. Perhaps it's a loving grandmother or a teacher you had

in school. It could be a person whom you've never met. It could even be a movie character.

Now take a look at all of the words on the second list that you used to describe yourself in the last exercise. With this compassionate person in mind, try to imagine what this person might say when viewing this list. What might she say about the struggles that you feel inside? How might he respond to the critical thoughts you have about yourself?

Allow yourself to fully experience the compassionate response that you imagine this person would give. What does it feel like to hear these kind words?

If you don't have a lot of experience being kind to yourself or receiving compassion from others, it can be really hard to imagine what a kind or compassionate person might say. A good example would be from the following conversation, in which two friends, Candice and Julie, debrief after Julie's speech at their alumni event:

Julie: That was so extremely stupid. I cannot believe I just spoke in front of all those people like that. Everyone thinks I'm an idiot.

Candice: Honey, it's okay. No one thinks you're an idiot. Everyone makes mistakes sometimes. Anyone who would judge you for that is not a good friend. So who cares what they think?

Julie: I care. Everyone saw me stumble and stammer. I got all red in the face and could hardly speak. It was a disaster. I froze like a deer in headlights.

Candice: And you also picked yourself up and got right back on track. I think that what felt to you like a century of silence was actually a minute or so.

Julie: I was humiliated. I'll never live it down.

Candice: Julie, you are not defined by one moment in your life. I don't think it's possible to go through life

without stumbling a little bit. No one expects you to be perfect.

Julie: But I do!

Candice: It sounds like you're beating yourself up. It's so hard for me to see you being so tough on yourself. You had the courage to get up there and speak to that group of strangers, and that says something about your character.

Julie: Yes, I guess so. I was amazed that I was able to do it! And once I got going, it wasn't so bad. And people in the audience seemed interested and laughed at my humor. Afterward, they all said it was a great presentation.

Candice: I'm proud of you. It takes a lot of courage to do public speaking, and you did it even though it was difficult.

If you struggle with low self-esteem, you probably spend a lot of time focusing on aspects of yourself that you don't like. You may have self-critical thoughts that you tend to repeat over and over again, feeling helpless to make them stop, which can lead to isolation and withdrawal.

It's important to be on the lookout for those critical thoughts. When they emerge, you can counter them by picturing a compassionate person, as you did in the exercise, and reminding yourself gently of this compassionate perspective. You can also address your negative thoughts by realizing that they don't really set you apart from others and make you a failure. In fact, they make you better able to relate to others, because everyone has self-critical thoughts. Everyone feels bad sometimes. This is part of the human condition.

Instead of beating yourself up, it can be very healing to use your pain to find ways to relate to and have compassion for others (Dym 1996). Self-acceptance builds tolerance for others. Being aware of

your own pain gives you the ability to understand how others may feel when they are experiencing hardship. By reaching out to someone who may need your help or understanding, you can use your compassion to make connections. Perhaps it's a coworker who's having a hard time or a student who needs mentoring. Perhaps it's finding a way to relate more to your own family, your spouse or your children, and focusing more on their well-being (Odegaard 1996). By connecting with and providing empathy for others, you're fostering the compassion, acceptance, and kindness inside of you.

Coping with Perfectionism

Many people who have perfectionistic traits do not think of themselves as perfectionists. When you think of a perfectionist in the traditional sense, you may imagine someone who has perfectly sharpened pencils lined up on his desk and never has wrinkles in his clothes. But perfectionism often looks very different from this and sometimes it's hard to see from the outside. Perfectionism is more about the critical voice that's inside—the inner critic.

