Building a Healthy Sense of Self

Lisa Firestone, Ph.D.

PSYCH ALIVE

Lisa Firestone, Ph.D.

Director of Research and Education
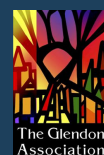The Glendon Association

Senior Editor
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What is a healthy sense of self?

Kind attitude toward yourself in which you see yourself from a flexible, changeable, resilient, realistic, compassionate point of view.

Aggrandized

Healthy

Diminished

Self-Compassion Vs. Self-Esteem

Research from Dr. Kristin Neff:

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 be as well.
- The need for high self-esteem may encourage us to ignore, distort, or hide personal shortcomings, so we can't see ourselves accurately.
- Self-esteem is often contingent on our latest success or failure, meaning that it fluctuates.

SOURCE: http://www.self-compassion.org/

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/

Has a significant positive association with:

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

Why People are Resistant

- Core resistance to forming a better image of yourself

- Involves breaking a bond with the original family where identity was formed, which was once a source of safety

- It's a kind of companionship/ connection to keep this identity

- Scary to assume a new, more positive identity

- Takes a lot of courage, understanding, and insight, but ultimately, the person has to take power

Reactions to Change

- Fear of the unknown or unfamilar
- Anxiety over living free from your inner critic
- Guilt over surpassing people from your past
- Sadness about the preciousness of life

"

To-be-nobody but yourself – in a world that is doing its best, night and day, to make you everybody else – means to fight the hardest battle which any human being can fight; and never stop fighting.

- e.e. cummings

Identities

"not the fixed markers people assume them to be but instead are dynamically constructed in the moment"

Source: Oyserman, D., Elmore, K., Smith, G. S. (2012). Self, self-concept, and identity. in M.Leary & J. Tangney (Eds). Handbook of self and Identity,2nd Ed (pp69-104). New York, NY: Guilford Press

Defining Self

From Dr. Dan Siegel's book *Pocket Guide to Interpersonal Neurobiology*

- **Self:** A term signifying an internal sense of identity, sometimes including one's body, personality, or membership in relationships or groups. There are many "selves" of a healthy individual. The self is often seem as a singular noun, whereas it may be better considered a "plural verb."

- "We are always unfolding (verb, not noun) and we are finding our sense of self in connections to others."

Self and Identity

"...thinking about self and identity. The self system is composed of the unique wants, desires, goals and values that hold special meaning for the individual as well as the specific manner and means that he/she utilizes to fulfill these goals."

- Dr. Robert Firestone
The Self Under Siege

"How much of our identity or "self" is truly representative of our own wants and goals in life and how much does it reflect the wants and priorities of someone else? Are we following our own destiny or are we unconsciously repeating the lives of our parents and automatically living according to their values, ideals and beliefs?"

- Robert Firestone, Ph.D.

Overlays on Personal Sense of Identity

Peers

Neighborhood

Social Groups

Parents/ Family

Nationality

Society/ Culture

How You Were Seen in Your Family?

Pretty/ Stupid

Funny/ Lazy

Smart/ Mean

Gifted/ Needy

The Creation of an "Accidental Identity"

Every child suffers to some extent. They create a self-concept out of hurtful experiences then live out that self-concept believing that's just the way they are. This is still not their authentic self or an accurate picture of who they are but rather "an accident of experience."

Three Important Influences:

1. Definition of ourselves picked up from emotional experiences - ways we were treated
2. Definitions by parents or early influential figures
3. Defenses formed to cope with painful experiences

Separation Theory
Robert W. Firestone, Ph.D.

