

Healing your Emotional Self

*A Powerful Program to Help You
Raise Your Self-Esteem, Quiet Your
Inner Critic, and Overcome Your Shame*

BEVERLY ENGEL

*Author of The Emotionally Abusive Relationship
and Loving Him without Losing You*



Healing your Emotional Self

*A Powerful Program to Help You
Raise Your Self-Esteem, Quiet Your
Inner Critic, and Overcome Your Shame*

BEVERLY ENGEL

*Author of *The Emotionally Abusive Relationship*
and *Loving Him without Losing You**



Table of Contents

[Title Page](#)

[Copyright Page](#)

[Dedication](#)

[Acknowledgements](#)

[Introduction](#)

[PART ONE - How Your Parents Shaped Your Self-Esteem, Self-Image, and Body Image](#)

[Chapter 1 - Our Parents as Mirrors](#)

[Self-Esteem Defined](#)

[The Real Cause of Your Low Self-Esteem or Negative Self-Image](#)

[“Inner Critic” Defined](#)

[Emotional Abuse and Neglect Defined](#)

[The Role of Shame in Creating Low Self-Esteem and Perfectionism](#)

[How Emotional Abuse and Neglect Affect Your Sense of Self](#)

[How Parents Act as Mirrors](#)

[Chapter 2 - The Seven Types of Negative Parental Mirrors](#)

[The Neglectful or Inadequate Parent - PARENTAL MIRROR: “YOU ARE UNLOVABLE”](#)

[The Abandoning or Rejecting Parent - PARENTAL MIRROR: “YOU ARE WORTHLESS”](#)

The Smothering, Possessive, or Intrusive Parent -
PARENTAL MIRROR: "YOU ARE ..."

The Overly Controlling, Tyrannical Parent - PARENTAL
MIRROR: "YOU ARE POWERLESS"

The Perfectionistic Parent - PARENTAL MIRROR: "YOU
ARE NEVER GOOD ENOUGH"

Hypercritical, Shaming Parents - PARENTAL MIRROR:
"YOU ARE BAD" OR "YOU ARE UNACCEPTABLE"

The Self-Absorbed or Narcissistic Parent - PARENTAL
MIRROR: "YOU DON'T MATTER" ...

Chapter 3 - Your Body as a Mirror

Obsessors and Avoiders
How Is Our Body Image Created?
Do You Judge Yourself Accurately?
Peer Acceptance and Rejection
The Effects of Emotional Abuse, Neglect, and
Smothering on Our Body Image

Chapter 4 - How Mirror Therapy Works

The Basic Premises of Mirror Therapy
Mirroring and Projection
How to Use This Book

PART TWO - Shattering Your Distorted Parental Mirror

Chapter 5 - Rejecting Your Parents' Negative Reflection

Shattering Your Distorted Image
Psychological Truths of the Week

Chapter 6 - Emotionally Separating from Your Parents

Enmeshment
Complete Your Unfinished Business
Resolve Your Relationships with Your Parents and Other
Abusers
Facing the Pain and Confusion of Emotional Separation
Psychological Truths of the Week

Chapter 7 - Quieting and Countering Your Inner Critic

Your Inner Critic
When Your Inner Critic Becomes a Saboteur
Replacing Your Critical Voice with a More Positive,
Nurturing Voice
Psychological Truths of the Week

PART THREE - Creating a New Mirror

Chapter 8 - Looking Deeper into the Mirror

Reconnect with Your Body and Your Emotions
Learning about Yourself through Your Emotions
Being Aware of Your Emotions Can Help You to Change
Them
Fill Up Your Emptiness with Your Own Feelings
Discover Your Essence
Shedding Your Idealized Self-Image and Embracing Who
You Really Are
Psychological Truths of the Week

Chapter 9 - Providing for Yourself What You Missed as a Child

How to Provide Empathetic Mirroring for Yourself
Creating a Nurturing Inner Voice (Mothering)

[Your Need for Structure \(Fathering\)](#)
[Creating Balance in Your Life](#)
[Becoming Your Own Responsive Parent](#)
[A Self-Care Assessment](#)
[Learning How to Soothe Yourself in Healthy Ways](#)
[Treating Ourselves the Way Our Parents Treated Us](#)
[Psychological Truths of the Week](#)

