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—JOHN GRAY, PH.D.

THE POWER OF
Self-
COACHING

THE FIVE ESSENTIAL
STEPS TO CREATING
THE LIFE YOU WANT

JOSEPH J. LUCIANI, PH.D.

Author of *Self-Coaching: How to Heal Anxiety and Depression*

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The Power of Self-Coaching

*The Five Essential Steps to
Creating the Life You Want*

Joseph Luciani, Ph.D.



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Preface

My father wasn't a happy man. The stress of his constant anger is father wasn't a happy man. The stress of his constant anger is probably what killed him at age fifty-two. As did his lack of exercise, lack of self-discipline, deplorable diet, and aversion to doctors. Toward the end of his life he was drawn to gambling—it represented a way out of his cul-de-sac existence. Hitting it big and winning the trifecta represented hope in what was otherwise a sea of hopelessness.

I look back at my father now and my heart aches. His life and early death were such wastes. If only I could have shared with him what I know now. If only I could have helped him recognize that there were choices. Like so many people, my father considered himself a victim of fate. It would never have occurred to him that his ineffective, frustrated life was nothing more than the result of cultivated habits of negativity. If only I could have told him about the power of Self-Coaching.

In more than twenty-five years of private practice I've come to realize that my father's tormented life wasn't that unusual. Many people wind up in therapy complaining of nagging, vague problems such as feeling overwhelmed, worrying about the future, or having general feelings of unhappiness, helplessness, or self-doubt. Some find their way into therapy because there's nowhere else to turn; everything in their lives has begun to crumble. Most people, I suspect, never make it into therapy. They just live with their problems, not realizing they have a choice.

Do you have your own laundry list of unresolved problems? If these diffuse, rather low-grade complaints are

allowed to fester, they can lead to more serious emotional problems. But why wait for depression to develop or for anxiety to slam you into a panic? Why not recognize that the friction you feel in your life is a clue that you've drifted away from your natural and spontaneous center, your capacity for genuine happiness. Self-Coaching can bring you back to where your life begins to make sense, where you begin to flow effortlessly with life rather than desperately trying to control it.

Learning to live more naturally and spontaneously may seem complicated, especially if you're suffering. It's not complicated at all. It isn't your nature to be unhappy or to suffer, it's simply your habit! And the truth is that habits are learned and habits can be broken. All habits. No matter how destructive, a habit can't hurt you if you learn to stop feeding it. How do you feed a habit? Every time you worry, fret, fear, or doubt, you're throwing your habit crumbs of your insecurity—feeding it. *The Power of Self-Coaching* will introduce you to a powerful tool called Self-Talk, which will starve the habits that hurt you and let you choose the life that serves you.

So get ready to take your life back from the grip of reflexive, habituated thinking. Once you do, you'll understand my attitude toward more complex, traditional methods of healing. And if I sound a bit cocky, that's okay. Because Self-Coaching isn't about reflection or philosophical meditation, it's about instilling a can-do fire that will enable you to have the life you want, the life you deserve.

In my previous book, *Self-Coaching: How to Heal Anxiety and Depression*, Self-Coaching was presented with the specific goal of alleviating the symptoms of anxiety and depression. Over the years since I first introduced Self-Coaching, I've found that my method is applicable to a much wider range of problems than just anxiety and

depression. You will find *The Power of Self-Coaching* to be an empowering guide that can eliminate emotional friction in your life and reconnect you with an innate capacity for genuine happiness—before more serious emotional problems develop. Long after you've eliminated insecurity and struggle from your life, Self-Coaching can continue to serve you as an ongoing source of strength and rejuvenation.

The power of Self-Coaching relies on the fact that you can learn to defeat whatever holds you back in life. Whether it is panic, depression, social anxiety, laziness, ineffectiveness, lack of success, or unhappiness, you must defeat whatever holds you back from the life you're capable of having. And you can! By following the five essential steps outlined in this book, you will find the uncomplicated answer to all your self-generated problems. You will learn to move from control thinking to a more spontaneous, instinctual understanding of what you need to be happy.

Introduction

Choose to Change, Choose the Life You Want

Destiny is not a matter of chance, it is a matter of choice; It is not a thing to be waited for, it is a thing to be achieved.

