



## From Hopeless to Happy

If life could be graded, Anthony would give his an F. His new job is stressful, his teenage daughter is struggling with depression, he and his wife are fighting a lot lately, and he hates himself for the extra 50 pounds he's carrying.

Anthony feels hopeless and his life seems depressing and dark. Every setback reinforces his pessimism and grim certainty that nothing will ever get better.

Barbara's struggles seem just as daunting. Her husband just lost his job two months after the birth of their first child. She is responsible for her elderly mother, who is becoming increasingly frail. To make things worse, her best friend and main support is moving to another state and the landlord just raised the rent by \$200. Despite all this, Barbara gives her life a strong B+ and knows there are some A+ days ahead.

Unlike Anthony, Barbara sees her setbacks as *temporary obstacles* to be overcome. To her, crises are part of life, opportunities for her to gain in wisdom and courage.

Put simply, some people are optimists and others are pessimists. However, optimism isn't an accident—it's a skill that can be learned, one that can help us feel better, resist depression and greatly improve our lives.

Psychologist, clinical researcher and bestselling author Martin Seligman has spent 25 years studying optimism and pessimism. In his book, *Learned Optimism*, he states that pessimistic thinking can undermine not just our behavior but our success in all areas of our lives.

"Pessimism is escapable," he writes. "Pessimists can learn to be optimists."

By altering our view of our lives, we can actually alter our lives, he says. First, he says we must recognize our "explanatory

style," which is what we say to ourselves when we experience a setback. By breaking the "I give up" pattern of thinking and changing our interior negative dialogue, we can encourage what he calls "flexible optimism." He believes that focusing on our innate character strengths (wisdom, courage, compassion), rather than our perceived failures, boosts not

**"'Hope' is the thing with feathers  
That perches in the soul  
And sings the tunes without the words  
And never stops—at all."**

—Emily Dickinson

just our moods, but our immune system. Research has shown that optimistic people tend to be healthier and experience more success in life; therefore, he encourages parents to develop the patterns of optimism in their children.

Practicing "spiritual optimism" is another way to improve the quality of our lives, writes Joan Borysenko, psychologist, speaker and author of several books, including *Fire in the Soul*. She encourages people who experience feelings of despair and hopelessness in times of crises to remember it takes courage to live, and that we can find that courage by facing our fears, finding support and using prayer or meditation.

Similar techniques outlined by Dr. David Burns in his book *Feeling Good: The New Mood Therapy*, have been effective in treating depression. He believes that changing our thinking has a profound effect on our moods, including cases of severe depression. It's not our lives that depress us, he writes, but our thinking about our lives.

So unless Anthony begins to change his thinking, his life's outlook may remain bleak and dismal. Barbara, however, is likely to graduate to even more satisfying and fulfilling years ahead because she believes her life is filled with challenges and opportunities. ✨

## 10 Actions of True Intimacy

The poet Rilke once advised a friend that partners in a good marriage should appoint the other "guardian of his solitude." Rilke's comments, applicable to all committed relationships, point to the mutual respect and clarity that form the basis for genuine intimacy. Here are 10 ways to deepen your intimacy.

1. **Bring up** difficult subjects.
2. **Listen** with openness to feedback.
3. **Elicit** a fuller range of feelings during discussions and disagreements.
4. **Respect** your partner's desire for greater distance as expressing a need for comfort—not a personal rejection.
5. **Listen** without comment during disagreements, despite strong feelings being stirred.
6. **Maintain** perspective. Your partner is a human, not deity or demon.
7. **Be honest** with yourself. Without that, true intimacy with another can't really happen.
8. **Dare** to expose your imperfections and fears. (See vulnerability article on page 3.)
9. **Avoid** depending on your partner to fulfill all your needs.
10. **Don't use** affection, sex and loving behavior to reward or punish.

Rilke reminds us of the connection between intimacy and a healthy ability to maintain what's separate: "Once the realization is accepted that even between the closest human beings, an infinite distance continues to exist, a wonderful living side-by-side can grow up, if they succeed in loving the distance between them which makes it possible to see each other whole and against a wide sky!" ✨



## Susan LeGrand Levine

Susan is the founder of Counseling Solutions in Madison, WI. She has practiced as a psychotherapist for 15 years. She received her M.S. in Rehabilitation Psychology from the University of Wisconsin in 1991. She has 3,000 hours of training as the family therapist in an intensive adolescent treatment program. She has extensive training in treating alcohol and drug issues. She has been trained by Hospice.

