Evolving

Self Confidence

How to Become Free From Anxiety Disorders and Depression

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Evolving Self Confidence

How to Become Free From Anxiety Disorders and Depression (The First Chapter)

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It is strongly recommended that anyone who is thinking, feeling or behaving in a way that they don't understand, any way that is causing pain or misery, should consult a medical professional and that a medical doctor should always be consulted for any persistent physical or body function problem, in the first instance, to rule out possible

physical causes before psychological reasons are explored. And that, under no circumstances, should anybody stop taking prescribed medication without fully qualified medical supervision.

This eBook contains the first 40 (print) pages of:

Evolving Self Confidence:
How to Become Free From Anxiety Disorders and Depression

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Introduction

THIS BOOK IS FOR all those of us who suffer the anguish and despair of loneliness rather than face the perceived rejection that social failure may bring. It is for those who experience as much fear and panic going into a shop or stepping outdoors as if they were going to face a firing squad, and for those who are so

convinced that they are physically or mentally ill that no medical tests can convince them otherwise For the ones who worry incessantly or scrub themselves hundreds of times a day or repeat phrases/rituals to allay anxiety over some perceived catastrophe (or retribution from ‘higher forces’), it’s for you. And it’s also for each and every one of us who looks back on a life with regret, engulfed in deep depression, longing for the person we feel we could have been or should have been.

This book is for everyone whose own thoughts, feelings and behaviours drive a life of anxiety and fear instead of the adventure and excitement it can be… It’s for all of us, because deep inside we are doing the same thing.

With anxiety-related problems (including depression as such a problem), we watch ourselves in everything we do and it is not difficult to appreciate how this self-absorption can lead us to believe that we are the only one with such a problem. This, in itself, strengthens the '*what's wrong with me*' beliefs yet nothing could be further from the truth.

Millions of people worldwide experience these problems; it is estimated that in America alone over thirty million people suffer from some form of anxiety disorder. The most common one is social anxiety disorder (or social phobia), closely followed by post traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and generalized anxiety disorder. Around one in thirty to fifty people suffer from obsessive compulsive

disorder (OCD) and one in ten are reported to have a specific phobia. This doesn't include vast numbers of people who have depression or those living anxious lives ruled by shyness or stress.

Many people feel they are working below their potential and are frustrated; more people are unhealthy and overweight than ever before; greater numbers of teenagers are depressed and problems involving anxiety and stress account for the majority of visits to a doctor's surgery. In a world of better education, food, hygiene and healthcare – emotionally, society is crumbling.

The unique pressures in modern society no doubt play a part in the tension and stress found in these

problems, but anxiety problems are nothing new; they are part of the human condition and the following quotation, from over three hundred years ago, sums them up aptly:

"The mind is it's own place, and in itself can make a heaven of hell, a hell of heaven."

– John Milton (1608–1674)

For centuries, writers, poets and artists have tried to convey the inner turmoil and conflict that is often associated with existence.

The world we live in personally is dictated by what goes on in our mind, irrespective of what external reality seems to be. Nowhere can this be seen more profoundly than in the case of anorexia nervosa. How can a painfully

thin girl look in the mirror and see herself as fat? Even to the extent of pointing out which areas of her body are too fat. Anxiety problems are reality to us and later we shall discover just how and why this happens, how we start living a life ruled by anxiety and how, even though we had little power over the creation of the situation, we can change things. Others don't see us as we see ourselves and once we understand this and why we think the way we do, we can start to accept things and change. We can now move forward and evolve beyond the problem to true self-confidence.

Vast resources in the form of research, therapy and medication have been used in an attempt to resolve these problems, with, on the whole, a

spectacular lack of success. Problems are defined, named, classified, listed, ordered, placed in categories and placed in sub-categories – all in an attempt to understand and control them. Strangely enough, exactly the same attempts to gain control are found in most forms of OCD. And while some argue that benefits of this system include a more accurate diagnosis and subsequent better treatment (which is debatable given such a lack of success) others argue that it is inaccurate, misleading and overlooks the bigger picture. That is what this book is about – the bigger picture.

But for slightly different circumstances, my social anxiety disorder could have been your OCD or your generalized anxiety disorder could have been your neighbour's Bulimia. At their heart, all

these problems are the same; they start for the same reason, grow in the same way and are cured by the same methods. Indeed, many people who seek treatment for anxiety-related problems present with a number of symptoms across the whole range of anxiety disorders and the final ‘disorder’ diagnosed is often one relating to the most frequent or strongest set of symptoms shown. Some people are actually diagnosed as having a number of anxiety disorders.

When we look at the backgrounds of large numbers of people with anxiety and depression problems, they are often strikingly similar in many ways. Negative life experiences and subsequent feelings involving self-worth and insecurity occur across the board with such regularity, and are so

similar, that it is hard to see how these factors cannot play a major role in anxiety-related problems.

Ranging from acute shyness and stress to anxiety disorders and depression, each problem is unique to the individual. Expressions of social phobia vary from person to person just as those of agoraphobia vary from panic disorder and GAD varies from OCD. However, as unique to the individual these problems are and as different to each other they are, these problems develop for similar reasons and strengthen in a similar way. They do so in a manner that reflects the way our mind and body works.

Every human being on the planet (indeed, every animal) is built in such a way as to develop an anxiety disorder given the right (or wrong) set of

negative life experiences.

We shall learn how at the heart of these problems lies neither illness nor disease and not even disorder for these problems aren't irrational they develop for a good reason – for our survival. As such, anxiety disorders (including depression) will be referred to as 'anxiety-related problems' throughout much of this book.

