

# Self-Coaching

*The Powerful Program to Beat  
Anxiety and Depression*

Completely Revised and Updated Second Edition

Joseph J. Luciani, Ph.D.



John Wiley & Sons, Inc.



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I would like to dedicate this book to all my patients and readers and to members of my Self-Coaching.net community. You have been my inspiration, my encouragement, and my motivation to continue on my path.





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# Preface

In the summer of 2001, when *Self-Coaching: How to Heal Anxiety and Depression* was released, I had no idea of the turbulent times that would befall our country in a matter of days. On the morning of September 11, 2001, I was driving into Manhattan on the George Washington Bridge. Suddenly the music I was listening to on the radio was abruptly interrupted by frantic and conflicting reports about an explosion at the World Trade Center. I glanced down the Hudson River shoreline, observing what was to become the most disturbing sight of my life. In that frozen moment, as the impossible expressed itself in the form of a black-orange plume of smoke wafting against an azure sky, I, like so many others, was confronted with a horror that continues to reverberate in my mind even now, years later.

During the months following 9/11, I was kept very busy with TV and radio interviews; everyone was clamoring for advice on how to handle their feelings of grief, fear, anxiety, and depression. As a nation, we were trying to cope. I hope that my message of Self-Coaching was able to offer solace during those impossible days. As a psychologist and author, I was deeply gratified by the response I received from readers and listeners all over the world letting me know that Self-Coaching had given them a new perspective, a way out of their suffering and struggle.

It never occurred to me that years later I would have so much more to say about healing anxiety and depression. As with so many things in life, growth and change are inevitable. The more I incorporated Self-Coaching into my practice and the more I lectured and wrote, the more I made refinements to my philosophy and my techniques. In 2003 I

## PREFACE

wrote *The Power of Self-Coaching: The Five Essential Steps to Creating the Life You Want*. This, my second book in the Self-Coaching series, applied my Self-Coaching techniques to a wider range of struggle than just anxiety and depression.

It was around this time that I created my Web site, [www.self-coaching.net](http://www.self-coaching.net). Through the Web site and numerous translations of *Self-Coaching* into other languages, I was able to reach people around the world. Those who wrote to me were curious about how and why Self-Coaching would be different from the many approaches they had tried. Many wanted to know if there was hope, legitimate hope for living their lives without anxiety, depression, or panic, and so many were looking for something they could do on their own to effect change in their lives.

Answering the thousands of posts on my Web site has allowed me to grow along with my readers. This daily ritual has also forced me always to be on the lookout for new ways to expand and improve my message of empowerment. There was the man from Seattle who thought he would never be free of panic attacks; the woman from Jordan struggling with depression and afraid her husband would find out; and the recent widow in New York, suffering from a chronic disability, who asked, "Why should I go on?" In order to help all these people, I knew that I had to continue to simplify my Self-Coaching message.

I've taken the accumulated insights from the past five years and written this revision. The program outlined in this book reflects countless hours spent helping patients understand that anxiety and depression aren't illnesses, diseases, or conditions that you *get*; they're nothing more than habits, habits of faulty, insecurity-driven thinking. And as with all habits, if you feed them, they will grow. If you learn to starve them instead, they will wilt and die. It's no more complicated than that.

The heart and soul of Self-Coaching is my technique of Self-Talk. Self-Talk is your *how-to* method to liberate yourself from anxiety or depression. In this edition I offer a completely updated and revised Self-Talk section.

For those of you who are new to Self-Coaching, welcome. For those who are joining me once again, thank you for becoming part of the growing Self-Coaching community.

# Acknowledgments

In the years since *Self-Coaching* was first released I have had the good fortune to meet and communicate with many people from all over the world. Through my Self-Coaching.net community, I have developed a much deeper appreciation for the torment and confusion that shrouds anxiety and depression. To all the good people who have joined me as part of my Self-Coaching community, I want to thank you for your courage and willingness to insist on living a more liberated, empowered life. It is primarily because of you that I have been encouraged and fortified to take this next step.

In the years that I've worked with my agent, Jean Naggar, I've come to recognize that had it not been for her faith in me and my writing, this dream would not have been realized. Jean has been a driving force behind the development and success of Self-Coaching from its inception. Her uncanny instincts, unwavering support, and vision have been my source of confidence these past five years. I want to thank Jean and her wonderful staff—Jennifer Weltz, Alice Tasman, Mollie Glick, and Jessica Regel—for all they've done.

