PART I

What Is Self-Coaching?

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A New Self-Therapy

Why are you reading this book? Maybe you worry too much, or perhaps lately you've been struggling with panicky, out-of-control feelings that leave you anxious and frustrated. You may snap at others. Perhaps your sleep isn't what it used to be, and you always seem to be in a bad mood. Maybe you've become depressed; you feel tired, hopeless, or just plain defeated. Sometimes you just want to give up.

You may feel confused, but you're sure of one thing: life's not supposed to be this hard. You want answers—now! The last thing you want is to waste more time.

So let's get started. The following self-quiz will show you how you can benefit from this book.

Is Self-Coaching for Me?

Identify each sentence as either mostly true or mostly false:

T F I often start my thoughts with "What if."

T F I usually see the glass as being half empty.

T F I worry too much.

T F I'm often fatigued.

T F I have difficulty concentrating.

T F I have trouble meeting deadlines.

T F I worry about my health.

T F I generally feel as if I'm on edge.

T F I'm often sad.

T F I have trouble falling asleep.

T F I have trouble trusting my perceptions (for example, Did I lock that door? Did I talk too much?).

T F I have too much doubt.

T F I would say I'm insecure.

T F I wake up too early.

T F My worst time of the day is the morning.

T F I dread having things go wrong.

T F I'm too concerned with my looks.

T F I have to have things done my way.

T F I can't relax.

T F I'm never on time.

T F You can never be safe enough.

T F I exaggerate problems.

T F I experience panic.

T F I feel safest when I'm in bed.

T F I'm too sensitive.

T F I often wish I were someone else.

T F I fear growing older.

T F Life is one problem after another.

T F I don't have much hope of feeling better.

T F I constantly fidget.

T F I'm prone to road rage.

T F I have phobias (for example, intense fear of closed spaces, bridges, open spaces, or social encounters).

Total your "true" responses. A score of 10 or fewer suggests that you are a relatively well-adjusted individual. Self-Coaching can teach you to shake off life's setbacks. You can expect your social and personal effectiveness to improve as you begin to become less tripped-up by emotional interference. Mostly, you can expect to enhance your already healthy personality with a more dynamic approach to life.

A score between 11 and 20 suggests that you have a moderate degree of personality erosion. Self-Coaching can quickly and simply teach you to get beyond the self-limiting effects of anxiety or depression and realize a more spontaneous, natural way of life.

If your score was above 20, you have significant difficulty with anxiety and/or depression. For you, Self-Coaching needs to become a priority. With patience and practice, you can learn to live your life symptom free.

As beleaguered as you are, I don't expect you to be convinced easily. For now, just recognize that regardless of how anxious or depressed you are, something in you is managing to read these words. That something, the part of you that hasn't quit, that healthy part of your personality that's still willing to try to solve the riddle that has become your life—that's the healthy person in you whom Self-Coaching wants to reach.

Self-Coaching, the Program

It took me twenty-five years of clinical work to write this book. That's not because I'm particularly slow or lazy (far from it), but because it takes a long time, a really long time, to see through the deceptive mist that shrouds anxiety and depression. One reason for this deception was my myopic view of psychology. Like so many other mental health professionals, I had been taught to view therapy as a relatively passive process, requiring a thorough, often painstaking, exploration and dissection of the past. The rationale is that unless you get to the underlying, unconscious reasons why you struggle, you can't expect to be healed.

It wasn't until I broke ranks with this traditional mind-set and started relying on my intuition and instincts that I began to see things differently. What I saw was that anxiety and depression weren't mysterious or obscure maladies; they were nothing more than the unavoidable outcome of

misguided, faulty perceptions—perceptions that, in time, wind up depleting and victimizing you. What's interesting, once you understand the nature of these faulty perceptions, is that anxiety and depression actually begin to make sense. As irrational as your particular symptoms may feel, when you learn the punch line, the riddle becomes clear. You'll see. These insights were the catalyst for a new form of therapy I developed to teach patients what they could do to make themselves better. (I dislike the term "patient," but I like "client" even less, so I'll use "patient" throughout the book.) I call my method Self-Coaching (Self, with a capital S).

