



Crazy Beliefs That Screw Up Your Life

Change these beliefs
and become a healthier,
happier person



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INTRODUCTION

“The doors we open and close each day decide the lives we live.”

Flora Whittemore

Our beliefs about ourselves, others and the world we live in have a profound impact on the quality and control we have in our lives. Beliefs often develop without our knowledge or approval. Our perceptions and interpretations can become fixed entities to which we strongly attach and which we fiercely protect. Our beliefs evolve through many sources: what we’ve been taught; experiences we’ve had and our interpretations of those experiences; what we’ve learned to fear; and what significant people in our lives have modeled for us. Beliefs generally aggregate in what I call “Thematic Belief Systems,” such as one’s need to seek approval or to be perfect, with specific sub-beliefs that define the theme. This book is about eight Thematic Belief Systems that have come up again and again in my practice as a psychologist and in my classes with students. A number of colleagues report the same themes in their therapy practices.

By helping clients and students identify and change these debilitating beliefs, many individuals have found their own voice and have thus become healthier and happier. Because of the effectiveness of this approach, I decided to put these specific belief systems into writing and call them *crazy beliefs* -- since they foment nothing but trouble. Most people with these beliefs are not crazy in the clinical sense, but they’re definitely not thinking straight, and the consequences they experience can be very upsetting and debilitating. Sometimes they may even think they’re going crazy!

Marshall McLuhan, the Canadian educator, philosopher and scholar, maintains that “Most of our assumptions have outlived their usefulness.” Unfortunately, people seldom take a hard look at their beliefs and weigh whether they are based in reality, serve them well or cause paralysis and distress. Thematic Belief Systems offer a framework for interpreting the events we experience. Since our beliefs play a large role in defining our reality, our decisions and our behavior, it behooves each of us to take stock of our thinking patterns frequently and thoughtfully. Keep in mind that the more entrenched a belief becomes, the greater the difficulty in questioning or changing that belief. Interestingly, because infants do not yet possess the ability to formulate opinions and have the automatic awareness to comprehend and manipulate what goes on in the cognitive domain, they don’t have emotional biases. Animals, as well, are free of these biases. Their actions are governed by evidence and reason alone – not opinions, interpretations or assumptions.

Our beliefs are often challenged when information comes our way that’s antithetical to how we see things. When there’s a discrepancy between what we have come to believe and the new information that contradicts these beliefs, we often experience a state of confusion and discomfort. This phenomenon is known in psychology as “cognitive dissonance.” When this occurs, the human tendency is to relieve the discomfort by reaffirming the original belief. The approach is either to consider the ideas that support the current belief to be more credible or to focus on ideas that refute the new information. There is, however, a healthier choice: to be open to the new information and identify ways to accommodate it into the current belief system, or to be willing to change your belief entirely if that’s indicated. In this way you update your beliefs so they become more realistic and empowering.

When we address our current beliefs, we should be asking questions such as:

Is there enough evidence to support this belief?

What limitations do I experience because of thinking this way?

How do these beliefs affect my relationships and functioning?

By asking ourselves these questions, we have the opportunity to decide if modifications to our thinking are in order. In *8 Crazy Beliefs That Screw Up Your Life! Change These Beliefs and Become a Healthier, Happier Person*, I offer specific criteria to investigate each of these belief systems so you can determine which ones are applicable and, as a result, learn effective strategies to help make the changes necessary for better health and happiness.

The French novelist and critic Marcel Proust tells us, "The real voyage of discovery consists not in seeing new landscapes but in having new eyes." Adopting reality-based, healthy beliefs is a smart place to start for those who are disappointed in their lives or who simply want to make some needed recalibrations. I encourage you to make the decision to identify, challenge and change beliefs that no longer work... I can promise you that you won't be sorry!

Bonus Chapter 5

IMPRISONED BY FEAR?

"You gain strength, courage and confidence by every experience in which you really stop to look fear in the face.... You must do the thing you think you cannot do."

Eleanor Roosevelt

The FEAR BELIEF: My life is governed by fear, so I have to worry about and avoid those things that scare me.