Core Conflict:
Integrates psychoanalytic and existential systems of thought

Two kinds of emotional pain:

UNDEFENDED

DEFENDED

INTERPERSONAL   EXISTENTIAL

FANTASY BOND   CRITICAL INNER VOICE
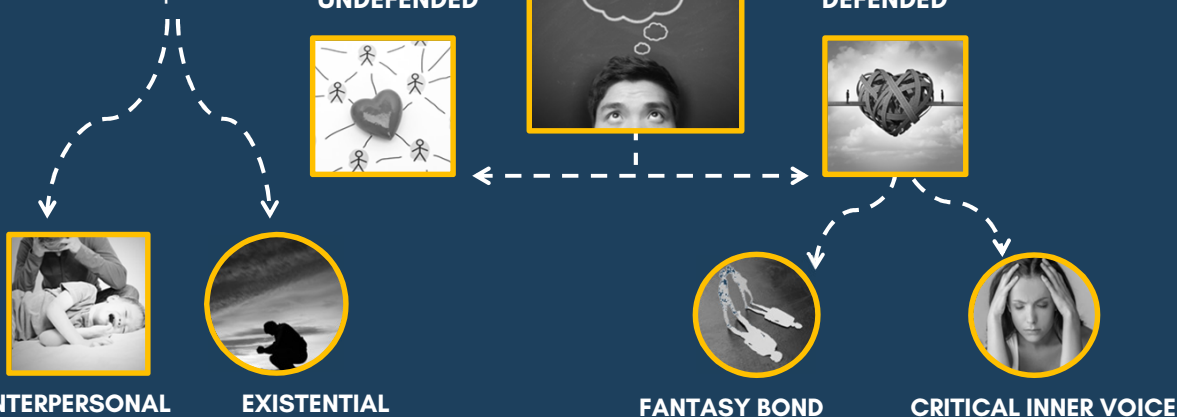
The Core Conflict

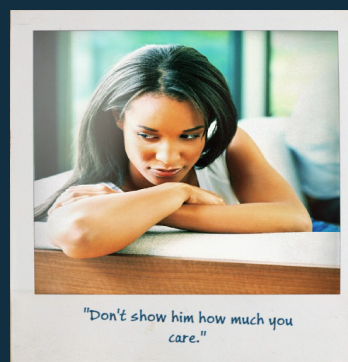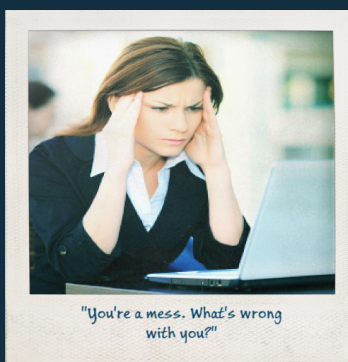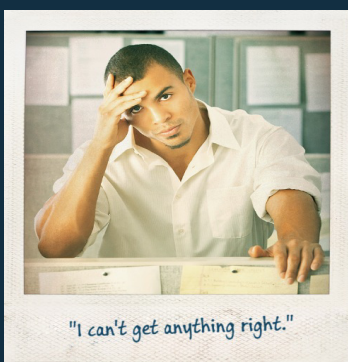| Undefended		Defended
Contending with emotional pain, both interpersonal and existential	→	Avoiding painful realities
Live with the pain of awareness, feeling integrated	→	Disengaging from self
Experiences all emotions, retaining the capacity to find happiness and joy in life	→	Denial and escape to an unfeeling existence
Better able to tolerate intimacy	→	Loss of personal identity, freedom and autonomy
More humane toward others	→	More punitive toward others

The Fantasy Bond

- Illusion of connection we originally form with our parent to help relieve early anxiety and emotional pain
- Process of self-parenting – see and treat ourselves the way we were seen and treated by our primary caretakers, both punishing and soothing ourselves
- Fantasy bond extends to our adult relationships
- Defenses we form limit our capacity for real love and closeness

The Critical Inner Voice

The Voice Process:

The "critical inner voice" can be thought of as the language of the defensive process. It has been defined as an integrated system of thoughts and attitudes, antithetical toward self and hostile toward others. The concept of the voice is not restricted to cognitive processes but is generally associated with varying degrees of anger and sadness.

"I can't get anything right."

"You're a mess. What's wrong with you?"

"Don't show him how much you care."

What Creates Our Inner Critic?

Our critical inner voice is formed from our early life experiences. It stems from:

- Internalized attitudes that were directed toward us by parents or influential caretakers throughout our development

- Internalized negative thoughts that our parents or early caretakers had toward themselves

Our sense of identity is often shaped by our inner critic.