—William Jennings Bryan

I find no better place to begin this book than by introducing you to Tracy, a single, forty-eight-year-old retail clerk who came to see me to ask one question—a question I’ve heard many times before. Perhaps it’s a question you’ve asked yourself:

All my life I’ve struggled. I’ve worked hard for thirty years and have nothing to show for it. No husband, no kids, no career, nothing. I live my life in this filthy, one-room apartment overlooking a parking lot and the roof of a Chinese restaurant. On a good day I drink too much wine, I watch too much TV, and I eat too much junk. On a bad day I don’t get out of bed. I worry about dying, I worry about living, but mostly I worry about being alone for the rest of my life.

Sometimes I can’t sleep, my mind races, thinking about opportunities I’ve missed and people I’ve hurt. I get headaches and stomachaches, I’m angry at everyone and find it impossible to trust. My doctor wants me to consider depression medication, but, to tell you the truth, I’m not sure I want to bother. So what if medication makes me feel better? I still live in

this apartment, still don't have a decent job or a family. Why bother?

My doctor also tells me my blood pressure is too high, I'm overweight, and unless I change my ways, I'm headed for a heart attack. Change my habits—what a joke. I *am* my habits! Sure, Doc, I'll just go home and change! Doesn't he get it? This is me, stuck, destructive, and destined to live out my days alone and miserable. And I'm so scared.

I came to therapy to ask you one question and I'd like an honest answer: *Can someone like me really change?*

How would you answer Tracy's question? Many seem to think the personality is fixed at birth: "He's been a control freak all his life. I don't expect him to change." Or, "Sure I'm anxious. My mother was anxious, and so was her mother. It runs in the family." Some seem unsure: "Ever since my surgery I've gone downhill. I wasn't always such a worrier. I just can't seem to get back to feeling secure again." And yet for others, it's not a matter of personality, it's a matter of fate: "Some people are blessed with good fortune. Me, I've had nothing but bad luck all my life." The questions remain: Do people change? Can an unhappy life be exchanged for one of happiness and success?

What Do You Think?

I pondered these questions for years, from both intellectual and personal standpoints. Struggling with insecurity and anxiety as far back as I can remember, I wanted to know the truth. And yet, as much as I wanted to change, there was always a part of me that felt I was chasing rainbows. *People don't change, not really.* Even when I gave myself the

benefit of doubt, the question remained: *If change is possible, can it be enough to make a significant difference in my life?*

Is Therapy the Answer?

I find that most people who come for therapy usually arrive with a guarded ambivalence about whether it's possible to change. For some, after years of struggle and frustration, therapy is often their last hope to learn life's secret formula for happiness. And who is the keeper of this secret? The psychologist, of course.

There's no doubt about it: a psychologist can inherit a lot of projected power. The psychologist becomes the healer, the teacher, the guru—and all before a single word is ever exchanged! Because of these projections, most people go through an initial infatuation period where just being in the psychologist's presence sends them off feeling “the best I've felt in years” and touting the amazing benefits of therapy. Then, as the sessions progress, things begin to slow down. Symptoms, initially eclipsed by the euphoric belief that finally you're getting the help you need, begin to return, along with the distressing realization that nothing has changed. Or worse, the fear that nothing *will* change! This can be a real letdown as the infatuated energy gets replaced by the mundane work of historical exploration, week after week after week. It's during this postinfatuation period that many begin to feel disillusioned, recognizing there's no abracadabra magic involved in change.

As therapy progresses, most people reluctantly give up hope for an epiphany or secret insight, one that's supposed to set them free. Instead of waiting for that startling breakthrough or quick fix, they're left with the tedious work of figuring out *why* they do what they do. And by this time

they're months into therapy and still acting like the same old wretch. What can they do? They've already invested all this time and money . . . maybe a few more sessions? A few more months?

What's the verdict? When it comes to therapy, what's the consensus? Is it just a palliative shoulder to lean on and nothing more, or is it a tool for legitimate personality change? The question needs to be asked: Does therapy work, does it hold the secret of change? The short answer is *yes* and *no*. But before making sense of this paradox, I first need to tell you what I learned from my own years of struggle and from my training analysis.

