

PART ONE

*How Your Parents Shaped
Your Self-Esteem, Self-Image,
and Body Image*

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Our Parents as Mirrors

Perfectionism is self-abuse of the highest order.

—ANN WILSON SCHAEF

I avoid looking in the mirror as much as I possibly can. When I do look, all I see are my imperfections—my long nose, my crooked teeth, my small breasts. Other people tell me I'm attractive, but I just don't see it.

—Kristin, age twenty-six

I'm what you would call a perfectionist, especially when it comes to my work. It takes me twice as long as it does other people to get something done, because I have to go over it a dozen times to make sure I haven't made any mistakes. My boss complains about my being so slow, but I'd rather have him complain about that than have him find a mistake. That would devastate me.

—Elliot, age thirty-one

There's a voice inside my head that constantly chastises me with "Why did you do that?" "Why did you say that?" The criticism is relentless. Nothing I ever do is right. I'm never good enough. Sometimes I just feel like screaming—Shut up! Leave me alone!

—Teresa, age forty-three

I don't know what it will take for me to finally feel good about myself. I keep thinking I need to do more, achieve more, be a better person, and then I'll like myself. Other people are impressed with how much I've achieved in my life, but it doesn't seem to matter how much I do; I'm never good enough for me.

—Charles, age fifty-five

DO YOU RELATE TO ANY of these people? Do you have a difficult time looking in the mirror because you never like what you see? Do you find that you are never pleased with yourself, no matter how much effort you put into making yourself a better person, no matter how much work you do on your body? Do you constantly find fault in yourself? Are you a perfectionist? Are you plagued by an inner critic who constantly berates you or finds something wrong with everything you do? Or are you like Charles, who believes that the way to feeling good about yourself is through your accomplishments—yet no matter how much you accomplish it is never enough?

Many of us focus a great deal of time and attention on improving our bodies and making ourselves more attractive. Yet, for all the time and money spent on dieting, exercise, clothes, and cosmetic surgery, many still do not like who they see in the mirror. There is always something that needs to be changed or improved.

People who are critical of how they look are usually critical of other aspects of themselves as well. They tend to focus on their flaws rather than their assets, and they are seldom pleased with their performance—whether at work, at school, or in a relationship. They chastise themselves mercilessly when they make a mistake.

There is nothing wrong with wanting to improve yourself; everyone suffers from time to time with self-critical thoughts. But some people have such low self-esteem that they are never satisfied with their achievements, their physical appearance, or their performance. They have a relentless inner critic who constantly tears them down and robs them of any satisfaction they might temporarily feel when they have reached a goal. The following questionnaire will help you determine whether you are suffering from low self-esteem and an unhealthy inner critic.

QUESTIONNAIRE: A “SELF” EXAMINATION

1. Do you suffer from insecurity or a lack of confidence?
2. Do you focus more on what you do wrong or what you fail at than what you do right or well?
3. Do you feel less than or not as good as other people because you are not perfect in what you do or how you look?
4. Do you believe you need to do more, be more, or give more in order to earn the respect and love of other people?
5. Are you aware of having a critical inner voice that frequently tells you that you did something wrong?
6. Are you constantly critical of your performance—at work, at school, at sports?
7. Are you critical of the way you interact with others? For example, do you frequently kick yourself for saying the wrong thing or for behaving in certain ways around others?
8. Do you feel like a failure—in life, in your career, in your relationships?
9. Are you a perfectionist?
10. Do you feel like you do not deserve good things? Do you become anxious when you are successful or happy?
11. Are you afraid that if people knew the real you, they wouldn't like you? Are you afraid people will find out you are a fraud?
12. Are you frequently overwhelmed with shame and embarrassment because you feel exposed, made fun of, or ridiculed?
13. Do you constantly compare yourself to others and come up short?
14. Do you avoid looking in the mirror as much as possible, or do you tend to look in the mirror a lot to make sure you look okay?

15. Are you usually critical of what you see when you look in the mirror? Are you seldom, if ever, satisfied with the way you look?
16. Are you self-conscious or embarrassed about the way you look?
17. Do you have an eating disorder—compulsive overeating, bingeing and purging, frequent dieting or starvation, or anorexia?
18. Do you need to drink alcohol or take other substances in order to feel comfortable or less self-conscious in social situations?
19. Do you fail to take very good care of yourself through poor diet, not enough sleep, or too little or too much exercise?
20. Do you tend to be self-destructive by smoking, abusing alcohol or drugs, or speeding?
21. Have you ever deliberately hurt yourself, that is, cut yourself?

