



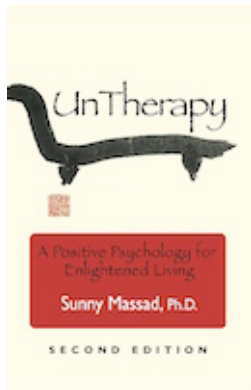
UnTherapy



A Positive Psychology for
Enlightened Living

Sunny Massad, Ph.D.

SECOND EDITION



UnTherapy challenges the premise of self-improvement by questioning the notion that painful experiences inevitably result in emotional crippling. Reflective exercises enable readers to take responsibility for how they create their own suffering so they can reverse old patterns of self-neglect.

UnTherapy: A Positive Psychology for Enlightened Living

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What people are saying about UnTherapy

“Sunny Massad has provided the distillation we have all been waiting for. *UnTherapy* is a smart little book, directed and utterly relevant for those of us with over-busy lives. She offers us clear choices for living fully, with grace and resilience.”

Laura Sewall, Ph.D.

**author of *Sight & Sensibility:
The Ecopsychology of Perception***

“Dr. Sunny Massad provides readers with a psychological and wellness-based owner’s manual.”

B. Eliot Cole, MD, MPA

Executive Director, American Society of Pain Educators

“If you are on a spiritual quest then you must read *UnTherapy!* You will feel lighter, clearer, and happier.”

Lama Wangchuk

“*UnTherapy* is a 'must read' that will shift your perspective and transform the way you interact with yourself and the world around you.”

Dr. Laurie Steelsmith

author of *Natural Choices for Women's Health*

“This wisdom-packed book helps reframe struggles of the heart while providing eminently practical ways to break free from negative thoughts. I recommend it to all who are seeking a life that is meaningful and free.”

Anita Johnston, Ph.D.
author of *Eating in the Light of the Moon*

“I love good self-help books that give practical advice and tell me something new. *UnTherapy* pulls out the plug on a lot of old stories. Read this book and help yourself to heal.”

Alice Anne Parker
author of *Understand Your Dreams*
and *The Last of the Dream People*

“Dr. Massad’s positive and optimistic approach helps you explore the peace of mind that comes by paradoxically accepting your negativity and pessimism—and with a genuine sense of humor, as well!”

Ragini Elizabeth Michaels
author of *How to Live with Paradox*

“We are all neurotic in one way or another. It is just part of the human condition. *UnTherapy* teaches us to accept our neurosis with compassion, while not letting it rule our lives.”

Brian Samo Ross
author of *Talking to God without Calling Long Distance*

“Sunny Massad's *UnTherapy* is a breath of fresh air that reveals the truth: you are enough, right now. If you are ready to be fulfilled, satisfied and at peace with yourself and your life, then this book is a *must read*.”

Linda Giles
author of *The Big Hunger*

“*UnTherapy* is exactly what we need at this time in history. It's time to stop talking and start listening. Stop doing and start being. Stop getting and start giving. This book provides the inspiration, support, and encouragement to do just that. It is not a book to speed-read, put aside, and forget. Its short sections are to be savored, their taste to linger in our minds, seep into our consciousness, and flavor our way of life.”

Makana Risser Chai
author of *Lomilomi: Sacred Touch of Aloha*

“Dr. Massad's book is true preventive medicine and a must read for patients who are prepared to see life as it truly is, free of the excess baggage we so often carry. Each chapter is a mercurial key that opens and enlightens the reader to another facet of life's self-imposed burdens on the path to joyful and calm abiding.”

Ira D. Zunin, M.D., M.P.H. Medical Director
Manakai O Malama Integrative Health Care Group

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A Positive Psychology for Enlightened Living



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Art by Patty Ward and Sunny Massad

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UnTherapy

A Positive Psychology for
Enlightened Living

Sunny Massad, Ph.D.

Chapter 1

Resilience of the Human Spirit



***You cannot fix yourself because you are not broken.
The more you try to fix, the more you find to fix.
Only wholeness heals.***

Alan Cohen

UnTherapy

In an effort to synthesize Asian philosophies with Western psychologies, *UnTherapy* proposes that a more heightened awareness exists than our normal waking conscious state. In this model, the transformation of a person's behavior is dependent upon the clarity that arises from stillness, silence, self-reflection, and thus, heightened awareness of one's own unconscious patterns. Such clarity allows the boundaries of "self" to expand in such a way as to include an experience of unity with all things, thereby restoring a sense of primal security. This is, by its very nature, the source of what is commonly referred to as character and virtue. And the means for accessing such clarity are within your grasp.