My editor at John Wiley, Tom Miller, was pivotal in this project. It was Tom who first suggested this revision. He has been a friend, an editor, and a shoulder to lean on during the process of putting together this, my third book with Wiley. From the start, Tom has demonstrated his unique ability to synthesize, organize, and reshuffle a manuscript in a way that continues to amaze me.

My relationship with Jane Rafal goes back to darker times when I was questioning whether I would ever get published. If it weren't for Jane, I

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

don't think I would have persisted. She was nothing less than my editorial coach. She was always there in a pinch, pointing me in the right direction, motivating me, and offering sage and sound advice. Without hesitation, I know that my evolution as a writer can be traced directly to Jane's expert tutelage. I want to thank her for being my literary center, but mostly I want to thank her for her friendship these past ten years.

A special thanks to my yoga instructor and mentor, Perinkulam Ramanathan. Rama has taught me many things. Most of all, he has allowed me to grasp the essential, wonderful simplicity of life. My practice of yoga and meditation has had a profound influence on my life and work. *Om shanthi.*

Finally there is my family. My daughter and fossil buddy, Lauren, is now a beautiful young lady attending the University of Delaware. Lauren, like her mother, will one day be a gifted elementary school teacher. I predict that Lauren's magnetic personality and innate charm will garner her bushels of apples from her admiring students. My son, Justin, has now graduated from Princeton and has put his heart and soul into developing [HealthyLivingNYC.com](http://HealthyLivingNYC.com), a health and wellness publication for New Yorkers. Justin doesn't climb mountains; he moves them. Last, but certainly not least, is my wife, Karen. Karen has been my support since I was an aimless teenager floundering for a direction in life. She encouraged and believed in me then, and she continues to be my inspiration and strength now. Her unselfish, undying love and loyalty have made her an equal partner in all my success. As I said five years ago in my acknowledgments, she is my gift.

# Introduction

**A**s far back as Joe could remember, he worried. When he was very young, about five or six, he mostly worried about his parents dying. An only child, Joe couldn't imagine life without them. He worried in school, too. What if he got into trouble or didn't do well? Some things, such as his parents dying, he couldn't control. Other things, such as school, he could.

At least he thought he could—until fourth grade. One morning, Joe's teacher saw him slouched over his desk and told him to lift his head up. Joe was caught completely off guard. Hearing a few giggles, he got upset. Then he panicked. If he raised his head to please the teacher, the kids would surely see the tear that was rolling down his cheek. So Joe did nothing—he froze.

The teacher stalked to Joe's desk and yanked his head up. Unfortunately, Joe's jaw clenched—right through his tongue. His mouth began to bleed. The teacher, seeing the blood, lost control and violently dragged Joe out of the classroom, tearing his shirt, screaming, and slapping him along the way.

Panicked and terror stricken, Joe ran from the building. The bottom had fallen out of his world. His worst nightmare had come true: his teacher obviously wanted to kill him, his classmates saw him crying, and his parents would surely be upset with him for messing up. (This was, after all, the 1950s, when parents viewed schools as ultimate authorities.) It was lunchtime. Joe ran all the way home and managed to slip into his

room unnoticed. He changed out of his torn shirt, rinsed off the blood, and combed his hair. He would have made it back to school if it hadn't been for his cousin, who was in Joe's class and, traumatized by the whole incident, arrived in tears at the front door.

Although what happened next was a blur, Joe does recall his parents being upset. His father was so enraged that he had to be physically held back from going to the school. A day or two passed, and when Joe returned to school, his teacher had been replaced. It didn't matter when someone told Joe the teacher had "snapped" and needed to go for help. As far as Joe was concerned, this was all his fault, and he had a lot of trouble living with that realization.

Joe, already a cautious, worrisome child, vowed to become even more vigilant, more in control. Somehow he would manage never to be caught off guard again. He would see to it. Unfortunately, it never occurred to Joe that he had done nothing wrong. Nor did anyone else make that clear to him.

Joe thought long and hard. He knew he wasn't perfect—far from it. Thankfully, he didn't have to *be* perfect; he only had to *act* perfect. Although he had always been rather finicky, it was different now. In the past he liked getting things just right. Now he felt he had no choice: He *had to* get things right. If, for example, he were building a model airplane and happened to smudge some glue on it, he couldn't go on; the model was ruined. If he had to make a correction on his math, instead of erasing the wrong answer, he would redo the entire assignment. Perfection became his shield against vulnerability.