If you answered yes to more than five of these questions, you need the special help this book provides in order to raise your self-esteem, quiet your inner critic, heal your shame, and begin to find real joy and satisfaction in your achievements and accomplishments.

Even if you only answered yes to one of these questions, this book can help you because it isn't natural or healthy to experience any of those feelings. You were born with an inherent sense of goodness, strength, and wisdom that you should be able to call upon in moments of self-doubt. Unfortunately, you may have lost touch with this inner sense because of the way you were raised and by the messages you received to the contrary.

Self-Esteem Defined

Let's start by defining self-esteem and differentiating it from *self-image* and *self-concept*. *Self-esteem* is how you feel about yourself as a

person—your overall judgment of yourself. Your self-esteem may be high or low, depending on how much you like or approve of yourself. If you have high self-esteem, you have an appreciation of the full extent of your personality. This means that you accept yourself for who you are, with both your good qualities and your so-called bad ones. It can be assumed that you have self-respect, self-love, and feelings of self-worth. You don't need to impress others because you already know you have value. If you are unsure whether you have high self-esteem, ask yourself: "Do I believe that I am lovable?" "Do I believe I am worthwhile?"

Our feelings of self-worth form the core of our personality. Nothing is as important to our psychological well-being. The level of our self-esteem affects virtually every aspect of our lives. It affects how we perceive ourselves and how others perceive us, and how they subsequently treat us. It affects our choices in life, from our careers to whom we befriend or get involved with romantically. It influences how we get along with others and how productive we are, as well as how much use we make of our aptitudes and abilities. It affects our ability to take action when things need to be changed and our ability to be creative. It affects our stability, and it even affects whether we tend to be followers or leaders. It only stands to reason that the level of our self-esteem, the way we feel about ourselves in general, would also affect our ability to form intimate relationships.

Many people use the words *self-esteem* and *self-concept* interchangeably, but these terms actually have different meanings. Our self-concept, or self-image, is the set of beliefs or images we have about ourselves. Our self-esteem is the measure of how much we like and approve of our self-concept. Another way of thinking about it is that self-esteem is how much respect you have for yourself, while self-image is how you see yourself. Still another way of differentiating between self-esteem and self-image is to think of self-esteem as something you give to yourself (that's why it is called self-esteem) and self-image is usually based on how you imagine others perceive you.

Our self-image is made up of a wide variety of images and beliefs. Some of these are self-evident and easily verifiable (for example, "I am a woman," "I am a therapist"). But there are also other, less tangible aspects of the self (for example, "I am intelligent," "I am competent").

Many of the ideas we have about ourselves were acquired in childhood from two sources: how others treated us and what others told us about ourselves. How others defined us has thus become how we now perceive ourselves. Your *self-image*—who you think you are—is a package that you have put together from how others have seen and treated you, and from the conclusions you drew in comparing yourself to others.

The Real Cause of Your Low Self-Esteem or Negative Self-Image

The primary cause of your low self-esteem or negative self-image probably goes back to your childhood. No matter what has happened to you in your life, your parents (or the people who raised you) have the most significant influence on how you feel about yourself. Negative parental behavior and messages can have a profound effect on our self-image and self-esteem. This is especially true of survivors of emotional abuse, neglect, or smothering as a child.

Inadequate, unhealthy parenting can affect the formation of a child's identity, self-concept, and level of self-esteem. Research clearly shows that the single most important factor in determining the amount of self-esteem a child starts out with is his or her parents' style of child-rearing during the first three or four years of the child's life.

When parents are loving, encouraging, and fair-minded, and provide proper discipline and set appropriate limits, the children they shape end up being self-confident, self-monitoring, and self-actualized. But when parents are neglectful, critical, and unfair, and provide harsh discipline and inappropriate limits, the children they shape are insecure and self-critical, and they suffer from low self-esteem.

When I first met Matthew I was struck by his dark good looks. He resembled a younger, taller, more exotic-looking Tom Cruise, with his chiseled features, his large, dark, almond-shaped eyes, and his straight dark hair. Because he was so strikingly good-looking I expected him to speak to me with confidence, but instead he spoke in a reticent, almost apologetic way. As he explained to me why he had come to therapy, I

discovered that he felt extremely insecure. Although he was an intelligent, talented, attractive young man, he was tormented with self-doubt and was extremely critical of himself. Why would a young man with so much going for him feel so badly about himself?