Identify Negative Thinking

Are you...?

- **Filtering:** You magnify the negative aspects of a situation and filter out all of the positive ones.

- **Personalizing:** When something bad occurs, you automatically blame yourself.

- **Catastrophizing:** You automatically assume and anticipate the worst.

- **Polarizing:** You see things only as either good or bad. There is no middle ground.

Source: Mayo Clinic

Our Theory

Each person is divided:

- One part wants to live and is goal-directed and life-affirming.
- One part is self-critical, self-hating and even self-destructive.
- The nature and degree of this division varies for each person.

**Real Self
Positive**

**Anti-Self
Critical**

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:
  - o Attunement
  - o Affection
  - o Control
  - o Nurturance
  - o 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

Goals
Needs, wants, search for meaning in life

Behavior
Ethical behavior toward self and others

Moral Principles

Realistic, Positive Attitudes Towards Self
Realistic evaluation of talents, abilities, etc. with generally positive/ compassionate attitude towards 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.

Self-Parenting Process

Punishing

Soothing
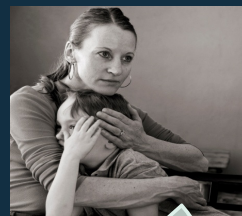
Anti-Self System
Self-Punishing Voice Process

Voice Process

1. Critical thoughts toward self

2. Micro-suicidal injunctions

3. Suicidal injunctions – suicidal ideation

Behaviors

Verbal self-attacks – a generally negative attitude toward self and others predisposing alienation

Addictive patterns. Self-punitive thoughts after indulging

Actions that jeopardize, such as carelessness with one's body, physical attacks on the self, and actual suicide

Anti–Self System
Self-Soothing Voice Process

Voice Process

1. Self-soothing attitudes

2. Aggrandizing thoughts toward self

3. Suspicious paranoid thoughts towards others

4. Micro-suicidal injunctions
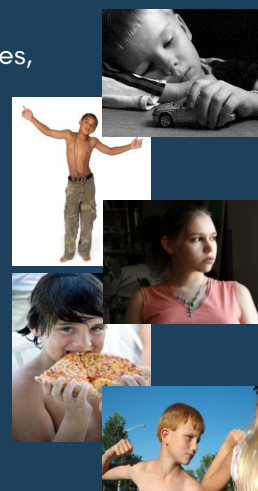
5. Overtly violent thoughts

Behaviors

Self-limiting or self-protective lifestyles, Inwardness

Verbal build up toward self

Alienation from others, destructive behavior towards others

Addictive patterns. Thoughts luring the person into indulging

Aggressive actions, actual violence

Becoming Your Real Self

Differentiation

Differentiation refers to the struggle that all people face in striving to develop a sense of themselves as independent individuals.

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 one's parents

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

Step 4: Develop one's own values, ideals, and beliefs rather than automatically accepting those one has grown up with
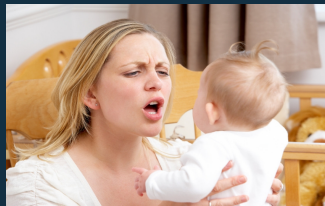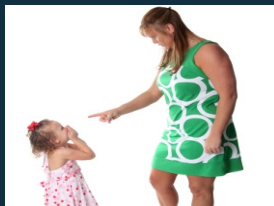
Step 1:

"We have to separate from the destructive attitudes that were directed toward us."

Separate from Destructive Attitudes:

- Self-critical

- Self-soothing

- Hostile and suspicious

- Self-aggrandizing

Step 2:

"We have to separate or differentiate ourselves from the negative traits of our parents and their defensive posture toward life."

For Example:

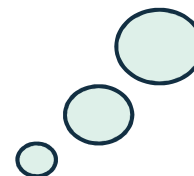**The way you are in your relationship...**

The way you are as a parent...

Saying Goodbye to Your Parent

- Picture each of your parents sitting in front of you.

- Describe your experience of each of them when you were a child.