Socially, it took a long time for Joe to feel comfortable. After all, he had been seen at his weakest moment. He gradually developed an acute sense of what any social exchange called for and managed to deliver it. He could be entertaining, silly, interesting, or serious—whatever the situation required. He became a chameleon, a very good chameleon. As one teacher was fond of telling him, "You're a good little soldier." No doubt about it, Joe not only knew how to follow orders, but he also anticipated them.

In spite of all his newfound success, Joe's self-esteem never gained solid footing. In fact, the more success he had, the more convinced he



became that he had to work harder to maintain the whole charade. After all, he had a lot more to hide. Everyone thought he was so cool that the truth of just how uncool he was would certainly be a traumatic revelation. He was depleted, always looking over his shoulder, wondering what might go wrong, always fearing the “what-ifs.”

It wasn't easy for Joe. I ought to know—I'm that Joe.

## **Finding the Answer**

I lived those early years of my life fighting and clawing to keep in control. It never occurred to me to ask why I needed to be in control; it only mattered that I was. By the time I reached high school I was a veteran manipulator. I joined the football team so the kids would see me as a tough guy—even though at 102 pounds, I was scared to death. I joined clubs, got elected to student council, and eventually was voted most popular. I had figured out how to be what people wanted.

No doubt about it, I controlled how people saw me. I never felt I had a choice; everyone had to like me. At the time it made common sense: make people like you and they're not going to hurt you. I began to feel like one of those houses in a movie: a two-dimensional façade built to fool the audience. That's what I had become: an illusion, a house without insides.

By the time I was in college, I had had enough. My life had become tormented; I longed for relief. All the “what-iffing,” the “shoulds,” and the “have-tos”—I was truly driving myself crazy. I worried about everything: grades, dates, money. Most of all, though, I worried about losing control—screwing up, getting into trouble, being in any situation where I would be floundering at fate's mercy.

I decided to major in psychology. Don't laugh; psychological torment makes for a good therapist. I once heard this phenomenon referred to as the theory of the wounded healer. I'll admit that my initial motive was more self-serving than altruistic. I had become desperate enough, anxious enough, and depressed enough that studying psychology appeared to be the brake pedal I was looking for. Maybe, just maybe, there was a way out.

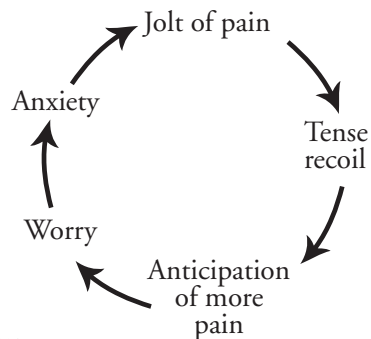
## Self-Coaching: Opening Your Fist

My studies of psychology, as well as the years I spent in both group and individual training analysis, were helpful, but both of my hands still tightly clenched life's steering wheel. I still worried and occasionally beat myself up. I gave Freud a chance, then Jung, but nothing changed. I still worried. Once again I heard myself saying, "I've had enough!" I was hungry for an insight.

I didn't have to wait long. One night, on the way home from work, a very simple thought floated through my mind: "There's no reason to be so miserable!" Let me tell you, something very startling happened in that moment. It's hard to convey the magnitude of this seemingly innocent and altogether elementary revelation, but for me it started a revolution in my thinking. *Nothing* was stopping me from feeling better! *Nothing* was making me worry except the way I was thinking. The truth was that I *could* choose not to be miserable! Finally, I had the insight that I had longed for. I realized, for example, that even a stubborn mood, if challenged by a shift in thinking, quickly tumbles.

I had always considered feelings, moods, and thoughts to be infused with unconscious roots. Was it possible that feeling good could be as simple as letting go of negatives? One day, while having a root canal, I had an interesting revelation. While drawing hard on the nitrous oxide to avoid a little pain, I was trying to understand just why this torturous procedure was not generating more anxiety. What I discovered was that the nitrous oxide caused me to forget. A jolt of pain would get my attention, causing a rush of anxiety, but the very next nanosecond I was completely relaxed, separate from the previous painful memory. In contrast, my normal, non-nitrous-oxide thinking would have been the opposite experience.