As Matthew told me the story of his life, I discovered his father was never pleased with him. No matter what Matthew did, it was never enough. He told me about a time when he got on the honor roll in school and was excited to tell his father about it. Instead of congratulating Matthew and being proud of him, his father told him that since school was so easy for him he needed to get a job after school. So Matthew did as his father suggested. But this didn't seem to please him, either. Instead, his father complained that he wasn't helping out enough with yard work and that he needed to quit his job. "You're just working so you can make money to waste on girls," his father criticized, somehow not remembering that he had been the one to pressure Matthew into getting a job in the first place. Matthew had an interest in music and was a very talented piano player. But his father wasn't happy about his taking lessons. "You're already too effeminate," he scoffed. "Why don't you go out for sports like I did in school?" When Matthew followed his father's advice and tried out for the track team, his father complained, "It just doesn't have the same prestige as playing football or basketball. Why don't you try out for one of those teams?"

Because his father was never proud of him and never acknowledged his accomplishments, Matthew became very hard on himself. He became very self-critical; no matter what he accomplished he found something wrong with it. If someone did try to compliment him, he pushed their praise away with statements such as "Oh, anyone could have done that," or "Yeah, but you should have seen how I messed up yesterday."

By not acknowledging Matthew and by never being pleased, Matthew's father had caused him to be self-conscious and fearful. Many parents undermine their children's self-esteem and create in them a sort of "self anxiety" by treating them in any or all of the following ways: with a lack of warmth and affection, acknowledgment, respect, or admiration, as well as with unreasonable expectations, domination, indifference, belittling, isolation, or unfair or unequal treatment.

“Inner Critic” Defined

Having a strong inner critic is another factor in creating low self-esteem, and it usually goes hand in hand with low self-esteem. Your inner critic is formed through the normal socialization process that every child experiences. Parents teach their children which behaviors are acceptable and which are unacceptable, dangerous, or morally wrong. Most parents do this by praising the former and discouraging the latter. Children know (either consciously or unconsciously) that their parents are the source of all physical and emotional nourishment, so parental approval feels like a matter of life or death to them. Therefore, when they are scolded or spanked they feel the withdrawal of parental approval very acutely because it carries with it the horrible risk of losing all support.

All children retain conscious and unconscious memories of those times when they felt wrong or bad because of the loss of their parents’ approval. This is where the inner critic gets his start. (I use “he” when referring to the inner critic because many people, including women, think of their inner critic as being male. Feel free to substitute “she” if it feels more appropriate for you.) Even as an adult there is still a part of you that believes you are “bad” whenever someone gets angry with you or when you make a mistake.

Your inner critic’s voice is the voice of a disapproving parent—the punishing, forbidding voice that shaped your behavior as a child. If your early experiences were mild and appropriate, your adult critic may only rarely attack, but if you were given very strong messages about your “badness” or “wrongness” as a child, your adult critic will attack you frequently and fiercely.

Emotional Abuse and Neglect Defined

Abuse is a very emotionally powerful word. It usually implies intent or even malice on the part of the abuser. But parents who emotionally abuse or neglect their children seldom do so intentionally. Most are simply repeating the way they were treated as a child—doing to their

children what was done to them. Many do not realize that the way they are treating their children is harmful to them; few do so out of malice—an intentional desire to hurt their children.

Low self-esteem is not usually instilled in children through conscious or deliberate efforts on the part of the parents. Typically, parents of children with low self-esteem had low self-esteem themselves. And those parents who emotionally abuse, neglect, or smother their children usually do not recognize the tremendous power they have in shaping their children's sense of self.

We need to be very specific when we use the words *emotional abuse*. Emotional abuse of a child is a pattern of behavior—meaning that it occurs on a continuous basis, over time. Occasional negative attitudes or actions are not considered emotional abuse. Even the best of parents have occasions when they have momentarily lost control and said hurtful things to their children, failed to give them the attention they wanted, or unintentionally scared them by their actions. Every parent undoubtedly treats their children in some of these ways from time to time, but emotionally abusive parents regularly treat their children in some or all of these ways.

