

The background image shows two hands clasped together in a firm, supportive grip. The hand on the left is wearing a red sleeve, and the hand on the right is wearing a brown sleeve. The background is blurred, showing other people outdoors, suggesting a social or community setting. A semi-transparent purple banner is overlaid on the top half of the image, containing the title text.

A Way Out of Loneliness: How to Feel Less Isolated and Alone

with Lisa Firestone, Ph.D.



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ASSOCIATION**


(For Professionals)

www.glendon.org

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An aerial, high-angle photograph of a busy pedestrian crossing. Numerous people of various ages and ethnicities are walking across the street, which is marked with white zebra stripes. The image is slightly blurred, suggesting movement. A dark teal banner is overlaid at the top, and a semi-transparent white box is in the center containing text.

Feel lonely? You're not alone

A recent U.K. study of millions of people found that one in 10 people didn't feel they had a close friend, while one in five never or rarely felt loved.

Feel lonely? You're not alone

In our research, we found that the most common negative thought people have toward themselves is that they are “different from other people.”



Importance of Connection

- “As a social species, humans rely on a safe, secure social surround to survive and thrive.”
- Seeking connection is a valuable mental health principle.



Source: <http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/20652462>



Anyone can feel lonely at any point in their lives...

BUT

loneliness can be a chronic condition with serious, harmful effects on our mental and physical health.

Definition of Loneliness

A photograph of a person in a dark blue pinstripe suit with their head buried in their hands on a wooden table. To the right of the person is a glass of whiskey. The scene is dimly lit, creating a somber and lonely atmosphere.

LONELINESS

The distress that results from
discrepancies between ideal and
perceived social relationships

Source: <http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/10677643>

Definition of Loneliness

- **Complex set of feelings encompassing reactions to unfulfilled intimate and social needs**
- **Transient for some individuals but can be a chronic state for others**
- **Major risk factor for psychological disturbances and for broad-based morbidity and mortality**

Satisfying Social Relationships Vs. Chronic Loneliness

- More positive outlooks on life
- More secure attachments
- More interaction with others
- More autonomic activation when facing psychological challenges
- More efficient restorative behaviors
- Lower cortisol levels throughout a day

Source: <http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/10677643>

Physical and Mental Health Consequences of Loneliness

“Perceptions of social isolation, or loneliness, increase vigilance for threat and heighten feelings of vulnerability while also raising the desire to reconnect.”

Mental Effects:

- Focus on exclusion instead of inclusion
- Timidity
- Misremembering

Physical Effects:

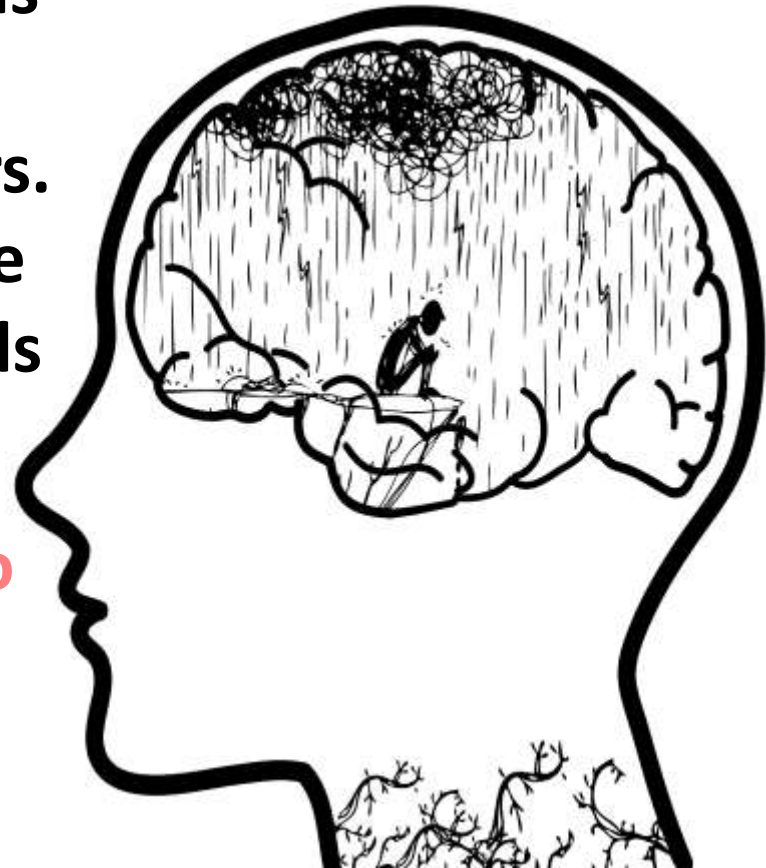
- Diminished sleep quality
- Increased morbidity and mortality
- Weakened health



Causes of Loneliness

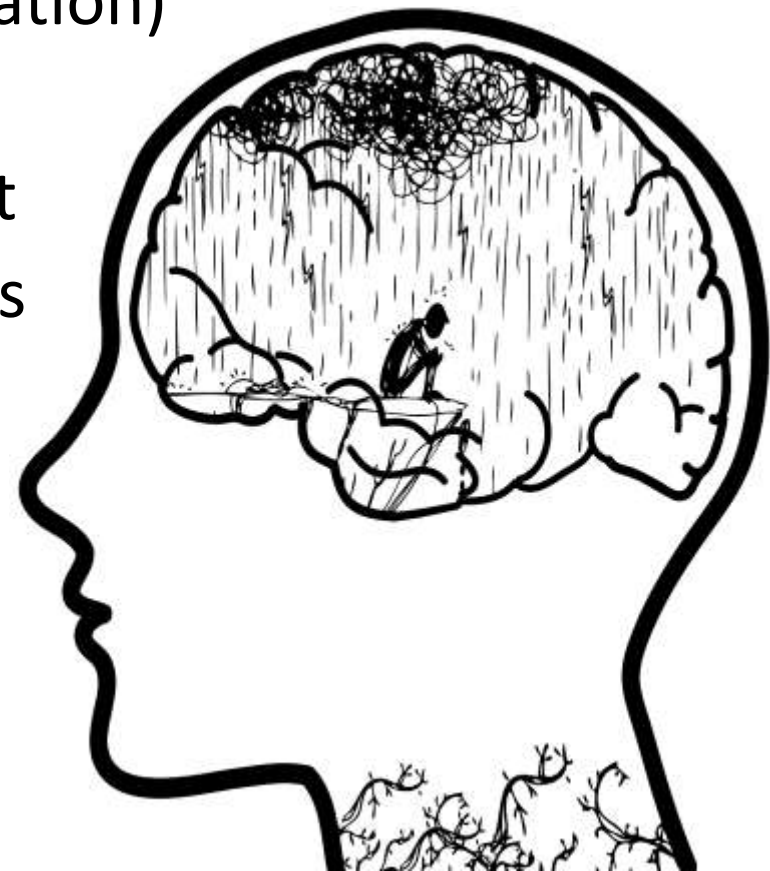
“Loneliness is about 50% heritable, but this does not mean loneliness is determined by genes. An equal amount is due to situational factors. What appears to be heritable is the intensity of pain felt when one feels socially isolated.”