This belief is a problem if you tell yourself:

- o Most of what happens to me is beyond my control
- o I believe I am not as brave and capable as others
- o Feeling safe is the most important thing in the world to me
- o Having security and staying in my comfort zone is far more important than taking chances that might lead to something better
- o I should be scared to death to take risks that could change my life in unexpected ways.
- o It would be disastrous if I made a wrong decision, made a mistake or failed at something
- o I will be devastated and unable to cope if something difficult or traumatic happens to me
- o The unknown is to be feared and avoided
- o It is better for me to avoid conflict with others because it might hurt them, disappoint them or make them angry at me
- o Because conflict with others is so uncomfortable for me, I should avoid it
- o I believe it is important to stay the course in relationships, no matter how dysfunctional
- o Change is something to be avoided when possible
- o I believe "the devil you know is easier to take than the devil you don't know."
- o It is easier to avoid many of life's problems and fears than to face them
- o If something bad might happen, I should worry about it so I'm prepared
- o If something bad might happen I should worry about it to make it less likely

For too many individuals, fear is paralyzing and, when allowed, can rule with an iron fist. The internal world and actions of a fearful person are governed by a phantom tyrant. Many of us capitulate to its perceived power, often without much resistance. This capitulation to fear is malignant to the human spirit, robbing one of dignity, happiness and hope. The power it wields is sheer chicanery existing only because an individual acquiesces, becoming its prisoner. According to Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Fear defeats more people than any one thing in the world."

Fear is one of the emotional/physical pathways we experience when the old, **non-thinking** part of the brain perceives that a situation is life-threatening. The other pathway is aggression. The fear reaction sets the body in motion to run or escape from the threat, while the aggression reaction sets the body in motion to fight. This "fight or flight response" is essential in truly dangerous circumstances to decrease the chance of injury or death. The key word here is "perceives." The perception that a situation is life-threatening does not mean that it is. And therein lies the rub. Most of us have experienced fear in circumstances that do not threaten our safety. But our body acts like a big old bear is chasing us down a mountain! The response is the same as in the days of the cavemen. It is, however, our interpretation of the situation – what we tell ourselves about the potential consequences – instead of a real threat of danger that has become the trigger. Arnold Glasow contends, "Fear is the lengthened shadow of ignorance."

What are these fears that immobilize and debilitate us needlessly? Some people fear making mistakes, or even more catastrophic, failing in any way. Just the thought can generate a panic attack. Others will do just about anything to avoid disapproval, embarrassment or rejection. Then there is fear of the unknown, which, of course, is far reaching since there are so many unknowns in life. There's fear of success -- what an action-stopper that can be. Some people are afraid of both failure and success! Fear of change and the possible loss of control that can accompany it, even if for a short time, can profoundly intimidate some people. And on and on it goes. Some folks move from one fear to another and another and another. I find it exhausting and depressing just thinking about how hard it is to live this way. Michael Pritchard warns us, "Fear is that little darkroom where negatives are developed."

In the event that you allow yourself to be governed by fear, to lack the courage to proactively live the life that's congruent with your vision, there are many negative consequences you can anticipate. The likelihood of getting what you want is markedly decreased. As Nora Roberts asserts, "If you don't go after what you want, you'll never have it. If you don't ask, the answer is always no. If you don't step forward, you'll always be in the same place." This positions you to assume the helpless role, leaving you with fewer and fewer choices. Sooner or later you will likely experience disappointment and haunting regrets about numerous lost opportunities. These regrets pile up, and before you know it, all you can think about is what you have lost and cannot regain. You keep paying dearly for your fear of fear. And sadly, this defeatist, fear-driven approach is often passed from generation to generation. Indeed, those who give in to fear are controlled from without, not from within, and their ability to garner what is resplendent in this life is severely limited.

Timothy Luce asserts, "The brave don't live forever, but the cautious don't live at all. Here's to the brave!" Indeed. Facing your fears takes courage, sometimes mounds of courage. Courage for many people represents something quite daunting, but in reality, it's not nearly as elusive and difficult as many believe. Psychological courage propels a person from powerless to robust and increases exponentially the ability to transform an impossible dream into a mission accomplished. Walt Disney, the great dream maker, believes that "all our dreams can come true if we have the courage to pursue them."

I love watching the 150 watt light bulb go on during a person's journey forward, experiencing the epiphany that facing your fears and refusing to be helpless makes you a mighty force for enacting your vision. The process of learning to take risks and act boldly is truly awesome, the gift that keeps on giving. This is a gift you give yourself and one you offer to others by your example. Fear, like hunger, is nature's way of insuring survival of the species. It's a distinct part of our human wiring, not something that should be a source of shame. What counts is your attitude and behavior when faced with the uncomfortable feelings of the fear response, which can range in intensity from mild to extreme. What matters is what you tell yourself and what you do about it.