Emotional abuse of a child is a pattern of behavior that attacks a child's emotional development and sense of self-worth. Because emotional abuse affects a child's sense of self, the victim comes to view himself or herself as unworthy of love and affection. Emotional abuse includes both acts and omissions by parents or caretakers, and it can cause serious behavioral, cognitive, emotional, or mental disorders in a child. This form of maltreatment includes:

- Verbal abuse (including constant criticism, ridiculing, blaming, belittling, insulting, rejecting, and inappropriate teasing)
- Placing excessive or unreasonable demands on a child that are beyond his or her capabilities
- Being overly controlling
- Emotionally smothering a child (including being overprotective or unwilling to allow the child to create a separate life from her parents)
- Rejecting or emotionally abandoning a child (including being cold and unresponsive and withholding love)

Neglect is an even more misunderstood word and can manifest itself physically and emotionally. *Physical neglect* includes failure on the part of a parent or primary caregiver to provide for the child's basic physical needs (food, water, shelter, attention to hygiene) as well as his or her emotional, social, environmental, and medical needs. It also includes failure to provide adequate supervision.

Emotional neglect includes failure to provide the nurturing and positive support necessary for a child's emotional and psychological growth and development—providing little or no love, support, or guidance. This includes inattention to a child's needs for acknowledgment, affection, and emotional support (being uninterested in a child's feelings, activities, and problems).

The following questionnaire will further help you to understand emotional abuse and neglect and to determine whether you experienced them as a child.

QUESTIONNAIRE: WERE YOU EMOTIONALLY ABUSED,
NEGLECTED, OR SMOTHERED AS A CHILD?

1. Was one or both of your parents overly critical of you? Were you frequently criticized for saying the wrong things or behaving in the wrong way? Did one or both of your parents often criticize the way you looked?
2. Was it impossible to please your parents? Did you get the impression that no matter what you did, your parents would never approve of you?
3. Were your parents perfectionists? Were you chastised or punished unless you did things in a certain way?
4. Did your parents tell you that you were bad, worthless, or stupid, or that you would never amount to anything? Did they call you insulting names?
5. Did your parents belittle you, make fun of you, or make you the object of malicious or sadistic jokes?
6. Did your parents ignore your physical needs, for example, failing to provide adequate clothing such as a warm coat in the winter, or not providing adequate medical care?

7. Did your parents force you to live in dangerous or unstable environments (such as exposure to domestic violence or parental conflict)?
8. Were your parents so preoccupied or busy with their own needs or problems that they didn't take time to be with you?
9. Did your parents frequently leave you alone to fend for yourself? Were you deprived of physical nurturing (for example, being held or comforted when you were upset) or affection when you were a child?
10. Was one of both of your parents distant or aloof toward you as a child?
11. Did one or both of your parents have a drinking problem or an addiction to drugs or gambling, or any other addiction that caused one or both to neglect you?
12. Were you ever abandoned as a child (were you ever sent away to live with someone else as a punishment or because a parent was sick or could not take care of you)?
13. Was one or both of your parents overly protective of you or overly fearful that harm would come to you (for example, not allowing you to participate in sports or normal childhood activities for fear of your getting hurt)?
14. Did one or both of your parents isolate you from others or refuse to allow you to have friends over or to go over to other children's homes?
15. Was one or both of your parents overly possessive of you (that is, did he or she appear jealous if you paid attention to anyone else or if you had a friend or romantic partner)?
16. Did one or both parents treat you as a confidante or seek emotional comfort from you? Did you often feel as if you were the parent and your parents were the children?

These questions describe various forms of emotional abuse and neglect. If you answered yes to any of questions 1 through 5, you were emotionally abused through verbal abuse or unreasonable expectations. If you answered yes to any of questions 6 through 12, you were neglected or abandoned as a child. If you answered yes to any of questions 13 through 16, you suffered from emotional smothering or emotional incest.

