The Radical Road to Self-Estee

You don't need to feel better about yourself before you can fix your life, says David K. Reynolds, Ph.D.

First do the right thing—even if it's tough or terrifying—and self-esteem will follow. BY ANNIE GOTTLIEB

EARCH THE WEB FOR "SELF-esteem" and you'll find more than 148,000 matches. In stores you'll run into hundreds of books on the same topic. You can choose among countless tests for measuring your self-esteem and techniques for raising it. Most of these programs teach you to recite affirmations, "visualize success," and "heal wounds from a difficult past."

David K. Reynolds, Ph.D., thinks they're wasting your time. "All these preliminary steps are useless," he has written. "Moreover, they may actually distract you from doing what needs doing."

Dr. Reynolds will turn your thinking about self-esteem upside down and inside out. For nearly three decades, he has studied and taught a simple, tough, and liberating "lifeway" called Constructive Living. No matter how you feel about yourself, or what happened in your past, he says, you can do what needs doing right now—and only that will transform your life. Dr. Reynolds, who has written more than a dozen books, spoke to O on the phone from Japan, where he lives and teaches for half of each year.

o MAGAZINE: In Western therapy, the conventional wisdom is that selfesteem is something you have to have before you can succeed—because otherwise your self-doubt or selfloathing will sabotage you. DAVID K. REYNOLDS: I think they've got it backward, to be honest. I think people who lack self-esteem lack it because they haven't taken enough risks and haven't succeeded enough! Nobody can talk you

into feeling good about yourself—you get the solid good feelings from success. So the question is, What do you need to do? What's going to bring you the success that will make you feel good about yourself?

o: But how can you "just do it," as you say? How can you take those first steps if you're terrified of failing or overwhelmed by feelings of shyness, hopelessness, or shame?

pkr: The notion that first you have to fix your feelings and then you can do something is so taken for granted in our culture that it needs to be examined. I'm scared to death to fly. Every time I get on a plane I know I'm going to die. And I fly to Japan every year, spring and fall. I have to—they haven't built a bridge yet! But you've heard people say, "I can't fly because I'm afraid." That's a lie. You can be scared to death and fly. You don't need to feel comfortable. What you need to do is buy a ticket.

Constructive Living is built from a couple of Japanese therapies, Morita and

Naikan. In Morita therapy, the principle is: Be scared to death—and do what you have to do. In America we have a big drug industry to try to make people feel good all the time. The fact of the matter is that being happy and anxiety-free all the time isn't useful or adaptive. Anxiety's good, because it reflects our desires. If you said you feel worried about how this interview is going to go, I'd say, "That's great! Be nervous, be tense, and go ahead and make the call and do the interview!" Actually, that's how grown-up people behave.

o: But grown-up people were once children. And the other piece of conventional wisdom is that our critical inner voices and negative feelings are the legacy of childhood wounds that need to be healed.

DKR: What's convenient about that is that you can use it as an excuse for not making an effort. It's easier to sit in a therapist's office and talk about something that can't be changed than it is to do what needs.

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to be done now. You can blame your parents, spouse, boss, race, social status—there's a whole slew of things you can use to slide out of the responsibility for what you're going to do next.

Some people believe that when they have some understanding of the childhood origin of their feelings, they'll have control over them. That isn't realistic. The fact is, no one has any idea how to fix feelings. No one can turn them on or off at will. They're something that happens to you, that keep changing, like the weather. And because you can't control them, you have no moral responsibility for them. The best you can do is notice what's happening and get on with your life. It's okay to have anxious, scared, angry, depressed, or lazy feelings - as long as you don't let them stop you from doing what you have to do.

Behavior, on the other hand, is almost

There's a key philosophy in Constructive Living: To know what needs to be done, you have to have purpose. Where would you like to be next year, next month, next week, this afternoon? What do you need to do to get there? If you've got a firm grasp on your purpose, then when your feelings are swaying you, you can keep your behavior directed.

o: And the experience of action will lift your self-esteem.

DKR: Yes, though that doesn't work all the time. The feeling of self-respect and self-esteem will come and go, like any other feeling. Constructive Living suggests that "reality-esteem" is a more solid basis for living than "self-esteem." We keep changing: Sometimes we're smart, sometimes not; sometimes we're kind, sometimes unkind. We aren't particularly deserving of esteem sometimes. Yet reality continues to sustain us. This chair

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always controllable. Except for a few things like tics and stuttering and impotence, 99.9 percent of behavior is controllable. And so you are morally responsible for every single thing you do.

o: Even if you have a biochemically based mood disorder?

DKR: When people are ill they may benefit from medication, but chemical imbalances in the brain are very likely influenced by behavioral factors as well. Judy Davin, a craftsperson and Constructive Living instructor, has written of her own experience with manic depression. For years, both she and her traditional therapists believed her depression to be "incapacitating, as if it had the power to prevent me from walking into the kitchen and turning on the oven, or walking into the laundry room and picking up the soap." With the study and practice of Constructive Living, she found that "I can do what needs to be done in my life, whether I feel like it or not. I have been living well without a therapist for about four years." Davin has learned that she can do her life even while feeling bad and that sometimes doing life well actually results in improved feelings.

I'm sitting on keeps supporting me whether I'm being a good guy or not. This telephone is cooperating right now. All these people keep feeding me—farmers, truckers, the guys who manufactured the food, the guys who paid me so I could buy it. So the American notion that "I am an independent, self-made person" is a distorted picture.

O: That certainly takes the paralyzing spotlight off "me, myself." One last question: What if you really screw up? DKR: You feel rotten. Now, what do you need to do next? That's the question. Rather than sitting around and wallowing in it, What needs doing next?

0: You're saying there's an intelligence in action itself.

DKR: Yes. Reality will give you feedback about what you're doing that's useful and what's not paying off. Reality just keeps coming, with fresh moments, one right after another. What you do with that fresh moment is up to you.

Annie Gottlieb is a freelance writer in New York City. To learn more about Constructive Living, call 541-269-5591 or visit www.click.or.jp/-dkr.