- John Cacioppo



Causes of Loneliness

- Heredity
- Environment (isolation, new location)
- Circumstances (divorce, loss)
- The way we think and feel about ourselves and the world around us



Severely lonely adults often report:

- History of abuse
- Hostile/intrusive or withdrawn/misattuned parents
- Disorganized or anxious ambivalent attachment style and problems with communication
- Internalization of parent/ attachment figures
- Feelings of hostility or helplessness



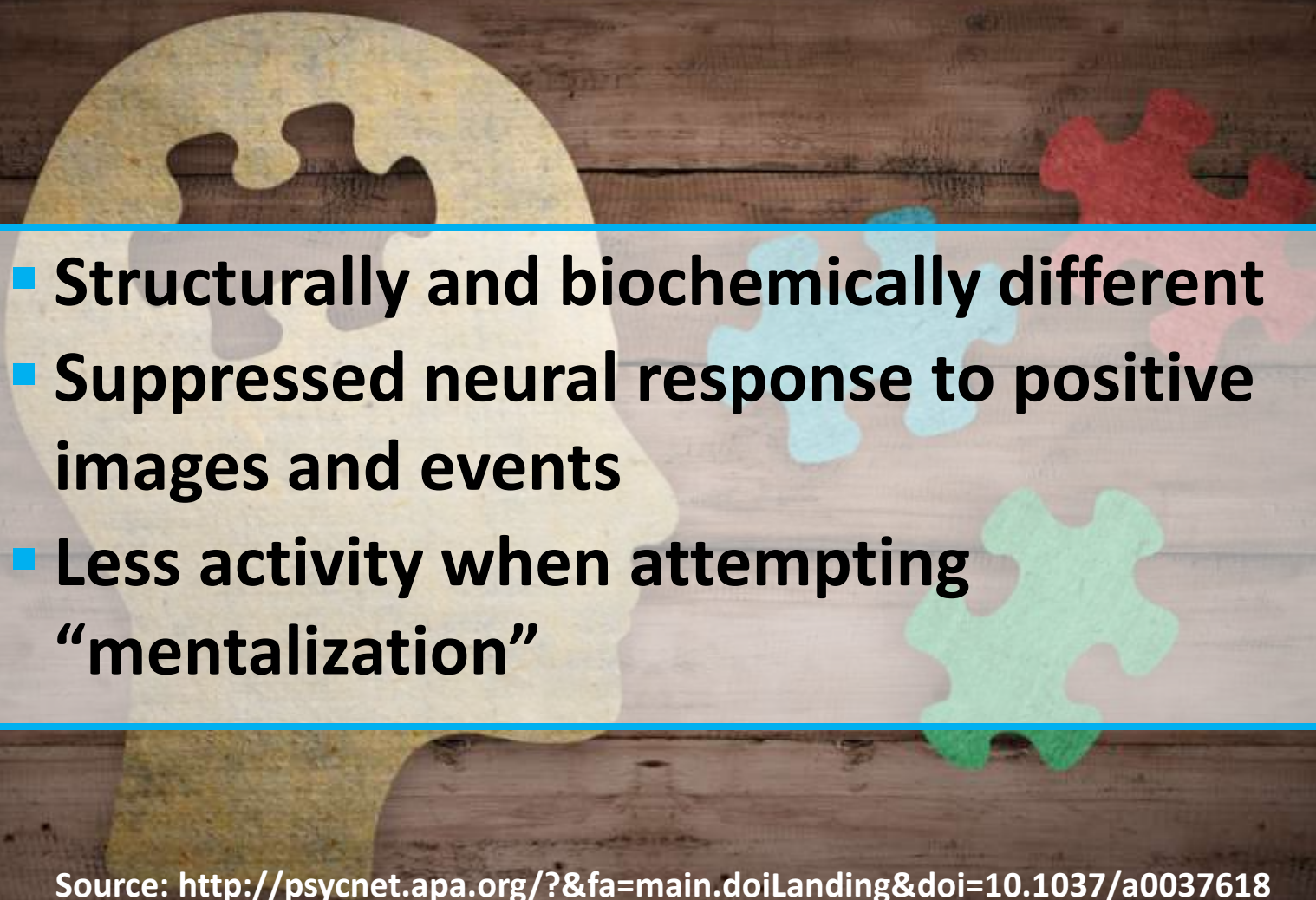
Source: <http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/25782760>

Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs)

increase the risk of:

- 
- Heart disease
 - Chronic lung disease
 - Liver disease
 - Suicide
 - Injuries
 - HIV and STDs
 - Other risks for the leading causes of death

The Lonely Brain

- 
- Structurally and biochemically different
 - Suppressed neural response to positive images and events
 - Less activity when attempting “mentalization”

Source: <http://psycnet.apa.org/?&fa=main.doiLanding&doi=10.1037/a0037618>



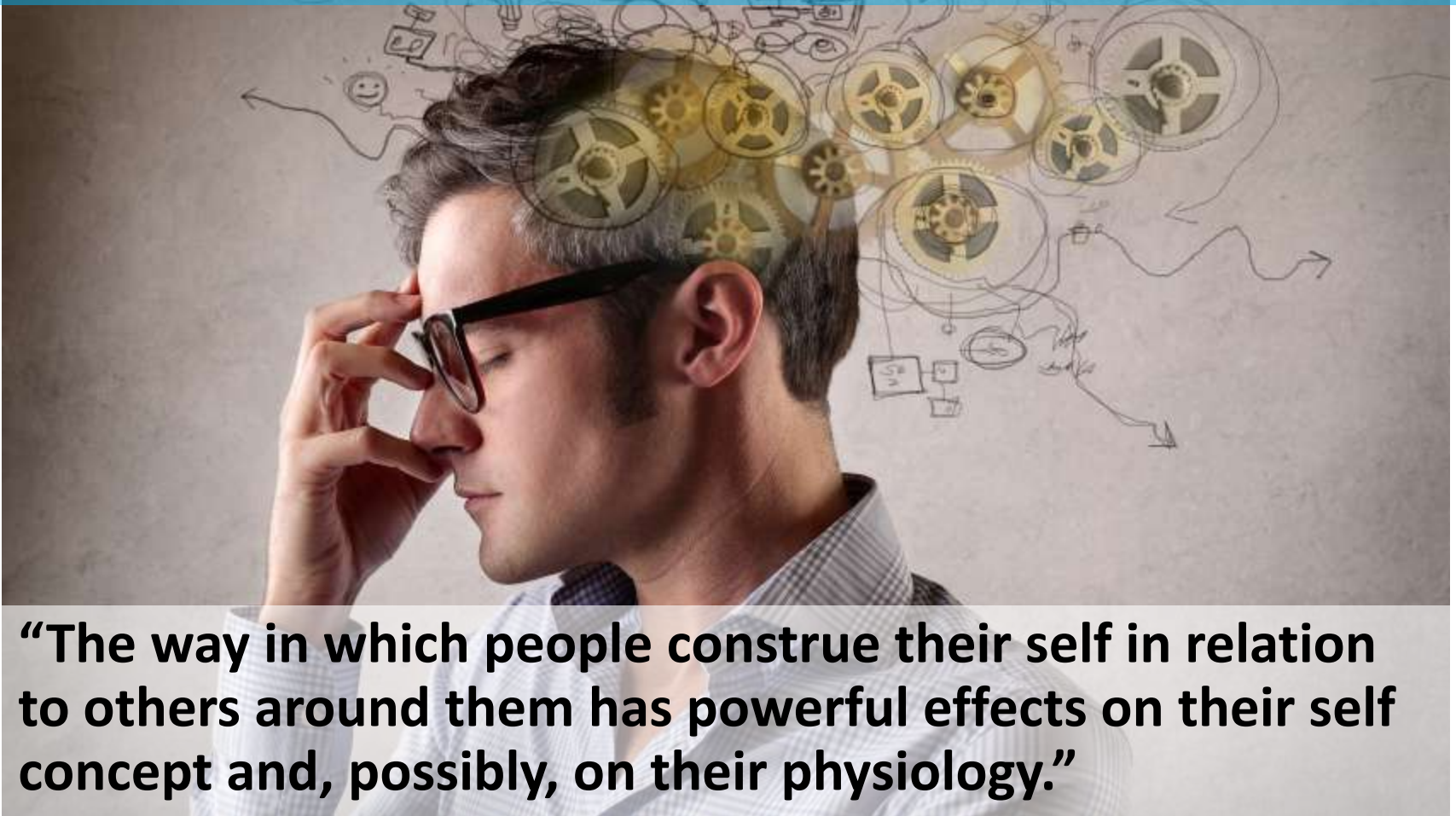
“Lonely individuals are more likely to construe their world as threatening, hold more negative expectations, and interpret and respond to ambiguous social behavior in a more negative, off-putting fashion, thereby confirming their construal of the world as threatening and beyond their control.”