Yes, Change *Is* Possible

I took my personal analysis very seriously. After all, if I was going to dispense sage psychological advice, I couldn't feign being healthy—I had to become healthy. This I did manage to accomplish. I'm not bragging, I'm just letting you know from the outset that *yes*, change is, in fact, possible. I actually became a different person, with different perceptions, different thoughts, and different behavior. "Different" may not be the correct word because I was still me, I didn't wake up one day feeling I was someone else. But my experience of life certainly was different. I no longer felt congested and bottled up with my habits of overthinking and worry. I began to relax and enjoy a spontaneity that had always eluded me. I was actually living my life for the first time rather than *thinking about* living my life. And these experiences have made all the difference.

If you asked me what changed me, I couldn't tell you. Not at first. But after many years of analysis and struggle, I somehow managed to change. I became a better person, no longer driven by insecurity and reflexive defense. The

problem was that I couldn't put my finger on *what* changed me. Being a psychologist and being curious, I had to find out. Was it my Jungian or Freudian analysis? My Gestalt or transactional group analysis? I couldn't tell you because my change came *after* I had finished all these experiences, not during. Perhaps it was the cumulative effect of all of the years and all of the insights and effort. Whatever it was, I needed to know. And I needed to be able to explain it to others.

As it turned out, my hunch was correct: it wasn't any one thing that turned my life around, but a combination of all my psychological efforts. Being a consummate opportunist, I took bits and pieces from each of my therapeutic experiences and, over time, combined these insights with all I had learned in more than twenty-five years of listening to people. And that brings us to Self-Coaching. I've been able to condense into five simple steps what took me a lifetime of struggle and curiosity to figure out—five essential steps to creating the life you want. Funny thing, the solution to the riddle of how we change isn't that complex or difficult. But like any riddle, until you know the punch line, it can drive you crazy.

Say Good-bye to the Medical Model

What exactly is the mechanism that promotes change? Notice I didn't say "promotes healing." That's because I think it's time we moved away from the medical model that has dominated psychology for the past hundred years. What's the medical model? Well, for starters, if you go to therapy, you're considered a "patient." If you suffer from anxiety, depression, or any other recognizable "symptom," you have a mental "illness." And to describe what's tripping

you up in life, you look to the “doctor” for a “diagnosis.” This is a physician-based medical mentality.

Okay, I’ll try to be fair. Psychology grew out of the psychiatric influence of the early masters—Freud, Jung, Adler—all of whom were physicians, influenced by the medical model of healing. It’s only natural that their ideas were influenced by their medical training. Unfortunately, this bias became rooted in the culture of therapy and to this day still winds up affecting how we think about psychological problems. In the classic 1948 film *The Snake Pit*, Olivia de Havilland portrayed a woman institutionalized in a crowded state hospital due to a breakdown following depression. The snake pit of the title is the hospital’s room of horrors, an open ward in which the hopeless cases are confined. This groundbreaking film, along with many others that followed, has contributed to our perception and fears of mental illness.

When I was nine years old, I overheard my father telling my mother that if he didn’t learn to relax, he was going to have a nervous breakdown. (When I grew up, in the fifties, “nervous breakdown” was a generic term used to describe anyone who had to be hospitalized for psychological reasons.) *Nervous breakdown!* I was petrified. What was this terrible thing that was wrong with my father? For a while I was afraid to ask, but my fear eventually forced me to approach him and ask for details. Unsuspecting that I had overheard his conversation, my father casually explained that if you ever had the misfortune of having a nervous breakdown, “men in white coats come to your house and take you away in a straitjacket.” If this wasn’t enough to set my thoughts spinning, he continued, “They put you in a padded room and give you medication and sometimes electric shock.” *Electric shock!* That was it—my head was swimming. Not noticing my apparent distress, my father

concluded, “When you have a nervous breakdown, you lose your mind.”

