

## RESILIENCE

# THE JOURNEY FROM SELF-DOUBT TO SELF-LOVE



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**W**e've all experienced self-doubt. We've felt uncertain about ourselves, our capabilities, and our potential. If we make a mistake or a misstep, we risk losing confidence. We may stop trusting ourselves and even begin to doubt our place in the world. According to leadership developer, speaker, and author, Gregg Vanourek, at the root of self-doubt is fear – fear of failure or fear of judgment. Who amongst us has never felt fearful? This fear and doubt can grow to the point that one stops seeing oneself through loving eyes, and instead, we become highly self-critical.

We are in the midst of a global crisis of self-love, according to a 2020 survey that asked 22,000 people in 21 countries to rate their self-esteem, resilience, confidence, and need for external validation. They found that 60% of people wished they respected themselves more; over half admitted to pretending to be happy in order to please others, and nearly 50% felt self-doubt more than self-love.

Self-doubt and a deficit of self-esteem are problems that deeply affect the lives and health of millions of people, particularly women. When we are riddled with self-doubt, we don't advocate for ourselves, we don't draw attention to ourselves, we don't negotiate strongly for a pay raise or ask tough questions. We don't fight back against injustices or set boundaries. We hold ourselves back from accomplishing all that we could, telling ourselves we're not worthy. Self-doubt can show up as imposter syndrome, and it can exact an exorbitant price in our lives. It affects our happiness, our relationships, our work performance, and more. Self-doubt can paralyze us.

*"Our doubts are traitors, and make us lose the good we oft might win, by fearing to attempt."*

- William Shakespeare, 'Measure for Measure'

Self-doubt can originate in childhood. It can result from critical parents who were hard to please, disapproving, or distant. It can come from a sense of having to prove oneself and earn love through compliance or achievements. Self-doubt can develop as one is compared with siblings, other family members, or classmates. It can even be the result of an overprotective parent who leaves a child feeling unable to manage on their own. Self-doubt can happen if we experience major failures or setbacks, or from abuse or trauma. Teachers, coaches, mentors, or friends can all inadvertently contribute to self-doubt by making ill-considered comments that the child or adult takes to heart. When we internalize those negative messages, it's called cognitive fusing, and we begin to believe these messages about us are true. This can keep us from achieving our full potential in our personal, academic, and professional lives.

*"Doubt kills more dreams than failure ever will."*

- Suzy Kassem, poet

When I was a child, I experienced many inadvertent negative messages that my impressionable brain quickly internalized. I heard my mother explain to her friends, teachers, and seemingly everyone I met that I was shy. It took me over 40 years to realize that I'm not shy. I'm

introverted and a deep thinker, but I love people, and I love to talk and laugh with people – often hundreds of people at a time from a stage under a spotlight.

Another message I received was that I wasn't good enough. No one actually said those words aloud, but it was always something I sensed under the surface. My older sister had a photographic memory, like my father, but rather than understanding that special gift, I simply knew that she didn't have to try hard in school to make excellent grades, but I did. I was compared often, but in a back-handed way. I heard messages that sounded to me like, "Kathy is average, and she's doing the best she can, so we won't push her to do better."

Finally, in high school, I realized I was quite capable of being an exceptional student, and I excelled. In college, my being named to the Dean's list for eight semesters in a row was met with surprise by my family. Who knew little Kathy had it in her? Certainly not Kathy because she had been told all her life that she was the sweet one, not the smart one. In dental hygiene school, I scored the highest grade on the National Board Exam that anyone from the University of Texas ever had. Finally, my family responded as if that were the expectation for me. They, too, had to unlearn that I was "average" and accept the reality that I was bright.

My family and teachers thought I was sweet because I was quiet. This personality trait was rewarded with praise and affection. That's when my Pleaser was born. It became my mission to make other people happy, often at my own expense. I truly love people, and I love to be kind and include everyone so no one feels left out. But when it comes to always putting others first, especially in business or personal happiness, that's not always a healthy choice. It can cause one to become a doormat, allowing others to take advantage of you. That can be a very destructive trait.

