

Self-Esteem

By Jean Kirkpatrick, Ph.D., WFS Founder

Seems like everywhere I look, I see speeches, courses, workshops, and seminars being given on self-esteem. In the last ten years, it has been discovered that self-esteem is the key to well-being. But we knew that, didn't we? I guess if anyone ever asked what is the key to recovery, the answer most certainly would be the degree of self-esteem we enjoy. There is just no way we can stay sober unless we have some good feelings about ourselves.

But therein is the catch, the Catch 22. We were drinking because of the despair we felt, the feeling of frustration we felt because of the life problems we had difficulty handling.

That's the paradox. We must quit drinking so we can handle our problems but our negative feelings do not provide us with any measure of self-esteem!

Obviously, the most important part of our recovery is a building of our self-esteem and that's not easy. For many years we have had negative feelings about ourselves and suddenly we must turn these around and become a positive person so that we can stay sober!

Our actions in life are always a result of what we think about ourselves, how we feel about ourselves. An interesting experiment is to ask others how they see us and we'll be quite surprised to learn their assessment of us, almost certainly a different picture of us than we have of ourselves.

It is almost common for all of us to devalue ourselves. We think much better of others than we do of ourselves. Are we afraid to let ourselves know anything positive about ourselves? Is our denial of our self-worth allied with our earlier denial of our alcohol problems? Has denial become such an integral part of our life that its tentacles have reached every area of our personality? Some think denial has a life of its own -- it permits our problem to flourish and is picked up by those around us. We can go on saying, "*I never did that,*" or "*How could I ever?*" Others around us pickup these negatives.

Some believe it is helpful to look back to our actions when we were drinking and to examine those feelings about ourselves to see if our feelings then are still damaging ourselves now. Few of us, if any, can come away from our drinking experiences with anything that comes close to a positive self-image. To counteract these debilitating feelings we have about our drinking, we easily move into all phases of denial. Our actions are so destructive to our feelings of well-being, we deny they ever happened. We become expert in putting the ugly into a box and shoving it under the bed. We simply act as if our despicable behavior never happened.

It is obvious how long the road is to our complete recovery. It stretches before us. We can also see the crying necessity for our change of old thoughts. None of this happens until we can clearly see ourselves. Until we can see what we need to do. Very often

that's a long time coming. Our denial has often entombed us.

There are some who know and acknowledge their negative feelings but feel hopeless about changing them. Day after day I read about this feeling of hopelessness in the letters that come into the office. Women express the need but feel helpless. For women, this feeling of helplessness is all part of our social conditioning -- that others always had power over us, that others set the rule for our behavior. Women have great difficulty coping with these feelings, even have difficulty with defining them.

So where to begin? The first is to discover our true feelings about ourselves. Exactly how do we feel? Have we been saying, "*My drinking wasn't all that bad,*" or "*I never drank in a bar.*"?

Or were our feelings the exact opposite of that: "*I made such a fool of myself, I'll never be able to look anyone in the eye ever again.*"

No matter which of these categories we fall into, obviously it is necessary to recognize our problem with alcohol and **that we have the power to overcome**.

Recovery happens when we know that we can take charge of ourselves, that we have the power within us to be a new person.

Others around us may try to dictate our behavior, but this is the time to begin with self-assertion. We need not only to know we want to get well but that we can get well.

If we are able to be in a treatment facility, then we have begun to think about ourselves in positive feelings -- hopefully. Facilities with women's programs begin this process for us. We begin to learn "how". Unfortunately, too many treatment facilities do not have a program for women and then we must begin the process of self-imaging when we get home. We must learn the most important lesson we'll ever come into contact with -- all that filters through our mind influences our experiences. We create our new selves through the thoughts we form. We cannot change old, bad experiences but we can change how we think about those old past experiences. By doing this, we will no longer carry all that old baggage with us into our recovery.

Our mind is never at rest unless we still it with alcohol or drugs. In sobriety, when we want rest from disturbing thoughts, we can exercise, meditate, and do yoga, garden, or any number of things.

When we acknowledge the power of our thoughts and how that affects our life's experiences, we have learned the most important law of life. Not until I learned this was I able to take charge of my alcoholism and my life.

This should be your gift to yourself -- to know you have the power within you to countermand all the negative things you've ever been told -- "You can't do it," "As a woman, you must know your place," etc., etc., etc.

Begin today to grab hold of your thoughts and, consequently, your life. Begin positive self-imaging. Never underestimate the power of the messages you can give yourself. Our mind is a flip chart waiting to be written on. And the messages we write are those

which will form us, create the new woman we are becoming. In our “New Life” Program we have a good sentence to begin with:

I AM A CARING, CAPABLE, COMPETENT, COMPASSIONATE WOMAN.

It is also a very good idea to remember that we are responsible for our actions now that we are sober and into recovery.