Western psychology has adopted a linear concept of life in which improvement and progress are perceived as end goals. A visual representation might look something like this:

The Past

Mistakes

The Present

Not quite good enough

The Future

Finally free

But in the East, the wheel of life is a symbol of circular motion. Change occurs on this wheel just as seasons change from year to year. Each season of life brings aspects that contribute to the perfect balance and harmony of nature. There is no question of improvement or progress. In the same way that fruit or leaves

might fall from a tree to provide nourishment to its roots, so, too, do the experiences of each season of one's life provide lessons that, when learned, inspire growth.

More and more Westerners long to experience "peace of mind" but most of us have rarely, if ever, experienced moments that are actually devoid of inner conflict. Whereas Western psychology has, until recently, predominantly focused on rearranging the contents of the mind, the emerging branches of humanistic and transpersonal psychologies have begun to return psychology to the original meaning of the word, which translates as a "study of the soul."

UnTherapy is an inclusive model that combines the latest discoveries of consciousness studies with the most recent findings relating to cognitive psychology. It calls for a shift in perception rather than a mere adjustment of beliefs and behaviors. *UnTherapy* proposes that a prudent combination of clarity, intention, curiosity, humor, and self-care will naturally propel human initiative and unfettered creativity.

The traditional view of therapy as building up the ego simply does not do justice to what people's needs actually are. Most of us have developed our egos enough; what we suffer from is the accumulated tension of that development.

Mark Epstein, M.D.

The Therapeutic Relationship

According to the National Institute of Mental Health, an estimated 26.2 percent of Americans ages 18 and older—about one in four adults—suffer from a diagnosable mental disorder in any given year. This does not mean that one in four adults actually has what you or I might consider a mental disorder. It simply means that one in four adults who turn to therapists for help in coping with life's challenges end up with a label that implies that they have a mental disorder.

Many people seek counselors to serve as mentors and confidants. Others seek spiritual guides to help them delve into existential issues relating to life's meaning and purpose. But most people do not realize that in order for their health insurance to cover the cost of treatment, their counselor must designate a diagnosis of a particular mental disorder to justify their visit.

The ever-expanding number of disorder categories designated by the American Psychological Association (APA) pathologizes what some people might consider normal experiences. Existential anxieties, for example, are labeled as "Anxiety Disorder," shyness is diagnosed as "Social Phobia," and lasting grief bears the diagnostic label of "Complicated Grief Reaction." Even a strong-willed or high-spirited child might be prone to a diagnosis of "Oppositional Disorder."

There are, however, emerging branches of psychology that embrace a more wellness-oriented approach. But even if a wellness-oriented practitioner bills your health insurance company for their services, they, too, would have to fit you into a diagnostic category in order to get reimbursed for their services.

Most people don't realize that both psychologists and psychiatrists are educated to exclusively help their patients develop personality strength in areas of their lives that are otherwise underdeveloped or compromised; sometimes as the result of a traumatic experience. Clinical psychologists primarily learn how to assist such people to build stronger, healthier, better functioning egos so they can become more adaptive and thus, more productive members of society.

But people seeking help with the ordinary challenges of life, and especially those who consider themselves to be on a spiritual path, may find that "getting in touch with feelings," "rehashing the stories of the past," or taking medication to treat symptoms can be more of a hindrance to their evolution than a help. Thus, many high functioning people seek out life coaching for a more direct approach, especially if they don't notice substantial changes in the way they feel about themselves or the manner in which they interact with the world, despite years of therapy.

Until recently, psychiatrists, unlike psychologists, are able to dispense medication to their patients but they receive very little training in counseling. Because their education is focused on prescribing medication, when a person books an appointment to see a psychiatrist, they will most likely leave with a prescription designed to relieve their unwanted symptoms. It very well may be, however, that the reason they are prescribed

medication is because that is what psychiatrists are primarily trained to do. Likewise, if you go to see a surgeon about a knee injury, the surgeon will assess your knee according to whether or not she believes that surgery would remedy your problem. Specialists only consider methods of treatment that are within the parameters of their particular education and expertise.