Anxiety problems are, in fact, highly adaptive given our life experiences and genetic history but they are not appropriate. In essence, most problems involving anxiety are learned behaviours involving deep-seated survival mechanisms that develop from the ways we learned to cope with negative life experiences. The vast majority of people with these problems

are extremely intelligent, more so than the average population, and are aware of the inappropriate thoughts, feelings and behaviours yet feel powerless to stop them. It's the fact that we are dealing with deep-seated, instinctual behaviours and self-beliefs that make them seem so hard to control.

Long-term anxiety and panic, phobias, OCD and depression can leave us feeling helpless, believing nothing can be done about them and that there is little we can do to get free. Years of searching, reading books and websites, finding what seem to be answers, trying ways to think, trying ways to behave, 'get-well quick' ideas, therapy, medication etc. can leave us exhausted, without hope and even more anxious about our problem. Yet many people do successfully overcome

anxiety-related problems, usually after years and years of experience, research and experimenting with their problem. They ultimately find the answer.

These people don't suddenly wake up one day and the problem has gone; they grow, move forward and change. Their problem weakens and fades as they come to understand it, accept it and develop a new attitude towards it. They start to think and behave differently.

The key to overcoming most anxiety and depression related problems involves understanding how they work. Like everything in life, when we know how and why something works we know how to stop it. To try and overcome these problems without this

understanding is exceptionally difficult for whatever we may try, as soon as any symptoms occur, we think that it's not working, that it isn't the answer and we continue with our never-ending search for the 'real answer'. Feelings of no control play a huge part in the development and growth of these problems and without a real, deep understanding of what is happening, the unknown will always overpower us.

To start dealing with these problems takes courage, for fear and self-doubt play a major part in them. And yet, if you have admitted to yourself that you have a problem, you have already taken one of the most courageous steps.

Although you may not appreciate it at the moment, you do have special

qualities that many people don't have, including some that could have only developed out of the struggle with feelings of self-doubt and anxiety. You have the potential to become a much stronger, wiser person than one who hasn't experienced these problems.

We all learn and grow through our experiences. In anxiety disorders and depression we learn and grow in a negative way. But this can be turned around whenever we choose and we can become stronger, wiser and better for the experience. Armed with the right knowledge it is possible to become free.

The aim of this book is to provide such an insight into these problems that you can stand back and say “that’s it, that’s what happened to me”, and with this

knowledge you can stop searching for that elusive ultimate reason (which, as we shall learn later, doesn't actually exist) and start to live.

Research shows that the right kind of self-help can be beneficial with anxiety and depression problems, however our individuality and uniqueness means that with self-help: 'one size doesn't fit all'. Basic truths apply to all of us, but take the advice given and tweak it, mould and shape it to suit your self.

Individual disorders are explained in more detail in 'The Problem' section and even if you feel that you have (or have been diagnosed with) only one particular 'disorder', it may be a good idea to read about all the disorders covered since they are all connected and you may learn something beneficial.

When it comes to the mind and anxiety problems, generally speaking, anything that we feel uncomfortable with and have to force will not work since this merely enhances the ‘feeling bad’ part of us. Conversely, things that are comfortable to us can work.

Freedom from these problems involves insight, understanding, acceptance, practise and perseverance. With these, we can go from feeling bad about our self to feeling great about our self and once we start to feel this way everything else follows. The foundation for this change is insight; the greater the insight, the greater is the potential for change. So let’s look at the ultimate question – just what are these problems and how do they start?

PART I

THE CAUSE

“Do not give in too much to feelings. A overly sensitive heart is an unhappy possession on this shaky earth."

– JOHANN WOLFGANG VON GOETHE (1749–1832)

The Bear and the Flagpole

…You're running down the road, you are frightened, something is behind you. You can feel its presence *bearing* down on you. It is chasing you, it's *overbearing* and you know that if it catches you it will destroy you. Wherever you run it follows; down every street, down every alley, it is still there right behind you. You run into a house and hide – still it comes. Managing to glance back you see it, it is in fact a… *giant grisly bear*… snarling ferociously and wanting to destroy you. Tiredness is setting in, you've been running for so long and still the bear is

right behind you. What can you do? How can you escape? You turn a corner and see it, there in the distance – your salvation.

Twenty yards in front of you... *a flagpole*... you'll be safe up there, the bear won't be able to get you. You make it and climb to the top just as the bear reaches the bottom of the pole. Seeing the bear down below, you breathe a sigh of relief – you are safe.

Suddenly you feel scared, you realise that you are thirty feet in the air. Any wrong movement and you could fall; you must stay alert at all times to prevent this. So there you are... at the top of the flagpole, unable to go down towards the bear, constantly alert lest you fall...

The above describes a dream, a

dream that symbolises the cause of anxiety-related problems and how we come to live our lives: constantly alert, watching our self so that we don't fall (fail), trying to protect ourselves from a greater fear, always anxious to some degree.

But how do we get to this position?

We need to start at the beginning; our lives begin to take shape in infancy and childhood… and so do these problems.

1

As a Child…

OUR PARENTS ARE GOD to us. We worship the ground they walk on. They gave us life and keep us alive. A father shows his son what it is to be a man. A mother shows, to her daughter, a woman. And yet this same parent, the one we worship, can come to make us feel as though we are inadequate, stupid, weak and worthless. Significant

others can do the same to some extent, but with our parents it's different. Their genes are a part of us; their behaviour towards us strikes at our very existence, our inner-self, our being and we cannot feel any way towards them without feeling the same about part of our self.