- Say goodbye to them as a parent.

  - *"I don't need you anymore as a parent."*
  - *"I'm an adult."*
  - *"I'm a separate person from you."*

Step 3:

"We want to separate from the defenses we use to cope with elements of our childhood—we want to break with these defenses as well. And being ourselves, we have to move away from the defensive posture that we adopted realistically as children, but that are no longer necessary or functional."

A Conversation with Your Child Self

- Picture your child self sitting in front of you.

- What does that child need?

- What would you say to that child?

Most people either:

Are compliant and rarely deviate from the beliefs and opinions held by their parents and tend to live conventional and predictable lives.

OR

Adopt a defiant stance in opposition to their parents' ideas and values and approach life, mistakenly believing that their defiance and rebelliousness is their real identity.
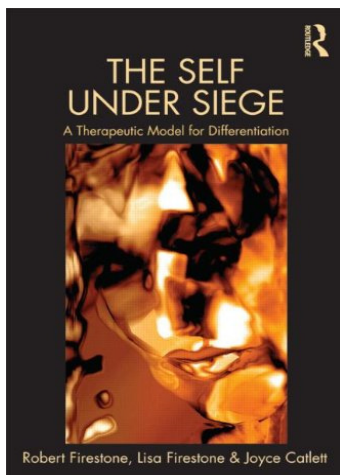
Step 4:

"We have to develop our own values, our adult value system, and approach to life, to really fulfill our destiny as a human being, our potential as a unique individual."

> **"**
>
> *We can make the most of our short experience of life, actually, and to live it fully, to exist as a separate, creative individual, we have to differentiate in those ways.*
>
> – Robert Firestone, Ph.D.

THE SELF UNDER SIEGE
A Therapeutic Model for Differentiation

Robert Firestone, Lisa Firestone & Joyce Catlett

• "More differentiated individuals have a greater potential to experience all of their emotions, including an increased capacity to feel the joy and happiness of life, and a higher tolerance for intimacy."

• "People who are relatively undefended feel more integrated, are better able to live more fully and authentically, and tend to be more humane toward others."

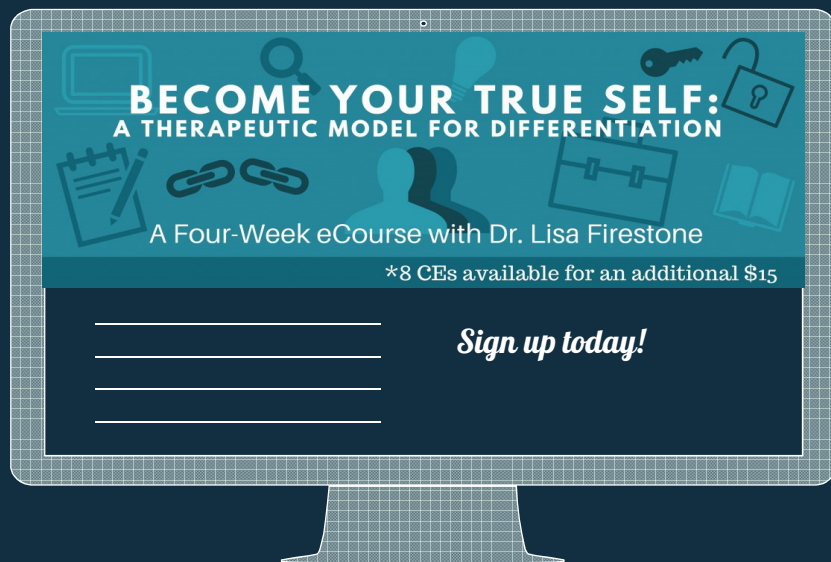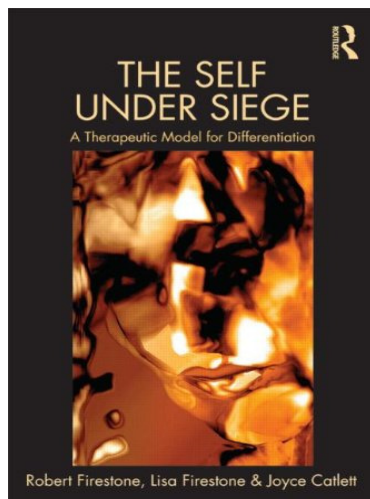The Self Under Siege, Routledge, 2012

"

- "In order for people to live their own lives and fulfill their destiny, they must differentiate themselves from destructive environmental influences."