Nontraditional counselors work in a very different way. Life coaches and wellness counselors are not trained to look at symptoms as they relate to diagnosable conditions. They predominantly focus on helping clients to find their own solutions to issues that weigh them down. So if you are a psychologically healthy and high-functioning person who is more in need of a periodic “tune up” to boost you forward so that you can feel more motivated but you feel worse when you leave your therapist’s office than you did when you arrived, you might be better suited to work with a counselor or coach who works outside of the APA model of mental health. A wellness-oriented counselor is usually better equipped to serve seekers and other such individuals who do not require, and, indeed, might even feel impaired by traditional therapeutic interventions focused on resolving mental and emotional issues that are considered diagnosable conditions. This is not to say that psychiatrists and clinical psychologists do not do a great service for the populations they are trained to serve. The advancements made in regards to psychoactive medications and therapeutic interventions over the past fifty years have exponentially improved the quality of life of millions of patients. It is important to find the most qualified practitioner that can help you to satisfy your specific needs and circumstances so that you can determine whether you would be best served as a patient or as a client.

Sunny Massad, Ph.D.

What we call 'normal' is really a psychopathology of the average, so undramatic and so widely spread that we don't even notice it.

Abraham Maslow

Options for Change

Western psychological culture adheres to the notion that painful early life experiences can result in damaging emotional aftereffects, sometimes for the rest of one's life. While this can certainly be true in cases of severe psychological trauma, this perspective, which I call "woundism," has indoctrinated the greater culture and resulted in a society that is quick to blame. Yet studies show that people who were deeply hurt as children are capable of tremendous resilience. If they learn how to make sense of the pain from their past, they tend to easily flow with change, have sharpened intuitions, possess excellent crisis management skills, and work particularly well under pressure.

If you are a human being, you will experience pain no matter who your parents were or how your siblings, teachers, or peers may have behaved towards you. And unless there were exceptionally traumatic experiences that caused you deep, irreversible anguish, analyzing your past will not necessarily help you to feel better today. In fact, dredging up painful memories may actually inhibit your ability to enjoy the present. When you stop dividing life into good and bad, right and wrong, sick and healthy; life is just life, with seasons and cycles, like changes in the weather. Likewise, when you recognize that painful experiences have provided profound lessons and insights that you might not have known otherwise, and when you outgrow the defenses you developed as survival

strategies to cope with your childhood, the pains of the past will effortlessly fall away in the same way that ripe fruit falls from a tree.

The more one's personal version of their story gets told, whether in a therapeutic or social situation, the more it is kept alive. Chronic grief about one's life story can even degenerate into self-pity. So, dwelling on tales of personal tragedy past the necessary amount of time it takes to process an event can result in re-injury over and over again. There is certainly a point at which telling one's story can be therapeutic: during the period of grief that follows a death, for example. In other, more normal circumstances, however, repeating a story again and again can keep an otherwise healthy person continuously identified with the drama that is connected to that story.

Once you come to realize that your negative attitudes and resentments no longer serve you, you naturally advance to the "Yes, it sucked, and I'm ready to move on" phase. This is the point at which it is important to seek out a coach or counselor who is solution-oriented rather than a therapist who begins their sessions with some version of the question "What seems to be the problem?" because negative questions generate negative answers, which inevitably will lead you right back into identification with your pain. Once you no longer identify with your life history, you actually can be free of its painful emotional influence over you.

Those things that hurt, instruct.

Benjamin Franklin

Wounds

You do not, in actuality, have to remain feeling broken or irreversibly damaged by the heartbreaking events of your past. You are human and human beings are built to survive. *UnTherapy* recognizes and celebrates the resilience of the human spirit. That is not to say that repressed or unresolved issues or feelings relating to devastating experiences cannot prolong one's mental anguish or cause the heart to shut down. But carrying stories of guilt, shame or blame into the present only serves to keep the past alive.

Many people do, indeed, feel scarred by old wounds, partly because our culture supports the idea of "woundism" and partly because most people don't know how to release themselves from the grief of their own life history. *UnTherapy* imparts an opportunity to resolve convoluted feelings about the past so that you can step more fully into the present, secure in the recognition that you not only survived, but developed extraordinary life skills that you may not have yet recognized.

Regardless of how deeply you might have been hurt, those scars from the past cannot only heal, they can serve as essential markers to arouse you to move forward out of the shadow and into the light. For example, there may no longer be any trace of the physical scars that marked the triumph of learning to ride your first bicycle. Each spill taught you what not to do the next time you got back up on that bike. The same principle applies to emotional scarring. When the lessons of painful experiences are recognized, hurt and resentments begin to fade.