That’s all I had to hear: *You can lose your mind!* I was distraught. I can’t say for certain, but I think it was that same afternoon that I went to the library and took out my first book on psychology, Freud’s *The Ego and the Id*. I couldn’t understand a single word of it, but just having it in my possession made me feel safer. I should point out that by the ripe old age of nine, I had already become a consummate worrier. I used to worry about everything: my parents dying, schoolwork, who liked me and who didn’t. So don’t think I was going to let this nervous breakdown thing die. After all, what if nervous breakdowns were inherited? That very afternoon I decided no nervous breakdown for me. I wasn’t about to lose my mind! No, sir, not if I could help it.

Such was my introduction to psychology.

As I see it, the term “nervous breakdown” has become almost extinct, only to be replaced by the more ambiguous term “mental illness.” What is your reflexive association to the word “illness”? When you’re ill, you need to see your *doctor*, right? Why is this? Because an illness is something that happens to you, you don’t necessarily cause it, you’re powerless to do anything about it, and therefore you can’t be responsible for curing yourself. This definition takes the concept of “healing” out of your hands and puts it in your doctor’s—where it should be with a physical illness.

As far as I’m concerned, it doesn’t matter if you go to a neighborhood clinic or travel to Vienna for your therapy, healing . . . wait, let me stop myself here. From now on, rather than using the term “healing,” I will use the more appropriate term “change.” That said, regardless of whom you seek for treatment, no therapist in the world can change you. Change—all and any change—has to come from you. This is worth repeating: the capacity for creating

the life you want resides within you. A therapist can facilitate that change, but so can you, with some insight and direction. That's where Self-Coaching comes in. But first, a bit of background.

“Yes, Dear”

I had just gotten my doctorate and was involved in acquiring the necessary training analysis to apply to the Jungian Institute. My analysis had been going on for a few years (that's right, years) when one day I was complaining about not having enough free time, not having enough money, and not having enough fun. Now, I don't know if it was intentional or whether it was a calculated response or whether it was just his frustration, but my analyst interrupted me with the overly sarcastic comment “Yes, dear . . .” I didn't hear a word he said after that. I was mortified, shocked, embarrassed. How dare he insult me like that? I left his office in a huff.

Those words hung in my consciousness and refused to let go, *Yes, dear*. In that moment, what was pointed out was the lunacy of my ongoing, forty-dollar-an-hour whining! “Yes, dear” was telling me—or that's how I interpreted it—that not only wasn't I being mature about my problems, but also I had gone over to the other side, I was acting like a child, and a wimpy one at that. Those words just kept echoing in my mind like a bell. The nerve! How dare he?

It wasn't until after I had discontinued my therapy that the bigger truth was able to reach me: he was 100 percent right—I was acting exactly like a whining, whimpering child. I had unconsciously assigned the lofty designation of “parent/protector/keeper of life's secret” to my analyst, and I was expecting him to take care of me and make it all better. My job was just to show up each week and free-

associate (which for me was a euphemism for complaining) about the problems du jour. When he said those now-pivotal words, something in me shifted. It was—well, not at first, but in the weeks, months, and years that followed—an insight that allowed my life to turn on its axis. Those two seemingly magical words—“Yes, dear”—need to be explained so you can understand the core motivational starting point of Self-Coaching.

Don't Be Addicted to Rescue

I don't think I'm that different from most people who enter therapy. In each of my therapeutic experiences (I've had a few), I entered therapy expecting to find answers. And in each case I fully expected my therapist to have those answers. It never occurred to me that he didn't. Or, for that matter, that I was at all responsible for this understanding. Week after week I would offer up my trials and tribulations, waiting for profound insights, one of which—I was sure—would change my life.

Week after week I left feeling mildly disappointed, unburdened—a bit lighter, but no different. In part, I wasn't getting better because of my expectations. When you enter therapy you naturally begin to hand over responsibility for your problems to the therapist. You quickly get used to sharing what, until now, were totally your problems and burdens. And with this sharing, you feel a sense of relief. I see this all the time. Someone will report after a first session, “Doctor, I feel so much better. I haven't felt this good in a long time.” This phenomenon reflects the infatuated experience I mentioned above, and it's also part of the relief you experience from what I call “unburdening.”