As a psychotherapist in general practice, Susan uses a supportive, goal directive approach to assist clients. Her style is nurturing and utilizes strengths and resilience naturally available to the client. Susan has counseled many hundreds of adults, couples, teens and children. Her style is person-centered. She has a unique ability to understand, motivate and inspire those who seek her guidance.

Susan's life has been her greatest teacher. Her spirituality has been a great strength. She is married to Steven Levine, a writer, and they have eight children and 16 grandchildren. She and her husband have foster-parented 41 adolescent young men in their home in the past 10 years. In her spare time, Susan enjoys music, sports, gardening and, of course, personal improvement. She lives in Mount Horeb, a small town 17 miles west of Madison.

## How Controlling Are You?

We all know them...the folks who **MUST CONTROL EVERYTHING**. Perhaps it's the mother-in-law who you secretly call "Controller of the Universe," or the boss at work who has to have a hand in every little detail of your work, or the parent who directs every aspect of their child's life. However well-meaning controlling people might be, their actions often result in alienation, resentment and a lack of intimacy with loved ones. When they have a choice, people don't usually like to be around controlling individuals. Take this quiz to see how controlling you might be.



### True False Set 1

- 1. I discourage the people around me from expressing anger, fear or sadness.
- 2. I know what's best for others; that's why they should listen to what I have to say. I'm only trying to help them.
- 3. I'd rather do most things myself.
- 4. When people go against my suggestions, I tend to withdraw my affection; when they do what I say, I'll lavish the praise.
- 5. I take it as disloyalty or personal rejection when others act or feel differently than I do.
- 6. When I'm in a relationship, I want to know where my significant other is all the time.
- 7. I am easily irritated, especially by others' incompetence or rebelliousness.
- 8. When watching television with others, I have to have the remote. Similarly, when in a car with others, I feel uncomfortable unless I'm the driver.

### Set 2

- 1. I encourage others to express their true feelings around me.
- 2. I would rather people be themselves than try to please me, and that they do things out of choice, not obligation.
- 3. It doesn't bother me when others question or disagree with me. In fact, I enjoy a lively debate.
- 4. I steer clear of micromanaging family members or employees, and instead encourage independence and independent thinking.
- 5. I choose not to focus on power, prestige or perfection; I hold others to be the best they can be—and true to themselves.
- 6. I find it easy to relax, laugh or be spontaneous.
- 7. I value stability and consistency, and don't get caught up in chaos and drama.
- 8. Getting someone to do something by yelling at them isn't something that works for me.

If you answered true more often in Set 1 and false more often in Set 2, you may wish to examine where your urge to control is coming from. Most often, fear is the deep culprit. Learning how to approach and handle fear in a positive manner helps us accept others—and ourselves—better. And doing so sets us up for better relationships, better health and better self-esteem. Please don't hesitate to call if you'd like to explore this issue in your life. ✨

# What Does It Mean to Be Vulnerable? (And Why Is It Empowering?)

Leslie is terrified of getting older, of her children leaving home, of being alone. These feelings scare her so much, she invents ways not to face her fears. Mostly, she lashes out at others for "making" her feel bad. She wonders why she has so few friends and can't find a mate.

Tom doesn't walk, he swaggers. He doesn't talk, he commands. When his children and friends head for the exit, he figures they just don't have the guts to handle such a big man. But he has an ulcer and he can't sleep. Lately, he's been having nightmares about being trapped. Deep, deep down, he's afraid he's really a little man after all.

## Vulnerability Is Not About Being Weak

It hurts to admit we are vulnerable. For so many of us, it means we are weak, helpless and open to attack by others or by whatever life throws at us. Our culture demands that we be strong, so we try our best to hide our fears and cover up our weak spots. We don't want to be seen as failures.

But there can be beauty in vulnerability and value in exploring so-called weaknesses. By exploring our "dark" side, we can turn our fears and vulnerabilities into strengths. To paraphrase author Matthew Fox, "Our demons aren't *in* the way; they *are* the way!"