Believing that you can face your fears and dictate how your life will be is a prerequisite to taking control. You must be willing to do what it takes to shape your life in the direction of your goals in spite of fear. As Mark Twain contends, "Courage is resistance to fear, mastery of fear, not the absence of fear." And Ambrose Moon believes, "Courage is not the absence of fear but rather the judgment that something else is more important than fear."

THE BENEFITS OF PSYCHOLOGICAL COURAGE

What do you gain by becoming psychologically courageous? You gain yourself. There is a wonderful freedom that comes from being brave and facing your fears. Unchallenged fear is a prison that progressively depletes your world of choices as you comply repeatedly with its dictates. Avoidance leads to more avoidance, forcing a long and arduous detour from a fulfilling, fruitful life. Just as avoidance leads to more avoidance, courageous thoughts and actions lead to more courageous thoughts and actions. As a psychologist, I have worked with so many people whose lives were tied up in knots by their uncontested fears and by the difficulties of not knowing how to manage stress. When you embrace the courage it takes to meet your fears with action and resolve, you get the opportunity to be the person you want to be. Anais Nin, the French author, contends, "Life shrinks or expands in proportion to one's courage." Courage fosters creativity, happiness, integrity, social connections, optimism and resilience. Remarkably, courage turns change from a fear stimulus to a "field of dreams," helping in the discovery of your power within.

How you feel about yourself and your place in this world is greatly affected by whether you take the path of surrendering to fear or the path of becoming courageous. As an unknown author wisely states, "An inferiority complex is a conviction by your fears." Courage nourishes self-confidence, self-respect and self-efficacy. Saying no to the path of avoidance, the alluring, deceptive path of least resistance, and choosing the path of forward motion can be a transformative decision for an individual. Each time you take on something you fear, even if in small increments, you learn of your strengths and potential. This translates into confidence and self-reliance.

Courage and happiness go hand in hand. In their book, *What Happy People Know*, Dan Baker and Cameron Stauth advise, "We need to be willing to charge headlong into the inferno of our most horrific fears – eyes open, intellect and spirit at the ready – even as our survival instincts are screaming, 'Run! Run! Get out!' That takes courage, and that's why courage is one of the prerequisites for happiness."

Creativity and success belong to those who face their fears. Both require the willingness to take leaps into the unknown, to continue to believe in yourself and your goals when others offer only discouragement. Both creativity and success are born of adventurousness and the understanding that it often pays off to flirt with the impossible. As President Franklin Delano Roosevelt contends, "The only limit to our realization of tomorrow will be our doubts of today."

Courage is the gift we give to others by our example. In a moving tribute to her husband, Eleanor Clift, the political commentator and contributing editor to *Newsweek* magazine, told of his courage and its effect on others in his battle with kidney cancer in an article published April 1, 2005. In this impassioned article, she tells us that her husband was a man who early in their marriage had difficulty handling sinus infections, but that somehow when facing this devastating illness he displayed the courage, spirit and clarity that was a gift to her and others. He convinced her to join him on the Diane Rehm radio broadcast to discuss his journey and answer questions in an attempt to help others facing such circumstances. At first reluctant, she decided that she had to find the courage to do this with him. The public response was heartening: "So many people have mentioned hearing us and gaining strength and courage from Tom's unflinching responses."

THE MALIGNANCY OF AVOIDANCE

When you avoid something that scares you, those fearful feelings and the accompanying physical symptoms often diminish or disappear altogether. When you avoid something that's distasteful or boring, the absence of the negative or boring situation actually reinforces the avoidant behavior.

Because the behavior of avoiding or escaping is so powerful in halting that which is distressing, distasteful or boring, it becomes more likely that you'll use this response again when the same or a similar situation presents itself. Avoidance has gained strength, and you are in backward motion. Avoidance leads to more avoidance. When this is the case, you have limited or lost your control in this area. You are caught up in a cognitive, emotional and behavioral state of confusion.