Growing up in a family where one felt the need to earn love and acceptance, it's common to become a people pleaser. Studying the work of Shirzad Chamine, an executive and author of the book and coaching program, Positive Intelligence, I learned that being a Pleaser is a "saboteur" or an "automatic and habitual mind pattern that harms our ability to function effectively."

These automatic and habitual mind patterns are the negative self-talk that occurs so often without our awareness. According to Chamine, we all experience the "universal saboteur," the Judge. Those of us who suffer self-doubt and a lack of self-love also experience other saboteurs whom I often recognize as inner bullies. These

bullies can talk us out of passing an exam or applying for a promotion. They can keep us from accepting a date or even answering a message.

I've spent my life only able to see myself through the eyes of my bullies. When we internalize an identity that isn't who we really are, it can cause a lot of internal stress. Now we know that this sort of stress can lead to both mental and physical illnesses such as anxiety, depression, digestive disorders, weight gain, and hormone imbalance. Low self-love can lead to a deep melancholia that can overwhelm you. In contrast, high self-esteem is correlated with better mental and physical health. It makes sense to learn to love oneself back to health.

Reading Chamine's book and taking his online course with a small cohort of trusted friends enabled me to discover my main saboteurs and begin to overcome them.

*"It's not who you are that holds you back – it's who you think you are not."*

- Eric Thomas (aka ET, the Hip Hop Preacher)

As you read the following descriptions of saboteurs, note which ones challenge you. Do you have an inner bully who exaggerates your failures and who diminishes your successes?

1. **The Judge:** finds fault with self, others, or circumstances. My Judge is very harsh with me, but not with others. I believe it's because I have a high level of empathy for other people, just not for myself. I envision my Judge as Nurse Ratched from *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*. She has always felt very tall, looming over me, but as I continue my personal work, she's shrinking in her old age.
2. **The Avoider:** avoids difficult situations and responsibilities. Sometimes the Avoider avoids making difficult choices, like leaving an unhappy marriage or an unfulfilling job. The character Holly Golightly from *Breakfast at Tiffany's* is this type of person. Holly avoids conflict by keeping her emotions at bay and running away from deep, meaningful connections. She keeps herself detached from situations that may lead to confrontation or vulnerability. She prefers to escape into a fantasy world. I recognize a lot of avoider tendencies in myself.
3. **The Controller:** tries to control situations and

people, leading to inflexibility. A well-known controller type is the character of Miranda Priestly in *The Devil Wears Prada*. This person tries to manipulate those around her. I had a very dear friend who wanted to control how I handled my relationship with my sons, and when I refused, he left my life. Rather than choosing to be flexible and accept that a parent must do what is in her heart, he was inflexible and true to his Controller type. It really hurt that my friend's saboteur was so strong that he couldn't love me if he couldn't control me. This is a great example of how destructive the saboteurs can be.

4. **The Hyper Achiever:** constantly seeks external validation and achievements, leading to burnout and possibly neglecting other areas of life. My father was a Hyper Achiever, speaking nine languages, earning an MD and a DMD concurrently, nominated for the rank of General in the Air Force, and receiving countless accolades throughout his academic and professional career. I became a Hyper Achiever once I realized that I had the potential to be. I also believe that it comes from growing up feeling the need to prove myself worthy and having to earn the love and attention I craved. The character Paris Geller in *The Gilmore Girls* is a Hyper Achiever. She has absentee parents, and she seems to feel unworthy and unlovable unless she's at the top of her class, unless she gets into Harvard, unless she wins all the accolades. I would be willing to bet that among Dental Entrepreneur Women, there are more than a few Hyper Achievers.
5. **The Hyper Rational:** focuses excessively on logic and analysis, often neglecting emotions and intuition. There may be a tendency not to get too close to people. The Hyper Rational may not be the warmest people. The character Mr. Spock from *Star Trek* is a good representation of this type of person. They are all logic all the time. I don't have even the least little bit of this saboteur!
6. **The Hyper Vigilant:** is constantly on alert for potential threats and dangers, which leads to anxiety and overthinking. This was also one of my father's saboteurs. He was hyper vigilant because of his experience as a 13-year-old boy fleeing Eastern Europe as World War II was beginning. He and his family brought just a few special items with them as they traveled across Europe and the Atlantic. By the time they reached Ellis Island, they had only the clothes

