

Section One

Relating: Beginning with the Self

LOOKING AHEAD

After completing this section, you will be able to

- Describe a positive relationship, define interpersonal relations, and understand how they are related to each other.
- Explain how people learn interpersonal skills.
- Contrast personal and professional lives with past generations and explain why interpersonal skills may be needed even more in today's world.
- Describe personal and professional benefits of interpersonal skills.

The journey to the development of positive relationships begins within.

—Sharon Hanna

Do you want to relate positively to others? Hopefully your answer is “yes” because human contact and connections enhance development. Personal growth and happiness are by-products of positive relationships.

What are positive relationships? A **positive relationship** is one in which individuals experience the following reactions:

- Significantly more emotional pleasure than pain
- General feelings of satisfaction and happiness
- Personal growth grounded in a genuine regard for self and others

In order to develop positive relationships, we engage in **interpersonal relations**, an ongoing interactive process that includes initiating, building, and enriching relationships with different people in a variety of situations. If the process goes well, we are likely to live happier lives. Interpersonal skills must be learned. This book can help you develop a deeper understanding of human interactions and relationships. The beginning of this understanding is knowing and loving yourself. The foundation of respect for others is self-respect (Branden, 1992). In turn you can reach out positively to others.

Be gentle with yourself.

Learn to love yourself, forgive yourself.

*For only as we have the right attitude toward ourselves,
can we have the right attitude toward others.*

—Author unknown

Individuals do not always understand the importance of communication in developing positive relationships. Because relationships are so important and

usually complex and unpredictable, specialized training in interpersonal relations can make a significant difference in the quality of our lives. In a national study (Packard, 1992), 66 percent of family relation teachers identified interpersonal relationships and communication skills as essential. Adjustment and relating skills are even more necessary today than they were in the past because life today is more populated, mobile, diverse, complicated, fast changing, and full of choices. Can you think of more examples?

Gender and family roles are also different from the past. In the past, roles were clearly established and people were limited in their number of relationships. Today individuals experience many more interactions and relationships. Interpersonal and communication skills are needed but are frequently overlooked or avoided. Although a logical learning environment for relationship skills is the educational system, how many of your classes have taught you specifically about yourself? Leo Buscaglia (1982), who taught college classes about love and relationships, questioned an educational system that has a worthy goal of self-realization but does not teach it. If interpersonal relations courses are not required, people will continue to learn from experience and untrained teachers.

The home is the first learning environment. Our skills begin in the cradle. The sad truth is that families may teach negative interactions. Examples that can influence children are:

- Direct instruction (“Do not hit your sister”)
- Modeling (watching a parent hit your sister, which is confusing if you have been told not to hit!)
- Experience (hitting someone and receiving encouragement or discouragement for doing so)

We also learn from friends, school experiences, the media, and other worldly sources. What have you learned about love? For many, information about relationships comes from television soap operas, which is neither helpful nor adequate. Additional benefits of learning good communication skills include taking charge of your own life, being motivated to change, gaining insight into how to adjust, and learning coping strategies. Although some changes may be impossible, you can always improve yourself. Limitations exist only in your mind. You can improve your interpersonal relations with training.

I believe that wherever you are in life, and however you learned it, that if you want to learn it differently, anything that can be learned can be unlearned and relearned. (Buscaglia, 1982, p. 66)

People can develop healthy relationships as easily as unhealthy ones. The quality of our relationships influences our productivity and our lives both personally and professionally. If people learn positive interpersonal relationships, problems can be solved or avoided. One approach to interpersonal relationships starts with developing your own voice first, and then you can inspire others and create a workplace where people feel engaged (Covey, 2004).

Positive interpersonal skills can benefit your career by helping you:

- Know yourself well enough to choose a satisfying career and rewarding jobs.
- Have a high level of self-esteem, which will increase your chance of getting the job you want.
- Use people skills to enhance your value as an employee or employer.

This book will help you gain insight into yourself and others, learn to communicate in a positive way, and discover how to develop healthy relationships. Take the time to complete the self-appraisal at the beginning of Reflections and Applications (p. 371). Even if you already interact with others in a positive way and enjoy fulfilling relationships, new interpersonal challenges will arise as you grow and change. Your present level of interpersonal skills can be improved. You can appreciate the goodness of life as you learn, grow, and relish the joys and rewards of positive relationships. The interpersonal journey can be interesting and highly rewarding. It begins with you!

I am convinced that much human misery is rooted in ignorance of self and relationships.

—Teresa Adams



KNOWING AND VALUING YOURSELF

LOOKING AHEAD

After completing this chapter, you will be able to:

- Explain the concept of self and discuss the benefits of self-knowledge and understanding.
- Name and describe the four developmental areas of the self and how they relate to each other.
- Define attitude, optimism, and pessimism.
- Explain self-concept, self-esteem, and ideal self.
- Give reasons why high self-esteem is important and identify its sources.
- Use cognitive restructuring.
- Define self-fulfilling prophecy and recognize its existence in your own thinking.
- Define self-efficacy expectations and discuss their importance.

The unexamined life is not worth living.

—Socrates

How would you answer the question, “Who are you?” Each of us is a unique whole self, an integrated human being.

What is the self and why is it important in the development of positive relationships? Think of the **self** as a separate being within an environment. Early in life each human being distinguishes himself or herself from others. Self-knowledge continues throughout life.

The greatest joy in life is to know oneself from the inside out. Such knowledge enables us to know another and be known. (Adams, 1987, p. 1)

An early pioneer in understanding the self was sociologist George Herbert Mead. Mead (1934) believed that social experience shapes the self and that, in fact, selves only exist in relationships to other selves. Psychologists, too, have a keen interest in the self. The humanistic approach, which is emphasized in this book, features a complete, or holistic, view of the self. The focus is not on selfishness but rather on the goals of self-discovery, self-awareness, and self-fulfillment.

Humanistic psychology seeks to help people become fully functioning and achieve their full potential so they have more to give to others.

Although learning about the self can be fascinating, the reluctance to seek insight is common. It may be painful. If you are hesitant, push yourself to learn more. The rewards are many, and as the process continues, the discomfort lessens. Maturity comes from self-discovery, a slow and never-ending study. The *self* is a “vast continent whose exploration we can never complete” (Branden, 1983, p. 173).

Exploring Developmental Areas of the Self

Recognizing that the self is a whole person, human development researchers pay attention to four developmental areas: physical, mental or intellectual, emotional, and social. First, we will study each area to gain an understanding of how each part contributes to the whole person. Then we will explore how the four areas come together to interact with each other to define who we are. As we explore the four areas, try and relate the following quote to your personal life in relation to the four areas of self.

*God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change,
Courage to change the things I can, and
Wisdom to know the difference.*

—Author unknown

Just as this quote is used in some “self-help” programs, readers can also use the quote as a guide when applying the textbook reading to their personal situations.

Physical Self

Condition of the body and appearance are included in the physical self. Certain characteristics are either determined or greatly influenced by heredity. Examples are but not limited to race, hair texture, the natural color of hair and eyes, bone structure, and height. We have more control over other physical aspects such as weight, hairstyle, and muscle tone. Accepting what cannot be changed, such as your age, is a wise decision. Each of us will age as long as we are alive! Viewing the aging process as depressing is setting yourself up for despair.

Appearance. Americans often pay too much attention to one part of the physical self, the outer shell. **Body image**, defined as a perception of one’s appearance, is strongly correlated with regard for the self. Females are significantly less satisfied with their appearance than males (Stowers and Durm, 1996). Many people, seemingly obsessed with appearance, work hard to achieve high standards of beauty. Women may not consider comfort important in their attempts to look attractive. For example, they squeeze their feet into pointed-toe spiked heels that may be stylish, yet quite uncomfortable!