Often, we believe that keeping a stiff upper lip will keep us strong. We hold a tight lid on our fears and pain, but in doing so, we also cover up and lose touch with our feelings. This, in turn, shields our hearts and separates us from our connection to humanity.

Instead, imagine the worst thing that can happen and explore your fears. It is often helpful to work with a therapist to face what it is you

believe you are defending yourself against, and then to help you understand, accept and let go. This is a journey that can be long and difficult, but it's only by facing our vulnerable places—not covering them up or running from them—that we come out the other side.



## Vulnerability Is Empowering

Being vulnerable actually empowers us. We all have a wound, and when we allow ourselves to be vulnerable, we accept that wound and then we can move forward. Our wound is our blessing.

Being vulnerable hasn't been very popular in our society, but this is changing. Words such as "humility" and "gratitude" and "forgiveness" are being used more frequently. They are terms that show a cultural shift towards accepting all human traits, negative and positive, strong and weak.

Author and therapist Beth Miller takes this one step further. In her book, *Resilience: 12 Qualities to Cultivate*, she calls vulnerability "falling apart" and urges that "it is time to bring falling apart into fashion."

Being a student of life means being vulnerable—open to life, to learning, to experiences, to yourself and to emotions. Most of all, it means being willing to accept things as they are.

Being vulnerable comes easier to some than others. Here are some ways to explore being vulnerable:

- Be honest with yourself.
- Look for deeper reasons or motives for your own behavior. Take responsibility for your behavior.
- Take a risk. Start by letting someone you trust know your weak places.
- Be willing to listen to honest feedback.
- Accept the fact that you have anger, and find words to talk about it.
- Let go of guilt and resentment. The past is past. Make amends if needed.
- Accept that you make mistakes. That's part of being human. \*



## Learning to Trust After Betrayal

A man finds out his business partner has been using the company's profits to fund a gambling addiction.

A woman learns her sister has hidden assets from their parents' estate.

A husband discovers his wife has been having an affair with his friend.

Whether it's by a sibling, colleague, spouse or other close individual, betrayal slices through us like nothing else. It shatters close bonds, destroys self-esteem and breeds insecurity. It's almost guaranteed to cause pain, heartache, shock and fury.

But it's possible to mend the wounds of betrayal. It's possible to conquer rage and regain dignity. Most of all, it's possible to trust again.

To get through betrayal, it's helpful to have a roadmap—a plan, if you will—for what to expect and what you might want to consider. Here are some ideas, followed by a list of books that can help with the process.

**Get support.** Sharing your feelings helps to release the pain. Consider whether you will be best served by support from your family, friends, therapist or a supportive group.

**Consider when/if/how to confront.** Thinking this through in ad-

vance and acting with intention can positively affect the entire healing process. Also consider how, or whether to talk to children about what has happened.

**Weigh your options.** You could seek revenge, hold on to outrage and resentment, forget about the transgression or forgive. The choice is yours. What do each of these options hold for you?

**Examine why the person betrayed you and what makes you vulnerable to betrayal.** Confronting the reasons behind betrayal requires a commitment to self-examination and mutual examination of the relationship itself. Doing so, while difficult, can create a stronger relationship than existed before the betrayal.

**Rebuild your self-image.** The journey back to trust also includes reconciliation with yourself, so that you can trust yourself again. Start by banishing self-blame; change the negative statements about yourself to self-loving statements. For example: "I am whole. I am a devoted friend/spouse/sibling. I am loved from the inside out." Write lists of your positive



qualities to keep perspective.

Trust is the cornerstone of all relationships. Moving past the trauma of broken trust can mean moving into a new realm of intimacy with ourselves and with others.

### Some Helpful Books

*How Could You Do This to Me?: Learning to Trust After Betrayal*, by Jane Greer and Margery D. Rose

*Not "Just Friends": Rebuilding Trust and Recovering Your Sanity*, by Shirley P. Glass

*Back from Betrayal: Saving a Marriage, a Family, a Life*, by Suzy Farbman

*After the Affair: Overcoming the Pain and Rebuilding Trust*, by Janis Abrahms Spring and Michael Spring

*Betrayed!: How You Can Restore Sexual Trust and Rebuild Your Life*, by Riki Robbins \*

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