Throughout recent history there have been changes in thinking about the influence of parents on a person's emotional health. Parents have gone from being fully responsible or having no responsibility at all to a middle ground, where other things such as peers, school, society, and media play a major part. And these do play a part, but nothing influences us quite like our parents. Their genes are our genes and from the day we are born we are shaped by their beliefs, attitudes and

behaviours, we are moulded by their hopes and fears and many people, well into their middle age, are still trying to please their parents and gain their love.

In her excellent self-help book about depression, Alexandra Massey estimates that around 80% of people that she has spoken to about depression are entangled with their parents and stuck. And research has shown an improvement in the phobic behaviour of adolescents when relationships with their parents improved.

However, the purpose of this section is not to blame, judge or denigrate our parents. It is not to justify anger, resentment or hate, for in doing this – something that plays a large part in many people's problems – we only hurt and damage our self. The purpose of

this section is simply to understand what happens and why.

A Parent's Power

Human infants are the most helpless of all the mammals when newborn. Immediately after being born we cry in order to be comforted and we come equipped with a number of instinctual behaviours to form strong attachments to those who can protect and nurture us. As we grow, this attachment grows to ensure our safety.

The power of our parents is unquestionable. They are big and strong, we are small and weak. They can do things we can't: drive a car, mow the lawn, drink beer and change a light bulb. They teach us how to do

things, things that empower us, like how to ride a bicycle, how to swim and what everything means. Their knowledge and power shapes our sense of competence, what we can and cannot do, and our confidence. Our parents feed and clothe us and keep us warm. They can do so many things we can’t and know so much we don’t that they must be right and we must be wrong.

They make us feel good and make us feel bad; almost all of the rewards and punishments that a child receives are mediated by their parents. They hurt us and they help us get better. To top it off, we cannot avoid them. Even as a small child, certainly as a teenager, if someone was nasty to us or treated us badly we would soon learn to avoid them – but we can’t do this with

parents.

Every child faces this situation, totally dependent on their parents who are so powerful and sometimes so rewarding, trying to deal with mixed up feelings about their parents and themselves.

What we do next is something that strengthens the parent-child bond (for good or bad) – we start to identify with our parents.

Identification

The dog, a family pet – its owner will look after the animal, feed it and take care of its needs. He may become strongly attached to it, but it's unlikely that he will identify with it. However, if the dog is a show dog, a thoroughbred, winner of the best of breed in many dog

shows, the owner may identify with the dog in order to gain status that he, himself, lacks. The public accolade that comes with being a winner, through the qualities of the dog, provides a feeling of self-enhancement for the owner.

The child believes that if he or she were more like the parent and shared some of the parent's qualities then they would feel more competent and powerful and feel stronger. At some stage in their lives virtually every son wants to be like his father and every daughter like their mother. As a young child, we can feel immense pride when people comment on how much we look like our father or mother, and when identification with the same sex parent is particularly strong, we may even want to look like them. Many children actually go through stages of looking

remarkably like their parents. (Perhaps, as in the pet example above, there is some truth in the saying that ‘the owner looks like their dog’).

Identification involves the strong desire to possess the characteristics of the model; characteristics such as attitudes, values and qualities not actual behaviours, which involve imitation. Because it relates to such things as values and qualities, identification is associated with our self-concept and this can be seen throughout life. New recruits to the armed forces (or social groups, companies, political parties etc.) will adopt a great many attitudes held by the group because his or her self-image is so dependent upon their relation to the group. We take the values of the model into our own understanding of

our self and the world. In essence, we want to be like something we value so that we can become strong like them and liked by them and thus liked by people in general. In this way our self-image becomes linked to our parents.

Identification serves an evolutionary purpose. Through it, the child learns to depend on himself. Our parents, the ones who we see living successfully in the world, no longer have to be by our side for we internalise their successful coping and start to act as our own caretaker. As we grow, we develop the ability to control our self and we learn to do this, initially, through self-talk.

Self-Talk

Self-talk, the scourge of virtually all anxiety and depression related problems – but only because it is negative, in both content and tone. It's a fairly safe bet that when we use 'you' in our self-talk that it is our parents talking.

When we learn to talk we learn to self-talk, to direct our self. It follows the same development path as learning to read: first we do it out loud and then we internalise it, taking it into our heads. The first stages can be seen in children who will often talk out loud whilst performing tasks. It has a survival value; we only need to hear our parent shout, "don't touch that fire" once, with fear and alarm in their voice, in order to

direct ourselves not to do it in the same manner in the future.

Through talking to our self, we come to no longer need our parent in such a way, for they are in our head. By using the words the parent uses, in the way that they use them, we can warn our self of danger and about the consequences of our acts. In this way, we learn and obey rules and behaviour patterns appropriate to our sex and to the standards of our family and society. If necessary, we can punish our self by reproving our own behaviour.

I remember well, during a university psychology lecture, a story related by the Emeritus Professor of Psychology at the time about a woman who got off the bus at the wrong stop. When asked by a friend “why?” she replied,

“because my mother told me to”. Her mother had been dead many years.

As adults, we talk to our self silently in our heads all the time, usually in a way that reflects the beliefs, attitudes and qualities of our parents. Unfortunately for many, and entirely due to what they have experienced, self-talk becomes focused on self-criticism and self-punishment.

But it doesn’t have to stay this way. When we understand how and why we identify with our parents (and the way in which self-talk facilitates this) and when we realise that our parents weren’t really so successful, that they didn’t know everything and much of the time what they said about us wasn’t actually the truth – we can legitimately change the way we talk to ourselves. Our self-talk can be encouraging and supportive,

a friend rather than an enemy.

* * *

Born out of the instinctual behaviour to form a strong bond with someone who can protect us, for the most part, identification isn't some 'thing' that we consciously decide to do. It is a natural progression that follows from seeing what success means and wanting to be like that and wanting to have it. It is a part of growing and developing and it's a double-edged sword.