Can a desire for attractiveness interfere with good health? Achieving the “thin look,” so prevalent in the media, can become an obsession. Unhealthy ways to lose weight, such as using laxatives, taking diet pills, inducing vomiting, and restricting caloric intake to under 1,200 calories a day, are commonly used by high school female students, especially those who are frequent readers of beauty and fashion magazines (Gorrell, 2001). Putting such a high premium on the “thin look,” especially if it endangers health, is alarming. **Anorexia nervosa** is a life-threatening disorder that includes a distorted body image, refusal to maintain a healthy weight, and an intense fear of being overweight. An attempt to achieve close to an ideal weight and a fit body is highly recommended. How to lose weight in a healthy way is covered later in this chapter.

Men experience similar pressures to achieve the perceived perfect look. They may use steroids to build muscle mass. Although men may achieve the desired look, anabolic steroid abuse has been associated with a wide range of adverse side effects ranging from some that are physically unattractive, such as acne and breast development in men, to others that are life threatening, such as heart attacks and liver cancer. Most are reversible if the abuser stops taking the drugs; others are permanent such as infertility and the shrinking of the testicles (National Institute on Drug Abuse, 2006). A survey conducted by the *Lincoln Journal Star* (1998a) found that 2.7 percent of 965 middle school athletes, some as young as 10 years old, used steroids and that girls’ involvement was about the same as boys, involvement. The desire to be muscular is not worth the price, especially since other ways to achieve that look are available.

Individuals continue to take health risks in other ways when, for example, they believe that a “good” tan is desirable in spite of conclusive research on skin cancer. Across cultures, young people who are highly concerned about physical appearance are more likely to sunbathe and not take proper precautions (Prentice-Dunn, Jones, and Floyd, 1997). Excessive sun exposure puts a person at risk for melanoma, a serious type of skin cancer that claimed an estimated 9,600 lives in the United States in 2006 (National Center for Chronic Disease Prevention and Health Promotion, 2006). According to the National Cancer Institute, the annual number of new cases has more than doubled since 1973. This could partly be due to the introduction and use of tanning beds. Exposure to sunlamps, tanning beds, and all types of solar radiation are identified as known human **carcinogens**, substances that tend to cause cancer (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2001). A survey sponsored by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC, 1999) found that approximately 43 percent of white children under age 12 had at least one sunburn during the past year. Ironically, sun exposure leads to skin wrinkling, which is not a standard for attractiveness. Proper use of sunscreens can prevent the effects of long exposure to the sun.

Judging others only on their looks can limit possibilities and lead to unhealthy relationships. People often miss opportunities to meet wonderful individuals. Those who evaluate themselves only on the basis of appearance put their self-esteem at risk. Trying to look as attractive as possible can be an enjoyable expression of how we feel about ourselves as long as appearance is not the yardstick by which we measure our self-worth.

Mental Self

The mental self is fascinating. Learning abilities, thought-processing patterns, as well as attitude and motivation are facets of this important area of the self. Cognitive development, as it relates to the thought process, occurs throughout life.

Mental abilities. What intelligence means and how to assess it are controversial issues. For years **intelligence** was considered to be an intellectual capacity or potential. Recently, attempts have been made to broaden this definition. Believing that a narrow scholastic definition of intelligence can cause children with various other abilities to think they are stupid, Howard Gardner (1983) introduced the concept of seven **multiple intelligences**. More recently he has expanded the number of possible intelligences and emphasized the abilities to solve problems and to create products that are of value in a culture (Gardner, 1999).

Which of the Multiple Intelligences Do You Possess?

- Musical (related to performance, composition, and appreciation)
- Linguistic (related to language)
- Logical-mathematical (related to problem solving, mathematical operations, and scientific investigation)
- Bodily-kinesthetic (using the body and handling objects skillfully)
- Spatial (related to manipulation of space)
- Interpersonal (related to understanding and working with others)
- Intrapersonal (related to understanding oneself)
- Naturalistic (related to sensing and observing the environment)

Continued research by Gardner (1999) led to the identification of an eighth type of intelligence, naturalistic, as described in the foregoing list. Regardless of definition or number of intelligences, problem solving, display of curiosity, and ability to get along with others are important intelligences to develop.

Intelligence is believed to be a complex result of the interrelationship between heredity and environment (Singh, 1996). The prenatal environment probably plays a significant role (Devlin, Daniels, and Roeder, 1997). An IQ (intelligence quotient) test is typically used to measure intelligence. A score indicates a person's level of ability and potential mainly in the areas of language and mathematics. Other tests such as the ACT and SAT measure academic aptitude and play a major role in college admission and financial aid awards. Caution is advised because low achievement can be caused by other factors such as cultural bias in testing, test anxiety, or **learning disabilities**, a group of related and often overlapping conditions leading to low achievement by people who have the potential to do better (Smith, 1993). Most people with learning disabilities are talented and bright; however, traditional schooling is often challenging. The educational system has found ways to recognize and help those who learn differently. Reading a book such as *ADD and the College Student* (Quinn, 2001) and also seeking help from a specialist can make a great deal of difference. College students with learning disabilities who ask a lot of questions and seek support are more likely to graduate than those who do not seek help. Students with learning disabilities can acquire a better way to learn and realize their potential.



Figure 1-1 Reading is a favorite way to improve mentally.

No matter how an individual learns, achievement and grades in school are usually a reflection of how much effort a person is willing to make. A study of high school valedictorians revealed that they were not always the brightest students; they were, however, the hardest working (Arnold, 1995). Whatever your measured degree of intelligence or your style of learning, you can choose how to use it.

Learning readiness and strategies. Willingness and eagerness to learn are valuable traits, and employers view them as important assets for an employee to have. Curiosity about a number of subjects can result in a well-rounded person who is both interested and interesting. You may be surprised to realize that feeling confused can set the stage for learning. Students confess that they are afraid to ask questions, citing situations in which they were put down or laughed at because they did so. Unfortunately, it is often the case that only the teachers ask ques-

tions in the classroom. If you are reluctant to ask or answer questions, try to overcome the hesitancy. You need to regard both asking and answering questions as an indication of having some knowledge and a desire to learn more. How do you learn most easily? Individuals typically learn from their experiences, so actual hands-on or **experiential learning** is effective. For example, you may have been instructed how to set a videocassette recorder. Would it have been better to have actually gone through the motions as well? You have probably learned through traditional instructional methods and have found one or more that work well for you. Learning is most effective when it involves several of our senses and being actively involved in the learning process (Fig. 1-1).

Critical and creative thinking. Where did you learn how to think? Were you ever taught actual thinking skills? **Thinking** is the ability to activate and then pursue mental activity. For years our educational system presumed that if students were reasonably intelligent, they were able to think and did not need training. Educators only gave information and told students about ideas. These types of practices do not encourage thinking. Only memorization skills are needed, and those who have difficulty memorizing do not do well. Ability to think is rarely assessed. Years ago, von Oech (1983) criticized our educational system. Unfortunately, what he wrote still applies in some classrooms.

Much of our educational system is geared toward teaching people the one right answer. By the time the average person finishes college, he or she will have taken over 2,600 tests, quizzes, and exams. Thus, the “right answer” approach becomes deeply ingrained. This may be fine for some mathematical problems where there is only one right answer. The difficulty is that most of life does not present itself in this way. Life

is ambiguous; there are many right answers—all depending on what you are looking for. But if you think there is only one right answer, then you will stop looking as soon as you find one. (p. 21)

Being “right” or certain can stop us from being curious, and curiosity is the basis of learning. As you read this book, you will see how important thought-processing is. The ability to think is the foundation of human accomplishments. Each person develops methods of processing information and acquires a number of beliefs. These ideas are beneficial only if they are not so rigid that they limit a person’s ability to discover, think, and learn.

Taking nothing for granted is one aspect of **critical thinking**. Do you believe everything you read or hear? If so, you are not using critical thinking. Do you dig deeper, challenge assumptions, and examine the logic of differing points? If so, you are thinking! Try to develop a “working knowledge” of material by thinking, talking, and actually using what has been read or presented.

