

The Post-Traumatic Gazette No. 20.

© 1998, 2021 Patience H. C. Mason Feel free to copy and distribute this as long as you keep the copyright notice and give it away

Compassion vs. The Cycle of Self-Pity and Self-Criticism: How to empower yourself

Self-Pity is “pity for oneself, especially exaggerated or self-indulgent pity,” according to the American Heritage dictionary.

If you feel like a victim, are waiting to be “fixed” by time, a therapist, or God, or if you are waiting for it to magically stop hurting, you may be experiencing self-pity. Being stuck in the past, thinking how unjust it was, or how “if only I had done this or that, it would have come out differently,” is another form of self-pity.

Self-pity originates in an innate sense of justice which we all have. Trauma is by its very nature unjust. No one deserves to be traumatized. No one. So the question, “Why me?” is understandable, but it is also unanswerable, or the answer is wrong. If you believe you did something wrong and it caused you to walk into the ambush, or caused your parents to beat you, or that guy to rape you, focusing on that will keep you stuck in “if onlies” forever.

Self-pity is contained in the words, “Why me?” It derives from two mistaken myths about life: if you are good and careful and hard-working enough, nothing bad will ever happen to you; and the other one: you should never feel bad.

You probably cycle from self-pity to self-criticism: “Why do I feel like this? What’s wrong with me? Why aren’t I *over* this?” These words bury the pain *inside* you, so it stays with you forever and eventually it starts to hurt again. That is the problem with self-pity. Over time it keeps you stuck in the past trying to change history. Self-pity becomes a bag of resentments dragged around and dragging you down. It becomes a rejection of reality; reality being that bad things do happen for no reason. Self-pity can also

make you quite unkind to others (What are you whining about? I have real problems!).

Compassion, (“deep awareness of the suffering of another coupled with the wish to relieve it”) on the other hand, is rooted in reality and based in being real. Bad things happen. No one knows why. They hurt.

Compassion is a necessary emotion, one of the major survival adaptations of the species. It gets grownups running into burning buildings to save kids, gets men to run out under a hail of bullets to drag wounded buddies back to cover. It inspires nurses and doctors, medics and EMT’s, rape-crisis counselors, child-protective workers and the ordinary man and woman to do extraordinary things.

Compassion activates and motivates helping. As a trauma survivor, you need to help yourself so you will heal. Developing compassion for yourself will give you the power to do so.

First, it is important to acknowledge the usefulness of self-pity which kept alive the idea that **I didn’t deserve this**. The only realistic answer to “Why me?” is that trauma is a part of reality and can strike anyone anywhere. You don’t have to make a mistake to be traumatized. You were not bad, no matter how human you were or how many mistakes you made, or what someone has told you. You did not deserve to be traumatized.

You deserve to recover.

Self-pity originates in an innate sense of justice.

Trauma is by its very nature unjust.

No one deserves to be traumatized. No one.

If you are mad at yourself for having been hurt and for not getting over it, if you alternate between poor me and lashing yourself for being affected, it is a pretty hard cycle to break. Self-lashing probably has served you in the past, helping you to act when you had no other skills. However, it costs a lot in emotional energy and self-esteem. Compassion is more effective and empowering. Emotional numbing may have repressed it, but compassion is a quality you *can* develop.

People who develop compassion for themselves and others become empowered. They respect themselves and their experiences and do not expect to be unaffected. Compassion for themselves gives them the power

to act in their own behalf even when others (parents, the authorities, the military, the Veterans Administration) have not.

Self-pity seems to render people hopeless and helpless while they tear themselves up with the idea that it shouldn't have happened (true) and they shouldn't still hurt (false).

How to move from self-pity to compassion?

Practice! What are some things you can practice to move from self-pity to compassion for yourself? How can you enhance your capacity to heal?