Before telling you about the specific origins of my program, let's look at a few common misperceptions about anxiety and depression. Everyone gets a bit anxious or depressed once in a while. It's a normal part of everyone's life. Getting uptight if you're late for an appointment or feeling down and upset over an argument with a friend are inescapable parts of life. Contrary to what most people think, it's not life's challenges (or our genetics) that lead to what we call clinical depression or anxiety (more about this in upcoming chapters), but how we react to these challenges. When insecurity is allowed to embellish difficult life circumstances—such as a tax audit, not getting a raise, or a fight with your spouse—with unnecessary doubts, fears, and negatives, then you're being driven not by facts but by fictions, fictions perpetrated by insecurity. You tell yourself, "I'll never get through this!" or "I can't handle this."

As Shakespeare wrote, "The fault . . . is not in our stars, but in ourselves." It's not life that victimizes us and brings us to our knees, but how we interpret and react to life. And when insecurity is steering your life, the effect is like rubbing two pieces of sandpaper together; it's friction, psychological friction. And make no mistake, psychological friction will wear you down just like sandpaper on wood, creating the clinical conditions we commonly refer to as anxiety, panic, or depression.

Intuition

The talent I value most as a psychologist is my intuition. Intuition is the ability, as Carl Gustav Jung once said, to see around corners. In contrast to the intellect, intuition is much less deliberate; it just happens. When

it comes to psychology, strong intuitions are about as important to you as a telescope is to an astronomer. Just as the surface of the moon turns into a landscape of pockmarked craters under a telescope's magnification, intuition can begin to reveal the hidden aspects of anxiety or depression.

Once I magnified my view of anxiety and depression, I found myself reacting to my patients differently. Instead of treating them in a traditionally passive way, I responded to them in an active, rather spirited way. This wasn't a conscious or deliberate strategy. I just allowed my intuition to guide me. With depressed patients, for example, I sensed that they were missing a vital energy necessary to combat their difficulties. Using my energy, my optimism, and my enthusiasm, I modeled the attitude necessary to conquer the negativity, despair, and inertia. Essentially, I created what I perceived to be lacking in my patients.

With anxious patients, I followed my intuition, too. For these patients I became the voice of calm, encouragement, and conviction. I pushed hard for courage and risk taking against life's worries and fears. Anxiety-prone people are overthinkers and worriers who need to learn to overcome self-doubt by learning to risk trusting life and self.

Both anxiety and depression are weeds that grow from the fertile soil of insecurity. In order to challenge the powerful influence that insecurity has on our lives, I knew that not only did I need to have a "can-do" attitude, but I also needed to challenge the sanctity of anxiety and depression.

I suspect that most people consider anxiety and depression to be forms of mental illness; some might use the word *disease*. What we call something is very important. Words shape the way we think and feel. Mark Twain once said, "The difference between the right word and the almost right word is like the difference between lightning and the lightning bug." To me, mental *illness* is not "almost" the right word, it's the wrong word! When I think of an illness or a disease, I think of something you catch, a sickness that infiltrates your body leaving you its victim—you catch a cold or the flu. If you step on a rusty nail, you contract tetanus. You don't catch or contract anxiety or depression. You generate it!

Why is this important? With a cold, a flu, or tetanus, you're nothing more than a passive victim of some outside nefarious biological agent. And by definition, a victim is someone who is helpless and powerless. If

you think of anxiety and depression as illnesses, than you can't help but feel victimized. So let's change the language. Instead of calling anxiety and depression illnesses or diseases, I'm going to suggest the rather heretical notion that anxiety and depression be seen as habits—habits, fed by insecurity, that wind up depleting your chemistry (which is why medication works) while distorting both your perceptions and experience of life. Habits that *you* generate. Anxiety, just a habit! Depression, just a habit! Granted my approach may seem radical, if not capricious, but its effect on my patients was undeniable: "You mean I'm not mentally ill?" "Can it possibly be as simple as you say?" It can be. It is.