You employ **creative thinking** when you think about ideas in different ways and generate a variety of solutions to problems. The basis of creativity is mental flexibility. Try thinking creatively and come up with different uses for common objects such as bricks. A problem that is not too difficult (although you may be surprised how many times individuals do not seem to be able to solve it) is that it is 7:30 in the morning, and your car will not start. You have a class in an hour. What can you do? Creative thinking is liberating and can solve many problems in your life!

Why are different types of thinking so important? The amount of new information doubles every four years (Shenk, 2004), and we are faced with numerous decisions based on new information. With information production not only increasing but also accelerating, there is no sign that processing will ever catch up. We have quite suddenly mutated into a radically different culture, a civilization that trades in and survives on stylized communication (Shenk, 1998). Too often, people depend on so-called experts and accept all that they see and hear. Using our thought processes in critical and creative ways is important when faced with new information. A student commented at the end of a sociology course, “I do not know for sure how much I have learned, but the course really taught me to think.” Learning how to think was the most valuable concept for this student to learn.

Limiting yourself by lack of curiosity, fear of questioning, and lack of confidence is a waste of your human potential. As you read this book and participate in discussions, use your wonderful mind to ask questions, present alternative ideas, and generate thoughts! Be like the students, who wrote: “My mind has been resting on a shelf for too long, and now it is ready to apply its power!” “Thank you for making me do this challenging assignment—it made the textbook come alive!”

Attitude. An extremely influential aspect of the mental self is **attitude**, a state of mind that is reflected in how a person approaches life. In referring to the future, **optimists** have positive thoughts, whereas **pessimists** view life negatively. Optimists think that they will never die or, if they do, they will wake up to the glory of heaven, whereas pessimists are certain that they will not live much longer and that if they wake up in heaven, they will not like it (Chapman, 1993). In a study of college students, high optimists enjoyed the highest overall quality of life satisfaction whereas low optimists were dissatisfied and used more alcohol in an

attempt to cope (Harju and Bolen, 1998). Optimists and pessimists interpret the same experiences very differently and, therefore, live much different lives. Think of your own attitude about how your life is progressing and determine if you have an optimistic or pessimistic outlook.

Quite a Contrast

Optimists

- Protect their personal health (Greenberg, 1997)
- Cope with extremely difficult situations through activity (Greenberg, 1997)
- Have fewer serious disease and health problems (Goleman, 1997)

Pessimists

- Discontinue their medicine and report poorer health (Aversa and Kimberlin, 1996)
- Have a higher risk of death from cancer (Schulz et al., 1996)

Some people have been “attituded” excessively, with such common statements as “Your attitude stinks,” “If you would only improve your attitude,” or “You have an attitude.” The effects of our attitude on ourselves and others are so powerful that they cannot be disregarded.

If you can create and keep a positive attitude toward your job, your company, and life in general, you increase your chance of success. If you are unable to do this, you may find many doors closed to you on the job, and your personal life less than exciting. (Chapman, 1993, p. 20)

Attitude is described as positive or negative; it usually varies between these two extremes. A positive attitude is not the same as a “Pollyanna” way of looking at life. That is, you can have a positive attitude and realize that life is not absolutely wonderful all the time. Being positive means that you look on the brighter side of events, that you are more “up” than “down,” and that you usually feel responsible and in control of yourself. Positive people are generally more energetic, motivated, and alert. With a negative attitude the world almost always appears bleak, a “down” feeling is apparent, and blaming and excuse making are common. Think of someone you know whose attitude is negative. Any of these descriptions may come to your mind: fault-finding, irresponsible, lazy, apathetic, complaining, or gloomy. An individual who fits this description is likely to be avoided by others. “Misery may love company, but company does not love misery” (Myers, 1992, p. 20).

Attitudes are acquired more than they are taught. Both negative and positive attitudes are transmitted on the job. A persistently negative attitude, like the rotten apple in the barrel, can spoil the positive attitudes of others. (Chapman, 1993, p. 23)

Think about those who influence you and those who look to you for guidance. The tone of the day can be set by one person. Having a positive attitude can be contagious!

In specific situations, employees can especially benefit from positive attitudes. Pretend you are a supervisor. You have two employees who have a disagreement, and they come to talk to you. Carlos is a positive person, and he rarely complains.

Sean's attitude is generally negative, and this is not the first gripe he has brought to you. The two tell different versions of the same event. Which one will you believe? Even if Sean's version is accurate, the odds are that you will believe Carlos.

Having a positive attitude is also highly desirable outside the workplace. Ask athletic coaches, teachers, and others who work with people about the advantages of a positive attitude. Positive athletes are better competitors and give up less easily; they try harder in the classroom and use their mistakes to improve. Those with positive outlooks are enjoyable people and interactions with them are more productive. Think about individuals you know. Do you prefer to be around those who have a positive attitude or a negative attitude? An outstanding example of a positive attitude maintained against all odds was Mike, a student who wrote as a description of himself: "I have a slight health problem, cystic fibrosis, but I will not let it get me down." Cystic fibrosis is much more than a *slight* health problem. Mike has never let it change his marvelous attitude.

Examine your way of approaching life. You have an opportunity to rate your attitude in Reflections and Applications and compare it with what others think about you. Remember that attitude is always a choice; the key is to change both thoughts and behaviors. The book *Learned Optimism* (Seligman, 1998) is an excellent guide with ideas on how to become more positive. Coursework can also help. Reading and putting into practice the ideas and methods presented in this book can empower you to develop an even more positive attitude.

You have probably heard about the power of positive thinking. Norman Cousins (1979, 1983, 1989) told remarkable stories of his recoveries from a serious illness and a heart attack and of research showing how intense determination and hope influence the course of disease. Others believe that pain can be caused by belief or attitude and that a person's way of thinking can decrease or eliminate pain (Benson, 1987). In this book you will learn more about the power of belief and how to change your thoughts.

Emotional Self

A third part of the self is emotional; it is composed of feelings and ways of expressing them. Human beings are often unaware of their emotions. For example, when asked, "What are you feeling right now?" a person commonly answers, "I do not know," "Fine," or "Okay." Rarely are emotions identified. Personal expressions of emotions vary considerably. Because of its importance, Chapter 5 is devoted to the subject of the emotional self.

Social Self

The social self is defined as "the idea that the self is produced through interaction with two or more people" (Glossary, Social Science Department, University of Colorado, 2005). For example, a mother is a social self because a mother cannot be without a child. Important aspects of the self are **statuses**, defined as what we are or our social positions, and **roles**, the behaviors that are a part of those statuses. A father's statuses may be son, father, husband, employee, and friend. Within each status, he performs certain roles such as provider and nurturer. Consider your own



Figure 1-2 Interacting with people is an important part of the social self.

Source: www.indexopen.com

statuses and roles. Other parts of the social self are relationships and social behaviors. How do you get along with other people? Humans require social exchanges with others in order to be loved and to learn to love. Nobody can survive in a vacuum, and social relationships are vital to our well-being (Fig. 1-2)!

A primary objective of this book is to guide you in the development of relationships. A beginning step is to understand how you have developed socially. Personality, addressed in Chapter 2, plays a major role in the social aspects of life.

Integrating Your Whole Self

Fortunately, you are not like Humpty-Dumpty, who could not be put back together again! The parts make up a whole, and examining your integrated self is fascinating. “Every baby born into this world is a living question mark. The first question is about the self: ‘Who am I?’” (Powell, 1976, p. 47). Humans continue to search for the answer. By discovering and valuing your own self-identity, you can have a positive relationship with yourself (Fig. 1-3).