*There are two educations.
One should teach us how to make a living
and the other how to live.*

John Adams

Vulnerability

At your birth, when the umbilical cord was cut and you began to breathe on your own, you most likely cried for the first time. Regardless of how soft the blankets might have been, how dim the lights were, or how warm the room was, compared to the first nine months of floating in warm amniotic fluid, comforted by your mother's ever-present heartbeat and the safety and comfort of her womb, the birth experience must have been a frightening first adventure. Perceiving the sights, smells, tastes, and sounds of a foreign world resulted in a sense of being separate, dependent and vulnerable. If someone had not taken care of you at that time, you would not have survived.

Of all the mammals, human beings are the most immature at birth and require the longest period of development before becoming self-sufficient. Fear of not surviving is an appropriate response to the helplessness experienced during those first years of life. That fear arose from the fragile, finite, temporary nature of living in a separate mortal body that was utterly dependent upon the care of others. Such vulnerability causes children to look outside of themselves to get their basic needs for safety and comfort met. Unfortunately, kids aren't taught how to make themselves feel safe as they grow older.

Imagine how different your life would be today if you had been taught how to calm your mind when worried, how to

cope with emotional pain, how to communicate when you feel threatened, and even how to fall asleep at night when your mind won't quiet down. As these personal life skills are generally not taught by parents, teachers, or clergymen, it is no wonder that both children and adults suffer from feelings of inadequacy about how to cope with life's most basic stressors.

In more primitive cultures it is customary to initiate adolescents into adulthood with a rite of passage. Such rituals stimulate young people to recognize that they have internal resources that they have spent a lifetime developing and can continue to draw upon. They come to recognize that they no longer need to depend on others for their emotional survival. This insight instills confidence and trust in one's own ability to endure. Feelings of fear and neediness can transform into a more balanced give-and-take relationship with friends, family, and lovers. But, with the exception of very few children raised in Western cultures, most do not generally have the opportunity to experience such a ritual. As a result, both young and old adults might tend to look to others to provide the sense of safety and comfort they long to feel. How could we have done otherwise? If we were not taught how to be physically or emotionally self-sufficient, or, if we did not have access to healthy role models, we simply may not have ever learned how to tap into or even cultivate a healthy sense of well-being.

***What is necessary to change a person
is to change his awareness of himself.***

Abraham Maslow

Self-Image

As a vulnerable infant, with physical and emotional needs that could only be met by someone older and more capable than you were, a separate sense of self was bound to develop. Although you were most likely aware that you were a part of a family, the primordial fears of being separate, alone, and vulnerable could not help but inform your outlook on life. As the ego develops, small children generally lose awareness of the vast reality beyond their subjective sense of self and begin to believe that their individual ego is a distinct entity, separate from others and the environment. This is how the first feelings of alienation arise. When you were afraid and alone, you had to rely on the generosity of others to meet your every need.

The “separate self,” or ego, is merely a reflection of how your caregivers treated you. If you were neglected or abused, the perception that you were unlovable most likely became a part of your self-concept. If you were treated with love and care, the feeling of being valued may have more positively shaped your self-image. As you grew older, you had no choice but to act in accordance with the self-image that reflected the thoughts, feelings, and behaviors of each important person with whom you interacted.

Now, as an adult, you are probably subjected to a constant stream of judgments, ideas, criticisms, plans, regrets, and opinions of your own. Of the apparently 80,000 thoughts that psychologists say the mind generates in a day, many are self-

deprecating and endlessly repetitive. For over five thousand years, Buddhists have contended that the ego is simply a mental construct that is not much more than a succession of thoughts. Whenever you identify with thought, or more precisely, whenever you believe that the content of your thoughts is always true, you live more robotically than consciously.

Self-inquiry, sometimes referred to as mindfulness, begins with the premise that the mind is a conditioned mechanism that is based on our past experiences and education. Luckily, though, the mind can learn and change with further education and with the introduction of new and different life experiences. When your objective is to be free of the confines of your own conditioning, the boundaries of “you” as a separate self, begin to dissolve. The heart begins to open to the awe and wonder of the world and the sense of being a part of a larger whole emerges. In such moments, the miseries of feeling separate and alone begin to dissolve. The Tibetans refer to a primordial intelligence that is perpetually radiant and awake and that permeates all living things, as *rigpa*. Mindfulness transfers the focus of the ego mind to the experience of being palpably alive and part of this larger whole.