- From “Loneliness” by John T. Cacioppo & Louise C. Hawkley

A photograph of a person wearing a red hooded jacket and blue jeans, sitting alone in a vast stadium filled with rows of green plastic seats. The person is seen from behind, looking towards the back of the arena. The perspective is from behind the person, looking down the rows of seats which stretch far into the distance, emphasizing the isolation of the individual.

**IT IS A FILTER OF SEEING
OURSELVES AS ALONE**

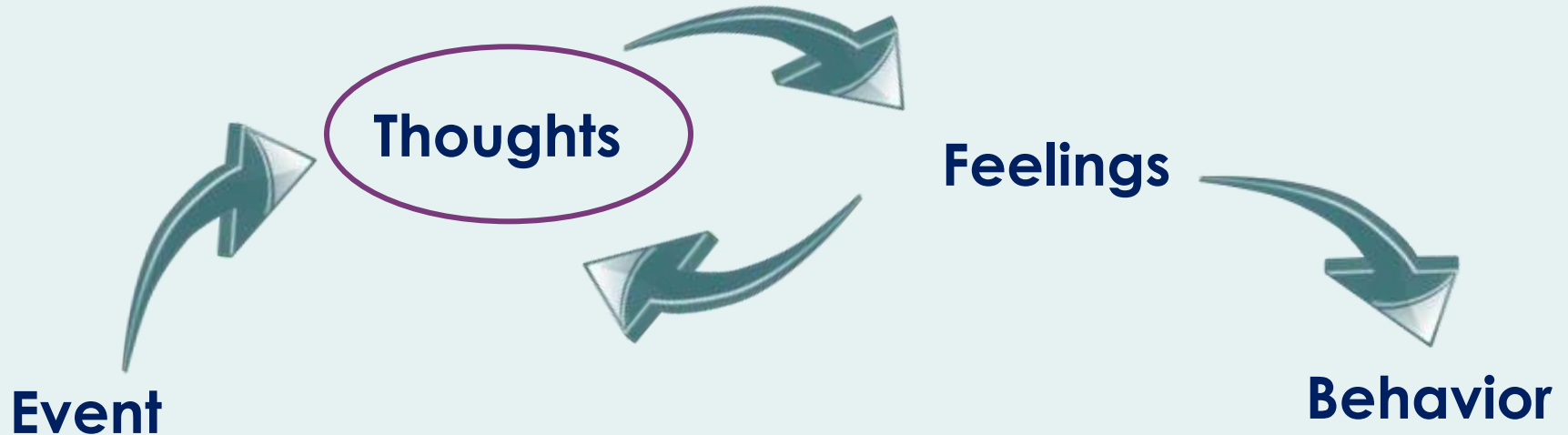
The Effect of Thoughts



“The way in which people construe their self in relation to others around them has powerful effects on their self concept and, possibly, on their physiology.”

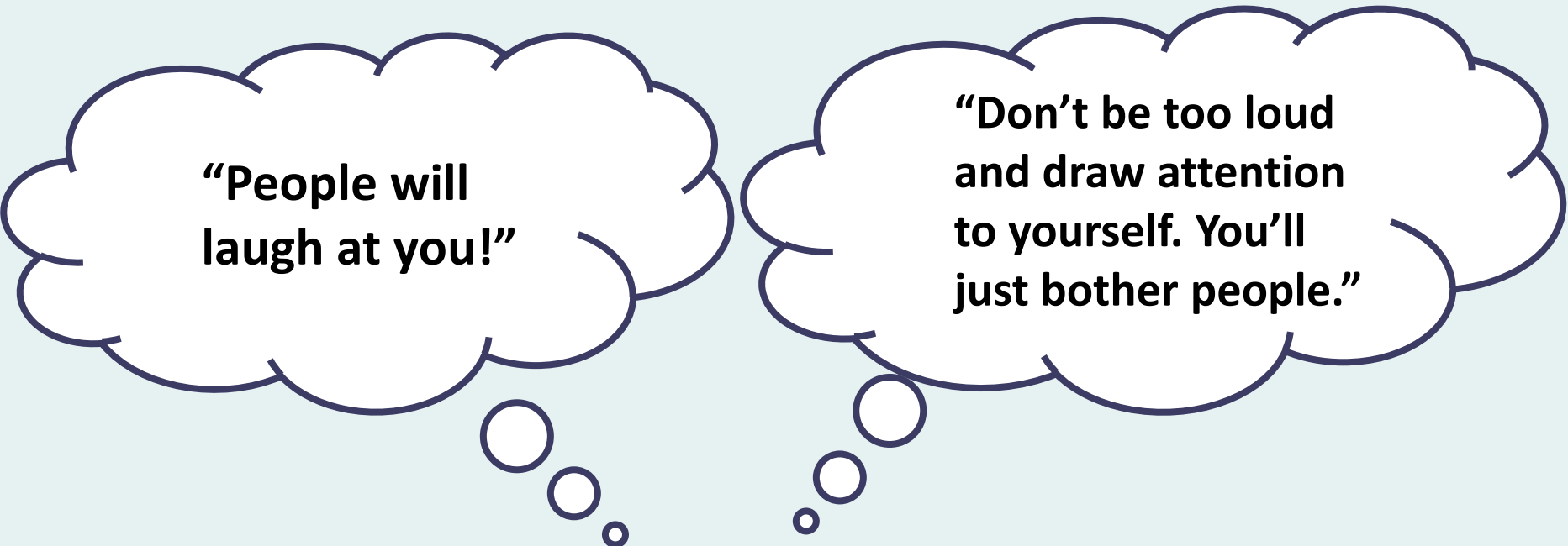
Our Approach to Self-Destructive Behavior

How a person is thinking is predictive of how he or she is likely to behave.



Lonely individuals typically:

- **Fear negative evaluation**
- **Engage in overly cautious social behaviors that perpetuate their social isolation**



“People will laugh at you!”

“Don’t be too loud and draw attention to yourself. You’ll just bother people.”

The Language of Loneliness

The Critical Inner Voice:

- The critical inner voice is a well-integrated pattern of destructive thoughts toward ourselves and others.
- The nagging “voices” that make up this internalized dialogue are at the root of much of our self-destructive and maladaptive behavior.



