

A NEW HARBINGER SELF-HELP WORKBOOK

The Mindfulness & Acceptance Workbook for Self-Esteem

Using Acceptance & Commitment Therapy
to Move Beyond Negative Self-Talk
& Embrace Self-Compassion



**Includes downloadable worksheets
& guided audio meditations**

A POWERFUL STEP-BY-STEP PROGRAM TO HELP YOU:

- Break free from self-doubt
- Learn to accept yourself
- Discover your strengths
- Realize your full potential

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FOREWORD BY RUSS HARRIS

CHAPTER 1

A Brief History of the Human Race: The Need to Fit In with the Group

We are going to begin this book in the last place that you would probably expect us to. Your mind might protest when you see where we are going to start, and we urge you to make a courageous move and stick with it. Ready? Strap yourself in. Here goes...

You are amazing.

You're still here? That's a relief. Well done. We imagine those three words might be grating on you right now. That's probably because there's a good chance that you don't always feel amazing, and feeling *pretty far from amazing* may even be the reason that you reached for this book in the first place. Nevertheless, it is our contention that there is something really amazing about you. If you have made it this far, we would really like you to stick around a while longer as we explain just how amazing you are and how it is that you got to be that way. It all started a very long time ago...

THE EVOLUTION OF HUMAN SOCIETY

Scientists believe that humans have been around for about 250,000 years. Although there are various explanations about how we all got here, there is no dispute that human beings differ significantly from most of the other creatures we share the planet with. This is where we come back to the idea of you being amazing. Along with the rest of your fellow humans, you are capable of things that no

other creature on Earth will ever be able to achieve. You have a talent for the most incredibly creative and flexible patterns of thought and behavior. You can create entire worlds in your imagination and effortlessly travel from the past to the future. Up there in that head, you can conjure incredible beauty and the most fearsome monsters. Your brain is the biological equivalent of a high-performance sports car. It leaves the rest of the field standing. Just like with that sports car, it would probably be wise to understand a little of how your brain works before you take it out for a spin.

This leads us to an interesting story featuring, among other things, fire, food, and friends. By the way, if your mind is grating on you again at this point, perhaps saying stuff like *Well, I can buy that human beings as a species are pretty remarkable, but me, I'm just useless*, later chapters are going to unpack further why you, our dear reader holding this book right now, are personally amazing yourself. Stick with us.

For most of our history, humans lived in small groups, slowly developing more and more complex ways of living. We were largely nomadic until about 12,000 years ago, when we started planting and growing crops. Once agriculture was born, we needed to stay in one place in order to look after our harvest. In turn, this necessitated the building of walls to keep other communities out and a whole host of new technologies to build, maintain, and run these new settlements. Gradually, we started to develop specialized skill sets. Where previously, individuals in hunter-gatherer bands would have *all* been strong, athletic, and equipped with the skills for survival on the move, people living in settlements began to specialize. As our villages, towns, and eventually cities became ever more complex, a wide range of occupational roles came into being and we developed myriad new ways to interact with, and relate to, each other.

In the modern age, our division of labor and roles has made us stronger as a group, although as individuals we have moved from knowing pretty much everything we needed to know for our survival to becoming highly skilled in just one or two areas. For example, you might be fantastic at performing open-heart surgery while having no clue whatsoever about how to grow tomatoes. Since there are countless people in our society who are better than us at lots of different tasks (neither of us are very good at open-heart surgery *or* growing tomatoes), for the individual person, this leaves lots of room for feelings of inadequacy to creep in and take hold. In terms of the whole of human history, this transition, along with other changes to the way we live, has been extremely rapid, and modern humans, with the same brains as their Stone Age ancestors, often find themselves struggling to keep up with the pace of it all.

COOPERATION

You might be wondering what on Earth this history lesson has to do with the way you feel about yourself. The key to the answer is buried in the previous paragraph and relates to the unique ability