It was obvious to me that my new approach was a dramatic departure from the more traditional therapeutic methods I usually employed, yet because my insights were more of an evolution than a revolution, it took me a while to put my finger on exactly what it was that I was doing. One day, while working with a young man who had been struggling with anxiety and panic attacks, I heard myself telling him, "You keep looking to me to make your anxiety go away. I can't do that for you. What I can do is give you a new way of seeing why you're suffering. I can fire you up and tell you exactly what you need to do to eliminate anxiety from your life. But I can't change you. Only you can do that. Instead of thinking of me as your psychologist, think of me as your coach." There it was. I was *coaching*, not analyzing, not passively listening, not reflecting. I was coaching to bring out strength, confidence, and a sense of empowerment. My patient quickly and easily related to this simple concept. Rather than seeing me as parent-authority-healer, he clearly understood my new, revitalized role: I was coaching *his* efforts, *his* determination, and most important, *his* need to overcome anxiety and depression.

The ease with which my patient and I progressed convinced me that healing problems as a coach rather than as a therapist could have far-reaching implications. But wait, let me stop myself here. Rather than using the word *healing*, let me replace it with a more precise word: *change*. From the start, it's important for you to know that I'm not trying to promote healing, because there's no illness. And if you're not ill, then you don't need to be healed. If you're anxious or if you're depressed, you need to *change*.

So what I do is coach change—changing insecurity to security, distrust to self-trust, depression and anxiety to a liberated life of empowerment. In order to challenge these entrenched habits, I recognized that an easy-to-follow, commonsense technique was needed. So I created a technique I call Self-Talk. Self-Talk is a straightforward, three-step technique that ensures change. I first introduced this method in my book *Healing Your Habits*, where I called it Directed Imagination.

Self-Talk provides a powerful formula, capable of stopping anxiety and depression where it begins—in the thoughts that precede and fertilize these conditions. Self-Talk replaces faulty, destructive, insecurity-driven thinking with healthy, liberated living. Notice I say "liberated living" and not "liberated thinking." When you remove the clutter of overthinking, rather than filtering everything through your mind ("I should tell him how I feel, but maybe I shouldn't be so bold, or maybe . . . "), you'll begin reacting to life in a more direct and spontaneous way.

Insecurity leads to attempts to control life: "If I can't trust, than I have to figure out how to be safe." In time, you become reliant on *figuring out* life rather than living it: "If he asks me where I was, I'll say I was sick, and then if he wants to know . . ." and so on. Figuring life out before it happens seems much safer than living unrehearsed. In fact, living life more spontaneously may feel downright reckless. But it's not reckless at all; it just *feels* that way. You have six million years of instinctual, intuitional hardwiring that's not going to let you down, not once you learn to trust. And this is one of Self-Coaching's essential goals: to reconnect you with your innate capacity for intuitional self-trust. Only with self-trust will you be willing to risk living your life more naturally, more spontaneously, and less rehearsed. And when you do, it will be without anxiety and depression.

Self-Coaching Reflection

Anxiety and depression depend on your inability to trust.

It doesn't matter whether you're exercising to lose a few pounds, working to improve fitness through power walking, or preparing as a serious athlete for a big race: effective training always involves following a

program of repetition and progressive effort. Psychological training is no different; it requires repetition and progressive effort. Self-Talk will become the core of your training program, demanding a similar commitment. There's no magic, no gifts, no abracadabra insights, just plain old hard work—hard work that pays off.

Training

As I continued to develop my program, I found that the concept of training was particularly appealing to my highly motivated anxiety-prone patients. They usually struggle with traditional therapy's passive approach, especially when they aren't seeing results. A well-thought-out training program was clearly something they could sink their teeth into.