Let's say that you are fearful of public speaking. You've agreed to give a presentation, but just the thought of standing in front of a large audience gives you heart palpitations, gas, sweaty palms and thoughts of moving to Australia. You put off practicing the speech because even practicing makes you feel ill. You make a phone call to cancel or reschedule your commitment with the lame excuse of having some disease one can only contract in a remote village in Africa.

When you hang up from the call, your heart palpitations and gas disappear, your sweaty palms become dry, and your thoughts are focused on what you are going to have for lunch. Avoidance in the moment has aborted your fearful symptoms. The avoidant behavior has gained power in this situation, and in the future the likelihood of using this course of action has increased, sometimes markedly. Avoidance controls you. In terms of your public speaking fear, persistence has been dealt a blow. It's much like drinking alcohol in the morning to treat your hangover. This intervention may reduce your symptoms, but I can guarantee that you're not in control, the alcohol is in control.

So what's wrong with strategies that make you feel better, even if just in the short-term? What's wrong with managing fear and aversive situations in this way? The answer is important. Your behavior is reactive, not proactive. You're not going toward your power, you're moving away from it. You have limited your choices. This backward spiraling may take on a life of its own. It can become infectious, spreading or generalizing to other parts of your life. I have seen the far-reaching effects of avoidance many, many times. These effects can result in one's own personal incarceration. Fortunately, this pattern can be turned around. You can become proactive and regain control.

For many years, from childhood to graduate school, I too was horrified by public speaking. On a rational level, I realized that this was a very common fear, but I still believed beyond a doubt that my case was special, that for some reason I was more terrorized by this than anyone in history. Just the thought of presenting in front of a group made me feel incredibly sick. Now that I have worked for so many years with clients who are fearful, I realize many people feel like their reactions are beyond the usual human experience.

Anyway, I was forced to overcome this fear because professors are not very understanding of graduate students with this problem -- or any other problem for that matter. The real day of reckoning came when my supervising professor signed me up to give a lecture to a psychology association membership. On the way to the talk, I actually thought about being in a minor car accident and how that might be preferable to showing up! Not that I would intentionally do such a ridiculous thing, but how crazy is that? Think about it. I imagined how great it would be to have some sort of acceptable excuse to avoid my fear rather than stand and talk to people who had no reason to hurt me! When I work with clients I reflect on that day; and the very vivid memory keeps my empathy flowing.

I'm delighted to tell you that fear is very treatable and, in most cases, without a therapist. The principles and tools are pretty straightforward. Keep in mind that you're dealing with the "fight or flight response." Abundant research and clinical work have availed strategies that can empower you to take on your fear and manage it quite well. This is true even if you have an anxiety disorder that may make this response even more challenging. I learned the strategies, and they have served me well... a relief indeed!

People with anxiety disorders generally have a heightened reaction to certain fear-evoking situations. The reaction may be triggered more quickly, may last longer, or may be greater in intensity than would be the effect on the rest of us. The same strategies are used for managing these heightened reactions with a significant success rate. People with anxiety disorders often need professional help to manage the condition optimally.

MANAGING FEAR AND DEVELOPING COURAGE

Identifying your particular area or areas of fear is a very important first step. Below you will find some of the most common fear situations and challenges:

Making difficult choices and taking risks

Helen Keller believes, "Security is mostly a superstition. It does not exist in nature... Life is either a daring adventure or nothing." Making bold choices involves learning to tolerate, even enjoy, the prospect of unknown results. It's an attitude of wonder, not fear of the unpredictable. Making difficult or bold choices teaches us to look at the plethora of possibilities. And with each choice that's made, we are rewarded with strength and self-confidence, even if the choice does not work out as well as we had hoped. According to Harvey Mackay, author of *Swim with the Sharks without Being Eaten Alive*, "There are lots of ways to become a failure, but never taking a chance is the most successful."

Taking risks can alert the brain to engage its alarm system. But keep in mind that when you're not held hostage by this primitive system, you become the engineer of your existence. Start with one small risk. Follow through, and after you've taken a deep breath, choose another to pursue.

Facing interpersonal conflict

Interpersonal conflict has a chilling, incapacitating impact on many people. Once a person starts avoiding or retreating from conflict, this pattern of avoidance and escape gets a heavy dose of reinforcement. Left unaddressed, this pattern wields a destructive influence on your ability to succeed in your goals and dreams. Bottom line, whatever you avoid due to fear stops you cold in your tracks.