- "Differentiation is a universal struggle that all human beings face if they wish to fully develop themselves as individuals."

- "They implicitly trust that their thoughts, beliefs, and feelings are their own, and fail to recognize that they may be "channeling" someone else's thoughts and feelings."

- "Without differentiating from parents or caretakers we may never succeed in living our own lives."

– Robert Firestone, Ph.D.

eCourse

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Child Self

Real Self

Parent Self

THE SELF UNDER SIEGE

A Therapeutic Model for Differentiation

Robert Firestone, Lisa Firestone & Joyce Catlett

Compliance and defiance are both driven by the views, behaviors, or lifestyle of one's parents and neither is truly representative of one's own identity or self.

It is of the utmost importance to take both of these contingencies into consideration when approaching the project of differentiation.

The Self Under Siege Routledge, 2012

"Real You"

Exercises

Who is the Real You?

- Times when you notice you feel the most yourself.

- Times when you notice yourself following in the footsteps of others (i.e. of parents or other influential figures).

- What are the things that light you up?

- What are the things you do to please or conform to the standards of others?

- Are there areas of your life in which you act either childish or parental?

- At what times do you lose your own point of view?

What Gives Your Life Meaning?

- What did your parents think gave life meaning?
- Name three areas that you feel give your life meaning.
- What about these things matter to you/ light you up?
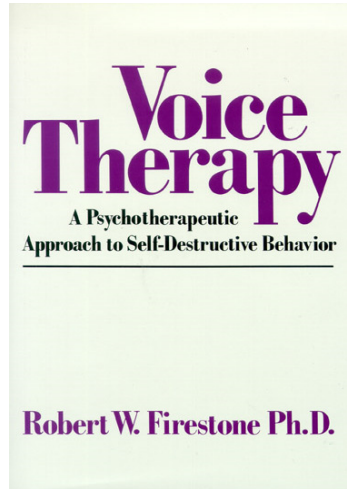- How could you do these things more justice in your life?

Critical Inner Voice vs. the Real You

1. Recognize the events that trigger it
2. Recognize specific outside criticisms that support it
3. Become aware of times you may be projecting your self-attacks onto others
4. Notice changes in your mood
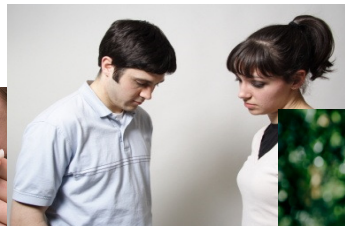
Voice Therapy
Cognitive/ Affective/ Behavioral Approach