The right amount, with a good role model can lead to a well-rounded individual, someone who is independent and confident, intelligent and well disciplined, respectful of the standards of others, the family and society. Identification can equip one to

deal with life successfully. It's a good example of evolution and learning working in harmony.

With a good role model, even excessive identification may be beneficial at times and can lead to great achievement. An article in the Sunday Times in 1997 regarding some of the influences on great explorers described Robert Swan as driven by a father who was extremely strict with high expectations, and Ranulph Fiennes as spending his life trying to live up to a father that he never even knew. Importantly, we can also identify with strong images and ideals of parents that we don't even know.

However, over-strong identification with a weak role model can be devastating. It can lead to that entanglement with our parents, the

‘being stuck’, that continues throughout our lives. In childhood it can cause over-dependency and attachment and a desperate need for their love. As an adult we can spend a lifetime of perpetual achievement in order to please our parents.

Excessive identification results from feelings of insecurity about our relationship with our parent. The more a parent makes us feel unloved (in whatever way), the more we need to be like that parent, not only to feel more competent and successful (and less insecure) but also because we think it will make them love us.

Children will forgive their parents anything to receive their love. It has been shown that children who have suffered incredible neglect and abuse from their parents still want to be with

them.

It follows that since we want to be like our parent, the identification between father and son and mother and daughter will be more intense and have a greater effect than identification between opposite sex parent and child. A son very rarely wants to grow up to be like his mother for she cannot teach him what it is like to be a man. And this is generally the case, with father-son and mother-daughter conflicts continuing well up to middle age and sometimes beyond.

It may well be the case that same sex child-parent identification forms the base for many a neurosis, where we take things out more on our self because the connection is so strong, whereas opposite sex child-parent

identification, due to its corresponding weaker connection, leads to taking problems out on others.

Identification, in itself, is not the problem for it is a natural part of development. It is when it becomes excessive, for the wrong reasons that things can start to go wrong. This usually happens due to the way our parent – the one we look up to, the one that we want to be like and to love us – treats us.

How Parents Affect Us

We can see that, as a child, a large part of our self-concept starts to take shape through identification, mainly with our parents and usually one parent

more than the other. We look at their qualities and achievements through filtered eyes and want to be like that.

Throughout all of this we are interacting with our parents continually, dealing with them daily, and it is this interaction and the way they treat us that also helps to shape how we come to think and feel about our self.

We have seen how identification with a good role model is ideal and how, in certain cases, strong identification with a parent who isn't even present can lead to great achievement, but this book isn't about these things, it's about the other side of the coin: the development and resolution of problems that relate to severe, misguided identification and how we come to feel about our self.

When parents treat their children

badly, whether directly or indirectly, excessively or mildly, it affects the way the child feels. Being treated badly leads only to one thing – feeling bad.

Without doubt, one of the worst things to make a child feel bad is conflict between the parents.

Parental Conflict

"The most important thing a father can do for his children is to love their mother."

– Henry Ward Beecher (1813–1887)

Perhaps a truer word has never been spoken. When our parents argue we feel bad, simple as that. How many children have sat upstairs in distress, listening to their parents screaming at

each other below? And how many adults with anxiety-related problems can recall such a scene from their childhood?

Fighting parents pose a threat to the child's sense of safety; their fighting instils feelings of insecurity, worry and self-doubt. These things feel bad, and (as we will learn later) one of the key elements in developing anxiety and depression related problems is that when we feel bad, there must be a reason for it – if there isn't, we will find one.

Our parents are right, they know more than us and if something is going wrong between them or between them and us we feel that it must be something to do with us, it must be our fault.

It doesn't take a great leap in imagination or faith to see how regular

and extreme arguing between parents can leave a child in an almost constant state of distress. Indeed, arguing parents may affect a child before it is born: if soothing sounds are beneficial to the developing child in the womb, then raised voices and the mother's stressed body may have a negative impact that sensitises the child to such experiences later in life. Perhaps this plays a part in the different temperaments that can be seen in newborns.

Parental conflict affects us deeply but there is something that has an even greater effect on us: parent-child conflict.

Arguments between a child and his or her parent not only create stress and anxiety in the child (and probably also in the parent) but also influence how

the child begins to think about itself. As a young child we don't have the acquired brain development, experience and knowledge to work things out for ourselves so we build our self-estimate solely on the appraisal of others and how they react to us. When these appraisals come from our parents we don't doubt them.

The most powerful negative influence on a child's self-concept comes from criticism.

Parental Criticism

Constructive criticism, given and received correctly, can be extremely beneficial. But there are no benefits from destructive criticism. It destroys children; it can destroy anyone.

Children have an innate need for protection, support, emotional security and love. Anyone who has children has seen siblings competing for the attention and praise of their parents. To a child, being criticised by a parent is seen as a withdrawal of love, which leaves them feeling unprotected and afraid. And we cannot feel this way, for feeling scared signifies that our survival is under threat and we have to do something about it.

And children will do something about it. We see them doing things to try and please their parent, constantly asking if they are doing things well enough and if they are good enough.

With constant criticism, be it direct or implied, we can never do well enough and eventually we come to think that it is actually us, our self, our very being

that is not good enough.

Destructive personal criticism is an attack and it's not just the words used. Being told that we are '*stupid*' or '*useless*', that '*we can't do anything right*', that '*we always fail*' and '*will never amount to anything*' or that we are '*pathetic*', '*fat*', '*lazy*' or '*ignorant*' is bad enough but it doesn't end there. It is the manner in which such things are said to us that damages the most.