The Language of Loneliness

The Critical Inner Voice:

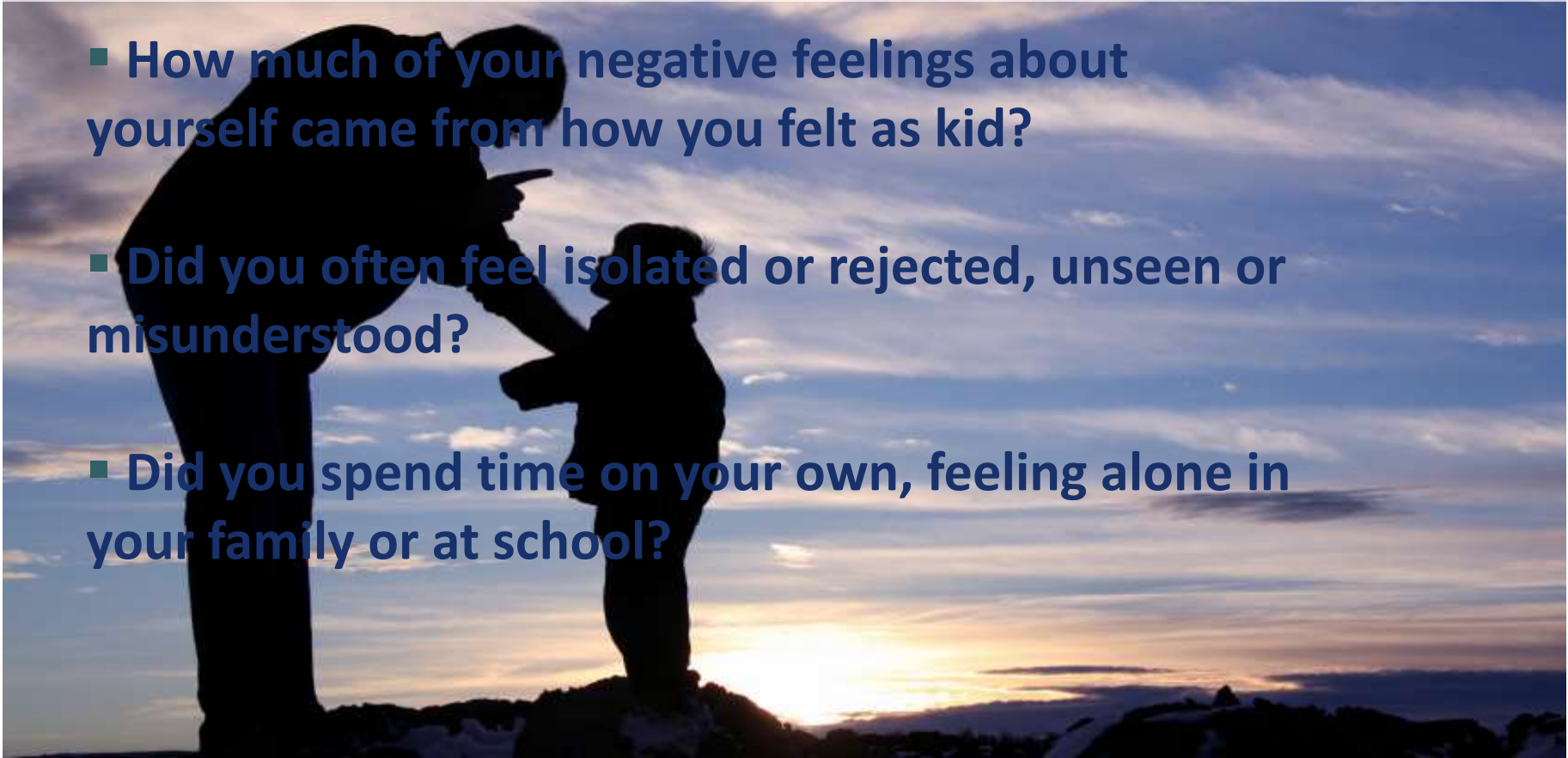
- The critical inner voice is not an auditory hallucination; it is experienced as thoughts within your head.
- This stream of destructive thoughts forms an anti-self that discourages individuals from acting in their best interest.



Where do these voices come from?

Not based on reality but a self-destructive point of view we've taken on based on early life experiences.

- How much of your negative feelings about yourself came from how you felt as kid?
- Did you often feel isolated or rejected, unseen or misunderstood?
- Did you spend time on your own, feeling alone in your family or at school?



Psychological Defenses

Individuals build certain psychological defenses to adapt to their early environment that can hurt or limit them in their current lives. These defenses can lead to feelings of alienation, isolation and depression.



Division of the Mind

Parental Ambivalence

Parents both love and hate themselves and extend both reactions to their productions, i.e., their children.

Parental Nurturance



Parental Rejection, Neglect Hostility



Self System

Parental Nurturance



Unique make-up of the individual (genetic predisposition and temperament); harmonious identification and incorporation of parent's positive attitudes and traits and parents positive behaviors: attunement, affection, control, nurturance; and the effect of other nurturing experience and education on the maturing self-system resulting in a sense of self and a greater degree of differentiation from parents and early caretakers.

Personal Attitudes/Goals/Conscience

Realistic, Positive Attitudes Toward Self

Realistic evaluation of talents, abilities, etc. with generally positive/ compassionate attitude toward self and others

Goals

Needs, wants, search for meaning in life

Moral Principles

Behavior

Ethical behavior toward self and others

Goal-directed Behavior

Acting with Integrity



Anti-Self System

- **Unique vulnerability:** genetic predisposition and temperament
- **Destructive parental behavior:** misattunement, lack of affection, rejection, neglect, hostility, over permissiveness
- **Other Factors:** accidents, illnesses, traumatic separation, death anxiety



The Fantasy Bond (core defense) is a self-parenting process made up of two elements: the helpless, needy child, and the self-punishing, self-nurturing parent. Either aspect may be extended to relationships. The degree of defense is proportional to the amount of damage sustained while growing up.

Anti-Self System

Self-Punishing Voice Process

<u>Voice Process</u>	<u>Behaviors</u>
Self-critical thoughts	Verbal self-attacks – a generally negative attitude toward yourself and others
Self-destructive thoughts	Addictive patterns and self-punishing thoughts after indulging
Suicidal thoughts	Jeopardizing actions like carelessness with one's body, physical self-harm and suicide

Anti-Self System

Self-Soothing Voice Process

<u>Voice Process</u>	<u>Behaviors</u>
Self-soothing attitudes	Inwardness, self-limiting or self-protective actions
Self-aggrandizing thoughts	Building up yourself verbally
Suspicious or paranoid thoughts toward others	Feeling alienated from others, acting destructive toward others
Self-sabotaging thoughts	Addictive patterns, thoughts that lure you to indulge
Violent thoughts	Aggressive actions and actual violence

Real Self vs. Anti-Self



How does the critical inner voice affect us?

- The critical inner voice is an internal enemy that can affect every aspect of our lives, including our self-esteem and confidence, our personal and intimate relationships and our performance and accomplishments at school and work.
- These negative thoughts undermine our positive feelings about ourselves and others and foster self-criticism, inwardness, distrust, self-denial, addiction and a retreat from goal-directed activities.