What if you could learn to let go of needless worry and anticipation of negatives, even without the aid of nitrous oxide or other drugs? What if you could



actively change the channel from distressful rumination to healthier, more constructive thoughts? What would happen to your anxiety, your depression? They would vanish. Just as the amnesiac effects of nitrous oxide will pull you away from anxiety and worry about a dental procedure, Self-Coaching will pull you away from the thoughts that bury you. What's more, once you learn how to liberate yourself from insecurity-driven thinking by replacing it with self-trust, you will have beaten anxiety and depression.

## **It Doesn't Have to Be Complicated**

In my twenty-five-plus years of private practice, lecturing, and writing, I knew that all my insights were wasted unless I had an adequate means of delivering those insights to others. As far as I was concerned, traditional therapy had become too complicated and stale, but many patients still felt comforted by traditional therapy's all-knowing therapist. I often heard from patients, "You're the doctor; tell me, what's going on? What should I do?" My patients expected and sometimes demanded that I not disappoint them by being a mere mortal.

Bret, a retired high school teacher, came to me dissatisfied with the years he had spent in traditional analysis. He wasn't dissatisfied with Dr. So-and-so, only with the fact that he didn't seem to be getting any better. Bret held Dr. So-and-so in the highest esteem and felt somewhat ashamed to have been such a poor patient. Bret couldn't understand why he hadn't profited from his analysis. Had his doctor not been retiring, Bret was sure he would have eventually figured it all out.

At first, no matter what I said, all Bret wanted to know was how his problems tied in with his Oedipal complex and repressed libidinal instincts. He was convinced his problems would one day be explained away by some arcane theory. His problems weren't, after all, simple problems. His torment was worthy of only the masters, Freud or Jung (and of course Dr. So-and-so). The straight-

forward, problem-solving approach I was presenting seemed too simple.

I asked Bret whether he had ever heard of William of Occam, the English philosopher. Bret hadn't, but he was delighted that I was finally bringing in one of the masters. Sir William, I explained, postulated the law of parsimony, commonly referred to as Occam's razor. I told Bret, Occam's razor states that you should prefer explanations that are no more complicated than necessary for any given situation.

I wanted Bret to know that for both patient and therapist, complicating things is often nothing more than a case of vanity. The only reason Bret fought my explanation was because he wanted his problems to be anything but ordinary.

Bret isn't unique. You may have similar ideas about why you suffer and what you need to feel better. Perhaps Self-Coaching doesn't sound as exciting as psychoanalysis, analytical therapy, or transactional analysis. In fact, Self-Coaching doesn't sound much like a psychological approach at all. Chapter 1 will provide you with a more grounded and formal explanation, but for now I'll just say this: put aside your old ideas. I will prove to you that there's a simple, direct way to beat anxiety and depression. My way isn't the usual path of traditional psychology. It's a more direct path, using simple and practical psychological tools combined with coaching and motivational strategies.

As Sir William of Occam might agree, if you want to be free from anxiety and depression, why not choose the simplest, least complicated way to do it? That way is Self-Coaching. Furthermore, once you rid yourself of anxiety and depression, you can keep using Self-Coaching to maintain a healthy, spontaneous life. Once you get in shape—psychological shape—you'll never want to go back to your old ways again.

PART I

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# What Is Self-Coaching?



# 1

## A New Self-Therapy

**W**hy are you reading this book? Maybe you worry too much, or perhaps lately you've been struggling with panicky, out-of-control feelings that leave you anxious and frustrated. You may snap at others. Perhaps your sleep isn't what it used to be, and you always seem to be in a bad mood. Maybe you've become depressed; you feel tired, hopeless, or just plain defeated. Sometimes you just want to give up.

You may feel confused, but you're sure of one thing: life's not supposed to be this hard. You want answers—now! The last thing you want is to waste more time.

So let's get started. The following self-quiz will show you how you can benefit from this book.

### **Is Self-Coaching for Me?**

Identify each sentence as either mostly true or mostly false:

- T    F    I often start my thoughts with "What if."
- T    F    I usually see the glass as being half empty.
- T    F    I worry too much.
- T    F    I'm often fatigued.
- T    F    I have difficulty concentrating.
- T    F    I have trouble meeting deadlines.