The Therapeutic Process in Voice Therapy

<u>Step I</u>

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

The Therapeutic Process in Voice Therapy

<u>Step II</u>

- 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

<u>Step III</u>

- 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're interested in attending a voice therapy training please contact jina@glendon.org or visit www.glendon.org.
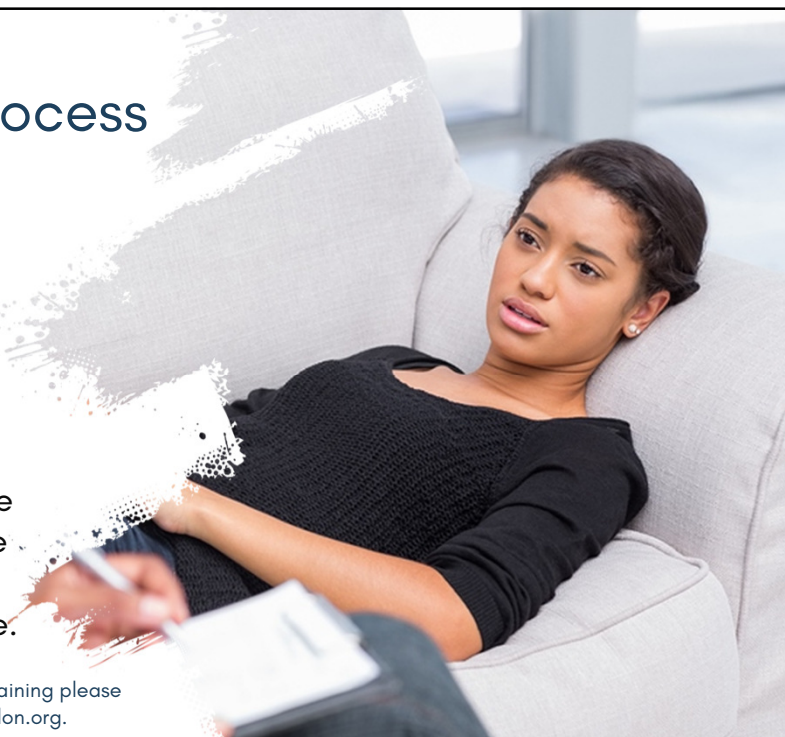
Real Self   Anti-Self

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OVERCOME YOUR INNER CRITIC:
HOW TO LIVE FREE FROM IMAGINED LIMITATIONS

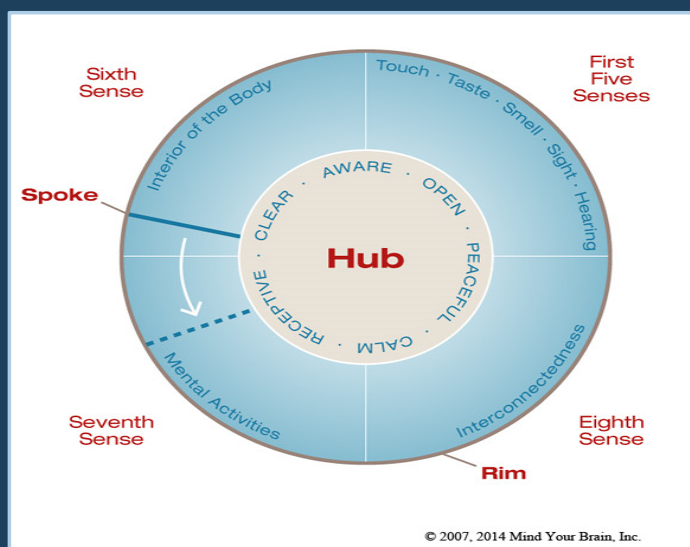A Six-Week eCourse with Dr. Lisa Firestone

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The RAIN Approach

- **R**ecognize
- **A**ccept/Acknowledge/Allow
- **I**nvestigate
- **N**on-Identification

Wheel of Awareness

Access on: http://www.drdansiegel.com/resources/wheel_of_awareness/
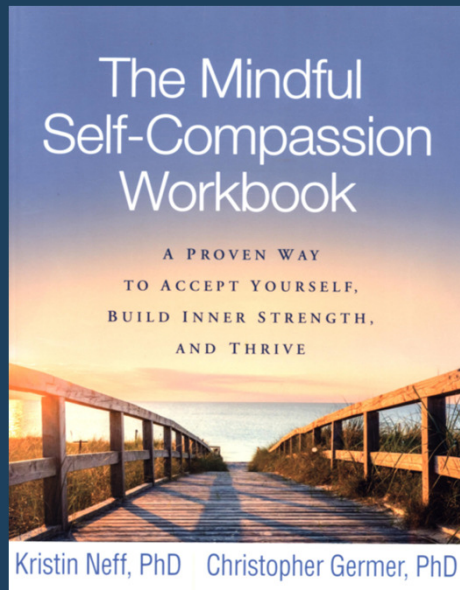
Self-Compassion

Self-compassion Counters Narcissism

- Self-compassion offers same benefits as self-esteem—less depression, greater happiness, etc.—without the downsides.
- Survey of 3,000 people, self-compassion was associated with more stable feelings of self-worth than self-esteem.
- Self-compassion was less contingent on things like physical attractiveness or successful performances than self-esteem.
- Self-esteem had a strong association with narcissism while self-compassion had *no* association with narcissism.