With perfectionism, there is a drill sergeant inside of you who's never satisfied. You set standards for yourself that are far beyond reach or reason. And if you don't meet a certain standard—no matter how unrealistic or unattainable—you cannot tolerate the feeling of failure and embarrassment. Take a look at this list to see how many of these perfectionistic traits you see in yourself:

- *I often criticize myself for mistakes or small faults.*
- *I work hard to maintain a flawless image for others and care a great deal about how others perceive me.*
- *I find that I am second-guessing myself constantly.*
- *I feel embarrassed or ashamed by my weaknesses and want to hide my flaws from others.*

- *I sometimes feel that if people knew the real me, they would be disappointed.*
- *I easily dismiss my own achievements and concentrate on the flaws I see in myself.*
- *I become defensive when coworkers, friends, or employers give me feedback.*
- *I am fearful of making mistakes and worry that I won't do a good job.*
- *Feeling overwhelmed often gets in the way of my performance at work.*
- *I have the desire to always have the right answer and be perfectly knowledgeable.*
- *I tend to be rigid or inflexible with expectations of others and myself.*

When you notice the drill sergeant of perfectionism starting to emerge, you can employ a couple of strategies to refocus your energy.

Seek Growth, Not Perfection

When you think about people you greatly admire, what do you admire about them? What hardships have they endured? What mistakes have they made? Did they always have the right answer the first time, or have they always performed flawlessly? Likely, the answer is no. The people we admire most are often not those who are perfect but rather those who have overcome adversity.

In a similar way, you can think about times when you've struggled the most. What did you learn about yourself? How did you grow? During difficult times, it's helpful to ask yourself these questions. The key is to recognize that imperfection is part of what makes you an appealing, complex individual, and that you can learn from your setbacks.

People who achieve the most success in life are those who grow from their experiences. As you learn to look for the moments of self-reflection and growth that come along with so-called failures, you will recognize that you weren't really failing after all.

Seek Challenges, Not Perfection

If you set goals for yourself that are unrealistic, you may end up giving up. Your goals may feel so unattainable that they drain your motivation to try anything. But does that mean you should avoid setting goals? Not at all!

The answer is to challenge yourself while making space for self-compassion when you notice harsh thoughts coming up. Giving yourself permission to make mistakes can be quite liberating. You can say to yourself, *You have permission to be imperfect.* Or *My goal is to see this through, work my hardest, and be kind to myself throughout the process.*

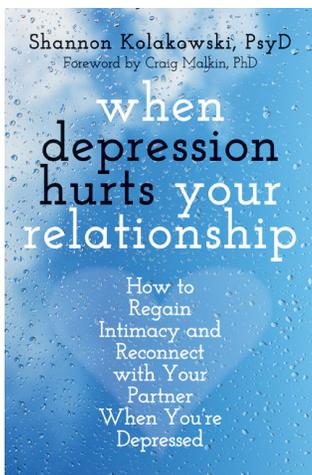
Finding a way to challenge yourself may mean using skills that you already possess but pushing yourself to use them in a new way. For example, Tami noticed that she tended to sell herself short when it came to preparing for work presentations. She told me that her high standards tended to paralyze her, and she usually ended up procrastinating and underpreparing because she felt that no matter what she did, it would not be good enough.

Once she realized that aiming for perfection was getting in the way, Tami decided to set a new goal of working on her presentation for a half hour each day. By changing her goal, she challenged herself without the pressure of perfectionism.

Another client named Celina, who had always been athletic, decided to take her skills to the next level by running a marathon. While she enjoyed pushing herself to go faster, she reminded herself that the goal of running the marathon was not to have the fastest time, but to see it through, even when it was difficult. Crossing the finish line was a proud moment for her, representing a great deal of personal growth. Another client had always enjoyed playing music in school, so he decided to take guitar lessons. He found learning

guitar to be a challenge and a great deal of work. It was intimidating to know how much effort it would take to become proficient, but he learned to take pleasure in small improvements and the sense of accomplishment that he felt after a long practice session.

Challenging yourself will help your relationship, as accomplishing new feats helps you feel more capable. By pushing your boundaries, you gain a sense of mastery. Regardless of the outcome, the fact that you've expanded your comfort zone contributes to your feeling of competence. You realize that you can stand on your own. For your relationship to feel healthy, it's important that you derive strength from within rather than only from your partner.



Learn practical skills to reignite intimacy with your partner using an integrative approach based in mindfulness, interpersonal psychotherapy (IPT), acceptance and commitment therapy (ACT), and cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT).

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