COMMON VOICES IN LONELINESS

**You just don't belong anywhere.
No one sees you.
Your life is so boring and empty.
Just keep your feelings to yourself.
You're too awkward. Just stay home.
Nobody really likes you. You're unlovable.
You deserve to be alone.
No one cares about you.
You're a burden. Stay away.
You have nothing to offer.
Why would anyone want to know you?
Don't trust anyone.
Don't reach out. You'll just get hurt.**



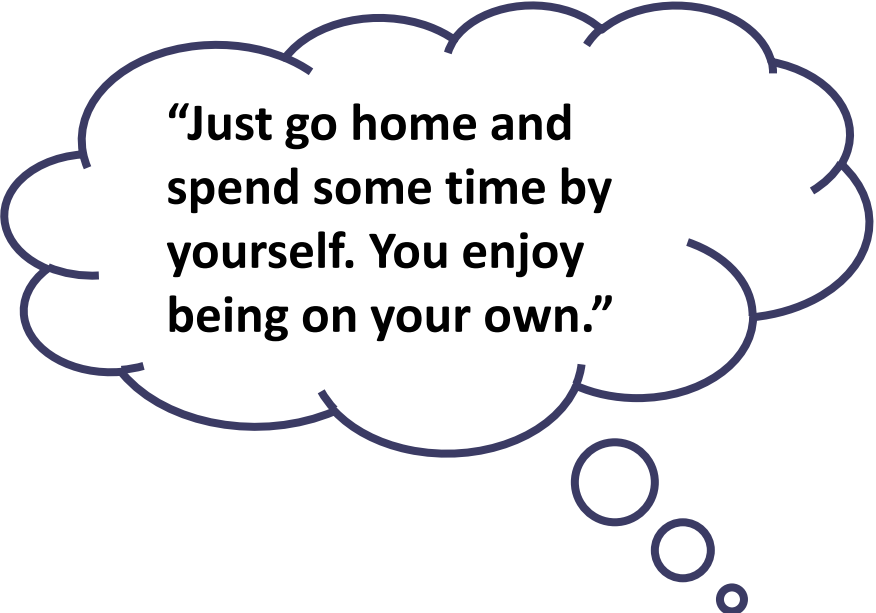
How the Critical Inner Voice Leads Us to Feel Lonely and Isolated



When it comes to feelings of isolation, the voice can be an especially complicated and strategic enemy.

How the Critical Inner Voice Leads Us to Feel Lonely and Isolated

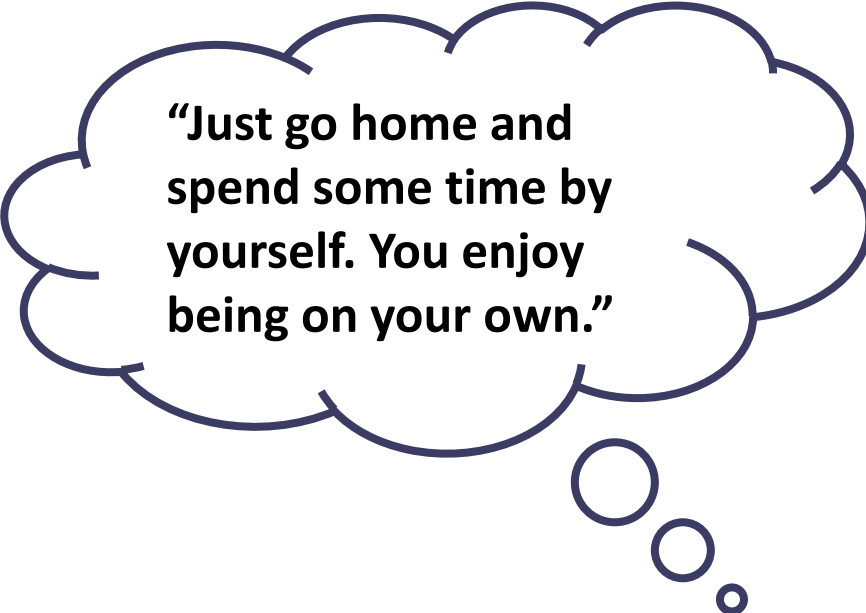
- Sometimes, it will lure us into being alone with comforting-seeming thoughts.



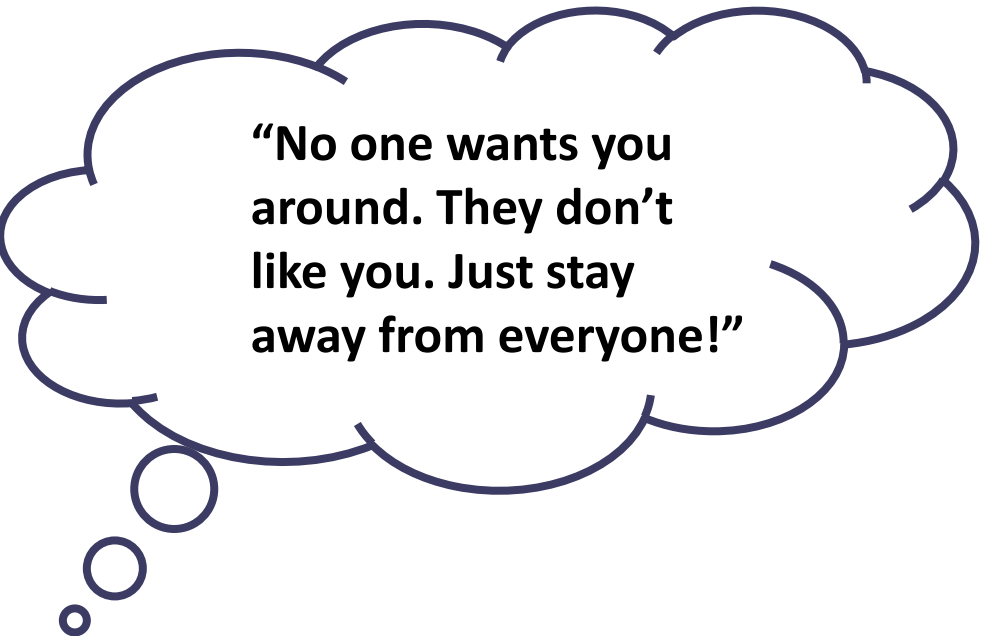
“Just go home and spend some time by yourself. You enjoy being on your own.”

How the Critical Inner Voice Leads Us to Feel Lonely and Isolated

- **Other times, when we start feeling alone, it will viciously attack us.**



“Just go home and spend some time by yourself. You enjoy being on your own.”



“No one wants you around. They don't like you. Just stay away from everyone!”

Treating Loneliness

A man with short dark hair, wearing a white polo shirt with a green and black striped chest, is sitting on a light-colored sofa. He is looking out a window to his left, holding a tablet computer in his hands. The background features a white brick wall and a window with a wooden frame. The overall mood is contemplative and somewhat somber.

How can we overcome the self-critical thoughts and self-sabotaging behaviors that perpetuate a cycle of solitude?

Four Strategies for Treating Loneliness

1. Improve social skills
2. Enhance social support
3. Increase opportunities for social contact
4. Address maladaptive social cognition

**most successful*



Challenging Maladaptive Social Cognitions



Efficacy of (social) cognitive behavioral therapy

Source: <http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/25866548>


Importance of Cognitions and Emotions

“It is vital to be alert to both verbal and nonverbal cues from the patient, so as to be able to elicit “hot cognitions”-that is, important automatic thoughts and images that arise in the therapy session itself and are associated with a change or increase in emotion. These hot cognitions may be about the patient herself (“I’m such a failure”), the therapist (“He doesn’t understand me”), or the subject under discussion (“It’s not fair that I have so much to do”). Eliciting the hot cognitions are important because they often have critical importance in conceptualization.”

- Judith S. Beck


Cognitive Therapy: Basics and Beyond

Emotion Focused Therapy (EFT)




“Facilitating Emotional Change: The Moment-by-Moment Process” by L. Greenberg, Rice, and Elliot (1993). Their approach, emotion-focused therapy (EFT), focuses primarily on eliciting emotion by directing the client to amplify his or her self-critical statements.