Depressed people face a different challenge. Depression makes it hard to muster the energy to do anything. How could I motivate depressed patients to want to train? Depression is like driving a car with one foot on the gas (that is, healthy desires) and one foot on the brake (that is, negative distortions); you're forever feeling stuck, frustrated, and discouraged. I knew that if my method was going to be successful, the training program had to offer release from the braking effects of depression—and that's exactly what happened. By replacing negative thoughts with more objective, reality-based thinking—separating facts from fictions—Self-Talk, in combination with a coached attitude of optimism, made the difference. Once patients got a taste of being unstuck, the necessary motivation for continued training was no longer a problem.

This training approach to therapy also explains why results are contingent not on therapeutic insights and aha! experiences, but on consistent, daily workouts using my Self-Talk approach. If you walked into a gym expecting that ten minutes on the treadmill would take two inches off your waist, no doubt you'd be very disappointed. In contrast, what if you approached the treadmill with a more realistic attitude, combined with a genuine desire to begin training? First off, you'd realize that one treadmill session is just that: one treadmill session. Only after repeated training sessions over time would you begin to reap the accumulated

benefits of your efforts, but the benefits would come. Whether in the gym or in therapy, a training approach both requires and teaches three essential things:

1. Patience
2. A realistic understanding of the dynamics of change
3. Self-reliance

This coaching/training program, using my Self-Talk technique for breaking destructive thought habits, became the heart and soul of the book you hold in your hands, with, of course, one major modification: rather than having me be your coach, you become your own coach, directing your own liberation. Understand that the potential for healing, real healing, always resides within you. Remember, the best psychologist in the world can't make you better. No one else can. Only you can, and Self-Coaching will teach you how.

Noticing how quickly and easily my patients responded to coaching, I wondered how effective this method would be in a self-help format. Could what I was doing for my patients be presented in a book? Had it not been for a cousin who asked me what she could do for her anxiety, I might not have pursued this possibility. I discussed my technique of Self-Talk with her and gave her a number of the handouts I had prepared for my patients, describing a few simple strategies and exercises. When she called me a few months later reporting that her anxiety was gone, I was more convinced than ever that coaching could, in fact, make the transition to Self-Coaching. It didn't take me long to make my final decision to start writing, but what finally convinced me wasn't my cousin's success.

I Think I Can, I Thought I Could

Somewhere back in my late thirties I had an inexplicable urge to run the New York City Marathon. I couldn't tell you why I wanted to run it. Maybe I did because it just sounded so impossible—26 miles! Perhaps I just wanted to know whether I had it in me. Whatever the reason, I decided to give it a shot. I didn't give my training much thought. After

all, I had been a recreational, couple-of-miles-a-day jogger for years, so what could be the problem? You just run longer and longer distances, right?

Fast-forward six months.

The first couple of hours of the marathon were terrific. I was high-fiving the kids along Brooklyn's Fourth Avenue, enjoying the crowd, my adrenalin, and the race. Why hadn't I done this before? By the third hour, however, more than halfway through the race and chugging through Queens, my high-fiving long since abandoned, I began to notice a deepening fatigue. Four hours into the race, the Bronx began to fade as all my attention became focused on the squish, squish of blisters. The fatigue that began ten miles earlier had become all-consuming by the fifth hour as I entered Central Park. My mind was taken over by a survival instinct that sought only to stop the pain and cramping. Somehow, I hung on and finished, five hours and twenty minutes after I had started. I shuffled through the chutes at the end of the race, trying not to think about the preceding three hours of my life.

After recovering for a few months (months in which I vowed never, ever to entertain the notion of running another race), I began talking to a friend who had run the same marathon at a much more respectable pace. He couldn't believe that I did all my training on the track. "What, no hill work? No speed work?" he asked. I realized how terribly flawed my training had been. I also realized that some things in life aren't apparent—at least not at first.