A husband hates getting into arguments with his wife. She's much quicker at comebacks and can be quite the bully. As a child he hated hearing his parents argue and then came the disturbing silence for what seemed like an eternity to a small boy. The husband has learned to keep his mouth shut regarding opinions that dissent with his wife's views. In this way he avoids the discomfort of conflict and silence and spares his child from the fear and sadness he felt growing up. His avoidance is reinforced by peace at home.

Sound okay? No way. This husband has convinced himself that psychological cowardice is his best course. It's not. He is not standing up for himself. He has adopted a role of emotional impotence that almost always fosters resentment and difficulty in relationships. To add to the dysfunctional effects, the husband is setting an unhealthy example for his child, an example of acquiescing again and again. Abraham Maslow, the American psychologist believes, "Conflict itself is, of course, a sign of health as

you would know if you ever met really apathetic people, really hopeless people, people who have given up hoping, striving, coping.”

I stipulate that conflict is best handled with fair fighting skills and rules. The husband and his wife in my example need to learn assertiveness and conflict resolution. Ann Landers subscribes to the belief that, “All married couples should learn the art of battle as they should learn the art of making love. Good battle is objective and honest – never vicious or cruel. Good battle is healthy and constructive and brings to a marriage the principal of equal partnership.”

Developing a proactive attitude toward difficulties

A person’s attitude about failure and difficulties has a commanding effect on the vim and vigor of psychological courage. If you believe that failure is shameful or unfair and difficulties are something to cry over, then courage will be sadly compromised in your repository of strengths. After all, you can choose to allow life’s stuff to beat you down and depress you, or you can take to heart the words of Leonardo Da Vinci: “Obstacles cannot crush me; every obstacle yields to firm resolve.” It takes courage to keep moving in spite of life’s “to be expected” arduous downturns and troubles.

Your attitude toward obstacles, criticism, setbacks, mistakes and failure is very important. Being afraid of encountering any of these, avoiding them whenever possible, is an entirely counterproductive approach. Victor Frankl, author of *Man’s Search for Meaning*, explains, “What a man needs is not a tensionless state but rather the striving and struggling for some goal worthy of him. What he needs is not the discharge of tension at any cost, but the call of potential meaning waiting to be fulfilled by him.”

I can promise you that 95% of the time you're working toward a goal, you will experience at least one, but more likely many, of the above. It’s your job in becoming persistent to normalize these, that is, see them as an inevitable part of the process, not a catastrophe. They are as common as inclement weather for you, me and everyone! Who in the world told you that goal achievement is supposed to come easily, quickly and without some bruises and cuts – sometimes deep cuts? If that’s the assumption you have, it’s time to change your mind. Instead of feeling sorry for yourself, refuse to be discouraged by failures, delays, difficulties, mistakes and other prickly interruptions.

Courage is born of understanding and accepting that life, with its dreams and goals, is often messy, difficult and painful. But for goodness sakes, take heart in what Christopher Robin said to Pooh: “Promise me you’ll always remember you’re braver than you believe, and stronger than you seem, and smarter than you think.” Change your internal dialogue. You can get out of the avoidance trap by viewing difficulties as challenges replete with all sorts of possibilities. Change your self-talk. Utilize strong statements to dispute the cognitions that immobilize your plans and dreams.

Ending unhealthy relationships

Eleanor Roosevelt said, “You gain courage and confidence by every experience in which you really stop to look fear in the face. You are able to say to yourself, ‘I have lived through this horror. I can take the next thing that comes along.’ You must do the thing you think you cannot do.”

Many people find themselves in complicated, abusive relationships where fear and uncertainty are pervasive, where the choice to end the situation is fraught with unknown, potentially negative consequences. The woman without financial options whose husband beats her and the children has to look long and hard for the backbone to leave. Her problems are overwhelming; after all, how will they survive without an income? What if he comes after them in a rage? Or the teenager who’s lonely and embarrassed not to have a boyfriend; she believes something is wrong with her if she’s not involved in a

relationship. Her current partner is kind now and then, but most of the time he tells her she's a loser and too fat. She wonders, "Isn't any kind of boyfriend better than no boyfriend at all?"

And then there's the man whose father has criticized him since childhood; he has tried every way he knows to please and impress this man – painfully, to no avail. If his father cannot love him, he thinks maybe he is unlovable. These are the relationships that need to be modified, even terminated. They are toxic. It takes tremendous courage to do what needs to be done. Professional help is often warranted in such cases.