[Chapter 10 - Learning to Love Your Body](#)

[Connecting with Your Body](#)
[Your Body as a Teacher](#)
[Your Body's Story](#)
[Our Parents, Our Bodies](#)
[Valuing Your Body](#)
[Loving Yourself](#)
[Psychological Truths of the Week](#)

[PART FOUR - Specialized Help](#)

[Chapter 11 - If You Were Neglected, Rejected, or Abandoned](#)

[Pay Attention to Yourself](#)
[The Importance of Touch and Human Contact](#)
[Abandonment Wounds](#)
[Inner-Child Work](#)
[Self-Indulgence](#)
[Stop Attacking Yourself](#)
[Being Reminded of Your Value and Lovability](#)

[Chapter 12 - If You Were Overprotected or Emotionally Smothered](#)

[Joshua: The Case of the "Momma's Boy"](#)

Healing from Emotional Incest
Action Steps for Healing

Chapter 13 - If You Were Overly Controlled or Tyrannized

Make Sure You Aren't Still Being Controlled
How to Take Back Your Power
How Being in Touch with Your Essence Can Help You
Quiet Your Inner Critic
Continue to Develop Self-Acceptance and Self-Love

Chapter 14 - If You Had Overly Critical, Shaming, or Perfectionistic Parents

Differentiate between Shame and Guilt
If You Externalized Your Shame
If You Internalized Your Shame - FROM SELF-BLAME TO
ANGER
How to Rid Yourself of Shame
How to Deal with a Shame Attack
Countering Messages from Perfectionistic Parents
How to Deal with Your Internalized Inner Critic

Chapter 15 - If You Had a Self-Absorbed or Narcissistic Parent

Creating a Separate Self
Allow Yourself to Experience Life
Explore Your Creativity
Join a Group
Focus on Establishing an Inner Life
Seek Outside Help

Chapter 16 - Continuing to Heal

[Appendix - Recommended Therapies](#)
[References](#)
[Recommended Reading](#)
[Index](#)

Healing Your Emotional Self

*A Powerful Program to Help You Raise
Your Self-Esteem, Quiet Your Inner Critic,
and Overcome Your Shame*

BEVERLY ENGEL



John Wiley & Sons, Inc.

Copyright © 2006 by Beverly Engel. All rights reserved

Published by John Wiley & Sons, Inc., Hoboken, New Jersey
Published simultaneously in Canada

No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, scanning, or otherwise, except as permitted under Section 107 or 108 of the 1976 United States Copyright Act, without either the prior written permission of the Publisher, or authorization through payment of the appropriate per-copy fee to the Copyright Clearance Center, 222 Rosewood Drive, Danvers, MA 01923, (978) 750-8400, fax (978) 646-8600, or on the web at www.copyright.com. Requests to the Publisher for permission should be addressed to the Permissions Department, John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 111 River Street, Hoboken, NJ 07030, (201) 748-6011, fax (201) 748-6008 or online at <http://www.wiley.com/go/permissions>.

Limit of Liability/Disclaimer of Warranty: While the publisher and the author have used their best efforts in preparing this book, they make no representations or warranties with respect to the accuracy or completeness of the contents of this book and specifically disclaim any implied warranties of merchantability or fitness for a particular purpose. No warranty may be created or extended by sales representatives or written sales materials. The advice and strategies contained herein may not be suitable for your situation. You should consult with a professional where appropriate. Neither the publisher nor the author shall be liable for any loss of profit or any other commercial damages, including but not limited to special, incidental, consequential, or other damages.

For general information about our other products and services, please contact our Customer Care Department within the United States at (800) 762-2974, outside the United States at (317) 572-3993 or fax (317) 572-4002.

Wiley also publishes its books in a variety of electronic formats. Some content that appears in print may not be available in electronic books. For more information about Wiley products, visit our web site at www.wiley.com.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data:

Engel, Beverly.