More months passed. I came across a great book written by two former coaches and marathoners, *The Competitive Runner's Handbook.* The book explained and analyzed elements of training in a comprehensive program. In spite of my resolve never to think about another marathon, I found myself devouring the book. I began to understand why my legs had become stiff, why I had cramped, why I had fallen apart the last half of the race, and even why my feet had blistered. These problems, I learned, could all be eliminated by proper training. Given the right program to follow, it should be possible to overcome the breakdowns that I had experienced. What had been a humiliating and chaotic experience could actually be deciphered, anticipated, prepared for, and,

most important, conquered. I liked that. I was eager to put my Self-Coaching to the test. To date, I've run three marathons, and I'm currently training for my fourth. My times have dropped, not by minutes, but by hours.

If I say so myself, I've learned a lot about Self-Coaching. My Self-Coached marathon experiences proved invaluable as I pondered the possibility of putting my experience coaching patients into a Self-Coached format. I began to pay particular attention to the way I worked with my patients, what I told them, how I advised them, and specifically what I was doing that coached success. In this book, I have distilled this information in such a way that a reader wanting to change will be able to succeed. Interestingly, when working with patients, I often hear myself repeating sections from this book word for word. Although I would hate to make myself obsolete, the truth is that there are fundamental aspects of Self-Coaching that lend themselves quite well to a self-help format. In certain ways, such as self-reliance and self-empowerment, there are distinct advantages to managing your own Self-Coaching program of change. These, then, were the goals that I set out to accomplish when I first introduced my book a few years ago, and from the countless responses I've received worldwide, I know that my goals have been realized.

Whether you're anxious or depressed, Self-Coaching can teach you how to do what's necessary to eliminate your problems. Our minds, as well as our bodies, deteriorate if we allow ourselves to follow destructive patterns. That's what anxiety and depression are. They are patterned, negative, self-defeating habits. Self-Coaching teaches you two things: (1) how to break the destructive patterns that distort your thinking and leave you vulnerable to depression and anxiety, and (2) how to replace these thoughts of insecurity with self-trust. Remember, it is the loss of trust with self and with life that underwrites anxiety and depression.

Self-Reliance

There are obvious advantages to having a personal coach (aka therapist), but keep in mind the distinct advantage of Self-Coaching. From the start, you have only yourself to rely on. You either work hard or you

don't; you either improve or you don't—and this is as it should be. Trust me on this: with anxiety and depression, it is absolutely critical to believe in your own resources to heal yourself. The sooner you take full responsibility for your program of change, the sooner you take back your life. Anyone who insists on looking for a guru, a shrink, a pill, or even a book to do their work will ultimately fail, because no one but you can ever topple your destructive habits. When you look for someone to heal you, to take care of you, to make you better, then, like a child, you remain without the full potential power of your maturity. It is exactly this power of personal maturity and trust that Self-Coaching promotes.

At first, relying on yourself for what you need may seem like a daunting proposition, especially if you're depressed. I understand this concern clearly and have made every attempt to anticipate your inertia. Ever try to push a car that's stalled? You put your back into it, straining every muscle, pushing until finally you begin to feel a slight movement. Then you push a bit more, and the car goes a bit faster, a bit easier. You've been straining against inertia. Objects at rest—and people, and anxiety, and depression—resist movement. Your initial efforts will be the most difficult, but with proper encouragement, motivation, and direction, inertia can, and will, yield to momentum. Momentum is that glorious feeling of movement—movement that becomes easier and easier once you get started. You'll see.

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Training Suggestion

Inner Experience–Outer Experience: Learning to Get Out of Your Head

Periodically throughout the day, begin to listen to your "inner talk." Whatever your thoughts are, for now, don't judge or criticize; just be aware of your thinking.

Once you've followed your thinking for a few moments, see whether you can switch from following these thoughts to participating in your world. This could be any activity: listening to music, looking at a flower, or twiddling your thumbs. Whatever you try, do

it as completely as you can. If, for example, you decide to wash a dish, wash it with complete attention. Feel the soapy water, the squeak of the dish as you scour it, the dragging of the towel against the damp plate as you dry it. Rather than thinking about what you are doing, try to just feel it. Try to get out of your head and into your experience.

This exercise is an important prelude to the eventual ability of learning to let go of destructive thinking.