Self–Compassion Exercises
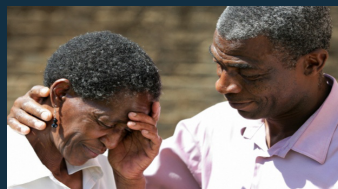
The Mindful Self-Compassion Workbook

A PROVEN WAY TO ACCEPT YOURSELF, BUILD INNER STRENGTH, AND THRIVE

Kristin Neff, PhD   Christopher Germer, PhD

Interpersonal Neurobiology

C urious

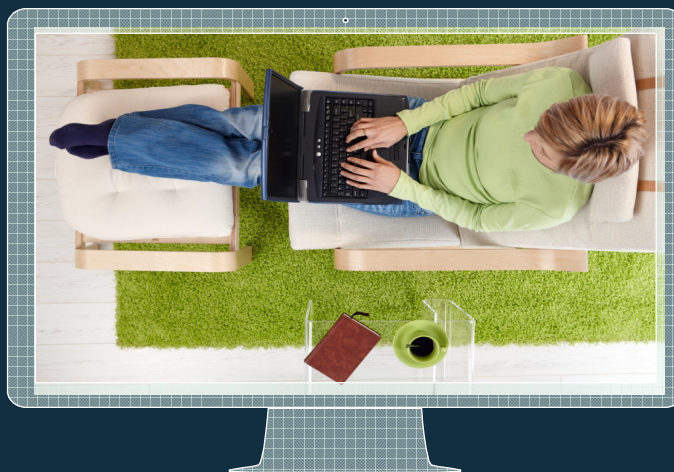**O** pen

A ccepting

L oving

What You Can Do

- **Take action:** Act against your critical inner voice, resist resorting to defenses, take risks, make alterations, go after what you want.

- **Be adult:** Realize you have power over your life and can make changes that immediately change your identity.

- **Be kind to yourself:** Treat yourself like a friend, being kind, inquisitive, patient, honest, and open.

Webinars

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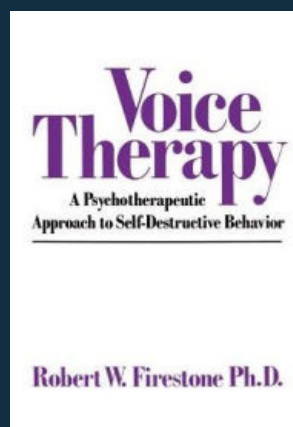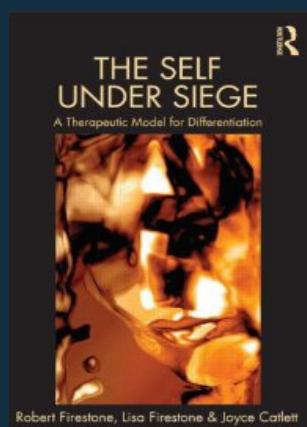www.psychalive.org for a full list of upcoming and archived CE Webinars

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A Therapeutic Model for Differentiation
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A REVOLUTIONARY PROGRAM TO END NEGATIVE
SELF-TALK AND LIVE FREE FROM IMAGINED LIMITATIONS
conquer your
critical
inner
voice
Learning to deal effectively with one's inner critic is central to all areas
of life: personal development, healthy relationships, self-esteem and
self-confidence, creative endeavors, and career success
Robert W. Firestone Ph.D. • Lisa Firestone Ph.D. • Joyce Catlett, M.A.

Voice Therapy
A Psychotherapeutic Approach to Self-Destructive Behavior
Robert W. Firestone Ph.D.

Visit www.psychalive.org for resource links

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Thank you!
Any questions?

Lisa Firestone, Ph.D.
lfirestone@glendon.org

Contact:
Glendon@Glendon.org
800-663-5281

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