Emotion Focused Therapy (EFT)



For example, if the client says “you’re worthless” or sneers while criticizing, direct the client to “do this again...,” “do this some more...”; “put some words to this...” This operation will intensify the client’s affective arousal and help access core criticisms.

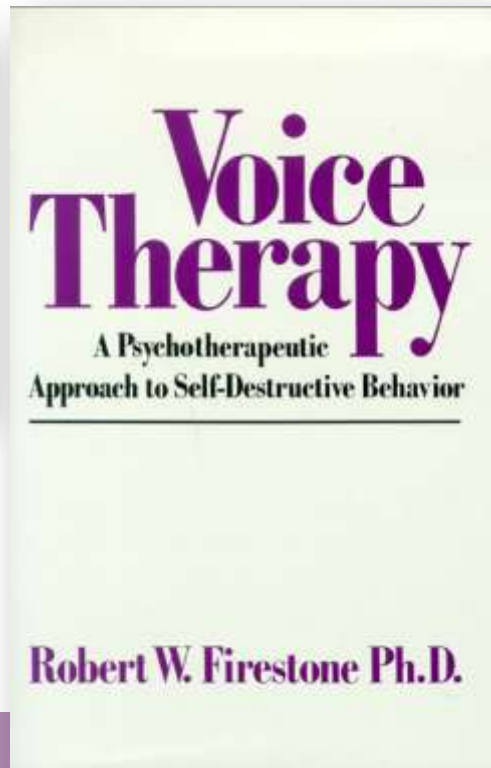
Emotion Focused Therapy (EFT)



“It is only then that they become accessible to new input and change”. Greenberg et al. believe that “Affect is thus a core constituent of the human self and establishes links between self and the environment and organizes self-experience. In a sense, feelings are ultimately the meeting place of mind, body, environment, culture, and behavior”

Voice Therapy

Cognitive/ Affective/ Behavioral Approach



The Therapeutic Process in Voice Therapy



Step 1

The person articulates his or her self-attacks in the second person and expresses any feelings that arise.

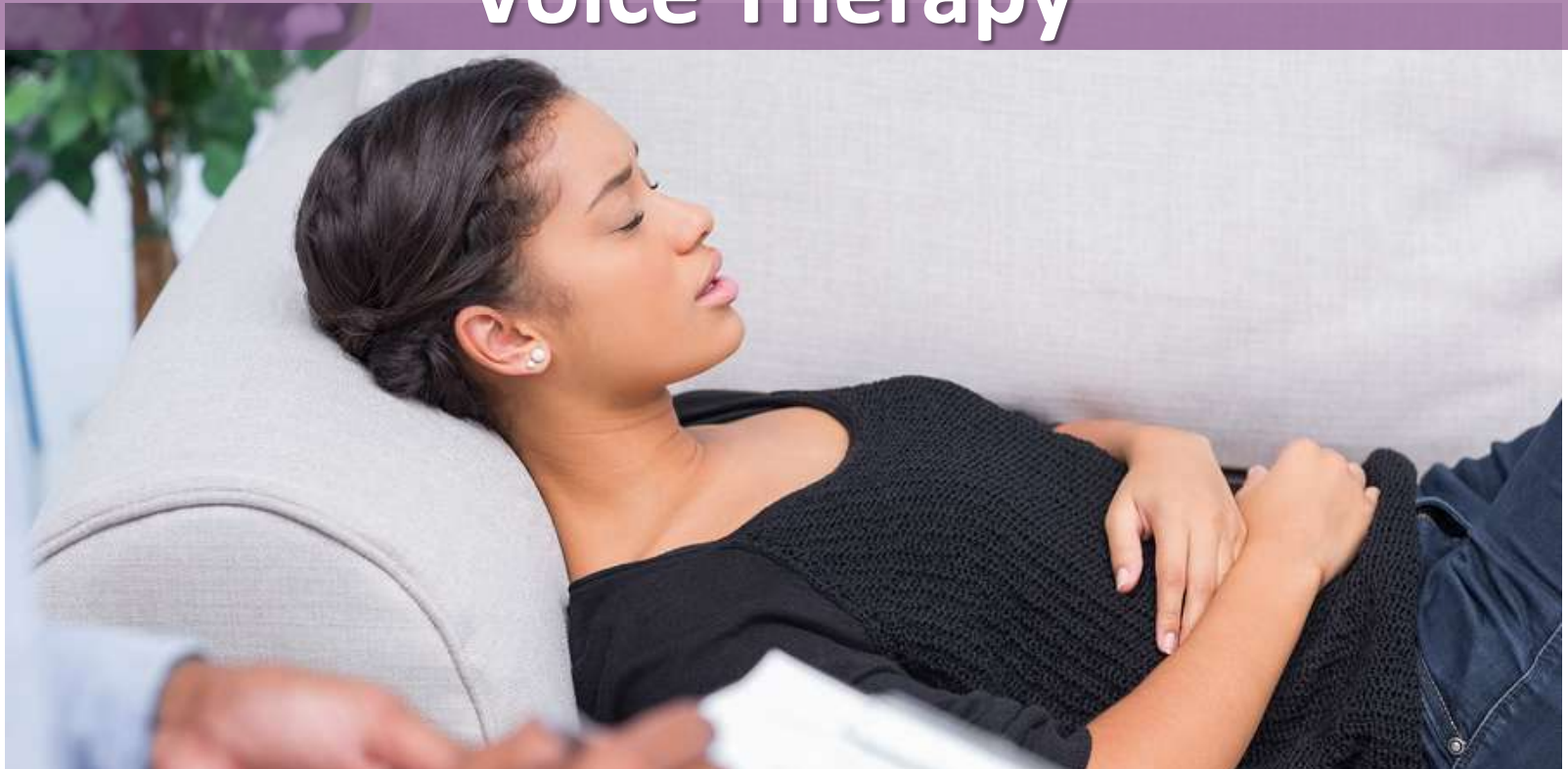
The Therapeutic Process in Voice Therapy



Step II

- The person discusses reactions to saying their voices.
- The person tries to understand the relationship between these attacks and early life experiences.

The Therapeutic Process in Voice Therapy



Step III

- The person answers back to the voice attacks.
- The person makes a rational statement about how he or she really is.

The Therapeutic Process in Voice Therapy



Step IV

The person develops insight about how the voice attacks are influencing his or her present-day behaviors.

The Therapeutic Process in Voice Therapy



Step V

- The person collaborates with the therapist to plan changes in these behaviors.
- The person is encouraged to not engage in self-destructive behaviors and to increase the positive behaviors these negative thoughts discourage.

If you are interested in attending a voice therapy training or in getting training materials please contact jina@glendon.org or visit www.glendon.org.

Self

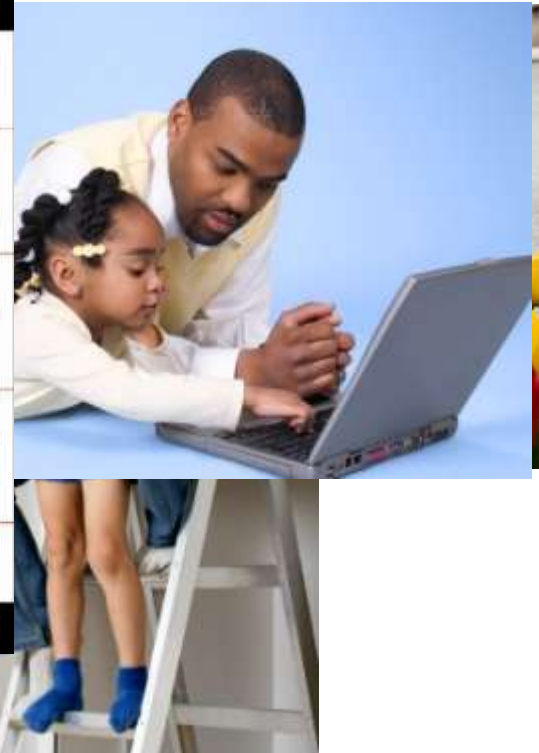
Anti-Self



Conquer Your Critical Inner Voice

Exercise 1.1: Visualizing the Real You

- My physical abilities
- My positive qualities
- My interests and activities
- My long-term goals
- My short-term goals:
- Where do I stand in relation to my goals?