SELF-COACHING

- T F I worry about my health.
- T F I generally feel as if I'm on edge.
- T F I'm often sad.
- T F I have trouble falling asleep.
- T F I have trouble trusting my perceptions (for example, Did I lock that door? Did I talk too much?).
- T F I have too much doubt.
- T F I would say I'm insecure.
- T F I wake up too early.
- T F My worst time of the day is the morning.
- T F I dread having things go wrong.
- T F I'm too concerned with my looks.
- T F I have to have things done my way.
- T F I can't relax.
- T F I'm never on time.
- T F You can never be safe enough.
- T F I exaggerate problems.
- T F I experience panic.
- T F I feel safest when I'm in bed.
- T F I'm too sensitive.
- T F I often wish I were someone else.
- T F I fear growing older.
- T F Life is one problem after another.
- T F I don't have much hope of feeling better.
- T F I constantly fidget.
- T F I'm prone to road rage.
- T F I have phobias (for example, intense fear of closed spaces, bridges, open spaces, or social encounters).



Total your “true” responses. A score of 10 or fewer suggests that you are a relatively well-adjusted individual. Self-Coaching can teach you to shake off life’s setbacks. You can expect your social and personal effectiveness to improve as you begin to become less tripped-up by emotional interference. Mostly, you can expect to enhance your already healthy personality with a more dynamic approach to life.

A score between 11 and 20 suggests that you have a moderate degree of personality erosion. Self-Coaching can quickly and simply teach you to get beyond the self-limiting effects of anxiety or depression and realize a more spontaneous, natural way of life.

If your score was above 20, you have significant difficulty with anxiety and/or depression. For you, Self-Coaching needs to become a priority. With patience and practice, you can learn to live your life symptom free.

As beleaguered as you are, I don’t expect you to be convinced easily. For now, just recognize that regardless of how anxious or depressed you are, something in you is managing to read these words. That something, the part of you that hasn’t quit, that healthy part of your personality that’s still willing to try to solve the riddle that has become your life—that’s the healthy person in you whom Self-Coaching wants to reach.

## **Self-Coaching, the Program**

It took me twenty-five years of clinical work to write this book. That’s not because I’m particularly slow or lazy (far from it), but because it takes a long time, a really long time, to see through the deceptive mist that shrouds anxiety and depression. One reason for this deception was my myopic view of psychology. Like so many other mental health professionals, I had been taught to view therapy as a relatively passive process, requiring a thorough, often painstaking, exploration and dissection of the past. The rationale is that unless you get to the underlying, unconscious reasons why you struggle, you can’t expect to be healed.

It wasn’t until I broke ranks with this traditional mind-set and started relying on my intuition and instincts that I began to see things differently. What I saw was that anxiety and depression weren’t mysterious or obscure maladies; they were nothing more than the unavoidable outcome of

misguided, faulty perceptions—perceptions that, in time, wind up depleting and victimizing you. What’s interesting, once you understand the nature of these faulty perceptions, is that anxiety and depression actually begin to make sense. As irrational as your particular symptoms may feel, when you learn the punch line, the riddle becomes clear. You’ll see. These insights were the catalyst for a new form of therapy I developed to teach patients what they could do to make themselves better. (I dislike the term “patient,” but I like “client” even less, so I’ll use “patient” throughout the book.) I call my method Self-Coaching (Self, with a capital S).

Before telling you about the specific origins of my program, let’s look at a few common misperceptions about anxiety and depression. Everyone gets a bit anxious or depressed once in a while. It’s a normal part of everyone’s life. Getting uptight if you’re late for an appointment or feeling down and upset over an argument with a friend are inescapable parts of life. Contrary to what most people think, it’s not life’s challenges (or our genetics) that lead to what we call clinical depression or anxiety (more about this in upcoming chapters), but how we react to these challenges. When insecurity is allowed to embellish difficult life circumstances—such as a tax audit, not getting a raise, or a fight with your spouse—with unnecessary doubts, fears, and negatives, then you’re being driven not by facts but by fictions, fictions perpetrated by insecurity. You tell yourself, “I’ll never get through this!” or “I can’t handle this.”

As Shakespeare wrote, “The fault . . . is not in our stars, but in ourselves.” It’s not life that victimizes us and brings us to our knees, but how we interpret and react to life. And when insecurity is steering your life, the effect is like rubbing two pieces of sandpaper together; it’s friction, psychological friction. And make no mistake, psychological friction will wear you down just like sandpaper on wood, creating the clinical conditions we commonly refer to as anxiety, panic, or depression.