of humans to cooperate in the way that we do. Let's pause for a moment to consider who has cooperated to put this humble little book in your hands. We'll start with you. Clearly you are central to the notion of "you reading this book." Before you, there are us, the authors. Between you and us, there are the wonderful Tesilya and Vicraj. They work for the publisher, New Harbinger, and have been our main point of contact during the writing process. There are yet others involved in proofreading, printing, and distribution before you can get your hands on a physical copy of the book. You might be reading a digital copy, which means a whole bunch of other people in the chain. The thing is, it doesn't really stop there. We wrote the book on computers, and neither of us built those machines ourselves. Thousands of people have cooperated to invent, design, build, and distribute our laptops. In formulating our ideas, we talked on the phone, chatted online, and met up in person. That's thousands more people right there from the communication, marketing, retail, and transport industries. And then there are all the people like teachers, colleagues, and clients who influenced our careers, and all the people who have shaped *your* life, for good or ill, to the point where you thought you might be interested in picking up this book. Now, obviously, the vast majority of those people were not doing what they did with the specific intention of facilitating your reading this book; however, if we take any of them out of the equation, "you reading this book" may never have happened. Such is the incredible nature of human cooperation. We do things together that benefit people we have never even met or who perhaps are not even born yet. It really is an amazing thing. Imagine how many people's destinies have you touched in the course of your life, either directly or indirectly, through your personal life or your work. If we gathered them all together in one room, how big would that room have to be?

LANGUAGE AND COMMUNICATION

This ability to cooperate has helped human beings compensate for our numerous physical disadvantages. We cannot fly, breathe under water, or survive for long in extreme temperatures. Our senses are not that acute, and our bodies are relatively small and frail. However, we *are* able to flexibly cooperate on a huge scale—and that has set us apart and contributed to our success. So, how did we achieve that? One theory suggests that about 70,000 years ago, human brain development took a leap forward and we developed the kind of abstract thinking and language abilities that we take for granted today. This enabled us to communicate with much greater precision and was the spark that ignited an explosion in the development of better tools and more complex cultural practices. In his book about human history, *Sapiens*, Harari (2014) lists three key benefits of this major development in communication. Having advanced language capabilities means that (1) we are able to learn quickly, (2) we can pass on that knowledge to others across generations, and (3) those whom we pass that knowledge to are able to build and expand on it, developing greater insights along the way.

Let's look at one example that we've all been through. Many years back, someone taught you to cross the road. Crossing the road is risky business, and someone who had previously learned the trick to doing it safely passed that knowledge on to you. They probably did this using language, alongside some actual demonstration of how to get across safely. We are willing to bet that they didn't pick you up and throw you in front of an oncoming vehicle in order for you to experience firsthand the consequences of not crossing safely. This is the great benefit of language in terms of cooperation. You can learn things without having to be shown. You can learn that roads are dangerous without having to actually get run over. The thing is, we need others to show us these skills. Therefore, being part of a social group is, and always has been, incredibly important to our survival. Historically, this has been a matter of life and death: if we were cast out of the group, we would usually wind up dead before too long. One might argue that our social nature is even more important today because of the specialization that has developed in modern society. We are all much more dependent on each other's skills for survival, whether that be in relation to tomato farming, heart surgery, or anything else.

THE DARK SIDE OF LANGUAGE

We all play a part in the incredible achievements of humanity. On a daily basis, we bend the environment to our will and contribute to complex systems of culture, religion, and commerce. Even our infant children can do things that no other creature on the planet will do in its lifetime. The power, flexibility, and creativity that language has given us is an incredible gift. However, language can also work against us and hold us back in ways that other species never have to worry about.

Let's go back to your learning to cross the road without ever having to get run over by a vehicle. What basically happened there was that you learned to be anxious about something that had never actually happened. In terms of not being run over, this is a good thing—your anxiety helped you to be cautious and pay attention each time you cross the road. The trouble is that being anxious about things that have never actually happened can show up in all sorts of ways that are definitely not so good. Have you ever worried about an upcoming event? Lost sleep over something that was due to happen the following week? Avoided something because your mind had convinced you that it would turn out badly? These kinds of experiences can be less helpful. They are uniquely human. Antelope don't worry about whether there will be enough food to eat *tomorrow*. Sheep tend not to ruminate over their past mistakes. Tigers don't give a moment's thought to how their careers are going to pan out. And zebras don't get stress-related illnesses, as Robert Sapolsky's (2004) famous book, *Why Zebras Don't Get Ulcers*, illustrates.

As much as human language is a gift, it does have a darker side. It can exert a huge amount of control over our behavior, and as we get older, we increasingly see the world, not directly *as it is*, but as our minds *tell us it is*. We perceive the world through the filter of our thoughts, most of which are

built out of words. Consequently, we struggle to be mindful and present-focused in the way that other animals seem to do so effortlessly. Animals without complex language abilities tend to respond to what is directly happening in their environment. If a cow in a farmer's field brushes against an electrified fence, it will move away from that fence as quickly as it can, and you would be unlikely to find many cows leaning against electrified fences. As humans, we *can* respond like this, although our minds tend to give us other things to respond to that are not about our direct experience. For example, you might stay in an unhappy relationship because of thoughts like *No one else would ever want me*, even though *experience* tells you that other people have indeed found you attractive as a person. We allow our minds to dictate to us what matters, and we respond to imagined consequences instead of actual ones. This can turn into the equivalent of leaning against the electrified fence.