Coming together, or integration of the self, is illustrated in Figure 1-3. The arrows indicate that the parts are interrelated, and they influence each other both negatively and positively. Recall a time when you were not feeling well physically. What were you like mentally, emotionally, socially? Even if you did not realize it, you were probably diminished in these other areas, too. The good news, which has already been mentioned, is that a positive spillover also occurs. For example, attitude can make a positive difference in the physical, emotional, and social parts of life. Studies indicate how important it is to pay attention to a person’s emotional distress and offer social support along with the physical. From his work with support groups for breast cancer patients, David Spiegel (1996) of Stanford University School of

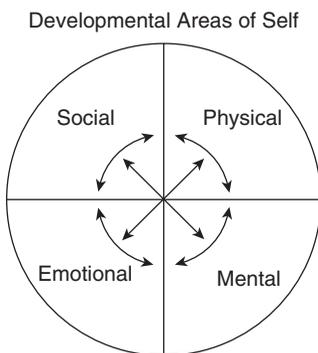


Figure 1-3 Developmental areas of self.

Medicine found that social contact not only had positive emotional effects but also reduced the death risk. He also discovered that a reduction in depression and anxiety seemed to increase the activity of natural killer cells in the body. A positive emotional state was related to improved physical health.

Improving yourself physically, mentally, emotionally, or socially will create benefits in other developmental areas. Pat was unhappy and shy. She started on an exercise program and had her hair cut and styled. She reported how much better she felt physically, mentally, and emotionally and described a definite improvement in her social relationships. An activity in Reflections and Applications gives you an opportunity to describe yourself in all areas. Checking to see that you are balanced in the four areas is also important. Some people devote a great deal of time and energy to their

mental self and exclude their social development. Others build their bodies but are strangers to their feelings. For example, although Jack had been happy-go-lucky and sociable, after he left home to attend college he became depressed and sought counseling. He had been concentrating too much on social activities and found himself failing in school and feeling ill. He didn't get enough sleep, his diet was poor, and he drank excessive amounts of alcohol. Jack learned the hard way how the various aspects of the self are integrated and how important it is to maintain a healthy balance among them.

Discovering Your Self-Concept

When you consider who you are, what do you perceive? Whether we realize it or not, each of us carries with us a mental blueprint or image of ourselves. How this self develops is of interest to both sociologists and psychologists. Influential is the **generalized other**, which Mead (1934) described as the organized community or social group. Thinking of a whole community's attitude gives you a concept of the generalized other. Have you ever thought, "I cannot do that. What would *they* think?" If by "they," you do not mean specific people and are describing a collective attitude, you are tapping into the generalized other. How does this guide our behaviors and development of self?

What are your ideas, mental representations, and understanding of your own self? The **self-concept** is the totality of your thoughts and feelings with reference to yourself and is the foundation on which almost all your actions are based (Rosenberg, 1979). When does self-concept form? During infancy, emotional experiences form the basis for its development (Eder and Mangelsdorf, 1997). Carl Rogers (1961) wrote about self-concept and how it develops. As a psychotherapist, he believed that a search for the self was at the heart of most of his clients' problems. Fulfillment of self means that one is basically positive, open to experience, trustful of one's own thoughts and feelings, self-evaluative rather than at the mercy of others' approval, and willing to be a process rather than a product. Rogers, a humanistic psychologist, was optimistic about human potential.

The self-concept consists of self-descriptions, ideal self, and self-esteem or self-worth. Use the key word *like* to help conceptualize self-concept. Think of it as (1) what I am like, (2) what I would like to be like, and (3) how much I like what I am like. Your current self-descriptions and your **ideal self** may be similar or quite different. Because of external standards, you may have an unrealistic ideal. If so, that image is more hurtful than helpful. Amy described herself as overweight, short, of average intelligence, shy, and unhappy much of the time. Her ideal self was slim, at least 4 inches taller, brilliant, friendly, and always happy. Which descriptors of her ideal self can help her improve and which would just be hurtful? As was mentioned earlier, knowing what you can change and what you cannot is valuable. Amy has formulated an ideal self that is not possible and is likely to lead to dissatisfaction and frustration.

People can be absorbed with their ideal selves to such an extent that their self-esteem could be at risk. Do you realize that it is possible to compare yourself to a person who does not exist: your ideal self? If your self-description and ideal self are very different, your self-esteem will be low. You may be underestimating



Figure 1-4 What are your areas of self?

Source: www.indexopen.com

preoccupation with the ideal self was correlated with anxiety, self-consciousness, and vulnerability (Bybee et al., 1997). Rather than an ideal, try thinking of this image as your **desired self**. Then use it to discover how to improve in realistic ways. Realize that if you want the best possible relationships, you will want to create the best possible “you.” Striving for improvement makes life interesting as well as challenging. Regardless of your level of self-satisfaction, positive changes can be made. Awareness of self followed by a sincere desire to change are the forerunners of personal growth. Throughout this book, you will be encouraged to improve in each of the developmental areas (Fig. 1-4).

your actual self or harboring an unattainable self-fantasy. **Perfectionism** is having an inflated and impossible ideal self. Perfectionists believe that they must set the highest performance standards or be considered second-rate. No matter what, they are not good enough. In a study of college students, a high level of perfectionism was associated with a low level of self-esteem (Flett, Hewitt, and DeRosa, 1996). A step in increasing self-esteem is to create a realistic ideal or possible self and then use it as a friendly guide, not as an enemy.

A study of college students found that

Valuing Yourself

Another critical part of self-concept is **self-esteem**, or the value that we place on ourselves. It is indicative of a positive or negative orientation toward the self (Rosenberg, 1979), an overall self-evaluation or degree of self-worth. Whether you perceive yourself to be competent to cope with life’s challenges and to be deserving of happiness is a reflection of your self-esteem (Branden, 1992). Think of it as a point on a scale ranging from very low to very high; this self-respect goes beyond acceptance of self and is virtually self-love. You may be thinking, “Love myself? That is selfish!” However, such a notion was disputed by Fromm (1956), who asserted that a selfish person does not possess true self-love. Fromm’s belief that self-love is necessary in order to love others is now widely accepted. If you are a loving individual and care about yourself, then you can be of value to others.

Can you think too highly of yourself? What is the difference between self-love and vanity or conceit? Vain individuals do not truly love themselves. Self-inflation is typically a sign of self-doubt. A person whose self-esteem is low may try to mask inadequate feelings with a false show of pride (May, 1953). Genuine love for self is a feeling of worth and dignity. Branden (1983) makes a sensible point: “No one would ask, ‘Is it possible to enjoy too high a level of physical health?’ Health is an unqualified desirable and so is positive self-esteem” (p. 15).

An important note is that esteem for the self that is unwarranted (Seligman, 1998) or what could be described as a false sense of self-worth is not conducive to living a productive, worthy life. Self-esteem that is earned by one's own efforts is, however, of utmost significance. One of our primary needs as humans is to feel worthwhile (Glasser, 1965; Maslow, 1968).

Effects of Self-Esteem

What specific areas of life are affected by self-esteem? A quick and wise response would be, "All areas." Specifically, note the following.

Academic success. Studies have found a significant positive correlation between self-esteem, grade-point average, and positive classroom behavior (Baker, Beer, and Beer, 1991), as well as academic achievement and intrinsic motivation (Skaalvik, 1997). In terms of potential academic performance, a student's IQ score may not be as important as the self-esteem rating. "Self-confidence permits a student to perform well academically; whereas brilliance may be trapped in low self-esteem" (Briggs, 1970, p. 270). Although individuals with low self-esteem can achieve, the path is usually more difficult.

Emotions and behaviors. Low self-esteem, loneliness, and depression are often connected (Bothwell and Scott, 1997). After controlling for depression, a study showed that self-esteem was associated with thinking about, threatening, and attempting suicide (Vella, Persic, and Lester, 1996). Low self-esteem was found to be a factor in abnormal eating behaviors (Button, Loan, and Davies, 1997) and children's use of tobacco and alcohol (Jackson et al., 1997). "Self-esteem is the armor that protects kids from the dragons of life: drugs, alcohol, delinquency, and unhealthy relationships" (McKay and Fanning, 2000, p. 279). A search for markers of happiness found that self-esteem definitely mattered. "When the going gets tough, those with strong feelings of self-worth keep going" (Myers, 1992, p. 108).