Healing your emotional self : a powerful program to help you raise your self-esteem, quiet your inner critic, and overcome your shame / Beverly Engel.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-0-471-72567-1 (cloth)

1. Mental health. 2. Self-esteem. 3. Self-care, Health. 4. Psychology, Pathological.
I. Title.

RA790.E555 2006

158.1—dc22

This book is dedicated to the memory of those who lost their lives in the tsunami in December 2004 and to all the people who worried about me while I was in India. The experience taught me a valuable lesson and reminded me of how many people love me—a lesson those of us who were abused continually need to relearn.

Acknowledgments

I feel so fortunate and so grateful to work once again with Tom Miller, my wonderful editor at John Wiley & Sons. I appreciate his wise feedback and am grateful for the fact that he has gone to bat for me over and over. His faith in me has been unremitting, and it has helped me to continue to have faith in myself. I wish to thank everyone at Wiley who worked on this book, especially Lisa Burstiner, who did an economical yet astute job of editing.

To my fabulous agent, Stedman Mays, I offer my undying gratitude and appreciation. You have gone way, way beyond the call of duty for me. I appreciate all your hard work, your feedback, your suggestions, your intuition, and most of all your dedication.

I also want to express my gratitude for Mary Tahan, my other agent. Mary, I appreciate your insights and suggestions regarding my books, and I especially appreciate all your hard work when it comes to selling my foreign rights. I always know you are pulling for me.

I am deeply appreciative of the numerous clients who were willing to try my Mirror Therapy techniques. Your courage, determination, and feedback are greatly appreciated.

I am deeply indebted to the work of two authors whose work I called upon for this book: Elan Golumb, Ph.D., author of *Trapped in the Mirror: Adult Children of Narcissists in Their Struggle for Self*, and Byron Brown, author of *Soul without Shame: A Guide to Liberating Yourself from the Judge Within*. Their wonderful work illuminated and inspired me.

I am also indebted to the work of two people whose ideas inspired me to create my Mirror Therapy program. Arthur P. Ciaramicoli, Ed.D., Ph.D., the author of *The Power of Empathy: A Practical Guide to Creating Intimacy, Self-Understanding and Lasting Love*, provided me a framework from which to work, especially with regard to having empathy for oneself. Laurel Mellin, creator of the Solutions Program and author of *The Pathway*, has helped me to further understand the damage caused by inadequate parenting. And while I already understood the importance of creating a nurturing inner voice (symbolic of a healthy mother), Laurel taught me that it is equally important to create healthy limits (symbolic of a strong father).

Introduction

THERE ARE THOUSANDS OF PEOPLE who were emotionally abused, neglected, or smothered by their parents or other significant caretakers when they were growing up. Many of these people do not realize they were abused or neglected, and they continue to suffer from myriad problems throughout their lives because they are not getting the help they need. People who internalize the abuse manifest self-destructiveness, depression, suicidal thoughts, passivity, withdrawal (avoidance of social contacts), shyness, and a low degree of communication with others. They are likely to have low self-esteem and may suffer from feelings of guilt and remorse, depression, loneliness, rejection, and resignation. Perceiving themselves as unworthy and the world as a hostile place in which they are bound to fail, many are unwilling to try new tasks, develop new skills, or take risks.

People who externalize the abuse may be unpredictable and violent, their behavior characterized by impulsive action rather than conformity to social norms. They frequently become anxious, aggressive, and hostile. They suffer from constant fear and are always on the alert and ready to hit back. Many end up mistreating others, often in the same ways they were mistreated.

At the core of all these symptoms and behaviors is an inadequately developed sense of self and a distorted image of self based on parental negative messages and treatment. Unless adult survivors address these fundamental issues, their efforts toward recovery will be thwarted.

If you were a victim of emotional abuse or neglect as a child, this book will show you exactly what you need to do in

order to heal from the damage done to your self-image and self-esteem. *Healing Your Emotional Self* will guide you step by step through a program that is both innovative and psychologically sound—innovative because it uses the mirror as a metaphor and a tool for healing, and psychologically sound because it combines my many years of experience specializing in treating people who have been emotionally abused with various respected psychological concepts.

