

The Radical Road to Self-Esteem

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

S 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 self-esteem is something you have to have before you can succeed—because otherwise your self-doubt or self-

loathing 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?

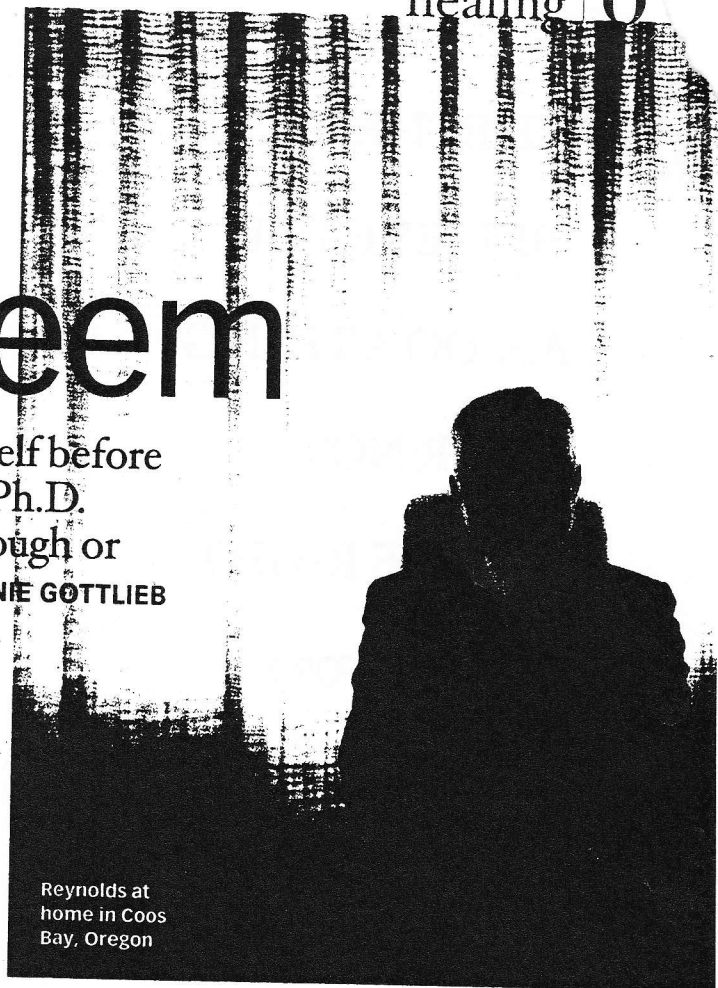
DKR: The notion that first you have to fix your feelings and then you can do something is so taken for granted in our culture that it needs to be examined. I'm scared to death to fly. Every time I get on a plane I know I'm going to die. And I fly to Japan every year, spring and fall. I have to—they haven't 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



Reynolds at home in Coos Bay, Oregon