they wore, a couple of family photos, and the Shabbat candlesticks my grandmother treasured. Everything else was stolen along the way. My father never got over his night terrors. He was always inordinately focused on double and triple-checking that the doors and windows of the house were locked and that we were safe. The character of Walter White in *Breaking Bad* is hyper vigilant – always on high alert and planning for the worst-case scenario. Hypervigilance can lead to high anxiety, high stress, digestive problems, headaches, and exhaustion.

7. **The Pleaser:** prioritizes the needs of others over their own, often leading to resentment and self-neglect. It can also lead to martyr syndrome by using one's suffering to gain attention. The Pleaser is my number one saboteur. As a child, I wanted everyone to be happy, and I wanted to be loved. I developed the belief that I had to make sure everyone was happy to be loved. The Pleaser will not engage or will avoid conflicts for fear that their opinions might cost them love. Being a Pleaser, I allowed myself to be treated poorly and to be taken advantage of. I bit my tongue if I disagreed with others and subjugated my own feelings and opinions for those of others. This is a very weak position in which to live, and there is no self-love in being a Pleaser. The movie character who represents a Pleaser to me is Cinderella. She does whatever she can to make her evil stepmother and stepsisters happy, regardless of how badly they treat her. Cinderella is subservient, and the story seems to teach that if you subjugate yourself and please others, eventually you will win your Prince Charming and live in a castle happily ever after. My own experience is proof that being a Pleaser and expecting to have a fairy tale life is completely unrealistic and unhealthy.
8. **The Restless:** finds it difficult to stay focused, is never satisfied, and is always seeking the next exciting thing. In the movie *Thelma and Louise*, Thelma yearns to break free of the constraints of her life, so she goes off on a big, ill-fated adventure. Inner restlessness and dissatisfaction with life drive the need for more. For the Restless, the goal post may continue to move further and further away, so the goal is always out of reach and satisfaction is never attained.
9. **The Stickler:** is focused on perfection and details, which can lead to delays and difficulty

completing tasks. For the Stickler, good enough is never good enough. I do suffer from the perfectionism of a Stickler. An example of the Stickler is the character of Miranda Priestly from *The Devil Wears Prada*. She demands perfection in every detail. Dwight Schrute from *The Office* is another character who represents a different type of Stickler – the rule follower. This person cannot tolerate any deviation from the rules and is very black and white. I'm absolutely not this type of Stickler – I'm all about shades of grey and I'd rather ask forgiveness than ask permission!

10. **The Victim:** feels helpless and powerless, often blaming external factors for their problems. The Wendy Torrance character in *The Shining* is a good example of a Victim. She's trapped in the Overlook Hotel with her husband, who is falling into insanity, and it's not until her child is in danger that she snaps out of the victim mentality and fights back. Another example of the Victim is Julia Roberts' character Anna Scott in *Notting Hill*. She is a victim of her fame, and she complains that she can't lead a normal life because of the constant attention of her fans. It's not until she takes charge of her own life that she gets her dream man and her dream life.

*"What a liberation to realize that the 'voice in my head' is not who I am. Who am I then? The one who sees that."*

-Eckhart Tolle

Did you glimpse any of your own internal saboteurs in those examples? Do you have a harsh judge snarling in your ear when you make a mistake? Are the voices you hear critical and demeaning?