Although the primary audience for this book is survivors of emotional abuse and neglect, this book is for anyone who suffers from low self-esteem or body-image issues. People who are preoccupied with their bodies, or who determine their self-worth by how their bodies look, will find the book particularly helpful. Many suffer from a distorted body image and from negative feelings concerning their bodies, but they do not understand that the cause may be negative parental messages, emotional abuse, or neglect.

Many of you know me from my other books on emotional abuse, namely: *The Emotionally Abusive Relationship*, *The Emotionally Abused Woman*, and *Encouragements for the Emotionally Abused Woman*. In those books I wrote about the fact that people who are currently being emotionally abused (or are abusive) are doing so because they were emotionally abused as children. Now, in *Healing Your Emotional Self*, I will help readers take a giant step forward by offering a powerful program that will help them repair the damage caused by emotionally abusive parents.

Childhood neglect and emotional abuse cause many of the most serious problems people suffer from today. This is not a revelation to most professionals or to many who suffer from its effects, but in spite of this knowledge, there is insufficient help for the survivors of these types of abuse. Relatively few books have offered readers a complete

understanding of how this kind of child abuse affects people, ways to heal from the damage, and how to resolve relationships with parents. This is the first book to offer a comprehensive healing program specific to the kinds of messages (mirrors) that emotionally abusive and neglectful parents give their children and to how this kind of abuse affects a child's self-image.

Neglect and emotional abuse are the primary causes of both borderline personality disorder (BPD) and narcissistic personality disorder (NPD), which have turned out to be *the* disorders of our time. This is true for two major reasons: Children in the past two decades have grown up with absent, neglectful parents and parents who continued to pass on the emotional abuse they themselves sustained. In addition, both the borderline and narcissistic personality disorders have "come out of the closet" in terms of professionals telling their patients exactly what their diagnoses are. In the past they had kept these diagnoses from their clients for fear of traumatizing them.

Those who were emotionally abused or neglected also tend to suffer from eating disorders. Many overeat as a way of soothing themselves, while others overeat out of self-loathing. On the other end of the spectrum, many become anorexic as a way of gaining a sense of control because they feel overly controlled by their parents.

People recovering from alcohol or drug abuse will also find this book helpful because many addicts suffer from severe distortions to their sense of self.

In *Healing Your Emotional Self* I offer my unique Mirror Therapy program for healing, which has proven to be highly effective with my clients and the clients of some of my colleagues. This program is highly innovative, combining

what I have learned from many years of specializing with adults who were emotionally abused or neglected as children with concepts from developmental psychology, object relations, self psychology, body therapies, cognitive behavioral therapy, and art therapy. Many of the ideas in the book are uniquely my own, while others are variations on the concepts created by other people, and together they form a unique program designed specifically for the emotionally abused or neglected.

For example, according Laurel Mellin M.A., R.D., author of *The Pathway* and creator of the Solutions Program, research on childhood obesity from San Francisco University shows that for the children studied, most of their extra weight was rooted in the most basic internal patterns of their functioning—the inner conversations they had with themselves. Teaching the kids some very basic skills—self-nurturing (which is like having a responsive internal mother) and setting effective limits (which is like having a safe, powerful father within)—brought their minds and bodies into balance and allowed their drive to overeat to fade. These skills can be taught to people of any age and are effective for other common excesses such as drinking, smoking, overspending, and working. The skills find their way into the thinking brain—our emotional core. I have adapted some of these skills to help adults who were emotionally abused or deprived to essentially “grow themselves up” and give themselves the skills their parents did not give them.

This book will not simply cover old ground. While I will spend some time defining emotional abuse and describing its effects, I focus primarily on healing, especially in regard to helping readers to raise their self-esteem and improve their self-image. (Refer to my earlier books *The Emotionally Abused Woman*, *Encouragements for the Emotionally Abused Woman*, and *The Emotionally Abusive Relationship* for more information on emotional abuse and its effects.)

I have organized this book around several themes, including “The Seven Types of Emotionally Abusive or Neglectful Parents” and “The Seven Most Common Parental Mirrors.” I provide specific advice and strategies for healing for each of the destructive parental mirrors and specific strategies for dealing with each of the seven types of emotionally abusive parents—all using my Mirror Therapy concepts and strategies.

