



OVERCOMING YOUR NEGATIVE SELF



Introduction

"I feel like I'm no good. Like I'm just damaged goods. I can't even put my finger on it. It's just like I feel... unworthy. I feel see-through, as if people are going to look right into me... and hate what they find."

When I asked Jenny how she would describe herself, I could see the pain playing around her eyes. She bit her lip and her voice dropped to a barely audible whisper.

"I'm cowardly, ugly, fat, useless, stupid, and selfish."

Jenny's description of herself couldn't have been further from the way I saw her. I wondered what interplay of experiences had caused her to embrace such a poor self-image.

After all, much of what she'd told me about her life showed me she'd been brave, not cowardly. She wasn't fat or ugly, not through my objective eyes. And, far from being useless, she was articulate, intelligent, and had achieved a lot in her life.

Like many people with a poor self-image, Jenny was fair, reasonable and generous when it came to *other* people, but reserved a special corner of mental torment for herself.

How you learn to see yourself

In Jenny's case, as a child, she experienced harsh criticism by her mother and father. They had wanted the best for her but in their drive to '*make her better*' they inadvertently heaped criticism upon her.

"Clever girls don't do that."

"If you dress like that no man will ever want you."

"Why can't you be more like your sister?"

Often criticisms of ourselves derive from *other people's* criticisms of us. It *feels* like we are criticizing ourselves but often, we have adopted (*often unknowingly*) other people's condemnations of us.

When I asked Jenny whose 'voice' it was when she was criticising herself, it took some careful thought before she told me it was a mixture of both her parents. She'd taken up the criticism baton from them and had been running hard with it ever since.

To some extent we all learn to compare ourselves to others: to build, almost without realising it, a self-image. But what is self-image, exactly?

The fall from innocence

"She has a prettier nose than me."

"I'm not as clever, cool, rich, funny, tall, successful, confident, young."

"I am an inferior specimen."

Why can't I be like her/him?"

We're born into the world beautifully unselfconscious. We have an 'I' of pure awareness, in which the self as an object hasn't yet formed in our minds. However, bit by bit, we learn to view ourselves as we imagine others see us. We learn to compare ourselves not just to others, but to our imagined idea of how we should be.

How do we compare?

"I'm 35; I should have my own place to live."

"By now I should be in a settled relationship."

"Am I aging quicker than the people around me?"

Even when we compare ourselves *favourably* to other people, the fact that we are comparing ourselves at all leaves us vulnerable because one day we might find we don't compare as well as we used to.

And if we tend towards perfectionism - an unachievable goal - then we can never be good enough. And we fall into a trap of our own making.

The cost of Comparison

Living your life through the lens of the people around you - causes pain, Comparison has the ability to embitter us, remove joy, introduce dark thoughts and distort and damage our self-regard.

Worrying how we're doing, how we look, and how we seem to others shrinks and spoils the life-expanding spontaneity that we once knew, before we objectified ourselves in this way.

More often than not, people who chronically compare themselves are aware on some level that they're doing it. They might say, "*Yes, I know I've got to learn to think differently.*" But in a way, just trying to *think* differently to improve self-image is putting the cart before the horse.

Why you can't think yourself into a positive self-image

It wasn't that Jenny believed logically that she compared unfavourably with others or that she really was fat, or ugly, or useless. Logically she knew that it shouldn't matter if she wasn't as slim as a supermodel or as rich as a CEO.

But this kind of painful self-image has little to do with thoughts and everything to do with feelings. To help Susan be as fair and kind to herself as she was to others, we had to put her thoughts aside and focus on appealing to her feelings.

Feelings are more powerful than thoughts, thanks to the limbic system of fight and flight. And this is why it's actually easier to change feelings in order to naturally change thoughts than the other way around. Jenny had tried positive thinking, but just felt guilty for not being positive enough.

1. Be kind to yourself by being calm about yourself

Learning to view yourself '*from the outside*' - that is, calmly and objectively - lets you appraise yourself not through the distortions of fear or comparison, but through calm, fair, and objective assessment.

We don't have to believe we are as beautiful, successful or as rich as someone else. We just have to objectively understand and accept that everyone is different, and be calm and objective about that rather than experience comparative torment.

I helped Jenny relax deeply into a beautiful relaxed state we used an hypnotherapy approach called, '*The Helping Hand Technique*'.

When she came out of trance, she found that her memories of being criticised and bullied as a child, though still hurtful, no longer affected how she felt about current self.