HEALS: Steven Stosny, Ph. D., developed a technique called **HEALS** which is designed to help you develop compassion for yourself and others (See issues 7 and 12). HEALS causes changes at the core levels of your sense of self. This is where you experience being your true self. Trauma can obliterate your old values and tear apart your self concept. Compassion will increase your self esteem, your ability to nurture yourself, your feelings of being effective, and change how you see yourself in a positive direction. Dr Stosny suggests practicing **HEALS** 50 times a day. Here's how:

H-When you find yourself trapped in self-pity say to yourself the word "Healing!" Picture it as a flashing neon sign. This moves your consciousness out of the pity-pot, just as it can move it out of the anger file (battering is what it was originally designed to heal).

E- Explain what is going on: Say to yourself: "I have been hurt. I'm feeling very natural pain for a trauma survivor. It is okay to hurt." Identify the feeling. Is it the pain of losing your buddy (grief), or the pain of thinking you should have known it was an ambush (guilt) or both? Is it the pain of name-calling (shame) or the pain of beatings and/or sexual abuse (shame and fear)? It may be several of these. Name them all. It might be one of Stosny's "core hurts: disregarded, unimportant, accused (guilty, untrustworthy, or distrusted), devalued, rejected, powerless, unlovable, or unfit for human contact." Try to feel the actual pain for a couple of seconds.

A- Apply self compassion. Say to yourself: "I was hurt. I did not deserve to be hurt. Today I can be kind to myself instead of hurting myself more with questions of why or unrealistic self-criticism that I should be over it. I can feel the pain instead of stuffing it with anger or

food or drugs or trying to fix people. I can heal. Healing takes time. I can ask for help. I can find support.”

Say: “Does the fact that I was abused mean anything about me as a human being? No. I am a good person, worthy of good treatment. All it means is that I was unlucky. My abuser was the one with the problems. S/he hurt me. I didn’t deserve it, no matter what s/he said or did. I deserve to recover and I can recover.”

Say: “Does the fact that my war was a no-win situation and we didn’t get the support we expected at home mean there is something wrong with me? Of course not. There was something wrong with the politicians, the war, and the country, but I was a good person trying to do my duty. I was hurt, but I deserve to recover.”

Create a personal statement that applies to your situation.

L- Love yourself by feeling compassion for your pain. Tell yourself you are lovable, valuable, important and worthy of regard and you can give yourself these things. Even if you don’t believe them, say them anyway. Eventually you will believe.

S- Solve the problem that caused the self-pity/self-criticism, i.e. ask for the help you need, take that nap when you are tired, call the Vet Center or the rape crisis counselor or whatever you need.

Self-Talk: If you don’t want to use something as systematic as HEALS (although I highly recommend it), observing your “self-talk,” and working towards making it healing and helpful, instead of hurtful and impatient is another technique you can practice. Most of us rent out space in our heads to a lethal critic. It’s the voice that says, “You loser! Get your act together!” or “I can’t win for losing,” or some variation of that. Identifying when you are self-talking, what you are telling yourself (which isn’t easy to do at first because it seems so right and true to you, you’ve never even thought about questioning it), and then changing the messages you give yourself takes time. Doing it will help you develop compassion. Most of us do not identify how cruel we are to ourselves. We must stop if we are to develop genuine compassion and to recover. You can evaluate self-talk on the basis of whether it is true, rational, sensible or helpful. Harsh self-criticism or global catastrophizing are usually none of the above.

Compassionate self-talk: “I have been hurt. It takes time to heal. I can give myself time and attention. I can love myself. I can respect my

experiences. I deserve to recover.” For me, recovering means that I take the time to recover, to go to meetings, therapy, quiet spaces, whatever helps.

Look around you for people the age you were when you were traumatized. We can often feel more compassion for others than we can for ourselves. Would you expect a young person to be unaffected by what you suffered at that age? Seeing how young you were can help you develop compassion for yourself. Visualize that inner child, inner vet, inner rape survivor or whomever and give him or her the same compassion you would give to another survivor today.