*Just trust yourself,
then you will know how to live.*

Goethe

Conditioning

Most people are unaware that they are the primary creators of their own life experience. They don't realize how much their own perception influences the way they experience life. Those who unconsciously perpetuate their own suffering often blame their pain on other people. They are completely unaware that it is the meaning that they attribute to the behaviors of others that is the root cause of their pain, not the people themselves.

In the absence of our opinion, life is neutral. It is simply the way that it is. Freedom arises when we learn to make our peace with that which cannot be changed and when we adopt new ways to adjust to that which can be changed. Psychology research has established that thoughts and belief systems can, indeed, be changed. And for those who are motivated to do so, behaviors can also be adjusted. The power to change is ours for the taking. Sometimes we merely need to learn how to go about it.

The root of your
dissatisfaction
is not found
in problems
themselves,
but rather in
the way that
you think
about them.

*How rarely are we able to let anyone see us as we are,
without donning a mask of some kind.*

John Welwood

Ego

The egoic mind has its own agenda: it wants to appear to be “okay” even though it is primarily a fear-based mechanism. It seeks to find safety and assurance amidst a life that presents a continuous stream of uncertainties. We never really know what is going to happen next and that can be unsettling to the psyche. This is why the mind so often feels conflicted. Many people attempt to hide their fears because they believe that being afraid implies that they are cowardly. Although our culture generally considers fear to be a sign of weakness, not recognizing or accepting our fears can result in what are commonly referred to as “negative” feelings. Often when people are angry, they are actually deeply afraid. Just like dogs tend to be, some people get aggressive when they are fearful while others may protectively clam up. Each one of us has a unique survival mechanism based on our past experiences.

A mind that is filled with fear has no space for dreams to grow. Growth requires change and change requires risk. Those who speak to themselves in a spirit of adventure and possibility tend to feel confident to move into new directions while those who speak to themselves with judgment and condemnation tend to feel anxious and afraid. Worst of all, the layer of protection a person might build to shelter themselves from the fear of getting hurt can also prevent love from entering their life. While fear perpetuates a sense of separateness, love opens the heart.



Self-Reflection Exercise

Identify a few of your own most common “What if’s?”

Example: What if I lose my source of income?

Now reassure yourself with facts about the present.

If it happens, I can handle it. I always land on my feet. Right now, there IS no problem.

Now you try it. Start with the first question: What are your most common “what if’s?”

Sunny Massad, Ph.D.

Be curious, not judgmental.

Walt Whitman

Judgment

What we generally assume to be reality is actually only our interpretation of reality. Our biases continuously shape the way we interpret the past, present, and future. The mind can't help but divide life into categories of "good" and "bad." It is commonly believed that it is good to be happy and bad to be sad, or even worse, to be angry. It is good to be healthy but bad to be sick. It is good to be alive but "bad" to die. Each of us has a unique list of preferences. Some common ones might include a list that looks something like this:

<u>Good</u>	<u>Bad</u>
wealth and abundance	poverty and debt
strength	weakness
love	fear
peace	conflict
health	sickness
happiness	sadness
comfort	discomfort
life	death

To have preferences is to be human. There is no problem, for example, in preferring abundance to poverty. But life often

presents experiences that do not fit into our desired agendas about how life “should” be. And when we resist or try to push away experiences that we don’t want or like, that resistance causes stress.

As much as you might prefer health, vitality, and peace, you will nonetheless, at some point, be subjected to illness, exhaustion, and inevitable moments of conflict. It is perfectly reasonable to prefer life over death, wealth over poverty, success over failure, heaven over hell, health over sickness, and youth over aging. Obviously, if you hold life-affirming values, you will probably not be drawn toward the idea of dying any time soon. But the perception that there is something wrong when the process of aging begins to deteriorate the body or mind, or when times of sickness or scarcity arise, is the source of much psychological suffering.

When you begin to accept your own weaknesses and mistakes you will find it much easier to accept the “flaws” in others because criticism and judgment often stem from feelings of insecurity. Watch the next time you feel judgmental about someone. How much of that judgment is driven by a desire to feel better about yourself?