Our “New Life” Program gives us all of the knowledge we need to become the wonderful women we should be. Just as the 12th Statement is important for daily use, so too is our 9th Statement, ***“The past is gone forever.”*** That means we give up all our emotional payment for experiences that happened to us in past time. We cannot change them; we can only accept the knowledge that they -- our terrible negative experiences -- are over.

By pursuing a daily systematic recitation of our new hoped-for image, we will soon discover that it is happening, that we feel a new inner strength, that we have a whole new feeling of freedom having jettisoned our baggage of bad experiences.

As we begin to live with our new feelings as a competent woman, we will gradually begin to have some self-esteem.

We can see there is a pattern:

- * **Learn the biggest secret of life -- our thoughts can change everything.**
- * **Every day work on self-imaging. Never miss a day. We will then become that person.**
- * **Know that we no longer have to continually pay for past mistakes: The past is gone forever and we can change how we think about it even if we can't change past events. We can know our negative experiences were a result of our negative life style.**

To have self-esteem, we must learn to like ourselves and then finally love ourselves. This seems a long way away from many of us who once said, *“I hate myself. I wish I weren't alive.”*

Yes, it is a long, long road but it is a road that is filled with wonderful experiences as we turn ourselves around. We will never be sorry we took this road to recovery, because we will find a happiness we never thought possible. We will also have learned so many of the important lessons of life -- that our problems do not have to manipulate us but that we are in charge and can take care of our problems in a rational non-disruptive way.

Yes, it's worth it. Just give it a try. You'll never be sorry.

Positive Aids To Help With A Self-Image

Many women write to us and say they want help but can't get to meetings (or don't

want to go to meetings) but that they want help.

This is not impossible. Our recovery is how we learn to know ourselves and how we can change. So how can this happen? Let me suggest use of some of our many workbooks. Their value for self-revelation cannot be measured.

There are workbooks on:

- * Self-Esteem
- * Coping With Stress
- * Communicating
- * Relationships
- * Anger: The Workbook
- * Self-Analyzers
- * Considerations
- * The "New Life" Diary

And perhaps one of the best ways to help one's self-image is to use cassette tapes. Many women listen to these in their autos while driving to work. The available cassette tapes cover almost every aspect of recovery:

- * The Program Booklet
- * Combating Depression
- * The Woman Alcoholic
- * So You Want To Quit?
- * Happiness & Sobriety
- * Self-Imaging
- * The First Year
- * Guilt Feelings
- * Special Needs of Women Alcoholics
- * Breaking Dependencies/ Anger & Women
- * Goal-Setting
- * WFS & AA
- * Handling Anger (1990 WFS Members)
- * Relationships (1990 WFS Members)
- * Women & Recovery (1991 speech)
- * Keys to Recovery (1984 speech)

There are many more tapes available -- tapes about the Program Statements -- but these tapes (above) will certainly do much toward your achievement of a positive self-image.

Recovery -- our recovery -- comes from our application of self to revelation and gradual growth. None of this happens without our making it happen. Although attendance at meetings is admirable, we must add much more to this. I've known persons who have stayed sober for many years by attending 2 meetings a week but they have never grown. They are sober. Period.

Life can be so much more fulfilling when we are tuned into ourselves, when we have identified our weaknesses and work to overcome these.

The WFS “New Life” Program means growth, growth, and more growth. It means that we learn how to take charge of ourselves and our life. It means dynamic living because we have unlocked the key to ourselves.

(This article is from *The Collection of Sobering Thoughts Booklet*, Volume 16 and copyrighted by Women for Sobriety, Inc., PO Box 618, Quakertown, PA 18951.)

Comments from Becky:

What a great way to start off your new life with a healthy dose of self-esteem. It reminds me of the old saying, “An apple a day keeps the doctor away.” If every day, like Jean suggested, we work on our positive affirmations to build up that newly precious self-esteem, than we would truly not feel the need to fall back on the various negative addictions that helped us escape from facing the problems of the real world.

Building the foundation for my life with self-esteem gives me the strength for endurance and resiliency in the times of change. Even if you have a few ‘weak areas’ in your self-esteem’s foundation, it doesn’t mean that you’re going to fall apart or that you’re not trying hard enough. I’ve learned enough in my lifetime not to go running out the door screaming and crying every time someone tries undermining my confidence and pushing my buttons. What I do instead is look inward, while meditating and doing deep breathing exercises, and I am reassured that it’s normal to go through ‘growing pains’ until I reach the next level of emotional maturity and confidence. I’m also learning how to be flexible yet strong in my belief in my capabilities and self-worth.

This is what I wish for all of our members... to be strong but flexible enough to adjust and accept all the changes that go on around you and especially the changes that occur within you. Embrace your new life... it’s worth every minute!