Within human history, we can see how the development of spoken language facilitated the spread of ideas and stories, and that this gathered pace even more quickly with the advent of the written word. Over time, for both individuals and groups, ideas and stories can grow in stature, and if there is a clash between the stories and actual experience, the story often wins. There are numerous examples of this all around us. Have you ever encountered a bureaucratic or administrative system that hasn't received your forms or has recorded the wrong information about you? Generally, it is the information "in the system" that will be trusted over anything that you might say or do. You may have been judged or selected or rejected for something on the basis of your academic grades at some point. Using information in this way to tell stories about people didn't exist until a few hundred years ago, and yet it can determine the way that other people perceive you—or, if you are like most people, that you perceive yourself. You might have decided that you are not good enough based on some arbitrary criteria like your grade point average or your bank balance. Language, and the ideas and stories that it can create, shapes an enormous amount of our daily experience.

As language has taken over in human society, one of the consequences for us as inherently social creatures has been that we compare ourselves with other people, and most often, we judge ourselves as coming up short in one way or another. The rapid pace of societal change has contributed to the inexorable rise of this rating game. If we consider our Stone Age roots, the evidence suggests that humans lived in small groups of approximately thirty to fifty hunter-gatherers. If you were a member of this community, your social reference group was small by modern standards. There were fewer people to compare yourself with. If you were a woman in her early twenties looking for a mate, your reference group was even smaller. If the entire community numbered only fifty, there would have been very few women in their early twenties besides you, perhaps only four or five. Back then it would have been much harder to look around the group and decide that you were inferior. Fast forward to today, and a woman in her twenties probably sees way more than four or five other twenty-something women before she even arrives at her place of study or work. If you add in all the comparable women she will see on social media, television, billboards, and magazines during the day, the number could easily be in the hundreds. If we also consider that many of those images will be retouched and airbrushed to

conform with somebody's view of perfection, we can start to see how much easier it is to look around at others and decide we are not good enough.

A concrete example of this phenomenon occurred in Fiji in the 1990s, when television arrived for the first time. In Fijian society, having a fuller or more robust figure was traditionally deemed an attractive feature in both men and women, whereas being of slim build was associated with being weak. However, within three years of the arrival of television, which brought with it the portrayal of Western images and values, many women started to think of themselves as being too big, and diagnosable eating disorders appeared for the first time.

The human population has rapidly expanded from approximately half a billion in the year 1500 to around seven billion today. Our brains have changed little since the Stone Age, and it is no wonder that we struggle to keep up with the complexity of the world around us. If you have ever looked around at other people and decided that you are not good enough or that you don't fit in with the group, history suggests there are some reasons why you might have done that, and you are most definitely not alone.

THE HUMAN CONDITION: WE HURT WHERE WE CARE

One of the consequences of wanting something a lot is worrying about not having it. Caring about anything tends to be closely related to getting stressed about it. Take a moment to think about the person you love most in the entire world (you can pick more than one if you feel like you're having to choose!). There's a good chance that this same person has the power to make you more anxious or angry than anybody else. Care and hurt, value and pain, all wrapped up in the same relationship. In exactly the same way, wanting to be part of the group will be closely related to worrying that you are not really part of it. This is why most of us have a version of the "I'm not good enough" story running around in our heads. As human beings we desperately want to belong, and the flip side of that is a deep-rooted anxiety that we don't. It is important to remember that we are most likely descended from the more anxious of the Stone Age people, since those who were more cautious and more on the lookout for various sources of threat were more likely to survive and reproduce. While they are often uncomfortable, anxiety and doubt are very natural parts of the human experience. To paraphrase the writer and comedian Ruby Wax, your brain is designed to keep you alive; it "couldn't give a shit about your happiness" (Ruby Wax Talks" 2015).

THE QUEST FOR SELF-ESTEEM

A thought like *I'm not good enough* is a prime example of the language of low self-esteem. It's hard to imagine having that thought and then punching the air with joy. It's likely to make you feel bad and have a negative impact on your confidence and motivation. Since the publication of Nathaniel Branden's (1969) *The Psychology of Self-Esteem*, mainstream psychology and the mass media have been fascinated by the concept of self-esteem, and it is often used to describe how people see themselves. It is not uncommon for therapists to refer to their clients as "having" low self-esteem, almost as if it were a disease.