Facing psychological, emotional and medical problems

I have spent a great portion of my professional life treating people with psychological problems. I can tell you that facing one's psychological and emotional demons requires profound courage. Whether it's the woman with panic disorder who feels like she's having a heart attack each time she drives her children to school; or the person with bipolar disorder who's on a roller coaster ride of mania followed by deep depression; or the little boy who hears voices; or the man who was abused as a child and still suffers from the trauma, courage is mandatory for these people in their quest to improve mental health.

Committing to treatment and doing what needs to be done invariably present monumental challenges that so often evoke sheer terror. I take my hat off to anyone who finds the courage for such an important endeavor. Those of us who have not been plagued with these conditions may never really understand the magnitude of courage that one must muster to do what needs to be done.

Facing medical problems, too, often presents gargantuan challenges that require enormous courage and resolve. Undergoing painful and frightening procedures, taking medications that have untoward side effects, experiencing physical limitations, waiting for what seems like an eternity for potentially life-altering answers, or receiving a frightening prognosis exemplify only some of the experiences in which one's courage will be put to the ultimate test. Courage is facing these challenges and at the same time continuing to live each day to the fullest. Alice M. Swain reminds us, "Courage is not the flowering oak that sees storms come and go; it is the fragile blossom that opens in the snow."

Making important habit changes

Habits are not, in and of themselves, negative. Many of the habits we have serve us well. It's not possible, and definitely not convenient, to have to think about everything we do day in and day out. Brushing your teeth in the morning and after each meal is done automatically; it has become a habit. There are some habits, however, that do not serve us well.

Some are pesky, little habits like nail biting that we would prefer to eliminate; some are bad habits that have a moderately negative effect on our health, well-being and goal achievement, such as eating more food than we need or working too much or not getting enough exercise. Then there are some habits that are highly destructive in our lives and in the lives of those close to us. It takes courage, in some cases huge quantities of courage, to do what needs to be done to change or eliminate these habits.

Most addictions would fall into the category of needing more help than simple habit change. And often just following guidelines spelled out in a book simply is insufficient. More support and/or treatment are indicated. Conquering addictions requires great courage.

Abraham Lincoln declares, "Always bear in mind that your own resolution to succeed is more important than any other one thing." Do NOT be discouraged if you have met with little or no success in building new positive habits or reforming old negative habits. To be courageous in this context often requires

specific information and a persistent attitude to get the job done. I love that commercial about trying to stop smoking. A kind voice says, "All those other times you tried, maybe they were just practice."

Making change an ally instead of an adversary

You have a choice in how you view, react to and utilize change. You can be afraid, hoping that very little will be different from what you have come to expect, or you can welcome change as one of your best friends. Either way, change will come, whether you like it or not. Outside factors just don't stay the same! The inability to be flexible and adapt to change is often one of the main reasons people have trouble reaching their true potential. They hold fast to ideas and ways that are part of the past. They stubbornly cling to their right to forever live in the past. They're afraid to welcome and adjust to the new because it's often fraught with unknowns. Hazel Henderson, evolutionary economist and author of *Building a Win-Win World*, suggests, "If we recognize that change and uncertainty are basic principles, we can greet the future and the transformation we are undergoing with the understanding that we do not know enough to be pessimistic."

So the question becomes how can you make change work to improve your life? First, you need to believe what Price Pritchett surmises "Change always comes bearing gifts." That's the focus of the person who leaves fear behind and proceeds to possibilities. Think of the gifts and always expect that change is on its way. Change is our ally. Change provides phenomenal opportunities. Eric Hoffer, the author of *The Ordeal of Change*, tells us, "In times of change, learners inherit the Earth, while the learned find themselves beautifully equipped to deal with a world that no longer exists."

Become the person you want to be by pursuing goals and dreams

Courage fosters your belief in yourself and your belief in all the possibilities within your reach. What gets in the way of goals and dreams? Plenty of things: fear of failure, fear of success, fear of the critical opinions of others regarding your choices, preoccupation with today's obligations or yesterday's disappointments, addiction to comfort and security, inadequate attention to what your goals and dreams really are, or whatever the "excuse de jour" happens to be. But as the poet and playwright e.e. cummings maintains, "It takes courage to grow up and turn out to be who you really are."