To be called '*stupid*' by someone jokingly with a smile is not the same as being called '*stupid*' by someone who is angry and exuding hatred and disgust.

Young children, without an understanding of language, have a greater awareness of things that accompany it such as tone of voice and body language. Studies have shown

that perception of emotion in the face and voice begins during the first year of life. Necessarily, when vocabulary is limited, a greater emphasis is placed on the way something is said rather than what is said. Children *feel* how their parents are interacting with them. As adults we may still possess these skills, although blunted with time, and use them to judge the real truth behind what someone is saying.

Things said with an aggressive posture in a harsh and accusing tone of voice are attacks, which make a child feel physically bad– usually tense, distressed and anxious. Unfortunately, some parents do criticise their children in just such a way – harsh words said in a harsh manner.

If only we had known at the time, that the anger and distaste displayed by our

parents as they criticised us was what they actually felt about themselves.

* * *

The effects of Identification, family conflict and parental criticism are all related to our perceptions of losing the protection and love of our parents. To exist in an environment of conflict and criticism makes us feel insecure and feel as if we are being rejected by our own parents. This perceived loss of love may also occur when parents are absent from the child's life, through, for example, parental separation, being reared mainly by nannies or sent away to boarding school. Indeed, the latter, sending a young child away from their parent's protection to an often-hostile environment can have a profound effect on many children.

It is important to realise that it is what the child feels that counts. Feeling bad due to our parent's actions causes us to question what our parents think of us and also what is wrong with us for them to behave in such a way. Surely there can be no greater negative life experiences for a child than those that lead to constant feelings of insecurity over their self-worth.

Studies on healthy families, in communities where external stress is minimal, over a number of years have found that when a family has problems it sends stress hormones coursing through a child's system.

In extreme cases, those that constitute abuse of the child, we can see how the child's self-identity can be severely damaged. Here, the child's survival is more directly threatened and negative

feelings regarding safety and self-worth can lead to the child blaming him or herself (for the parent's behaviour) even more.

Thankfully, only a tiny fraction of parents really don't love their children and many of these are often severely mentally ill. The majority of parents do love their children but, for a variety of reasons, are unable to show it. Many have their own problems expressing feelings and some don't have the time or emotional energy, or do mean to love their children but never get around to it. Love is also a verb not just a noun.

Identification involves love; we identify with something to enhance how we feel about our self and we love something that makes us feel good about our self.

We wouldn't identify with a parent who

never loved us; we would not look up to them nor want any of their qualities. We wouldn't want to be like them and would probably become indifferent to them. It may be that such a situation underpins many psychoses, in which compassion towards others and self-control is rarely shown.

Interestingly, if a lack of love plays a part in psychoses, then receiving love may help these problems. And one study, the Soteria Project, appears to show that it does. Here, acutely distressed psychotic patients were treated with maximum kindness and minimum medication and many of them fared as well as patients treated in conventional psychiatric ways. Perhaps love is all we need?

Strong identification with a parent that

we look up to, one that we want to be like, who then starts to treat us in a way that makes us feel insecure and unloved is a situation that can underpin all anxiety-related problems. Same sex parent-child conflicts may have a more profound effect – just how many mother-daughter conflicts are played out on the battleground of anorexia nervosa?

Variations in same/opposite-sex parent identification and the strength/number of conflict experiences probably shape the type and severity of any problems that develop. Of course, strong love from one parent may make up for a deficit of love from the other.

Over time, regular family conflict situations condition us to feel physically bad and bad about our self. A situation that involves alternating periods of

being treated well and being treated badly produces the greatest conditioning of all. If we are treated well all of the time we behave accordingly; if we are treated badly all of the time we also learn how to behave appropriately, but if we are treated well or badly at random – we just don't know how to behave. Even if we are treated well on successive occasions, we never know whether the next time will be good or bad and we can end up constantly anxious.

Eventually, with excessive identification and related feelings of withdrawal of love, we can become conditioned into a state that lies at the heart of all anxiety-related problems: *part of our self feels bad about our self.*

This may explain the core 'feeling bad' found at the heart of many people's

anxiety and depression problems. But it's just the start.

Many people live like this, driven by an inner insecurity that promotes a life ruled by shyness or stress. They are often too anxious to try things in case they are rejected or constantly looking for love and acceptance through achievement. Others may go on to develop 'disorders' involving anxiety and depression. But there are other influences and things that have to happen for these problems, these 'disorders', to develop and grow – things we shall come to soon.

It may seem that anxiety and depression problems are therefore ingrained in us and we can't do much about them, but this isn't the case. The past is the past, it has happened and

can’t be changed, but it’s what we think about the past and what we do to our self in the present because of it, that affects us now. And this can be changed.

We need to accept the past (not deny it) and change our beliefs about it so that we can move forward. We have to understand our experiences, the people involved and, more importantly, the conclusions we drew about our role in them, for it is not the experiences themselves that do the lasting damage, it's what we make of them. We have to understand how we learned to think and behave because of our experiences.

Love or the perceived lack of love and the way in which it can relate to our self-concept isn’t the only way that we

are shaped by our parents. We are also moulded by the things they teach us, either directly or indirectly. From social anxiety disorder through to eating disorders and depression, the type of anxiety-related problem that we develop may, in part, come from what we learn from our parents.

Learning From Our Parents

Our parents teach us things directly through what they tell us: things we should know and things we should do. Knowing that knives are sharp, fires are dangerous and to be careful when crossing the road ensures our safety, and parents necessarily instil apprehension and fear over something that could harm us. Many fears can be

taught directly and are beneficial but if we are constantly prevented from taking risks we never learn that we can overcome challenges successfully.