If you wouldn't feel compassion for another survivor, it is evidence that you were traumatized at a young age. This is because to survive, children who are traumatized have to answer the question, “Why me?” with “I'm bad. I deserved it.” By believing that, they can hope to become good and earn better treatment. Without hope, they will die. Since children are by nature childish and self-centered, believing the trauma is their fault is pretty natural for them. Abusers reinforce this by blaming their victims.

Sometimes a person who has experienced repeated childhood trauma develops a very hard shell and despises people who are hurt or who show pain. Compassion is one of the ways to dissolve that hard shell and heal.

Growing out of the belief that you caused the trauma is important for trauma survivors, especially since trauma can smash you back a few developmental stages. Under stress, you may find yourself acting or wanting to act as if you were the emotional age you were when traumatized or even younger.

Awareness: Any action which increases awareness will also increase the ability to be compassionate which is based on “the **deep awareness** of the suffering of others.” Even physical actions like mindful walking, running, dancing, martial arts, or singing can bring you to awareness of your feelings. They also empower you in a physical way, which can be very helpful in dealing with emotional pain. Various forms of meditation and prayer, and the “one-day-at-a-time” concept in 12-Step programs, also teach you to be here now, aware and living in this day, this hour, this minute. Once you can be aware of now, you can extend your awareness into your feelings and learn compassion. I find it very useful to do something my friend Katherine mentioned if I am in emotional pain when I medi-

tate. I say to myself, “I am a good person,” and as I say it, I strike my chest. It really brings me into the moment and affirms my right to be in pain as well as my right to recover.

Another awareness technique which a therapist I admire teaches to her clients, (one of whom passed it on to me) is **stop, drop, and breathe**: When you notice a feeling, **stop** to identify the feeling, **drop** into the feeling, allow room for it inside you, and then **breathe**.

Remember it is okay to hurt. Genuine painful feelings are not self-pity. When bad feelings arise, remind yourself that it is normal to be affected by trauma. This too shall pass. It is painful. It is okay to be in pain. Reach out to that suffering person inside you as if he or she were a friend. Have compassion for yourself.

Small steps: “...the **wish to relieve**” **suffering** is the other half of the definition of compassion. What do you wish for to relieve your suffering? How can you break it down into small steps that can actually be accomplished instead of being overwhelmed by big unreachable goals?

For example, suppose you wish to be happy. Break it down into a list of things that make you happy. Maybe you can do some of them today. To discover what makes you happy, you have to be **aware** enough to observe what actually does make you happy, instead of what’s supposed to make you happy.

If you wish to be able to go out socially without being triggered, break that down into manageable parts: spend time to identify your triggers (awareness), find places to go that don’t trigger you (research on what you like to do and what feels safe for you), and/or find therapy that helps you become less easily-triggered.

Ask other survivors for the names of therapists, call for introductory appointments, interview the therapist to see if he or she is someone you could work with, find out about his or her training, practices and beliefs.

If you wish for a healthy loving relationship, figure out the steps that might get you to your goal. Any plan you come up with will probably go through several revisions based on experience. It is okay to make mistakes. Try different approaches.

Asking yourself questions: In the American Heritage Dictionary, phrases defining synonyms for compassion include “sympathetic, **kindly concern** aroused by the misfortune...or suffering of another...**a feeling of**

sorrow that inclines one to **help** or to show **mercy**... the expression of **pity or sorrow**... the act of or capacity for sharing in the sorrows or troubles of another...a formal, conventional expression of **pity**...a vicarious **identification with and understanding of another's situation, feelings, and motives.**”

Are you capable of “kindly concern” for yourself, or are you always flipping between “Poor me,” and “Get over it!”? All-or-nothing thinking promotes self-pity.

Do you help yourself when you are having a hard time? Learning to identify emotions you’ve repressed or neglected will help you feel and release them. Even if they come back, you will handle them better each time.