There are other unique aspects to *Healing Your Emotional Self*. Most of my books on emotional abuse have been focused on the issue of *relationships*—how adults who were abused or neglected as children can avoid losing themselves in their relationships, how they can avoid being reabused, and how they can avoid passing on the abuse to a partner or to their children. *Healing Your Emotional Self* focuses on the *self*—how readers can become reunited with the self, how they can create a positive self separate from their abusive parents’ distorted picture of them, and how they can raise their self-esteem. In addition, the book focuses on helping readers to overcome their tendency toward self-blame, self-hatred, and self-destructiveness.

I also cover a subject that has not been focused on in self-help books: the effects on adults who experienced parental neglect in childhood. Many who were neglected will continually search for someone who will give to them what they missed out on in their childhood. This naturally sets them up to be used, victimized, or abused by their partners. Others suffer from a constant feeling of worthlessness, emptiness, deep loneliness, and confusion, and they are unable to sustain intimate relationships.

I will also discuss another issue that is seldom if ever covered in most self-help books—the effects of parental smothering on a child—which can be just as damaging as neglect.

Many people are preoccupied with their looks and even more are critical of them. While some depend on diets, exercise regimes, and cosmetic surgery to help them like what they see in the mirror, others recognize that they will never be happy with what they see unless they raise their self-esteem. This book takes raising your self-esteem to an entirely different level. It teaches a system that can actually help heal the damage caused by negative parental messages.

PART ONE

***How Your Parents Shaped Your Self-Esteem,
Self-Image, and Body Image***

1

Our Parents as Mirrors

Perfectionism is self-abuse of the highest order.

—ANN WILSON SCHAEF

I avoid looking in the mirror as much as I possibly can. When I do look, all I see are my imperfections—my long nose, my crooked teeth, my small breasts. Other people tell me I'm attractive, but I just don't see it.

—Kristin, age twenty-six

I'm what you would call a perfectionist, especially when it comes to my work. It takes me twice as long as it does other people to get something done, because I have to go over it a dozen times to make sure I haven't made any mistakes. My boss complains about my being so slow, but I'd rather have him complain about that than have him find a mistake. That would devastate me.

—Elliot, age thirty-one

There's a voice inside my head that constantly chastises me with "Why did you do that?" "Why did you say that?" The criticism is relentless. Nothing I ever do is right. I'm never good enough. Sometimes I just feel like screaming—Shut up! Leave me alone!

—Teresa, age forty-three

I don't know what it will take for me to finally feel good about myself. I keep thinking I need to do more, achieve more, be a better person, and then I'll like myself. Other people are impressed with how much I've achieved in my life, but it doesn't seem to matter how much I do; I'm never good enough for me.

—Charles, age fifty-five

DO YOU RELATE TO ANY of these people? Do you have a difficult time looking in the mirror because you never like what you see? Do you find that you are never pleased with yourself, no matter how much effort you put into making yourself a better person, no matter how much work you do on your body? Do you constantly find fault in yourself? Are you a perfectionist? Are you plagued by an inner critic who constantly berates you or finds something wrong with everything you do? Or are you like Charles, who believes that the way to feeling good about yourself is through your accomplishments—yet no matter how much you accomplish it is never enough?

Many of us focus a great deal of time and attention on improving our bodies and making ourselves more attractive. Yet, for all the time and money spent on dieting, exercise, clothes, and cosmetic surgery, many still do not like who they see in the mirror. There is always something that needs to be changed or improved.

People who are critical of how they look are usually critical of other aspects of themselves as well. They tend to focus on their flaws rather than their assets, and they are seldom pleased with their performance—whether at work, at school, or in a relationship. They chastise themselves mercilessly when they make a mistake.

There is nothing wrong with wanting to improve yourself; everyone suffers from time to time with self-critical thoughts. But some people have such low self-esteem that they are never satisfied with their achievements, their physical appearance, or their performance. They have a relentless inner critic who constantly tears them down and robs them of any satisfaction they might temporarily feel when they have reached a goal. The following questionnaire will help you determine whether you are suffering from low self-esteem and an unhealthy inner critic.