*"When you doubt your power, you give power to your doubt."*

– Honore de Balzac

When you allow the saboteurs, or inner bullies, to control you, you may self-sabotage by not taking care of yourself, not taking advantage of opportunities, and not shining your own light. So, how can you silence the voices in your head that don't serve your highest good? Over the

years of research and personal work to overcome my own saboteurs, I've learned a few strategies. I want to clarify that I'm not "cured" – this is a process. I still hear the voices. What I've learned are some techniques to hear the voices and then turn down the volume, and to hear the voices and do it anyway. Just as dentistry is a practice, self-love is also a practice. Here are a few tips to get you started on your path to reduce the impact of your inner bullies:

1. **Recognize your saboteurs.** You can go online and take a free assessment from Positive Intelligence. ([positiveintelligence.com](http://positiveintelligence.com))
2. **Practice accepting yourself as you are.** Embrace your unique qualities and even those things that you would label as imperfections.
3. **Practice not comparing yourself to others.** In this age of social media, this is extremely challenging. Remind yourself that the people you're admiring are sharing only the curated, edited, airbrushed parts of themselves and their lives that they want to share. Practice self-compassion and nurture a positive self-image.
4. **Practice not caring what other people think of you.** When you put too much value in other people's opinion of you, it will only serve to hurt you. What really matters is what you think of yourself.
5. **Practice setting boundaries.** Set and honor boundaries that protect your mental and emotional well-being. By prioritizing boundaries and self-care, we can establish healthy limits for ourselves. We can say "no, that doesn't work for me" without apologizing or feeling guilty. When we set boundaries, we can allocate our time to those projects and activities that bring us joy, promote balance, reduce stress, and enhance our emotional well-being. Setting boundaries is an act of self-love, self-worth, and self-respect. It is essential for cultivating healthy relationships that uplift and support our well-being. When you love yourself, you have a standard for how others will treat you that is non-negotiable.
6. **Practice putting yourself first.** Many of us have spent our lives putting ourselves last – behind our spouses, our children, our parents, our siblings, our extended families, our friends, our bosses, our patients, our co-workers, and our pets. There is so much truth in taking care

of yourself first, so you have the energy and resources to take care of those you love.

7. **Practice speaking your truth.** Holding your tongue may feel safe because it will prevent you from possibly upsetting others, but it will cause emotional and sometimes physical harm to you. Don't wait for permission to take a seat at the table and to join the conversation. Know that your voice and your opinions are just as important as anyone else's. Speaking your truth can gain the respect and admiration of your peers. It can bring you a sense of satisfaction and self-esteem.
8. **Practice feeling your true feelings.** Many of us grew up hearing we were "too sensitive," so we repressed our feelings and put on a happy face. Some of us are so repressed that we don't even know what our feelings are. Go inside and try to get in touch with your feelings. It can be scary to feel the actual pain, fear, and anger that have been tucked away in the deepest recesses of your psyche. You may need a professional to lead you through this process. Once you do, it can be freeing to discover your true feelings and realize that some of the feelings you have been experiencing are not even your own.
9. **Practice being kind to yourself.** Your own self-talk must counteract the saboteur voices that have been in your ears too long. Try to develop a new habit to quiet those voices. Start with recognizing the voice and taking control of it. I say, "Oh, hello Nurse Ratched. I know what you're trying to do, but I don't need you to interfere anymore." Or "Hello Pleaser, I know you thought you were protecting me when I was little, but I'm strong and I don't need you anymore." Recognize and celebrate the baby steps you're taking in the right direction. Give yourself grace. Forgive yourself for mistakes and for being imperfect. Remind yourself that you have been wonderfully made in God's image.

*"Our life is what our thoughts make it."*

– Marcus Aurelius, *Meditations*

In the end, self-trust and self-love are the building blocks for a fulfilling life. When we take action in the face of our doubts, we minimize their ability to control us, to stifle us, and to keep us small. When we take action, such

as shushing the inner bullies in our ears, we create a sense of control over our lives. The reality is that we have always had resilience, capability, strength, beauty, and intelligence within us. We just lost sight of our true selves along the way. It's time to recognize our strengths, accept our imperfections, and show ourselves the love we deserve.

*"You always had the power, my dear.  
You just had to learn it for yourself.  
You've had it all along."*

– Glinda the Good Witch to Dorothy in "The Wizard of Oz"

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About the author:

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