Do you push yourself? If you do, **HALT** is a good slogan. Don’t get too **hungry, angry, lonely** or **tired**.

Do you ask for help? Asking for help is another healing behavior especially if you ask early and often and before you are desperate. If you ask when you are desperate, it can appear to be a demand.

Do you have the capacity to share your sorrows with yourself or with a few trusted friends?

Do you give yourself formal expressions of sorrow and compassion for what happened to you?

Can you identify and understand your situation, feelings and motives? Everything a trauma survivor does is something he or she thinks will make him or her safe. Are your actions realistic? If not, maybe you can figure out how to make them more realistic. Do you feel safe? Is life the way you would like it to be?

How has this affected you? No one deserves to be traumatized, but if you were, realism suggests that it has affected you. It is time to change the question from, “Why me?” to “How has this affected me?” Most trauma survivors can give you a list. However, if you are a hard case, just barely beginning to realize you were even affected, this kind of self-awareness—examining yourself for symptoms—will give you a baseline for compassion for yourself. Every symptom started out as a survival skill that helped keep you alive.

Look at the adjective, compassionate: “Concerned with human welfare and the alleviation of suffering, charitable, humane, humanitarian, merciful.”

Are you merciful to yourself?

Are you working to alleviate your suffering? Looking out for your own welfare? Or are you abusing yourself with harsh judgments, unhealthy behaviors or substances?

How kind is your treatment of yourself? Do you have realistic expectations of yourself as a trauma survivor? Do you accept your natural, necessary pain or tell yourself to stop whining?

John Bradshaw in *Healing the Shame That Binds You* suggests saying, “I love myself. I will accept myself unconditionally,” out loud and often. This heals shame and develops self-love, which is an element of compassion.

If you also feel like you hate yourself or parts of yourself, that is okay. Bradshaw says we often dislike people we love, but it doesn’t mean we don’t still love them.

The process of learning compassion includes learning to accept and love yourself as you are. It includes identifying your defenses and survival skills that are not very effective today so you can create the kind of life you want and find healthier happier ways to meet those needs.

Bradshaw also recommends giving yourself time and attention, learning to be assertive, as opposed to either people-pleasing or aggressive behavior, and reframing mistakes. Everyone makes them. Self-pity leads you to think you are a mistake. Then you may try to become perfect, which will only make you hard to live with, not perfect!

Mistakes serve a lot of useful purposes. They can be warnings. They can result from spontaneity and willingness to learn and play. They can be great teachers, if you are aware enough and flexible enough to learn from them.

Bradshaw also recommends a commitment to becoming more aware of what you plan to do and what might come of it, using the experiences of the past and thinking through the likely consequences. This is a compassionate thing to do for yourself.

I’ve had a lot of experience with self-pity and self-criticism. I hated myself for not being perfect and treated myself harshly. I couldn’t figure out why I had problems, and I could never make them go away. It took me a long time to develop compassion for myself. It certainly wasn’t a concept

I had ever thought about or felt that I needed, but I believe it has helped me heal more than almost any other quality I have developed (except for its twin, acceptance). Compassion is the kind of survival skill which never loses its usefulness. Compassion for yourself is essential for recovery. Once you have that, you will find you can say what it says in the Big Book, *Alcoholics Anonymous*: “...we will find that the people who wronged us were perhaps spiritually sick,” but the harm they did us will no longer be able to kill us or drive us to kill ourselves, slowly through addictions or swiftly through suicide. We are out of their power. Because we have self-compassion, we simply don’t take any more abuse. We have the energy to work toward healing and the capacity to be kind to ourselves in the process. Compassion means we also will not find ourselves inadvertently or intentionally hurting others. We can see their pain and reach out in fellowship, because we acknowledge and accept our own.

Trust After Trauma

Aphrodite Matsakis, Ph.D.