QUESTIONNAIRE: A “SELF” EXAMINATION

1. Do you suffer from insecurity or a lack of confidence?
2. Do you focus more on what you do wrong or what you fail at than what you do right or well?
3. Do you feel less than or not as good as other people because you are not perfect in what you do or how you look?
4. Do you believe you need to do more, be more, or give more in order to earn the respect and love of other people?

5. Are you aware of having a critical inner voice that frequently tells you that you did something wrong?
6. Are you constantly critical of your performance—at work, at school, at sports?
7. Are you critical of the way you interact with others? For example, do you frequently kick yourself for saying the wrong thing or for behaving in certain ways around others?
8. Do you feel like a failure—in life, in your career, in your relationships?
9. Are you a perfectionist?
10. Do you feel like you do not deserve good things? Do you become anxious when you are successful or happy?
11. Are you afraid that if people knew the real you, they wouldn't like you? Are you afraid people will find out you are a fraud?
12. Are you frequently overwhelmed with shame and embarrassment because you feel exposed, made fun of, or ridiculed?
13. Do you constantly compare yourself to others and come up short?
14. Do you avoid looking in the mirror as much as possible, or do you tend to look in the mirror a lot to make sure you look okay?
15. Are you usually critical of what you see when you look in the mirror? Are you seldom, if ever, satisfied with the way you look?
16. Are you self-conscious or embarrassed about the way you look?
17. Do you have an eating disorder—compulsive overeating, bingeing and purging, frequent dieting or starvation, or anorexia?
18. Do you need to drink alcohol or take other substances in order to feel comfortable or less self-conscious in social situations?

19. Do you fail to take very good care of yourself through poor diet, not enough sleep, or too little or too much exercise?
20. Do you tend to be self-destructive by smoking, abusing alcohol or drugs, or speeding?
21. Have you ever deliberately hurt yourself, that is, cut yourself?

If you answered yes to more than five of these questions, you need the special help this book provides in order to raise your self-esteem, quiet your inner critic, heal your shame, and begin to find real joy and satisfaction in your achievements and accomplishments.

Even if you only answered yes to one of these questions, this book can help you because it isn't natural or healthy to experience any of those feelings. You were born with an inherent sense of goodness, strength, and wisdom that you should be able to call upon in moments of self-doubt. Unfortunately, you may have lost touch with this inner sense because of the way you were raised and by the messages you received to the contrary.

Self-Esteem Defined

Let's start by defining self-esteem and differentiating it from *self-image* and *self-concept*. *Self-esteem* is how you feel about yourself as a person—your overall judgment of yourself. Your self-esteem may be high or low, depending on how much you like or approve of yourself. If you have high self-esteem, you have an appreciation of the full extent of your personality. This means that you accept yourself for who you are, with both your good qualities and your so-called bad ones. It can be assumed that you have self-respect, self-love, and feelings of self-worth. You don't need

to impress others because you already know you have value. If you are unsure whether you have high self-esteem, ask yourself: “Do I believe that I am lovable?” “Do I believe I am worthwhile?”

Our feelings of self-worth form the core of our personality. Nothing is as important to our psychological well-being. The level of our self-esteem affects virtually every aspect of our lives. It affects how we perceive ourselves and how others perceive us, and how they subsequently treat us. It affects our choices in life, from our careers to whom we befriend or get involved with romantically. It influences how we get along with others and how productive we are, as well as how much use we make of our aptitudes and abilities. It affects our ability to take action when things need to be changed and our ability to be creative. It affects our stability, and it even affects whether we tend to be followers or leaders. It only stands to reason that the level of our self-esteem, the way we feel about ourselves in general, would also affect our ability to form intimate relationships.

Many people use the words *self-esteem* and *self-concept* interchangeably, but these terms actually have different meanings. Our self-concept, or self-image, is the set of beliefs or images we have about ourselves. Our self-esteem is the measure of how much we like and approve of our self-concept. Another way of thinking about it is that self-esteem is how much respect you have for yourself, while self-image is how you see yourself. Still another way of differentiating between self-esteem and self-image is to think of self-esteem as something you give to yourself (that’s why it is called self-esteem) and self-image is usually based on how you imagine others perceive you.