Relationships. Friendships and love relationships thrive in the presence of high self-esteem. Feeling liked and loved by others is not possible until you believe you deserve it. A study revealed that socially uncertain college students had lower levels of self-esteem as well as higher levels of depression, stress, and loneliness (Salmela-Aro and Nurmi, 1996). How you treat others is related to self-worth. "You will do unto others as you do unto yourself" (Briggs, 1977, p. 4). High self-esteem encourages us to seek out others and to develop healthy relationships enhanced by caring, democratic behaviors. According to Maslow (1968), the best helpers of others are those who feel positive about themselves. "So often the sick or inadequate person, trying to help, does harm instead" (p. iii) (Fig. 1-5).



Figure 1-5 A healthy relationship.
Source: www.indexopen.com

Long-term relationships are more likely to succeed if both people feel self-love. Falling in love is easy; sustaining love over time requires high self-esteem. Parenting is one of the most critical responsibilities in life. A classic study found that parents with high levels of self-esteem have a better chance of raising children with high levels of self-worth (Coopersmith, 1967). Relationships built on high levels of self-esteem are more likely to be nourishing. When you love yourself, you are not going to deliberately hurt yourself or anyone else (Hay, 1991).

Career success. Job seekers with high self-esteem will almost always achieve better interview ratings and receive more job offers than those with low self-esteem. Because employees' work will reflect the degree of their own self-worth, employers seek applicants who value themselves. Managers with high self-esteem have less trouble giving up control and delegating. Qualities such as innovation, personal responsibility, self-management, and self-direction are all by-products of high self-esteem (Branden, 1992). "In the workplace self-esteem is a survival requirement" (p. 77). In addition, a higher level of self-esteem helps in assessing ourselves realistically and making desirable changes. When faced with choices and decisions, a feeling of self-worth is a powerful ally.

A benefit to those with high self-esteem is the ability to recognize self-improvement possibilities and the tendency to view criticism as constructive. They do not interpret a "no" as an assault or a rejection; instead, they usually learn from mistakes and have more energy to begin anew. Both Lisa and Jessica were criticized by their track coach for not pacing themselves over a long race. Lisa accepted the criticism and changed her pattern. Jessica, whose self-esteem was below average at the time, became disheartened and quit the team. Self-worth allows people to view a problem as a challenge, choose a solution wisely, and engage in positive personal growth.

In its influence on all aspects of life, self-esteem is the foundation on which happiness and well-being are built. Nathaniel Branden (1983), who has studied and written extensively about self-esteem, expressed it well: "Of all the judgments that we pass in life, none is as important as the one we pass on ourselves, for that judgment touches the very center of our existence" (p. 1).

Sources of Self-Esteem

Human beings are not born with self-esteem. You have learned who you are and how worthy you feel from internalized messages and a variety of experiences. Four broad contributors can be identified (Baron, 1990): (1) social interaction, (2) social information, (3) social comparison, and (4) self-observation. The first two categories have to do with relationships. How people reacted and treated you in social interactions and their value comments about you have had much influence, and they still do. An early study found that the quality of the relationships between children and significant adults in their lives laid the foundation for self-love (Coopersmith, 1967).

Babies and young children are especially vulnerable in terms of the actions of others; parents usually serve as the most significant influences.

Children learn they are lovable by being treated as if they are special. A tragic price of low self-worth or worse is paid if there is a lack of warmth, love, care, and attention. Parenting effects remain influential throughout a child's life. A detrimental parental message is that a child is not good enough. Sometimes the messages are blatantly negative such as "You will never amount to anything," or "What did I do wrong to deserve you?" Without a doubt, these remarks do damage to the child's self-esteem. Others are more subtle or underlying but are still injurious. In a January 2, 2006, article in the *Lincoln Journal Star*, an 18-year-old girl was interviewed about running away from home. She reported that her mother's name-calling, nagging, and verbal abuse made their relationship difficult. Comments that the girl was too fat, lazy, and worthless led to her stuffing her belongings into a garbage bag and going on the run for over a year.

"Can you do something different with your hair?"

"When I was your age, I had a full-time job and still got good grades in school."

"You could do a lot better if you would just try."

Several students have identified the last message as common. "No matter what grade I brought home, short of 100 percent or A+, my dad told me I could have done better," a troubled young woman shared. Can you think of similar messages you received? The underlying theme is that something is missing or wrong. Parents' opinions usually continue to have an impact after a young adult leaves home. A 25-year-old confessed:

I do not know why I care what my parents think of me anymore. Most of what they did was criticize me, and that is what they still do. But I care so much, it hurts. I am still trying to be the way they want me to be.

Opinions of other family members can also diminish self-worth. Students often mention siblings who teased and ridiculed them. "I am convinced that there are no genes to carry the feeling of worth. It is learned. And the family is where it is learned" (Satir, 1972, p. 24).

Joyce remembered her childhood and a negative family environment. She wrote of feeling clumsy, skinny, and not as smart as her siblings. Those feelings came from her parents. "My dad said until the day he died that I was the clumsiest kid he had. When Mom made clothes for me, she said I was so straight that nothing fit me. They both told me I should do better in school because the other kids did." Sadly, she could not recall any positive messages. In fact, she said that any pride in accomplishment was frowned upon. Her parents thought that pride was the same as bragging. When Joyce was 40, she finally came to grips with her feelings of low self-esteem. The pain resurfaced when she prepared a childhood analysis for extra credit. She wrote: "I did not want to do this paper, and I did want to. I knew I did not have to. But something kept pulling me to do it. I realize now I needed to unload some more, and I felt better afterwards." Her postscript was: "This has been a painful experience for me. Lots of feelings that I did not want to deal with came back. Not one of us kids came out of that family with anything but low self-esteem" (Fig. 1-6).



Figure 1-6

Another student, Linda, optimistically wrote: "A self-esteem tip that hit home with me was not to belittle or label your children negatively, which is what happened to me. Unfortunately, my own parents' self-esteem was negative, and it was passed on to me. *But cycles can be broken, and this one is already beginning to crumble.*"

Self-esteem can also be damaged when a person is ignored and neglected. "I just felt it did not matter whether I was alive or dead, there or not there," said a young man. "I still have a hard time thinking that I matter to anyone."

In addition to family contributions, interactions with and information from others continue to be influential. Various groups impact our self-descriptions whether we are aware of what these are or not. Children often learn to tease others because of physical appearance. Another source of ridicule is perceived or actual knowledge of a gay male's or lesbian's sexual orientation. A review of studies indicated difficulty for gay adolescents in achieving healthy levels of self-esteem as a result of stigmatization (Radkowsky and Siegel, 1997).

Think back to school experiences and relationships with teachers and peers. For some, school is a nightmare. Hanna (2004) recalls a junior high teacher who delivered a daily assault of put-downs to a timid boy. "Can you write any neater than that?" "Hurry up. You are so slow!" "That is a dumb question." One day he announced that the lowest grade in the class was Gary's

as usual! Several students followed the teacher's lead, and Gary became the object of many cruel tricks and insults. That Gary survived is remarkable; the damage to his self-esteem is hard to imagine (Hanna, 2004). As a warning, Ellen Rosenberg, author of *Growing Up Feeling Good* (1983), told an audience of teachers, "Self-esteem may not be a separate subject in school curriculums, but children's self-esteem is being chipped away or built up at every minute at school or elsewhere." If educators understand this, fewer children like Gary will suffer.

Once self-esteem is high, input from other people is less influential. Nevertheless, students remind teachers how rewarding it is when instructors praise their work (Hanna, 2004). One way to assess whether a relationship is healthy is to ask if it enhances feelings of self-worth. We may be secure, yet replenishment is invaluable!