If we pick it apart, the term "self-esteem" has two components. First, there is the "self" part. We could disappear down a very large and complex rabbit hole trying to define exactly what the self is, although for simplicity we might think of it as everything that goes into making you *you*. It is the summation of all your behaviors, emotions, thoughts, sensations, and urges. In combination, these things make up a story of who you are. The story is mostly stable across time and is often the object of our introspection and navel-gazing, which is where the "esteem" part comes in. The word "esteem" comes from the verb "estimate" and signifies a judgment or evaluation. These days "esteem" is most often used as a noun, interchangeable with words like "worth." It follows that coming to a view about your self-esteem involves an evaluation of your *entire* self. Now, it might not be what you are expecting to hear, but we have a problem with that...

We believe that you are too amazing to be evaluated in such a simple and all-encompassing way. How could we reasonably come up with a judgment of you that captures all of your complexity? A big part of the notion of low self-esteem is that it involves globally rating ourselves with judgments like *I'm not good enough*. It's like saying "I" = "not good enough." This doesn't really cut it. Not good enough at what? Not good enough for whom? Not good enough when, or in what situation? The wonderfully complicated and ever-evolving person that you are is just too complex to be given a single rating like that. "Not good enough" is just not up to the task of describing you, or anyone else on the planet.

If you want to play with this idea a little, consider the chair that you are sitting in. If you are not sitting in a chair, go and find one. Be kind to yourself and take the load off for a few minutes. Take a moment to look that chair up and down. Get acquainted with how it feels to sit in it. Do you think you could come up with a single word or phrase that can successfully evaluate the whole chair? Something that completely captures the essence of the chair? Have a go. We've even started the sentence for you.

This chair is _____.

Now, we are prepared to bet that if you came up with something, it probably does a good job of describing a *quality* of the chair or some *particular aspect* of it. You might have said, "This chair is comfortable/functional/easy on the eye" or something similar. Respectively, those examples describe

the chair's comfort, its utility, and its visual appeal. We are going to go out on a limb here and suggest that you probably haven't managed to completely describe its essence, or really get to the soul of the thing in your one sentence. What we would like you to consider is that if it is hard to do that for a chair, how can we really do it for you? Are you more or less complex than a chair?

Obviously, the judgment *I'm not good enough* hurts, and the perceived solution for experiencing these global negative judgments has been to try and shift toward global positive judgments like *I'm awesome!* In short, the proposed antidote for low self-esteem has been to reach for high self-esteem. Unfortunately, though, research suggests that this has not been a very effective strategy, for reasons we will go into later. While replacing negative judgments with positive affirmations has a few short-term benefits, people often struggle to really believe them, particularly at difficult times when they need them most. It is for this reason that this book is going to take a different tack in terms of how best to respond to negative self-stories and the language of low self-esteem. Instead of talking about reaching for *self-esteem*, we will talk about reaching for *self-acceptance*. We will expand on this throughout the book, although for now you can think of self-acceptance as seeing your whole self with a greater sense of kindness and compassion, even the bits of you that you don't like so much. We want you to learn to respond to the negative self-stories in a less harsh and critical manner, which is less about trying to get rid of them or block them out, and more about letting them in. This might sound counterintuitive. If it does, see if you can make room for any doubt around that just for now. Perhaps, if you've tried to make those stories go away or counter them, and it hasn't worked for you, it might be worth seeing if there is a different way to go about responding to them.

IN SUMMARY

You are amazing, yet a lot of the time, your mind probably comes up with all sorts of reasons why you are not. Problems in the way people see themselves are extremely common among the clients who come to us for help, whether related to self-doubt, a lack of confidence, social anxiety, or thoughts about being worthless. Both of us experience this kind of thing too, and to be honest, we don't know many people who don't to some degree or another. Our view is that this is all about humans being social creatures and that it stems from our need to be part of the group. While this might not help you feel any better in relation to the particular stories your own mind tells you about who you are, sometimes it can help to consider that you are not alone and that you share the human condition with around seven billion others, all of us with our feet on the same ground, all breathing the same air.

Bringing It All Together

Take a moment to reflect on the reasons that you picked up this book. What were you hoping to get out of it? List two or three of the main ones below. This will help you focus on what you want to change over the course of reading the book.

Next, in order to shed some light on what might have influenced the views you have of yourself, try to think about where those reasons came from. For example, do they relate to things you were told as a child or to cultural expectations, or are they based on the story your mind tells you about who you are? Summarize these briefly below.

Lastly, we invite you to reflect upon those reasons now that you have read this chapter. What will you take away from it? Has reading it offered you a different perspective? It may or may not have. Just try to be open and honest with yourself.