Psychological Maltreatment

Although most emotional abuse and neglect is unintentional on a parent's part, sometimes parents deliberately inflict harm on their children in these ways. *Psychological maltreatment* is a term used by professionals to describe a concerted attack by an adult on a child's development of self and social competence—a pattern of psychically destructive behavior. Sometimes coming under the category of emotional abuse, there are five major behavioral forms:

- Rejecting—behaviors that communicate or constitute abandonment of the child, such as a refusal to show affection
- Isolating—preventing the child from participating in normal opportunities for social interaction
- Terrorizing—threatening the child with severe or sinister punishment, or deliberately developing a climate of fear or threat
- Ignoring—where the caregiver is psychologically unavailable to the child and fails to respond to the child's behavior
- Corrupting—caregiver behavior that encourages the child to develop false social values that reinforce antisocial or deviant behavioral patterns such as aggression, criminal acts, or substance abuse

How Children Are Affected by Emotional Abuse and Neglect

The primary way that children are affected by emotional abuse and neglect is that their self-image becomes distorted, they lack a strong sense of self, they develop extremely low self-esteem, and their

emotional development is thwarted. Emotional abuse and neglect create a distorted view of oneself as unacceptable, unlovable, or “less than” others. Emotional abuse, neglect, and smothering can also create self-hatred in a child. Many children who are emotionally abused or neglected exhibit extremes in either passivity or aggressiveness. Children who are constantly shamed, humiliated, terrorized, or rejected suffer at least as much as, if not more than, if they had been physically assaulted. Studies have found that neglect can be more damaging than outright abuse. A survey of maltreated children found that neglected children were the most anxious, inattentive, and apathetic, and that they often tended to be alternatively aggressive and withdrawn.

There are various reasons for this outcome. Neglect and abandonment communicate to a child that he or she is not worthy of love and care. Early emotional deprivation often produces babies who grow into anxious and insecure children who are slow to develop or who have low self-esteem. This is particularly true of babies who were given inadequate amounts of physical touch and holding. Researchers have found that the healthiest children are those who were frequently held and caressed by their parents. Children who were deprived of touch became what is called “touch avoidant.” By the age of six, these children would refuse nurturing touch.

Emotional abuse often includes communicating to a child, either verbally or nonverbally, that he or she is unlovable, ugly, stupid, or wicked. Both neglect and emotional abuse can cause children to search within themselves for the faults that merit their parents’ bad treatment. Such internalized rejection can take a heavy toll on a child’s developing self, leading to poor self-image and low self-esteem. Children who are shown little empathy and given little praise and acceptance often exhibit not only poor self-esteem but also self-destructive behavior, apathy, and depression. Children who experience a chaotic environment with little security and safety tend to exhibit anxiety, fear, and night terrors. If they are threatened with the withdrawal of love from their parents or primary caretakers, they often experience severe anxiety, excessive fear, and dependency.

A literature review of the effects of emotional abuse on children conducted by Marti Tamm Loring, author of *Emotional Abuse*, revealed the following:

Those who internalize the abuse become depressed, suicidal, and withdrawn. They manifest self-destructiveness, depression, suicidal thoughts, passivity, withdrawal (avoidance of social contacts), shyness, and a low degree of communication with others. They are likely to have low self-esteem and may suffer from feelings of guilt and remorse, depression, loneliness, rejection, and resignation. Perceiving themselves as unworthy and the world as a hostile place in which they are bound to fail, many are unwilling to try new tasks or develop new skills.

People who externalize the abuse frequently become anxious, aggressive, and hostile, may suffer from constant fear, and are always ready to “hit back.” As Louise M. Wisechild, the author of *The Mother I Carry*, a wonderful memoir about healing from emotional abuse, so eloquently wrote:

Emotional abuse is like water dripping every day on a stone, leaving a depression, eroding the personality by an unrelenting accumulation of incidents that humiliate or ridicule or dismiss. Emotional abuse is air and piercing vibration. Emotional abuse can feel physical even though no hand has been raised. The perpetrator may seem fragile and pathetic but still be vicious. Childhood emotional abuse can define us when we are young, debilitate us as we grow older, and spread like a virus as we take its phrases and turn them on others.

Note that emotional abuse is typically associated with and a result of other types of abuse and neglect. Emotional abuse is the core of all forms of abuse, and the long-term effects of child abuse and neglect generally stem from the emotional aspects of abuse.

The Role of Shame in Creating Low Self-Esteem and Perfectionism

Shame is a feeling deep within us of being exposed and unworthy. When we feel shamed we want to hide. We hang our heads, stoop our shoulders, and curve inward as if trying to make ourselves invisible.