Our self-image is made up of a wide variety of images and beliefs. Some of these are self-evident and easily verifiable (for example, “I am a woman,” “I am a therapist”). But there

are also other, less tangible aspects of the self (for example, “I am intelligent,” “I am competent”).

Many of the ideas we have about ourselves were acquired in childhood from two sources: how others treated us and what others told us about ourselves. How others defined us has thus become how we now perceive ourselves. Your *self-image*—who you think you are—is a package that you have put together from how others have seen and treated you, and from the conclusions you drew in comparing yourself to others.

The Real Cause of Your Low Self-Esteem or Negative Self-Image

The primary cause of your low self-esteem or negative self-image probably goes back to your childhood. No matter what has happened to you in your life, your parents (or the people who raised you) have the most significant influence on how you feel about yourself. Negative parental behavior and messages can have a profound effect on our self-image and self-esteem. This is especially true of survivors of emotional abuse, neglect, or smothering as a child.

Inadequate, unhealthy parenting can affect the formation of a child’s identity, self-concept, and level of self-esteem. Research clearly shows that the single most important factor in determining the amount of self-esteem a child starts out with is his or her parents’ style of child-rearing during the first three or four years of the child’s life.

When parents are loving, encouraging, and fair-minded, and provide proper discipline and set appropriate limits, the children they shape end up being self-confident, self-monitoring, and self-actualized. But when parents are neglectful, critical, and unfair, and provide harsh discipline

and inappropriate limits, the children they shape are insecure and self-critical, and they suffer from low self-esteem.

When I first met Matthew I was struck by his dark good looks. He resembled a younger, taller, more exotic-looking Tom Cruise, with his chiseled features, his large, dark, almond-shaped eyes, and his straight dark hair. Because he was so strikingly good-looking I expected him to speak to me with confidence, but instead he spoke in a reticent, almost apologetic way. As he explained to me why he had come to therapy, I discovered that he felt extremely insecure. Although he was an intelligent, talented, attractive young man, he was tormented with self-doubt and was extremely critical of himself. Why would a young man with so much going for him feel so badly about himself?

As Matthew told me the story of his life, I discovered his father was never pleased with him. No matter what Matthew did, it was never enough. He told me about a time when he got on the honor roll in school and was excited to tell his father about it. Instead of congratulating Matthew and being proud of him, his father told him that since school was so easy for him he needed to get a job after school. So Matthew did as his father suggested. But this didn't seem to please him, either. Instead, his father complained that he wasn't helping out enough with yard work and that he needed to quit his job. "You're just working so you can make money to waste on girls," his father criticized, somehow not remembering that he had been the one to pressure Matthew into getting a job in the first place. Matthew had an interest in music and was a very talented piano player. But his father wasn't happy about his taking lessons. "You're already too effeminate," he scoffed. "Why don't you go out for sports like I did in school?" When Matthew followed his father's advice and tried out for the track team, his father complained, "It just doesn't have the same prestige as

playing football or basketball. Why don't you try out for one of those teams?"

Because his father was never proud of him and never acknowledged his accomplishments, Matthew became very hard on himself. He became very self-critical; no matter what he accomplished he found something wrong with it. If someone did try to compliment him, he pushed their praise away with statements such as "Oh, anyone could have done that," or "Yeah, but you should have seen how I messed up yesterday."

By not acknowledging Matthew and by never being pleased, Matthew's father had caused him to be self-conscious and fearful. Many parents undermine their children's self-esteem and create in them a sort of "self anxiety" by treating them in any or all of the following ways: with a lack of warmth and affection, acknowledgment, respect, or admiration, as well as with unreasonable expectations, domination, indifference, belittling, isolation, or unfair or unequal treatment.

"Inner Critic" Defined

Having a strong inner critic is another factor in creating low self-esteem, and it usually goes hand in hand with low self-esteem. Your inner critic is formed through the normal socialization process that every child experiences. Parents teach their children which behaviors are acceptable and which are unacceptable, dangerous, or morally wrong. Most parents do this by praising the former and discouraging the latter. Children know (either consciously or unconsciously) that their parents are the source of all physical and emotional nourishment, so parental approval feels like a matter of life or death to them. Therefore, when they are