Although resistance will keep you in a state of tension and anxiety, accepting reality just as it is does not necessarily mean that you should not aspire to create a comfortable future or that you should lie down and play dead when life hands you unwanted circumstances! In fact, only when you embrace the paradoxes of reality can you effectively respond to them. Imagine how different life would feel if you experienced opposites as complementaries that balance one another? The presence of the mountains creates, by its very nature, a valley

down below. The brightness of daylight is naturally followed by the balancing effect of darkness at night.

Liberation occurs as a consequence of being free from the perception that half of existence is positive and half is negative, half is “good” and half is “bad.” Imagine how different the world would be if death were universally accepted as an inevitable and natural culmination of life, pain as a necessary communication from the body, and sadness as a natural emotion. When the mind’s view of existence is polarized to such an extent that the inherent contradictions of life become unacceptable, suffering emerges.

Enlightenment is the experience of clear perception that informs one’s view of reality without preconceived biases or distortions of any kind. So in what circumstances might it be inappropriate, dangerous or unethical to accept reality just the way it is? Obviously, it would be unconscionable to take a passive stance when basic human needs, whether your own or someone else’s, are unmet or violated. Standing up for what is right indicates a deep reverence and respect for life.

Choosing acceptance over resistance is a profoundly liberating formula that promotes drama-free living. Regardless of the ups and downs of life, peace occurs when you stop exclusively operating from projected ideals about how you and others and life itself “should” be. An internal serenity emerges when you learn to say “yes” to the present. Getting a flat tire, for example, is usually experienced as an unexpected and abrupt interruption. But the way in which you think about remedying the situation affects whether or not you prolong the painful event into a full day of suffering or whether you experience the event as an unintended adventure. If you tell yourself, “This is a drag; it’s going to be such a hassle to deal

with,” and ask yourself, “Why does this always have to happen to me?” you are bound to feel stressed. If you appease yourself with sensible thoughts like, “Tires go flat sometimes. This is not the end of the world. There’s nothing to do now but stop and replace it so I can get on with the day,” odds are that the flat tire event will end up feeling like nothing more than a nuisance.

Needing approval is tantamount to saying, 'Your view of me is more important than my own opinion of myself.'

Wayne Dyer

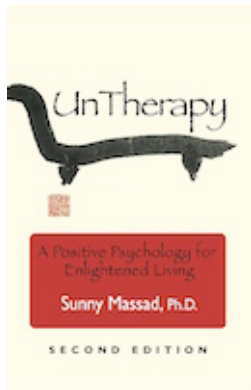
Acceptance

The desire to be “fixed or “free” or even “enlightened” stems from the belief that where you are right now, and sometimes, where others are, as well, is not good enough. While it is perfectly healthy to have a longing to improve, the incessant chasing after desires can rob you of the opportunity to be at peace in the here and now. Granted, it is not always easy to strike a healthy balance between an aspiration to evolve and an unconditional acceptance of yourself and your life as it is now. But incessantly chasing one’s own tail can cause the ego to focus on its inadequacies rather than its strengths. An important part of accepting reality *just as it is* requires accepting yourself *just as you are*. Putting effort into fixing or adjusting parts of yourself that you do not like may seem like a reasonable way to accelerate your evolution, but such efforts are based on the fundamental premise that it takes “work” to evolve. Trees don’t have to work hard to grow taller. They naturally just evolve as a result of being alive. The same is true for human beings. If we are in environments in which we can thrive, we need not effort to grow. Life will afford us plenty of opportunities to evolve.

Likewise, it is perfectly healthy to look forward to a positive future. But dependence on the future without acceptance of the present can delay happiness. Struggle only crystallizes the ego. Unless you are deeply grounded in the present, endless pursuits may have a tendency to distract you from deeply

appreciating the precise point of the journey that you are on right now.

If you want an orchid to bloom, you nourish and nurture it. As you give it what it needs, it begins to blossom. The so-called “improvement” naturally occurs as a result of creating the proper conditions in which it can thrive. Likewise, self-acceptance is the preliminary condition in which human beings can be free to blossom. If an orchid has aphids, you don’t spend a lot of time figuring out how they got there. You accept the plight and adjust the conditions in such a way that the aphids will no longer thrive on the orchid. Likewise, once you accept your present condition, you can identify what needs to happen to create even better circumstances in which you can flourish.



UnTherapy challenges the premise of self-improvement by questioning the notion that painful experiences inevitably result in emotional crippling. Reflective exercises enable readers to take responsibility for how they create their own suffering so they can reverse old patterns of self-neglect.

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