Conquer Your Critical Inner Voice

Exercise 1.2: Your Critical Inner Voice Attacks

**Self-critical attacks as
“I” statements**

**Example: “I don’t think
I’m an attractive person.”**

**Self-critical attacks as
“you” statements**

**Example: “You’re not
attractive.”**





Conquer Your Critical Inner Voice

Exercise 1.3: Keeping a Journal: Your Critical Inner Voice/The Real You

My critical inner voice as “you” statements

Examples:

- “Don’t bother trying. Just curl up on the couch.”
- “You should just be on your own.”
- “You can’t trust anyone, so don’t get too close.”

The real me as “I” statements

Examples:

- “I want to be active and pursue my goals.”
- “I don’t want to be isolated and will seek out friends”
- “I want to stay vulnerable in my close relationships.”





Conquer Your Critical Inner Voice

Exercise 1.4: A Plan for Action

**Actions dictated by my
critical inner voice**

**Example: “I don’t think
I’m an attractive person.”**

**Actions to take that
reflect the real me**

**Example: “You’re not
attractive.”**






When we learn to overcome the “critical inner voice” that tells us we are different in some basic, negative way, we can build more satisfying and meaningful connections.

What Therapists Can Do:

- Challenge misguided cognitive beliefs
- Offer reality-oriented feedback
- Provide validation and sense of safety
- Enhance ability to mentalize
- Improve attachment style (create a secure attachment)
- Teach emotional communication
- Help get in touch with anger that underlies loneliness



Loneliness Interventions

- 
- People can reduce their social avoidance by countering their critical thoughts.
 - When people were primed to feel more acceptance, they were able to be more outward.

Source: <http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/20817823>

Dr. Daniel Siegel:

Curious

Open

Accepting

Loving



Self-Compassion

“Being touched by and not avoiding your suffering”

From Kristin Neff:

Self-compassion is not based on self-evaluation. It is not a way of judging ourselves positively; it is a way of relating to ourselves kindly.

Three Elements:

1. **Self-kindness** Vs. Self-judgment
2. **Mindfulness** Vs. Over-identification with thoughts
3. **Common humanity** Vs. Isolation

Source: <http://www.self-compassion.org/>

Benefits of Self-Compassion

- 
- **Mechanism for change**
 - **Lowers stress**
 - **Buffers against negative social comparisons**

Source: <http://www.self-compassion.org/>

Self-Compassion Vs. Self-Esteem

Research from Dr. Kristin Neff:

Self-Esteem

- Self-esteem refers to our sense of self-worth, perceived value or how much we like ourselves.
- Low self-esteem is problematic, however trying to have higher self-esteem can also be problematic.
- The need for high self-esteem may encourage us to ignore, distort or hide personal shortcomings so that we can't see ourselves accurately.
- Our self-esteem is often contingent on our latest success or failure, meaning that our self-esteem fluctuates.

Source: <http://www.self-compassion.org/>

Self-Compassion Vs. Self-Esteem

Research from Dr. Kristin Neff:

Self-Compassion

- Self-compassion is not based on self-evaluations.
- People feel compassion for themselves, because all human beings deserve compassion and understanding, not because they possess some particular set of traits.
- Research indicates that in comparison to self-esteem, self-compassion is associated with greater emotional resilience, more accurate self-concepts, more caring relationship behavior, as well as less narcissism and reactive anger.

Source: <http://www.self-compassion.org/>

Studies show that self-compassion has a significant positive association with:

- ✓ **Happiness**
- ✓ **Optimism**
- ✓ **Positive affect**
- ✓ **Wisdom**
- ✓ **Personal initiative**
- ✓ **Curiosity and exploration**
- ✓ **Agreeableness**
- ✓ **Conscientiousness**
- ✓ **Extroversion**



Taking Action

**Loneliness is a feeling, and being
isolated is an action**



...both can be challenged.

Steps of Differentiation

Step 1: Break with internalized thought processes (i.e., critical, hostile attitudes toward self and others)

Step 2: Separate from negative personality traits assimilated from parents

Step 3: Relinquish patterns of defense formed as an adaptation to painful events in childhood

Step 4: Develop own values, ideals and beliefs rather than automatically accepting those grown up with



Overcoming Feelings of Isolation

- **“Voices” that you are unlikeable are much harder to accept when you’re around people who like you.**
- **Do not allow these “voices” to manipulate your behavior.**
- **Acknowledge feelings of loneliness and isolation without judgment (i.e. “I feel alone right now, but I’m not going to give in to my inner critic.”)**
- **Make your actions meet your words. Avoid isolated situations.**
- **Go out in public. Our brains do not respond positively to seclusion.**
- **Place yourself in social settings and interactions, even among strangers.**
- **Try calling or texting a friend or going online. Interacting on the Internet may be a good first step in giving you the confidence to express yourself.**