Emotional abuse and neglect are very shaming experiences, and those who are victimized in any way feel humiliated and degraded by the experience. In addition, most children blame themselves for the way their parents treated them, feeling that somehow they deserved to be treated in such a way and thinking, “If I’d only minded my mother, she wouldn’t have belittled and yelled at me in front of my friends.” This is an attempt to regain some sense of power and control. To blame oneself and assume one could have done better or could have prevented an incident is more tolerable than to face the reality of utter helplessness.

Children raised by parents who frequently scolded, criticized, or spanked them whenever they did the slightest thing wrong end up feeling that their very being is wrong—not just their actions. Some people fight against shame by striving for perfection. This is a way of compensating for an underlying sense of defectiveness. The reasoning (although subconscious) goes like this: “If I can become perfect, I’ll never be shamed again.” This quest for perfection is, of course, doomed to fail. Since the person suffering shame already feels inherently not good enough, nothing he or she does will ever be perceived as good enough. Therefore, continuing to expect perfection in yourself will cause you to constantly be disappointed and constantly damage your self-esteem.

How Emotional Abuse and Neglect Affect Your Sense of Self

I’ve used lots of words so far to identify different aspects of the self, such as self-image, self-concept, and self-esteem, but as yet I haven’t defined the concept of *self*. There are many definitions, but for our purposes we’ll define it as *your inner core*. It is the sense you have of yourself as a separate person—the sense of where your needs and feelings leave off and others’ begin.

There is another “self” phrase that needs defining: *sense of self*. This is your internal awareness of who you are and how you fit into the world. The ideal is what is referred to as “a coherent sense of

self,” which is having an internal feeling of solidarity. You experience yourself as a person who has a place in the world, who has a right to express yourself, and who has the power to affect and participate in what happens to you. Unfortunately, people who were emotionally abused or neglected in childhood possess a sense of self that is often characterized by feelings that are anything but empowering. Instead, they feel helpless, ashamed, enraged, terrified, and guilty, leading to feelings of insecurity.

We are not necessarily in touch with our sense of self until something happens to make us pay attention to it. If someone dismisses your accomplishments or rejects you, your focus will turn inward. You will begin to question whether you are worthy or loveable. The reverse can also be true. If someone compliments you, you might turn inward to congratulate yourself. Being self-conscious means that for whatever reason, you have become preoccupied with how you are doing or how you are coming across to other people. This self-evaluation can become obsessive and can cause you either to feel inhibited in the company of others or to put on a show for them. Either way, self-consciousness interferes with your ability to be your authentic self.

When we feel ignored or rejected by others (especially our parents), we often begin to worry about what we might have done to warrant this reaction. This begins early in life. Children are egocentric—meaning they assume everything centers around them and therefore they must be the cause of others’ reactions—and so they tend to blame themselves for the way others treat them. As we grow older we become self-conscious and we feed our self-consciousness with a lot of self-deprecating assumptions.

In order to develop a strong sense of self you needed to be raised in an environment where positive psychological nourishment was available. Positive psychological nourishment consists of the following:

- *Empathetic responses.* When we say that someone has the ability to empathize, we generally mean she has the space inside to listen and respond to another person without getting caught up, or stuck, in her own point of view. She has the ability to put

herself in the other person's place—to imagine how the other person feels. Unfortunately, many parents are so caught up in themselves that they have no room for anyone else's needs or views—even their own children's. A typical nonempathetic response from a parent may take the form of getting impatient with a baby who soils his pants when the parent is busy trying to get ready for a party. An empathetic parent will take a deep breath, pick up her toddler lovingly, and remind herself that the baby can't help it. She'll talk sweetly to the child and caress him gently as she changes his diaper. A nonempathetic parent may blame the child for causing a delay, handle the child roughly, and communicate displeasure toward him.

- *Having your perceptions validated.* One of the primary ways of encouraging a healthy sense of self is for parents to validate a child's experience, such as when a parent agrees that something is sad when the child feels sad. This kind of validation usually causes the child to experience a feeling of being all right. She feels that she is "on target" with her feelings and probably also feels less alone in the world. If, on the other hand, a parent tells the child that a sad thing is really a happy thing, the child might suddenly feel off balance or that something is wrong with her. She will also probably feel very alone.
- *Having your uniqueness respected.* When a child's uniqueness as an individual is respected, he learns to tolerate differences in himself and others. He learns that it is interesting to discover differences and to deal with them constructively. Unfortunately, in many families it isn't considered normal for people in the same family to have different preferences. Instead, there is an assumption that when a child has a different preference or disagrees, he is trying to control his caretakers or is involved in a power struggle. Some are even punished or blamed for being different from other family members. This is translated, in the child's mind, to the message "I am bad." When a child's individual preferences are respected, on the other hand, he tends to feel, "I am all right." This in turn promotes a sense of self characterized by feeling worthwhile and loved.

