

Your homework for 2016 — HAPPINESS!

Life is difficult these days. When life should be happiness and love, sometimes it's just slogging along. Sometimes you even feel like Macbeth who tells us that life "creeps in this petty pace from day to day... And all our yesterday have lighted fools the way to dusty death." Well, that's creepy! I sure hope you don't feel like that, but you might find yourself down in the dumps too often. Before you become like Macbeth, let's take a break from this "petty pace" of boring life or depression and despair and take a self-concept break. It can be fun and you can end up happier than you began. I hope you do like yourself. I hope you feel that you are likable and liked by others. If you truly feel you are a positive person, even a thoroughly great person, congratulate yourself and you can stop reading. If, however, you have doubts about yourself and your happiness, you can try this little exercise and feel much better at the end.

Start by looking for your "Internal Critic." I don't mean that you actually really have a little guy in your brain casting aspersions upon yourself. But years of critical comments by parents, teachers and others have likely raised doubts about your adequacy. And self-doubts can lead to negative thinking and even depression. So take a notepad or notebook and start jotting down your thoughts about yourself as you go through your day. One section could be happy thoughts and compliments. Hopefully you do think positively about yourself, but possibly not often enough! The section we are most concerned about will be self-doubts and criticisms. When we get too many of these negative thoughts we end up with self-concept problems and even perhaps an Internal Critic. Subtitle this section Internal Critic Homework. Your job is to monitor your thought patterns to catch as many examples as possible of the Critic judging you in a negative fashion. Sometimes it's hard to keep track of your thoughts as they go by so quickly. When you realize you've stopped monitoring your thoughts, try to backtrack and remember what you may have been thinking. Jot down as many internal critic comments as possible so that you can get a good overview of the problem.

Advice Line

By Dr. Betty Phillips



If you were to stop here you'd probably become even more depressed. "Oh my gosh, I didn't realize I was such a...slob... Idiot... nerd... whatever." No, in fact you are not those words. They're just self criticisms that make you feel unhappy, unworthy and even depressed. You've probably picked up the tendency to judge yourself as others have judged you. In most cases those judgments have been unfair and inaccurate even when they were rendered by well-meaning people. There are many reasons why children and adults are criticized: to enforce rules, to compete with others, for self-improvement or achievement, even sometimes to predict the worst so you will be prepared for it or to help you become used to rejection by others. It is helpful to become aware of and able to cope with criticism by others. Too often, however, that's all that happens, and you are left without coping strategies to ameliorate the negative internal effects of these criticisms.

Your next task will be to help yourself change these negative self judgments on the way to a more accurate and positive understanding of yourself. So for each of these negative self criticisms, I want you to learn to develop positive thoughts. These alternative positive thoughts will be more specific, more accurate and non-judgmental versions of the self criticisms you have recorded. When these problematic issues are identified you can learn to change them into achievable life goals for yourself. This may sound like too much work. I would agree with you if you find that you need to continue this work after a sample. Most people do not. Once they get the hang of it, they start automatically changing their critical comments into thoughts about themselves that they can live with. In some cases they even can move these thoughts into the positive category.

Let's try an example. Someone has called you a slob. You look around your bedroom and agree that the area is disorganized and chaotic and that you might appear to be a slob. But let's work on alternative thoughts. "In fact I don't like to pick up my bedroom very often. I'm very busy and my bedroom is not the most important part of my life. Looking around, I see a big pile of clothes and books in the corner. I usually straighten up my bedroom on the weekend when I have time for laundry and or when I am looking for a certain book." What's wrong with that? You see right here you have an alternative thought which is much easier to live with than the thought that you are a slob. No, you're not a slob and you don't need to call yourself a slob! To continue, you can also write down what I call counterbalanced thoughts. These are alternative thoughts to counteract the negative impression of the word "slob." The counterbalanced thought could be that you usually keep your office very neat for your working environment. Furthermore you usually clean up your bedroom on weekends. So, therefore, counterbalancing the "slob" adjective would be that "I'm not compulsive. I'm as tidy as I need to be." So you see the endpoint is that you have a better understanding of yourself and you're able to discard the critical thought that you are a slob. Why should we go around with these critical thoughts about ourselves percolating in our unconscious or conscious minds? Why not just operate more realistically and thus more happily in this world? You can choose as to whether you want to continue to use this exercise systematically in your notebook or just know that most self criticisms are worthless or harmful and can and should be countered whenever you need to do so.