How often do you compare yourself to others? Social comparison is a powerful source of ideas about the self. People tend to measure themselves against other individuals often on the basis of physical appearance, talent, and popularity. Comparisons within the family are common. When students were asked how many of them had been compared to their siblings, almost all students responded that they had been compared to their brothers and sisters. They acknowledged that the comparisons were not motivating or helpful and could even be harmful. One young man realized why he harbored negative feelings about his older brother: "I was never as good as Scott. He was better looking, smarter, and more athletic. I was nicer, but that did not seem to matter to Dad." Any comparison can diminish your uniqueness if you try to be someone you are not. Keep in mind that someone who is better looking, smarter, friendlier, or more popular likely exists somewhere so what difference does it make? Individual comparisons are helpful only if you learn constructively from them.

Broader comparisons can also be damaging. Members of a **minority**, a disadvantaged group that lacks power within a society, are frequently and unfairly perceived as inferior. People who differ from the majority group in race, ethnicity, or sexual orientation often face self-esteem challenges. For example, gays and lesbians are raised in a society oriented toward **heterosexism**, the belief that anything other than a heterosexual orientation is wrong. Do you think the following observation that was written years ago is still true today? "Homophobia, a fear or hatred of lesbian women and gay men, is so interwoven in society that lesbian and gay youth face especially difficult struggles for self-esteem, emotional security, and a sense of a caring community" (Whitlock, 1989, p. 1). Even though racism and heterosexism are rooted in ignorance and untruths, individuals can be immeasurably damaged.

Culture, which consists of behaviors, values, beliefs, and lifestyles that are characteristic of a particular social group as distinguished from other groups, is a key factor in self-esteem. Any group or individual difference can be either ridiculed or looked at positively. Aspects of self, when affirmed rather than condemned, will bolster self-esteem. **Multiculturalism**, a movement that recognizes cultural diversity, appreciates everyone's "roots," and promotes equality of all cultures, can yield high rewards for everyone.

Another source of self-esteem, self-observation, comes from one's own actions, interpretations, and feelings. Picture two young children on a playground.



Figure 1-7 Kids having fun playing builds self-esteem.

Haley successfully climbs the ladder of the slide and glides down. Melissa stands at the bottom, fearful of the ascent. After working up the courage to mount the steps, she sits frozen at the top and begins to cry. Haley comes to her rescue by sitting behind her and helping her down. Can you see how Haley's and Melissa's self-observations were quite different?

Adults continue to be self-observant. Mike and Angela are newly hired firefighters. Angela has been involved in two heroic rescues. Mike has spent most of his on-duty time cleaning the station, playing cards, and keeping in shape. He has participated in a few minor fire calls and is feeling frustrated. In the two situations Haley and Melissa as children and Mike and Lisa as adults have different self-observations that increase or decrease their self-esteem. Self-observation becomes increasingly important as you mature. What are you doing with what you observe about yourself? At this point in your life, you have a great deal of control over your level of self-esteem.

Part of self-observation that is of utmost significance are your thoughts. Consider two young men who are insulted by a coworker. On one hand, Tim thinks, "I must be a hard person to work with if that's what he thinks of me." On the other hand, Greg thinks, "I do not know what his problem is. He must be having a bad day." How will the two different thoughts affect each person's self-esteem? Do you see how powerful your thoughts are? In essence, your thoughts create your reality (Fig. 1-7).

Self-Esteem Building and Strengthening

What is your current level of self-esteem? You can use the rating scale in the self-concept inventory in Reflections and Applications (p. 371) to measure it. For those with healthy levels, self-esteem strengthening is a wise investment. Even if yours is low, you can do much to change it! Beginning to realize your sense of worth is a vitalizing experience. "You literally uncover the hidden jewel of your own value" (Mckay and Fanning, 2000, p. 89). Use the following suggestions in your building or strengthening process.

Heal psychological pain. Another major stumbling block in terms of self-esteem is extreme depression. Anyone suffering from untreated clinical depression lacks the energy and willpower to build self-esteem. Depression must be alleviated before the self can be elevated. Ways to do this are covered in Chapter 5.

Perhaps, it is a matter of **self-verification**, an intriguing theory that maintains that individuals have a strong desire to preserve their self-concept even if it is a negative one (Andrews, 1989). Jenni wrote in her journal, "I think sometimes I am afraid to feel good about myself, to not be insecure. It sounds so odd, but it is

almost like letting go of something you know so well and for so long for something you have never known." Paul expressed it as "just too afraid to feel good." Self-verification by confirming what a person already believes may make the world seem safe and predictable. Yet another possibility is **self-handicapping**, which refers to actions taken to sabotage performance and increase the opportunity to excuse failure (Berglas and Jones, 1978). Self-handicappers appear to have a valid reason for not succeeding other than their lack of ability. When self-sabotaging was discussed in the classroom, a young man said, "That sounds like me. What can be done?" Awareness is the first step. The enlightening book *Making Peace with Your Past* (Bloomfield, 2000) focuses on identifying and healing a painful past by coming to grips with shame, guilt, regret, blame, and unresolved grief.

If you think you are beset by self-handicaps or might be in need of healing, explore the avenues for healing that have been discussed in this section and then take steps to change your life. You deserve it! As Debra, a vibrant student, expressed it, "I found that a decision that you are *for* yourself is the beginning of an entirely different life."

Choose healthy, conscious living. Increasing your level of wellness, as discussed earlier, is basic to self-esteem development. Existing in a mental fog, even partially, limits potential for self-love. Think about how often you choose the level of consciousness at which you function. The choice may be between habitual drug use and alertness or between fatigue and getting enough sleep. Lack of alertness is not conducive to creating a positive self-image. The visibly alive, bright-eyed students we see each day have made a wise choice and are completing the first step toward building high self-esteem. Others are severely limiting themselves.

Set priorities. Think about where you rank yourself in comparison to others. Generally, those with low self-esteem place others ahead of themselves. Although being self-centered or selfish is not recommended, making yourself a priority is. You will then have more to offer the world. After a relationship in which she described herself as totally dependent, Faith, a young woman, said, "I finally learned how to put my love into myself rather than in someone else. Since I did this, my relationships have been much better, and a love relationship will just add more beauty to the life I already have."

Concentrate on your strengths. What do you like about yourself? Even the simplest positive quality is significant. Do you listen well? Are you considerate? What are your talents? You can make a list of strengths and post it where you will notice it. Positive statements about self are called **affirmations**. Statements such as "I am worthy" and "I deserve happiness" are powerful tools. More specific ones reflect unique positive aspects, such as "I am kind." Easy to repeat frequently, they empower the self. A woman working on self-esteem started each day by repeating to herself three affirmations and ended the day with three others. She reported a positive outcome: "I have become a much better friend to myself." In addition to writing, reading, and thinking affirmatively, you can visualize yourself in a positive light.

Beware of a tendency to focus on weaknesses and become bogged down. All of us have drawbacks. The key is to be aware of positive characteristics and appreciate yourself as you are. Concentrating on your potential, not on limitations, is a way to build self-confidence and self-esteem.

Demonstrate your strengths. Acting on your strengths is even more affirming. **Self-enhancement** is the process of finding and interpreting situations that result in a positive view of self. College students experienced enhanced self-esteem after receiving high grades; they believed that this reflected their abilities (Woo and Mix, 1997). If you have musical talent, join a performing group. If you are a whiz in the kitchen, cook a meal for someone. Accept positively any compliments. Contributing to worthwhile causes can also be a tremendous boost. Tina volunteered to accompany elderly people on shopping trips. Brad became involved in an environmental cleanup project. Each reported heightened feelings of self-worth. One of the surest ways to sustain a change in self is by helping someone else. Giving to others is a gift to yourself!

Make positive changes. Constructive changes improve your present self and ensure future well-being. Create an attainable, yet challenging, ideal self. Then choose an improvement area and set up an action plan. Chapter 3 suggests ways to achieve a goal. Express the change in a positive way. Say, "I will become assertive" rather than, "I do not want to be passive." Emphasize self-directed action. Instead of saying, "I hope I improve my grades," think and say, "I am studying so I can improve my grades." Think, "When I lose weight, I will feel better," not "If I lose weight . . ." (Canfield and Siccone, 1993).