Humans are obedient to authority, the child is taught to be obedient while taught to be good. Fear of authority is a powerful incentive for behaviour change and as children we are often told how to behave correctly (in our parent's eyes). It's not difficult to see how constantly being told to "look your best" and "do your best" or that "nice girls are clean, not dirty" can set the scene for social anxiety or obsessive and compulsive behaviour, later in life. Not just words, our parent's attitude and expression can often convey their disappointment in our behaviour. Parents may also provide conflicting information: preaching one thing yet

doing another.

We are also directly influenced by the ways we are rewarded or punished for certain behaviour. Children with parents who may not be warm and loving but reward them for excellence may become over-achievers, afraid of disappointing their parents and teachers initially and later of disappointing their friends, employer and spouse. Academic achievement and self-esteem are linked, and achieving becomes a way to be recognised and validated.

Achievement and wanting to achieve is normal, it drives us to perform well, the best that we can. But when this achievement becomes a desperate need, compensation for lack of love, it can be debilitating. With the need for achievement comes expectation, direct

or implied, and this can put anyone under tremendous pressure. A child placed under extreme pressure to perform during his or her education can become an adult who feels bad no matter how much they achieve.

Within the family, the expression of beliefs may also shape us. Being told things like “this family are all well-built” or “this family will always have to work hard” can set the foundation for our self-image later in life and stereotypical roles are often played out. Comments about children who are: “the clever one”, “the gifted one” or “the pretty one” can leave other children feeling that they are never good enough, and resentment between siblings, fostered by their differential treatment by parents, can last a lifetime.

We also learn from our parents by watching them. In children's play we can often see the entire parental role reproduced, including the appropriate mannerisms, tone of voice and attitude.

Children see and copy their parent's behaviour since they feel that it is the correct way to behave.

We may copy our parent's depression in times of sadness, their anxiety or anger when stressed or their concern with things being seen to be right in public. A mother who feels herself to be 'weak' and 'hopeless' may well generate those same feelings in us.

Being punished aggressively can lead us to believe that this is the correct way to act. Witness the little girl smacking and scolding her doll in exactly the same way her mother did to her.

Our parents therefore shape us enormously, through how we come to feel about our self and how we learn to behave. As we grow, other influences from outside the family come into play. Things like school, peers, teachers, society and the media all play a part and we'll look at these later.

But it's our parents that touch our inner-self and their influence can last many years. Women marry men who have the qualities of their father and men marry women with their mother's features. And just how many people spend a lifetime following a profession that their father wanted?

Healthy identification with a good role model is ideal whereas excessive identification with a weak role model can be disastrous.

Save those parents with severe mental illness, many of our parents treat us in a way that makes us feel rejected and unloved – but why?

Why They Do It

Some parents can't help themselves. Just as we cannot stop scrubbing our hands clean when gripped by the compulsions of OCD, although we know it's wrong, they cannot stop themselves being angry and critical of a child whose imperfections they believe reflect on them. They are driven by their own feelings of weakness and self-doubt.

Are such parents really weak? Are they not strong and it's the child that is weak? Well, consider this…

Without exception, those who criticise others can rarely take criticism themselves and they never fail to tell us just how good they are as they berate us. Most of them would never (dare) say to another adult, the things they say to us and are often kinder to strangers than they are to their own family.

If we were actually behaving in a way that was bad or wrong, a strong parent would explain why it was wrong and show us the correct behaviour; they would guide and support us in order to help us improve. They certainly wouldn't make us feel humiliated and ashamed. Many of our parents have greater problems than we realise. They are angry and frustrated at their own lives and they hate it, they don't hate us – it just feels as though they do.

It’s just not possible for some parents to show love, they were never shown any, so how can they? Some may compensate for this by providing a good home for their children and giving them all that they want, but unfortunately, for our inner-self, material possessions are irrelevant. We may have a nice house, nice car, everything that money can buy, but if there is no love in the house we are the poorest of all.

The hopes and fears of our parents can drive much of their behaviour towards us. Their failures drive us to succeed. A father who is a perfectionist in order to cope may strongly believe that his son needs to do things to perfection in order to succeed. A parent who feels hindered in life by lack of

education or one who is successful because of it will do all they can to ensure that their children are well educated.

On the other hand, many a parent may try to obtain success through their children. They push them excessively and get angry with them when they fail. Just watch most of the fathers at their child's football game.

At the end of the day, when we look back on our childhood and its connection to anxiety and depression problems, and to a parent that made us feel bad, it may be prudent to think that he or she has probably suffered as bad a problem as we have. Many of them are doing the best they can given their problems and, although often misguided, they are trying to give their offspring the advantages they never

had.

* * *

Some people think that our parents barely influence us. They believe that the people who create us, control us, help us survive, provide food, warmth and shelter, teach us what is right and what is wrong, reward and punish us, make us feel good and make us feel bad, and provide daily examples of attitudes and behaviour, don't really affect us. They point to studies carried out on adults who weren't reared by their parents and to those on genetically similar twins reared in different families. Evidence of an anxiety disorder in such studies is seen as evidence that the parent's role is limited, and that the problem is due to other influences or perhaps genetics.

But these studies miss a vital point, possibly an inherent flaw with such studies: children who aren't reared by their parents are separated from their parents. The parents are absent – a situation, which, in itself, may be experienced as a withdrawal of parental love and a precursor to self-doubt and anxiety problems.

Also, many adopted or foster children feel the need to find their biological parents when they are old enough. They are driven to find their parent(s) in order to discover where they themselves came from, hence who they really are.

Our parents are in our genes; nothing will ever influence what we feel about our self like they do. And while we're talking about genes, let's take a look at something that many people feel plays

an important role: genetics.