How Parents Act as Mirrors

Infants have no “sense of self,” that is, no internal knowledge of who they are as a person separate from everyone else. If an infant were to look in the mirror, she would not recognize herself. You’ve no doubt watched the reaction of infants or toddlers who look in a mirror. They often react as if they were seeing another child.

Parents act as a mirror to show a child who he is. If a baby’s parents smile at him, he learns that he is delightful and adorable. If a baby is held and comforted, he learns that he is safe. If his parents respond to his crying, he learns that he is important and effective. But if a baby is not held, spoken to, comforted, rocked, and loved, he learns other lessons about his worth. If his cries are not responded to, he learns helplessness; he learns he is not important. Later, as the child grows, his parents will act as a mirror in other ways. If they over-protect him, he will learn he is incompetent. If they are overly controlling, he will learn he cannot be trusted.

Throughout childhood there will be other mirrors that will show a child who he is. Teachers, friends, and caregivers will all perform this role, but a child will inevitably return to the reflection in the mirror that his parents held up for him in order to determine his goodness, importance, and self-worth.

In this book I focus on helping you to create a new mirror, one that reflects who you really are as opposed to how your parents or other primary caretakers defined you. Through a process I call Mirror Therapy you will be able to raise your self-esteem, improve your self-image (including your body image), quiet your inner critic, and heal your shame. Although this program is called Mirror Therapy, it involves a lot more than looking in the mirror. Certainly it is not based on the overly simplistic idea, depicted in an old *Saturday Night Live* skit, of looking into a mirror and repeating affirmations like “I’m good enough,” “I’m smart enough,” and “People like me.” Instead, it is a holistic approach based on important psychological concepts, techniques, and beliefs.

I call my program Mirror Therapy for several reasons:

- The mirror symbolizes our identity.

- Parental neglect, emotional abuse, and smothering all have a negative (mirroring) effect on a child's developing identity—his or her self-concept, sense of self, and self-esteem.
- Parental emotional abuse and deprivation also have a negative effect on a child's body image and body awareness. Thus, what the child (and later, the adult) sees when he or she looks in the mirror is distorted.
- Parental emotional abuse creates in a child a negative internal judge or critic, which acts as a warped lens that distorts reality.
- The practice of *mirroring* is a fundamental aspect of parenting and is absolutely necessary if a child is to grow into a healthy adult with a strong sense of self and high self-esteem.
- Mirror Therapy involves exercises and practices using mirrors as aids to reducing shame and raising self-esteem.
- Children mirror parents' behavior.

This method focuses on how the negative view or judgment of an emotionally abusive parent defines a child's self-image; how neglect causes a child to feel worthless and unlovable; and how emotional smothering causes a child to be unable to establish a separate self from his or her parents. Even though I created Mirror Therapy especially for the many who were emotionally abused or neglected as children, it can work for anyone who suffers from low self-esteem, a poor self-image, or a powerful inner critic, or is riddled with unhealthy shame. This includes people who were physically or sexually abused.

By taking in the information in this book and by completing the exercises, you have an opportunity to reject the distorted images you received from your emotionally abusive or neglectful parents once and for all. You have the opportunity to replace these distorted images with a more accurate reflection of who you really are. I call these two processes "Shattering Your Parental Mirror" and "Creating a New Mirror." I encourage you to take this opportunity. While you cannot reverse all the damage caused by abusive or neglectful parents, you can regain much of the sense of goodness, strength, and wisdom that is your birthright.

Mirror Therapy Assignments

In addition to various exercises throughout the book, I also offer you Mirror Therapy assignments at the end of each chapter. These assignments will help you to focus on important feelings and issues that may arise as you read the book.

MIRROR THERAPY ASSIGNMENT #1

This week take the time to notice how often you criticize yourself—whether it is because you did not perform the way you expected or because you are not happy with the way you look. Also notice how often you feel exposed, unworthy, or fearful that others will discover how flawed you actually are. If you like, record how often you are self-critical, the types of criticism you notice, and how often you feel shamed and what triggers that shame.