Allowing yourself to make mistakes along the way is healthy. High self-esteem does not mean that you never make errors. Feel good about yourself in spite of mistakes; do not wait until all has been corrected (McKay and Fanning, 2000). Use mistakes as helpful information and change your course of action.

Seek positive relationships. Building self-esteem is easier with the help of positive, supportive people. Cassie, who had low self-esteem, said she was bothered by a friend who was critical. She was advised to seek new relationships with individuals who feel positive about themselves. These people do not need to put others down, and modeling yourself after them is beneficial.

Evaluate sources. Analyzing how your self-esteem developed can be helpful. All of us have been criticized or put down at times. Instead of accepting negative assessments from others at face value, you might ask, "For what reason did they say or do that? Could it have been because they felt inferior or lacked self-esteem? Were they taking their frustrations out on me? Were they just being hateful? Did they just not know better and even think they were helping me?"

Parents raise children with the resources they possess, and they almost never intend to harm their offspring. If you understand that your parents probably did the best they could do within their limitations, you can free yourself to repair self-esteem. Extreme cases of psychological or physical abuse can be helped with therapy. The helpful book mentioned earlier, *Making Peace with Your Parents*

(Bloomfield, 1996), gives reasons and methods for releasing resentments. When we hold on to past resentments toward parents, current peace of mind and the ability to experience satisfaction in our here-and-now relationships are in jeopardy. Take responsibility for your own self-esteem. Consider the simple but true statement: "You make up your adulthood" (Spezzano, 1992, p. 17).

Perhaps you were not criticized by others, yet your self-esteem has suffered because you think you have disappointed someone. Troy berated himself about his career choice. "My folks want me to go to law school, and they think I am crazy for deciding to be a teacher. Dad said I am afraid to use all my abilities, and he is disappointed. I am at the point of believing him." Children often feel forced to live according to their parents' expectations and to reach for unrealistic standards of excellence.

Can you think of some areas in which you did not measure up? A frequent one is tidiness. Some parents demand perfection in bed-making, cleaning, and organization of belongings. "No matter how hard I tried, I could not make my bed to please my mother," said Ashley, "so I finally quit trying. It is only been recently that I can challenge the importance of being perfect at bed-making!" Breaking away from others' expectations is liberating. "If your life is a continual assessment of whether or not you please others, you are having your buttons pushed from behind" (Satir, 1978, p. 90). Caring what others think about us can be beneficial; however, we may pay a price in decreased self-esteem for trying to satisfy someone else. Similarly, taking responsibility for ourselves is affirming.

Change your thoughts. Let's continue the esteem-building process by taking a close look at **cognitive restructuring**, or thought-changing. The first step is to tune in to **self-talk**, your thoughts. "The practice of self-love begins in your mind. You must learn to control your thinking" (Dyer, 1976, p. 54). What do you think about yourself, your appearance, your behavior, and impact on others? Self-talk can be pictured as drops of water that become either a clear, unpolluted body of water or a toxic one. Do you hear critical remarks? To decrease the criticisms, follow a valuable suggestion: "I live by a helpful little motto, I will not criticize myself, and there are more than enough people willing to do this for me" (Glasser, 1984, p. 165).

Most of us find it virtually impossible to eliminate all negative thoughts. Yet restructuring an unrealistic self-thought is useful. **Irrational beliefs**, unreasonable and exaggerated thoughts, are at the heart of negative feelings about the self, and people who persist in such thinking make themselves miserable, according to Albert Ellis (1977), a well-known cognitive therapist. You can debate irrational thinking in regard to yourself just as you probably would do with a loved one. Try using these four steps:

1. Identify an irrational thought, exaggeration, or belittlement about yourself.
2. Determine the truth and the facts by asking: "What is the reason for the original thought? What is the truth?"
3. Then use this way of restructuring: "Just because (*the truth as identified in Step 2*) doesn't mean (*the irrational thought in Step 1*)."
4. End with an affirmation related to the specific situation or use a general one.

Pretend you have been told that you are no longer loved by someone. Following are the four steps:

1. "Nobody will ever love me." *This is an irrational thought (Step 1).*
2. A significant other has told you he or she doesn't love you. *This is the truth (Step 2).*
3. "Just because this person does not love me does not mean that I will never be loved." *This is the actual cognitive restructuring (Step 3).*
4. "I am a loving person and deserve someone special." *This is the affirmation (Step 4).*

If you do not succeed in switching to positive self-talk using these steps, try a cognitive technique called **thought-stopping**. Mentally, you can say any of the following loudly, clearly, and angrily: "Stop thinking this way!" "This is unrealistic." "I will not think it!" or just "STOP!" (Chapter 5 addresses in more detail changing what you feel and the power of your thoughts.)

Drawing on all the self-esteem recommendations, individuals can overcome the past and build and strengthen self-worth in the present. One basic question has to do with whether you are as kind and supportive to yourself as you are to a good friend. If you are not, why not become your own best friend?

Creating a Friend or Foe: Self-Fulfilling Prophecy

Predicting the future is usually the work of astrologers or those who claim to be prophets. In reality, each of us predicts what will be, and we also make it come true. A **self-fulfilling prophecy** is a thought or expectation that helps bring about a predicted event or behavior, which then strengthens the original thought. The concept was introduced by Merton (1948), who used it to refer to situations in which false beliefs become true. A classic study by Rosenthal and Jacobson (1968) demonstrated that teacher expectations could influence student achievement.

Examples of the self-fulfilling prophecy are easily found. A youngster who is labeled a brat is likely to believe and, thus, become one. I remember my first year of teaching. Jimmy, a sixth grader, suffered from an eye disease. I had been told that he could not be expected to do what other students did, neither in quantity nor in quality. Being new to teaching and optimistic, I asked Jimmy how he felt. He said he wanted to be treated like the others and expected to handle it. We spent hours after school; his determination made the difference. He left sixth grade with average grades; the next fall he strutted into my classroom with a beautiful smile on his face. "Guess what?" he said. "I made the honor roll in junior high!" Jimmy provided a wonderful lesson. What others believe can become internalized and then actually create one's reality. An expansion on this concept is a self-created prophecy.

Relationship Between Thoughts and Behaviors

Behaviors are usually the demonstration of thoughts. Let's say that you think of yourself as shy. **Shyness** involves a feeling of discomfort and usually apprehension in a social setting. Listen to your self-talk:

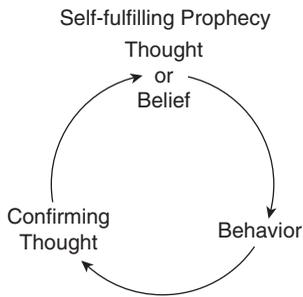


Figure 1-8 Self-fulfilling prophecy.

I am a shy person. I have always been that way. I was born shy. And because I am, I do not like to be around people. I cannot talk to them, and I am always uncomfortable. I will go through the rest of my life being shy, and that's it.

Powerful thinking, right? A friend invites you to a party. What is your reaction? "I do not want to go. I never have a good time at parties. I am shy, so I cannot look at people or talk to them. I would just have a terrible time because I am the way I am."

In this case your friend persuades you to attend the party. "I know I will not have any fun because I am shy," you tell yourself. How will you act at the party? You stand next to the wall away from the others and you look up, down, at the wall. You appear unapproachable and do not smile because shy people act this way! After a miserable evening, a strong confirming thought surfaces:

See, I knew I would not have any fun. Nobody talked to me, and I could not talk to them. I never enjoy myself at parties because I am shy.

As illustrated in Figure 1-8, this type of self-fulfilling prophecy becomes a vicious circle. A thought about the self is carried out in behavior, which then brings about an even stronger confirming thought. You, the shy person, have fulfilled your own prophecy. If the descriptor is a positive one and increases your self-esteem, the self-fulfilling prophecy is a friend. Too often, though, thoughts are limiting or berating and serve as our enemies.