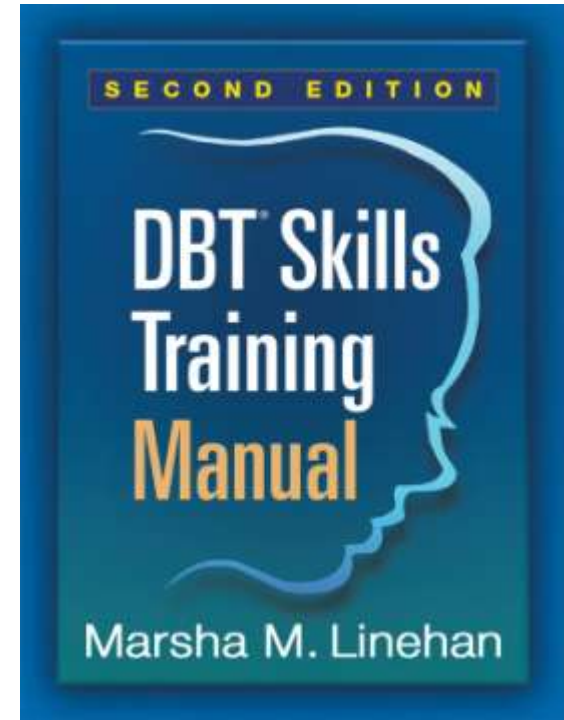
Generosity and Volunteering

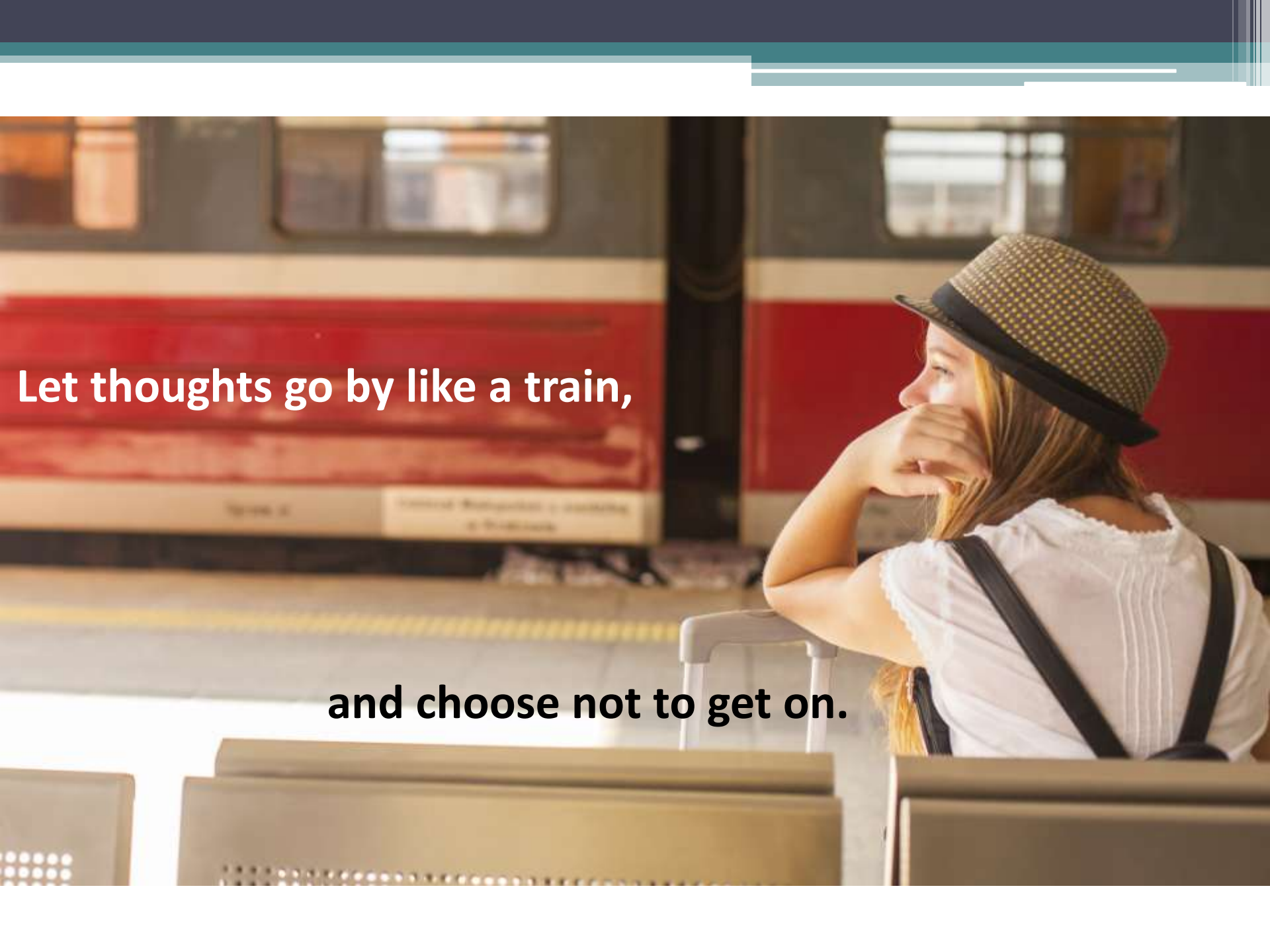
- One way to counteract feeling hopeless is to think outside of ourselves.
- Believe beyond all doubt that you have something to offer.
- Volunteering gives you the opportunity to connect with new people.
- Even little acts of generosity can have a significant impact on mood.
- Generosity, as a principle, can lead to stronger self-esteem, which then leads to more social behavior.



DBT Skills

- ✓ **Mindfulness Skills**
- ✓ **Interpersonal Effectiveness Skills**





Let thoughts go by like a train,

and choose not to get on.

Guidelines for Continued Personal Development



- Be aware of the fear that accompanies change.
- Realize that psychological pain is valid.
- Develop a more realistic view of your parents.
- Differentiation – unlearn old behaviors, learn new behaviors.
- Become more aware of specific defenses against feeling.
- Recognize the value of friendship.

Guidelines for Further Developing a Meaningful Life



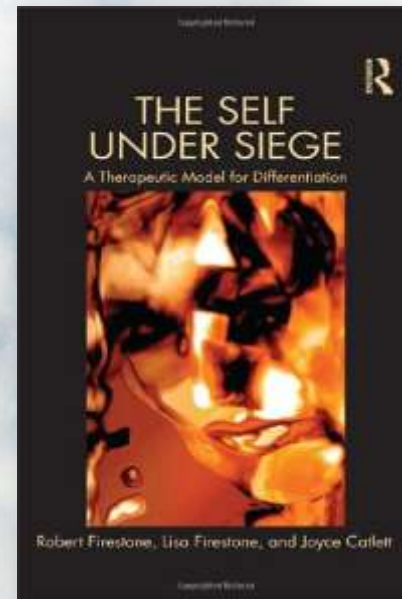
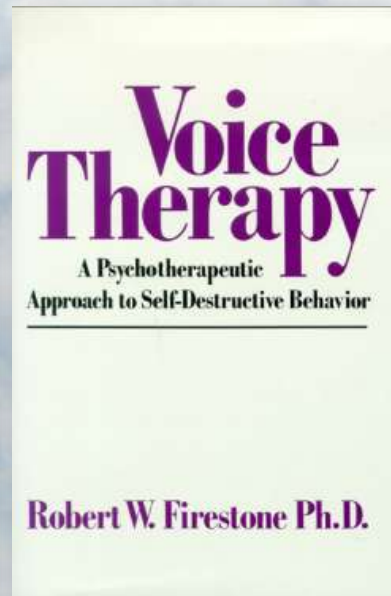
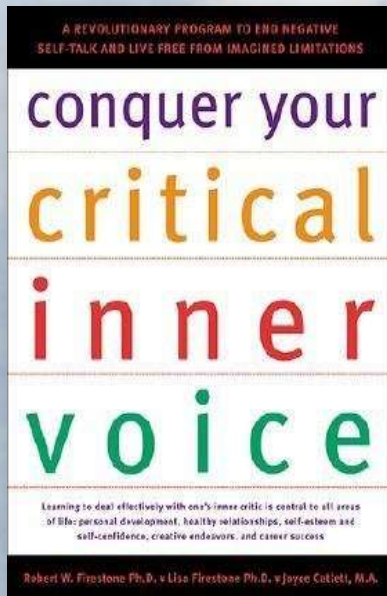
- Practice being generous in all your relationships.
- Become aware of existential realities.
- Develop a spiritual perspective and appreciate the mystery of existence.

A human being is a part of a whole, called by us 'universe', a part limited in time and space. He experiences himself, his thoughts and feelings as something separated from the rest... a kind of optical delusion of his consciousness. This delusion is a kind of prison for us, restricting us to our personal desires and to affection for a few persons nearest to us. Our task must be to free ourselves from this prison by widening our circle of compassion to embrace all living creatures and the whole of nature in its beauty. Nobody is able to achieve this completely, but the striving for such achievement is in itself a part of the liberation and a foundation for inner security.

- Albert Einstein



Resources: Books



Visit www.psychalive.org for resource links.

eCourses



Compassionate Parenting:
A Holistic Approach to Raising Emotionally Healthy Children



Overcome Your Inner Critic:
How to Live Free of Imagined Limitations



Become Your True Self:
A Therapeutic Model for Differentiation
**CE's Available*

See a full list of eCourses at eCourse.PsychAlive.org

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Sources:

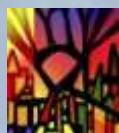
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- <http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/20716644>
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