Unburdening can be appropriate in times of stress or duress, but as a style of life it becomes regressive and

childlike, especially when you begin to believe that *I don't have to deal with this now, I'll just wait until I see my therapist*. Once you become convinced that you don't have to handle your struggle anymore, or worse, that you can't handle it, and Dr. So-and-so can, then the die is cast. Why do you think people remain in therapy for years and years? It's because they've become convinced they can't possibly do any of this psychological problem-solving on their own. As self-trust dwindles, you become susceptible to addiction—an addiction to being rescued.

In this way, a therapist can easily become a crutch. When you sprain an ankle, a crutch is indispensable. But as the sprain heals, it becomes imperative that you discard the crutch and strengthen the leg. If you neglect to exercise and strengthen your ankle, what happens? The muscles atrophy and you lose function in your foot. At this point you declare, "I can't walk without my crutch." The same thing can happen in therapy. If, after a period of time, your ego begins to lean too heavily on the therapist, your ability to handle life atrophies. You become convinced that you can't possibly function without your therapist's advice.

This is why when I meet with someone who is anxious or overly controlling, one of the first things I tell him or her is that my approach is not traditional, that in the interest of developing maturity and personal responsibility, I don't want them to call me between sessions with hysterical outbursts or questions. (I do, however, first establish a foundation of why and what we're trying to accomplish and give full instructions for any emergency situation; that is, any situation in which there is doubt about maintaining personal safety or ensuring the safety of others.) At first, most will struggle with this limitation because it seems counterintuitive: therapists are supposed to rescue you! I once worked with a man who, shocked by my policy, asked:

“You mean you want me to handle my own problems?” Yup, I did!

Jean, a twenty-eight-year-old secretary, came to me after a long history of anxiety-related problems. It was evident to me after our first session that Jean wasn't going to be a happy camper. Jean had long ago abandoned any capacity for self-trust and had since been to a string of psychologists and psychiatrists, looking for someone to take on her burden. Her calls became so childlike, so self-defeating that I saved one of her voice messages to play back for her:

Dr. Luciani, I know you're not going to call me back, but could you please reconsider. I really need to talk to you. I really do. Honest! Someone at work said I was obsessing about something and I don't know if I made a fool out of myself. I'm driving myself crazy worrying and I need you to call me back as soon as possible. I don't want to wait until our next session. Please call me right away. I know you're there! Just this one time, I promise I won't call again. Please, please, please call me. I don't want to struggle like this. . . . I need you to call . . . right now!

Jean was giving in to a childish reflex that insisted that whatever she needed to handle life, *she* didn't possess it. She was convinced that I possessed the magic words to stop her pain. And you know what? There was a grain of truth to her fantasy. Had I returned her call, she would have felt cared for, she would have felt that someone handled the situation and that her world wasn't going to end. She would have hung up the receiver feeling fine. This had been a typical scenario for Jean with her former therapists until they got fed up with her constant barrage of phone calls. One therapist told her, “Don't you know you're bothering me? Can't you just leave me alone for one weekend?”

Jean was addicted to being rescued. I, from the start, had a much bigger objective in mind. We had to break her reflexive habit of leaning on others and instead begin to establish self-reliance and trust. The only way this could begin was to get Jean to tolerate her fears and hysterics. After I gave her a foundational understanding of her need for control, I had to give her a few pep talks. I had to convince her that her habit of insecurity wanted her to believe she couldn't handle the challenges of her life—but the truth was, she could. She needed to develop some muscle—ego muscle. The first step was to help her understand that it was imperative for her to struggle through her weeks without using me as a life preserver.

She hated it and me for a while, but slowly the calls diminished. Jean would often plod into our sessions huffing and puffing: “Yes, I got through this week. Yes, on my own, thank you!” But soon she began to realize the single most critical point I was trying to make. She recognized that since I wasn't going to bail her out, she had to do something to feel better. The operative word here was that *she* had to do something. This was the beginning of the end of Jean's suffering.

Shortly after this insight she informed me, “Since I knew you weren't going to call me back, I decided to handle the situation on my own.” Although full of resentment, she did it. She actually did it! And believe me, I was very enthusiastic about pointing this out to her (along with a bit of a pep talk): “You're really doing a great job. Don't feel you need to understand everything right now—just getting through these panicky times and not quitting on yourself, that's the first step. Fantastic! Great job!”