The Role of Genetics

Many anxiety ‘disorders’ and depression can be seen to run in families, but it’s too easy to see this as proof of genetics being the cause of these problems. A depressed or anxiety-riddled parent may treat their child in such a way, and provide such a role model, that the child could develop emotional problems entirely through learning and conditioning.

Human beings are complex. If all of the DNA (deoxyribonucleic acid) in your body were laid end to end it would reach to the sun and back over 6oo times. Over 99% of our DNA sequence is the same as other humans.

Genes are made of DNA (our entire DNA sequence is known as a *genome*, comprising an estimated 20000-25000 genes); they are pieces of DNA passed from parent to offspring that contain hereditary information. A parent and child share 50% of their genes as do siblings. Identical twins share 100% of their genes.

Once the human genome was mapped (the entire DNA sequence that makes up humans) it was hoped to be able to identify and cure the genetic cause of almost everything. But that didn't happen. Whilst ground has been made identifying DNA mutations or variations that may be associated with a higher risk for certain diseases, the actual situation is a great deal more complex. The position of the genes in relation to others and interactions between them

may exert as great an influence as the genes themselves. It's the structure as a whole, the system, not just its constituent parts that is important. Anxiety and depression problems are the same, it is the whole system that counts – our mind and body and the environment they are in.

For all we know, such a process may also apply to the hereditary information that passes between parent and child. Not just physical attributes and behaviour traits but emotional elements could, in theory, be passed on too. We may also inherit such things as hopes, fears and frustrations – things that have played a large part in the whole system of our parent's existence.

If a person has survived in life (and very importantly, survived at the level of

his inner-self) despite an existence racked by worry, compulsions or depression, it's not unreasonable to assume that these survival 'tactics' will be passed to his offspring in order to increase their chances of survival. A lifelong depressive, no doubt, passes genetic information appropriate to having depression to his offspring.

However, DNA is our past not our future. Information that is passed between a parent and child does not result in actual behaviours but predispositions; not fixed behaviours but ways of behaving we are susceptible to develop given the right stimulation. A parent cannot pass on fixed behaviours for the environment the child is born into is unknown. The knowledge we inherit has to flexible to enable us to adapt and survive –

reacting with extreme anxiety to unconditional love would not be adaptive.

We all come predisposed to learn language but the main language we eventually learn to speak depends on where in the world we are born. Racehorses are bred to be good runners but they still have to be groomed and trained. Any genetic information that we receive from our parents can only be put into practice when the appropriate environment exists. Family conflict and destructive criticism are two environments appropriate to the development of many anxiety and depression problems.

Complex interactions between predisposition and environment probably influence the development of

anxiety-related problems and the strength of the problem. But it's the environment (our experiences) that holds the upper hand. The genetic influence sits quietly in the background, waiting to develop and flourish in the right circumstances or wither and die if not called upon. A severely 'anxiety-disordered' person can, by treating them in the right way, raise a totally emotionally healthy child… many do.

There is also evidence to suggest that genes can be altered through learning.

The popular belief among scientists has been that, although the environment influenced natural selection, mutation was random. This is to say that environmental changes may favour certain characteristics of a species (so that only those members that possess such characteristics

survive to pass on their genes) but genetic changes were purely random, it happened by chance and may or may not confer benefits for survival.

However, experiments by Barbara McClintock in the 1950's showed vast changes in the DNA of plants occurring when they were stressed. A stressful environment actually resulted in whole sequences of DNA moving from one place to another, even inserting themselves into active genes. Not random behaviour, there was a method to their shifting and it was triggered by outside influences. Changes in the environment such as extreme heat or drought, that threatened the survival of the plant altered its DNA. Initially ignored by her peers, McClintock received a Nobel Prize for her work, some thirty years later.

Genes were actually changing due to experience in plants. Imagine what may be happening within the complexity of humans.

Intuitively, we would expect this to be the case. Life is about growing, learning and evolving; genes shape our reaction to experiences and our reaction to experiences and learning must shape our genes. We need not be slaves to our genes!

* * * * *

In summary:

The helpless infant, we instinctively form attachments to our parents in order to be protected and nurtured to survive. This is seen in all animals where the infant is born reliant on the parent and even in some adult animals. Wild dogs on the edge of settlements

become friendlier in order to be given scraps of food and many family pets have now become so cute and cuddly that some people treat them as babies and children.

The bond between the helpless infant (promoted by sounds, smells and appearance) and the powerful parent (receptive to such things) ensures the survival of the infant and ultimately the survival of the parent's genes.

For the first two or three years or so, the vast majority of parents dote on their children, who feel secure and loved – witness the confidence of most small children – and as the child grows they want to be like their powerful, successful parent, generally like the same-sex parent. The more powerful and successful the child views the parent (or even an image of the parent)

the greater their desires to be like that parent. This, in itself, can be a healthy and positive situation, however, as the child grows they become more aware.

We start to notice the arguments between our parents, which affect us deeply. We may even have genetic predispositions how to react to stress or have been sensitised to it in the womb. Constant arguing leads to us feeling insecure, unsure about our safety, and afraid. An absent parent can make us feel the same to some extent.

As we grow, the parent whom we look up to may then start to criticise us in a harsh way and it's a destructive criticism that hurts.

The word 'critic' comes via the Latin *criticus* meaning 'a judge', and that's how we feel, judged by our powerful

parent and left wanting, feeling that we are never good enough. Be under no illusion, destructive criticism is a destroyer, it has the greatest influence of all. It leaves us feeling not only physically bad (tense, confused, and anxious) but also feeling bad about our very self. Actual physical or sexual child abuse can take this to the extreme.