Self-fulfilling prophecies are powerful. A story is told of two brothers, one who was alcoholic and one who hardly drank liquor. A psychologist wondered why they differed. One brother said that because his father was an alcoholic, he had become one, too. The other explained that because his father was an alcoholic, he learned the horrors of the habit and decided to abstain (Branden, 1983). Clearly, two people with the same background are capable of forming opposite prophecies with different outcomes and, thus, create their own unique realities.

Changes in a Self-Fulfilling Prophecy

Examination of self-fulfilling prophecies is valuable. If you want to change any of yours, two avenues are possible. Psychologists who emphasize cognitive techniques would tell you to change your thoughts. Learning theorists would have you alter your behavior. I recommend, as do many in the cognitive-behavioral area, changing both (Fig. 1-8).

Go back to the example of shyness. An unrealistic thought would be, "I am no longer shy." However, you could use cognitive restructuring and think, "Just because I have been shy in the past does not mean I have to continue. I do not like it, and I am going to change." One authority on shyness says that you are shy if you think you are (Zimbardo, 1977). Empowered with a different belief, you can attend another party and change your behavior. As difficult as it may be, you

For Better or For Worse®

by Lynn Johnston

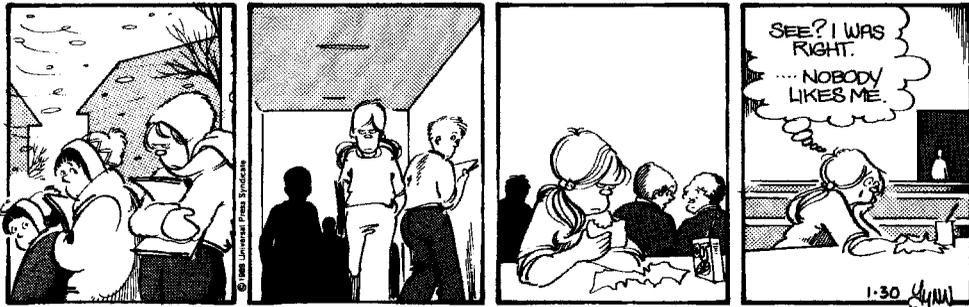


Figure 1-9

position yourself near people. A next step is to look at others with an open expression. You may even smile! If you are not approached, you can muster your courage and go up to someone and say hello. In almost all cases, the person you approach will respond positively. At that point you have broken out of the vicious circle (Fig. 1-9).

With success, new ways of behaving become easier. For a class self-improvement project, an overweight female student decided to change. In the process, she learned an invaluable lesson as she recalled the pain of her self-fulfilling prophecy.

I felt so insecure as a teenager. I felt I was being judged because I was fat so I would not give people the chance to reject me; I rejected them first. It was a perfect example of a self-fulfilling prophecy. I mourn all the friendships I missed out on. With the help of this course I see that when most people look at me, they see *me*, not an overweight person, and when I look at them, I see them as they are and not just as individuals who could hurt my feelings.

Examining all of your self-fulfilling prophecies is wise. As a way to strengthen self-esteem, keep the ones that are friends; work on the foes!

The greatest discovery in our generation is that human beings, by changing the inner attitudes of their minds, can change the outer aspects of their lives.

—William James

Increasing Your Capabilities: Self-Efficacy

Whether you have the confidence to improve yourself will depend on what was defined by Bandura (1977) as **self-efficacy**, “the conviction that one can successfully execute the behavior required to produce the outcomes” (p. 79). Self-efficacy expectations are beliefs regarding capability or competence related to a particular task or activity (Bandura, 1986). Notice the difference between thinking, “I can

handle this task,” rather than, “I cannot do it.” You may remember the story of the little engine who succeeded in ascending a mountain by saying, “I think I can, I think I can.” People who have self-efficacy expectations think they can handle the task.

How positively you assess your capability in a specific situation influences success in several ways. First, you are more likely to attempt a particular task if you think you can do it. Second, if you expect a positive outcome, you will exert more effort. Finally, you will persist much longer.

Extensive studies have shown that self-efficacy is a primary factor in behavioral change (Cervone, 2000) and can improve outcomes in a number of important areas. Self-efficacy is related to the following:

- Prevention of and adaptation to cancer (Lev, 1997)
- Better outcomes for smoking cessation (Etter et al., 2000) and for alcohol dependence treatment (Allsop, Saunders, and Phillips, 2000)
- Continuation in exercise programs (Sullum and Clark, 2000)
- Higher grades (Jinks and Morgan, 1999)

Even though perceptions of self-efficacy are likely to be generalized across situations (Cervone, 2000), believing that you can handle any and all tasks is unwise because this is not possible. And, if you are perceived as being capable of everything, others may not think you need any help.

Think of times in your life when your own self-efficacy has motivated you. Has a lack of self-efficacy ever hindered you? By take the opportunity to describe self-efficacy and one of your self-fulfilling prophecies in Reflections and Applications. Building and strengthening self-esteem, creating empowering prophecies, and increasing self-efficacy expectations are wise investments in yourself. By taking all these concepts in consideration and applying them to your everyday life, you will have the serenity to accept the things you cannot change, the courage to change the things you can, and the wisdom to know the difference (Reflect and Apply).

REFLECT AND APPLY

Reflect

- ◆ *Identify a negative self-fulfilling prophecy from your past or present. Then determine how it could have been or can be changed.*
- ◆ *Think of a recent task in which your self-efficacy expectations were high. Then think of a skill you lack or a task in which your self-efficacy expectations are low.*
- ◆ *Recall a time your “I can” belief was beneficial.*

Apply

- ◆ *Behave differently from a past or present self-fulfilling prophecy.*
- ◆ *Act on a skill or expertise in order to demonstrate high self-efficacy expectations.*
- ◆ *Try something new!*

LOOKING BACK

Awareness of self is at the heart of interpersonal relations, and self-understanding is an ongoing process.

- Each of the four developmental areas (physical, mental, emotional, and social) influences the others, and together all four form an integrated, whole self.
- Self-concept is a collective view of self including self-description, ideal self, and self-esteem. Ideal self is an image of what one wants to be and is most helpful when it is realistic and attainable. Self-esteem is the value placed on self.
- Improving one's physical and psychological health requires wise choices in the areas of physical activity, nutrition, weight, rest, and stress management.
- Because high self-esteem has numerous advantages, learning to value yourself is highly recommended.
- Self-esteem develops through feedback and interactions with others and through one's own observations and judgments.
- In order to build self-esteem, it may be necessary to first heal psychological pain.
- Self-esteem can be built and strengthened by conscious living, prioritizing, concentrating on and demonstrating of strong points, positive changes, healthy relationships, cognitive restructuring, and evaluation of self-esteem sources.
- Self-fulfilling prophecies can be helpful or damaging. A way to improve one's life is to examine, evaluate, and change negative prophecies.
- Self-efficacy is the sense of competence in the face of a particular task. Many studies have shown that self-efficacy expectations are related to well-being and success in life.

I am convinced that the crucial factor in what happens both inside people and between people is the picture of individual worth that each person carries around.

—Virginia Satir

RESOURCES

Overeaters Anonymous.
(505) 891-2664.

[http://
www.overeatersanonymous.org](http://www.overeatersanonymous.org)
Learning Disabilities Association of
America (LDA), 4156 Library
Road, Pittsburgh, PA 15234. Toll

free: (888) 300-6710. [http://www.
ldaanatl.org](http://www.lदानatl.org)
Parents and Friends of Lesbians
and Gays (PFLAG), 1101 14th
Street NW, Suite 1030,
Washington, DC 20005.
(202) 638-4200.
<http://www.pflag.org>

Counselors in educational institu-
tions can help with learning
disabilities as well as personal
problems.
Self-esteem classes are often
offered through wellness centers
at hospitals, social service agen-
cies, colleges, and organizations.