Jean and I are finishing up her treatment as I write. It has been a few months, and during this time I can report that not only do I never get any hysterical phone calls, but also

Jean has learned that what she was looking for from me was something that truly existed within her. It was there all along. She just didn't know it. She's no longer psychologically frail; now she has real ego muscle.

What about you? Do you believe, or can you believe, that you can find everything you need by looking within? If you're like so many others, you may have become conditioned to burying your head in the sand. If this is the case, you're probably caught up in a life of compensation, seeking meaning and answers externally (money, power, status, or control), or you've become plagued with symptoms of emptiness, anxiety, or despair. Take a close look at your life. See it as a mirror would. And just as a mirror reflects the reality of your physical image, so your life experiences can reflect an accurate image of your personal evolution if you learn to interpret what you see.

Let's start with quality of life. Are you generally happy? Content? Successful? Or do you feel unhappy, downtrodden, and defeated by life? Specifically, what are your symptoms? Do you get bored with things and people? Are you experiencing depression, tension, stress? These are all part of insecurity's reflection. Self-Coaching is going to use this information to change your life. And don't start whining about being confused or overwhelmed, because if you do, I have two words for you: "Yes, dear."

The Dynamics of Change

As previously stated, all change begins with an acknowledgment that the power to transform your life comes from you. Self-Coaching is going to teach you that

accepting this responsibility means challenging the shabby thinking that has compromised your life.

The misguided person who rejects personal responsibility is convinced that there is an easier way: *if only I could hit the jackpot; if only she would say yes; if only I could get that promotion.* “If only” is a statement of despair and an avoidance of responsibility. What you’re really saying is “If only such-and-such would happen, then I’d take responsibility.” It’s as bad as the “Yes, buts”: “Yes, I want to change, but it’s too hard.” What about you? Are you excusing yourself from taking responsibility? Are you talking yourself into a life of stagnation?

You can begin the process of change right now, by looking for limiting terms such as “if only” and “yes, but.” Begin to develop some psychological muscle by realizing the truth about what’s going on in your life rather than excusing yourself from it. Becoming more conscious of life’s responsibilities will serve as a springboard for the Self-Coaching that’s ahead.

Pick the Life You Want

It may seem incomprehensible that you can actually pick and choose the life you want. But Self-Coaching can convince you by:

- teaching you *what* to change
- training you *how* to change
- convincing you that you can do it

When I first started driving I knew nothing about my Volkswagen’s internal combustion engine. On those few occasions where something did go awry and I found myself stuck on the side of the road, I’d wind up popping the hood

and randomly poking around, hoping that magically I'd touch something that would revive my recalcitrant Beetle.

After one particularly frustrating experience, I was determined to do something about my helplessness. I purchased a repair manual from the dealer and decided to make friends with my engine. It wasn't long before I was changing spark plugs, setting valve clearances, and adjusting the timing. Not too shabby for a beginner. As time went on, my confidence and expertise grew. The ultimate test came while my wife and I were traveling cross country. We had just entered South Dakota's Badlands National Park and pulled off the road to view the desolate beauty of the landscape. Getting back into the car and turning the key, I was greeted not with the familiar sounds of ignition but with a disconcerting silence! Had it been a few months earlier, I would have been left to my aimless poking, but now I knew I had legitimate options.

Getting a screwdriver from my tool kit, I confidently slid under the car, located the starter solenoid, and placed the blade of my screwdriver across its two protruding screws. With a crackle and a spark, the engine fired right up. The solenoid had gone bad and needed to be jump-started. Rather than spending a night in the Badlands, we were off for points east—me, with a smile that lasted for many miles.

When it comes to cars, trial-and-error, hit-or-miss mechanics is rarely successful. The same goes for psychological problems. If something breaks down in your life and you blindly begin poking around, chances are you're not going to stumble on the answer. The first step in change is to lay a foundation of understanding and consciousness. You need to know what the problem is if you're going to fix it. Instead of an auto-repair manual, you have a Self-Coaching one. In the chapters that follow you're going to be introduced to the simple truth about psychological struggle.