Being made to feel this way by a parent we look up to can lead to an almost obsessive identification with them, wanting to be like them more and more to help us stop feeling insecure and to be loved. Such an entanglement with our parent can last many years.

Unsure about the effect of destructive criticism?

Well consider this… If we take two small children: one we criticise

constantly, put down, humiliate, exaggerate and ridicule their failures, and mock their attempts; the other we praise often, support, help, guide and demonstrate behaviour constructively – which one will grow up afraid to do anything, totally lacking in self-confidence? And which one will have total self-confidence? In fact, we could do the same to two dogs or any other animal that is smaller than us.

Many parents do a fantastic job in raising their children but when the main environment of a child comprises combinations of, and variations in, family conflict, destructive criticism, genetic predisposition and parental absence, the foundation can be laid for anxiety-related problems to develop. This environment can last until the child

leaves home.

Constant pressure and distress, in a child without the maturity and experience to cope, leads to one thing – *feeling bad,* and it's a special kind of feeling bad (as we will learn later) that lies at the heart of a myriad of anxiety and depression problems.

* * *

As we move towards our teenage years into a bigger, bolder, more competitive world, this vague 'feeling bad', (this feeling 'not good enough in some way' almost always accompanied by feeling insecure) can shape our lives. Some people stay at this stage, to various degrees, and lead lives ruled by shyness and self-doubt or spend life behaving in self-defeating ways in times of stress. Others may find

comfort in food with all the associated problems this brings.

However, for many us, life's progression, coupled with being made to feel bad and scared even more, can take things to the extreme and make the chance of developing an anxiety disorder almost inevitable.

But before we come to what happens next in the development of these problems, we need to know a bit more about something that's responsible for them all… *feelings*.

2

...Feelings

THEY ARE NOTHING more than feelings, but they rule our lives. What drives someone to scrub the skin from his or her hands or avoid doing things in front of others? How can some people starve themselves or harm themselves? What causes many to perform endless rituals or to believe

they are seriously ill, and why do vast numbers of us feel we are worthless?

Feelings are everything to us; they reflect our inner-self's understanding of what is happening in the world outside and what to do about it. Part of an inner guidance system that conveys how our experiences are affecting us, they are related to survival and being in control. Feeling bad means that we are under threat, either directly or because we have no control. We all want to stay longer and enjoy any situation that makes us feel good and we'll actively seek out such situations, but when something feels bad we are driven to stop it, get away from it as soon as we can or to avoid it altogether.

It is often pointed out that many people actively seek out feeling bad, particularly being scared, through such

things as scary movies or theme park rides. But this is different, in these situations we are scared whilst actually being safe, we are scared with control. Millions may pay to watch the antics of a knife-wielding maniac on screen, but nobody would want to be in the real situation. To feel bad with no control is to be really scared.

And we don't need direct experience to feel in certain ways. Our brains are programmed to empathise with others and how they feel. Feelings are shown by the expression on our faces for it can be advantageous to know what another person is feeling. To know whether someone is pleased to see us or not and to sense what others are going through without having to go through it our self can save a lot of pain. In mimicking the feelings of others

we feel the same way as they do to some extent. Watching a depressed relative may truly make us feel depressed.

With feelings, we *feel* something happening to...

[End of Preview]

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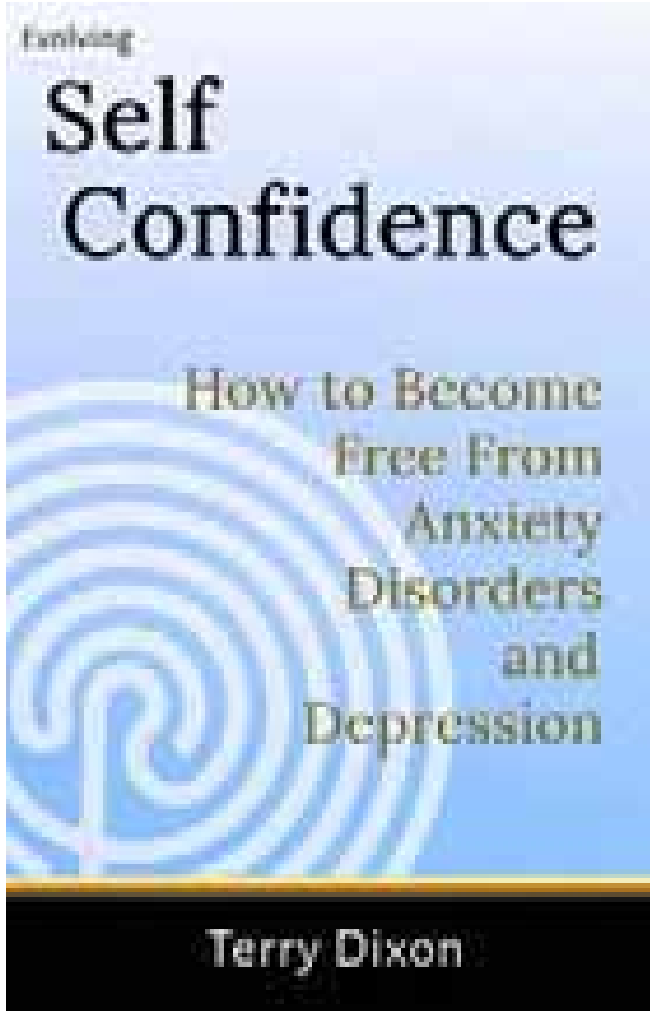

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Evolving Self Confidence: How to Become Free From Anxiety Disorders and Depression (The First Chapter)
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