When you are down in the dumps and burdened by self-criticism or excessive external criticisms, there is another exercise you can use that I call "Let the Sunshine In: Banish the Internal Critic."

Start making a list of the positive qualities which you appreciate in yourself. Do put the list in your notebook so that you can consult it whenever you feel down or doubtful

about yourself. Criticisms usually have a lot more power than self appreciative thoughts. It's too bad that this is so, but we live in this kind of world of guilt and self-blame. Some of us even become blocked when we think of positive qualities in ourselves. So you can start with a list of positive adjectives and spend time during the day thinking about how these positive adjectives apply to you. If you're having trouble doing this, you can systematically jot down positive thoughts: qualities about yourself that you have noticed, qualities that others have praised or appreciated, those that make you feel happy, proud or bring happiness to others, qualities and skills that help at home, work, or other situations. Many of you will have doubts when you write down these positive qualities. It's important to realize that these doubts are fostered by your internal critic and your life experiences of criticisms. I remember distinctly having a client in my office who was so depressed that she was unable to generate any positive feelings about herself. She did allow her spouse to come to the session and contribute to a list of her positive qualities. At that time she could not feel that those positive qualities described her. But she agreed to carry the list around and try to match her experiences with her list. Over time she did become less self-critical and more positive about herself.

For additional reading about these issues, you can find information on my website in the Reading Room in a series of three articles on the topic of Self Esteem. The second article has a list of positive adjectives which you can use as you are trying to boost your self-esteem. The articles contain a reference to an extremely helpful book on this topic, McKay and Fanning, *Self-Esteem*, Third Edition, New Harbinger, 2000.

I'm going to share another strategy that may cause you to chuckle or even wonder about my sanity. (Before you spend much time wondering about this, I will tell you not to worry, that sanity is on my list of positive adjectives.) I had a client who was so wracked with anxiety that she was unable to get to

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TAKE CARE of the NIGHT

A Study of Religion, Dream, and Magic



RENZO SERENO

*Anxiety — An Examination by a Classically-Trained Scholar
of the Mid-Twentieth Century*

EDITED BY JULIAN SERENO AND DR. LYNN VEACH SADLER

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Written to challenge the foremost intellects of the mid-20th century. Edited to be accessible and entertaining to all readers of the early 21st century.

Renzo Sereno, an erudite and imaginative thinker, died fifty years ago, leaving behind a manuscript that has now been rescued, cleaned up and published. It still resonates with insight, wit, learning and skepticism. His writing is a kind of bridge between traditional scholarship and modern social science.

Dr. Sereno attempts a new definition of the human situation: we are mammals who are beset by anxiety. We attempt to escape our anxious predicament in endless ways, some of which make us even more anxious. And we are destined to fail.

He focuses his attention on three areas where we, as a species, attempt to "take care of the night"—or cope with our affliction: religion, dream, and magic. His arguments range across numerous cultures and cultural practices, with an eye to the universality of our anxious quests; from Machiavelli, to psychoanalysis, to Obeah (the form of magic he spent much time learning about in Antigua.)

The book is laced with wit. For example, in reference to Vilfredo Pareto: "who so impressed scientists.. and find his jargon that of a man intelligent enough to understand the importance of being pretentious by being obscure." or "Marx defined religion as the opiate of the people; we can define the languages of the social sciences as the bicarbonate of the elite."

Is our culture any less anxious than it was fifty years ago. I doubt it. Sereno speaks to this in a strikingly contemporary observation: "... another instance of our knowing more of the remedy than of the malady. We are far more familiar with a sleeping tablet than sleep." Many an Ambien user could relate to this observation.

Sleep, the night and its mysteries—find an astute and compassionate observer in this book.

— Lou Lipsitz, poet, psychotherapist and Professor Emeritus of Political Science at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill

www.takecareofthenight.com