## **Intuition**

The talent I value most as a psychologist is my intuition. Intuition is the ability, as Carl Gustav Jung once said, to see around corners. In contrast to the intellect, intuition is much less deliberate; it just happens. When

it comes to psychology, strong intuitions are about as important to you as a telescope is to an astronomer. Just as the surface of the moon turns into a landscape of pockmarked craters under a telescope's magnification, intuition can begin to reveal the hidden aspects of anxiety or depression.

Once I magnified my view of anxiety and depression, I found myself reacting to my patients differently. Instead of treating them in a traditionally passive way, I responded to them in an active, rather spirited way. This wasn't a conscious or deliberate strategy. I just allowed my intuition to guide me. With depressed patients, for example, I sensed that they were missing a vital energy necessary to combat their difficulties. Using my energy, my optimism, and my enthusiasm, I modeled the attitude necessary to conquer the negativity, despair, and inertia. Essentially, I created what I perceived to be lacking in my patients.

With anxious patients, I followed my intuition, too. For these patients I became the voice of calm, encouragement, and conviction. I pushed hard for courage and risk taking against life's worries and fears. Anxiety-prone people are overthinkers and worriers who need to learn to overcome self-doubt by learning to risk trusting life and self.

Both anxiety and depression are weeds that grow from the fertile soil of insecurity. In order to challenge the powerful influence that insecurity has on our lives, I knew that not only did I need to have a "can-do" attitude, but I also needed to challenge the sanctity of anxiety and depression.

I suspect that most people consider anxiety and depression to be forms of mental illness; some might use the word *disease*. What we call something is very important. Words shape the way we think and feel. Mark Twain once said, "The difference between the right word and the almost right word is like the difference between lightning and the lightning bug." To me, mental *illness* is not "almost" the right word, it's the wrong word! When I think of an illness or a disease, I think of something you catch, a sickness that infiltrates your body leaving you its victim—you catch a cold or the flu. If you step on a rusty nail, you contract tetanus. You don't catch or contract anxiety or depression. You generate it!

Why is this important? With a cold, a flu, or tetanus, you're nothing more than a passive victim of some outside nefarious biological agent. And by definition, a victim is someone who is helpless and powerless. If

you think of anxiety and depression as illnesses, than you can't help but feel victimized. So let's change the language. Instead of calling anxiety and depression illnesses or diseases, I'm going to suggest the rather heretical notion that anxiety and depression be seen as habits—habits, fed by insecurity, that wind up depleting your chemistry (which is why medication works) while distorting both your perceptions and experience of life. Habits that *you* generate. Anxiety, just a habit! Depression, just a habit! Granted my approach may seem radical, if not capricious, but its effect on my patients was undeniable: “You mean I'm not mentally ill?” “Can it possibly be as simple as you say?” It can be. It is.

It was obvious to me that my new approach was a dramatic departure from the more traditional therapeutic methods I usually employed, yet because my insights were more of an evolution than a revolution, it took me a while to put my finger on exactly what it was that I was doing. One day, while working with a young man who had been struggling with anxiety and panic attacks, I heard myself telling him, “You keep looking to me to make your anxiety go away. I can't do that for you. What I can do is give you a new way of seeing why you're suffering. I can fire you up and tell you exactly what you need to do to eliminate anxiety from your life. But I can't change you. Only you can do that. Instead of thinking of me as your psychologist, think of me as your coach.” There it was. I was *coaching*, not analyzing, not passively listening, not reflecting. I was coaching to bring out strength, confidence, and a sense of empowerment. My patient quickly and easily related to this simple concept. Rather than seeing me as parent-authority-healer, he clearly understood my new, revitalized role: I was coaching *his* efforts, *his* determination, and most important, *his* need to overcome anxiety and depression.

The ease with which my patient and I progressed convinced me that healing problems as a coach rather than as a therapist could have far-reaching implications. But wait, let me stop myself here. Rather than using the word *healing*, let me replace it with a more precise word: *change*. From the start, it's important for you to know that I'm not trying to promote healing, because there's no illness. And if you're not ill, then you don't need to be healed. If you're anxious or if you're depressed, you need to *change*.