This was the first step in undoing the negative conditioning from her past. She was beginning to change her *feelings* about herself so that her *thoughts* - her self-image - could naturally and easily update, modify, and change.

Improving self-image isn't about trying to force yourself to switch from negative to positive, it's simply about gaining more **self-objectivity**. Seeing yourself calmly '*from the outside*'. But that's only the first step.

2. Don't compare your inside to other people's outside

Feeling we have to be perfect is an imperfect way of travelling through life. It's easy to compare ourselves to some kind of impossible sense of who we imagine we should be, or to a person or people we have deemed 'perfect'.

There is always going to be someone richer, more classically beautiful, more 'successful' - whatever that means. More, more, more. But there are also millions who will always have *less* of none of your attributes. We all need to try not to compare ourselves to others- but you will slip, and when you do, at least make it a fair comparison. So be careful with *whom* you compare yourself to.

But even then, are we actually comparing ourselves to who other people really *are*, or who we *imagine* they are?

It's so easy to look at someone and think they have everything. But they may be looking at us feeling the same thing. Even the most beautiful, witty, clever people have their own inner doubts. After all, nothing is forever. Beauty fades, bodies fail, relationships end, money runs out. Nobody has everything.

One final way we can harness the understanding that self-image stems from feelings rather than logic is through metaphor. Here's one I used in partnership with Susan.

3. Improve your self-image with hypnotic metaphor

"It was like I was trying to con myself or something, because although I was trying to think good things about myself inside, I just didn't feel that way."

That's how Jenny described her attempts to try to improve her self-image just by trying to think more positively. I explained to her that there are more connections leading from the emotional parts of the mind to the thinking/logical parts (Actually, to ratio of 10:1) This is why trying to change feelings by changing thoughts can be so challenging.

Every time I would try to challenge Susan's negative self-image, she would argue with me. Not that I was surprised. Negative self-image is resistant to direct disconfirming feedback, which may even make someone cling *more* tightly to their painful self-image. This is why metaphor is so useful.

Metaphor is an *indirect* way of communicating with the powerful unconscious mind - the part that actually produces the horrible feelings of inadequacy in the first place.

I took Jenny into hypnosis, and I told her metaphorical stories. In this deep state of relaxation, her feelings could calm and adjust, making it natural and easy for her to think in healthier ways. Here's one story I told her that really did seem to have an immediate effect - and it may well help you too.

The Freed Princess

In a dark castle lived a princess who had never seen her own reflection. She'd been locked up for her whole life, until one day found that the door to her palace dungeon had accidentally been left open. Amazed, she stepped free for the first time ever.

She walked outside and down to a shimmery lake - another thing she had never seen before. With wonder, she peered into the lake and, for the very first time, saw her own reflection. But it was stormy, the wind was whipping the water, and her reflection was fractured and warped.

Naturally, the princess believed this was how she really was, how she really looked. Jagged. Distorted. Ugly. She began to cry at the 'true nature' of herself. Then a serene elderly lady quietly approached her with a kind smile and warm, understanding eyes.

The lady comforted the princess and, as she gently reassured her, the warping wind calmed. Almost instantly, the surface of the lake became even and calm. The sun emerged, and everything felt gentle and peaceful once more. After a moment, the old lady encouraged the princess to observe herself again in the reflection of the now calm lake.

With everything - the elements, her mind, and the very atmosphere - calm and balanced, she now saw herself as she truly was and started to come to know herself.

You can tell yourself how amazing you are until you're blue in the face, but this is not the path to restoring healthy self- image. **Calm self-observation** is the first step to seeing yourself as you are meant to be seen.

As you really are. Not perfect, not terrible - but worthy of respect, and full of potential above and beyond what yourself or others may have said or thought. As the song goes, 'Perfectly flawed.'

We all have some flaws and foibles but they do not detract from our beauty, potential or value.

Healing not hating

Over time, we worked on removing the emotional charge from Jenny's most troublesome memories so they no longer coloured and dictated her feelings or thoughts about herself. We worked on strategies to help her meet her emotional needs. And she began to use her mind to heal, not hate herself.

Jenny began recognising, not as just an idea but as a *felt reality*, her attributes, her beauty, and her array of potentials. She began to respect herself not because it was something she should do, but as a natural consequence of her newly developed calm after overcoming past harsh conditioning.

In the end, Jenny liberated the inner princess. Perhaps you too, can realise the inner, wonderful you.

If you have questions about panic attacks or are seeking solutions, please contact me via email: steve@iotherapy.net

Note: Jenny was not her real name and was changed, with consent, for all the obvious reasons.