Pursuing your goals and dreams involves a belief system that renders courage a necessity in the pursuit of a fulfilling existence. You must believe in the importance and accessibility of your most treasured aspirations, and you must be daring and determined in the chase. Dreams flourish when one has the right kind of internal conversation. You must become your own cheerleader, repeating, "It can be done, and I'm just the one who will prove it!"

Erma Bombeck, the beloved humorist and author of *At Wit's End*, says it so well: "There are people who put their dreams in a little box and say, 'Yes, I've got dreams, of course I've got dreams.' Then they put the box away and bring it out once in a while to look in it, and yep, they're still there. These are great dreams, but they never even get out of the box. It takes an uncommon amount of guts to put your dreams on the line, to hold them up and say, 'how good or bad am I?' That's where courage comes in."

SUGGESTIONS FOR BECOMING MORE COURAGEOUS

Spend time with positive, supportive, courageous people

Follow the lead of hardy people like Oprah Winfrey who says she surrounds herself with people who say "Why Not?" to her ideas. Find those folks who have demonstrated their courage and who enjoy watching others succeed. Learn to model courage for those you care about.

Be aware of people in your world who discourage you in your important quest. Develop ways to neutralize their dissuasions. Assertiveness skills can be helpful in preparing you to speak up to those who attempt to deter you from your path of courage. Practice disputing the objections and discouragement of others, both the ones you anticipate in your head and the ones actually hurled at you. Information on assertiveness and disputing can be found in the last chapter of this book.

Believe that you are able to do what needs to be done

Initially, it can be very difficult to believe you have what it takes to complete this mission, but I promise you do. Repeat again and again a positive statement about your ability to work this through. At first you may not believe it, but if you repeat again and again, it will take hold and you will eventually know it's true. Just remember that the negative, fearful statements that you've made to yourself over time had become habits by repetition.

Don't talk yourself out of action

Fearful individuals who have succumbed to the avoidance trap are masters at talking themselves out of action. Senator John McCain, in *Why Courage Matters*, recommends the following: "If you do the things you think you cannot do, you'll feel your resistance, your hope, your dignity, and your courage grow stronger every time you prove it. You will someday face harder choices that very well might require more courage. You're getting ready for them. You're getting ready to have courage. And when those moments come, unbidden but certain, and you choose well, your courage will be recognized by those who matter most to you. When your children see you choose, without hesitating, without remark, to value virtue more than security, to love more than you fear, they will learn what courage looks like and what love it serves, and they will dread its absence."

Practice, practice, practice

You can make courage a habit by doing it again and again and again. Plan to do at least one act a day that requires courage. Ruth Gordon tells us, "Courage is very important. Like a muscle, it is strengthened by use." And Aristotle explains, "We are what we repeatedly do. Excellence, then, is not an act, but a habit."

Stop thinking of yourself as a victim

Identify instances in your thinking and imagery in which you have ordained yourself the dreaded victim. Use distraction and disputing techniques (last chapter of this book) to challenge these clearly counterproductive thoughts and images. In this world, the victim mentality is an impediment to productive self-control and certainly to the strength of courage. Develop visual imagery and a dialogue in which you are powerful, determined, brave and successful.

Learn to manage the stress response

The more control you have over your body and its emergency gear, the more likely you are to face your fears and make bold choices.

Identify cognitions that feed fear and block forward progress

Use the cognitive techniques -- distraction and disputing -- to reduce, eliminate or replace the fear cognitions. For a week, keep a record of fear and negatively based thoughts and images. Identify their

frequency, duration and the circumstances under which they occur. Circumstances or triggers can include times of day, interactions with others, situations where things do not go your way, and so on.

Use systematic desensitization; remember that the journey can be divided into steps

This is an ongoing journey that unfolds in a step-by-step progression. According to Lao-Tzu, the Chinese philosopher, “The journey of a thousand miles begins with one step.” This is especially true in terms of managing fear. Systematic desensitization, also known as exposure therapy, is a highly effective method for managing fear/anxiety reactions to events, situations, persons or things. Joseph Wolpe, the South African psychiatrist, developed this procedure in the 1950’s. Based on the classical conditioning model, this intervention is an effective treatment for phobias and anxiety disorders as well as those fear responses that do not meet the criteria for a clinical diagnosis. The instructions for systematic desensitization can be found in Chapter 9.