Another extremely helpful book for trauma survivors from the pen of Aphrodite Matsakis! *Trust After Trauma* is a well-thought-out book, full of exercises and opportunities for growth, which never minimizes the work it takes to recover. Here are some excerpts, quoted with the permission of the publisher:

From Chapter 4, Relationships and the Physiology of Trauma:

Asking others to support you by listening to you or giving you concrete help during your trigger times is a matter of survival. It is also a means of helping you to grow. As paradoxical as it may sound, depending on certain trusted others to help you get through times of extreme hyperarousal or numbing, or so that you can begin to manage your triggers, most likely will mean that you will need less help in the future. To the Western mind, which values self-sufficiency and believes in the myth of “rugged individualism,” it may seem

paradoxical that those who ask for help to survive difficult times and to get the strength to grow, do better than those who try to handle overwhelming situations on their own.

We are biologically hardwired to seek secure attachments. Feeling the protection that comes from a secure bond with at least one person gives us the courage to explore new alternatives and the peace of mind necessary to learn new skills and ultimately become more emotionally, socially, and intellectually developed. Research on children has proven this repeatedly (Wattenberg 1996, James 1994). Similarly, research on and observations of traumatized adolescents and adults show that those who reach out by sharing their struggles and asking for help, recover faster and in more ways that people who isolate or have no one (or hardly anyone) to turn to for support (Johnson 1996), (113-114).

From Chapter 7, Mind-Sets:

In this chapter, three common trauma-related mind-sets are described: all-or-nothing, now-or-never thinking; perfectionism or intolerance of mistakes; and denial of personal difficulties. These mind-sets are not inherently “bad,” “dysfunctional,” “sinful,” or “psychologically incorrect.” In fact, they probably helped you to survive the trauma. These mind-sets may still be extremely useful in some areas of your life today. In other areas, however, they may distort your perceptions and reactions and not serve you well. In still other areas, your challenge will be to modify or adapt these mind-sets to meet your personal goals and improve your relationships.

As you become aware of your mind-sets, you will become able to catch yourself thinking in these predictable ways. You can then stop yourself and consider whether thinking in these ways is best for the situation or relationship at hand. Just as during your trauma, your first priority was to do what was best for you or for a valued relationship. Now and forever, your first tendency may be to think in ways the trauma taught you to think. In some circumstances, it may make sense to think along those lines; in other circumstances, however, that may not be to your advantage.

You may never be able to stop trauma-related ways of thinking from coming into your mind almost automatically, but if you can

become aware of *how* you are thinking, then that thinking need not determine your behavior. The hard part is catching yourself in a trauma-related mind-set. Once you do that, the next challenge will be to see if other points of view might be beneficial. This is no small feat, but if you can do it, then you will have choices as to how you respond...(181-2).

Further on, discussing All-or-Nothing-Thinking: When applied to yourself, all-or-nothing and now-or-never thinking leads to you judging yourself in the same black-and-white terms. You see yourself as a total failure or a total success. You make few allowances for partial successes or partial failures and your eyes are focused solely on the present, not on the past or the future. You don't take into consideration what you did in the past or what you might do in the future. All that matters is what you are doing or feeling right now (183).

From Chapter 8, When Your Loved Ones Set Off Your Triggers:

It isn't always possible to arrange relationships to accommodate your needs, but you can try. As you think about the close relationships that trigger you, keep in mind the following question: Are there any ways to change or modify part of the relationship? For example, can the time, the place, and/or the nature of the activities be changed to make it more tolerable for you? Can you present some of these ideas to the other person involved in a non-blaming manner as a way of enhancing or improving the relationship?

For example, if your child (partner, sibling, close friend) wants you to do things with him/her that trigger you, can you put a time limit on these activities or suggest other activities? If being with a certain loved one is tolerable for only one or two hours, can you try to arrange for your interactions to be of this length?

Your need to structure and control these interactions may change over time. Do not fall victim to all-or-nothing, now-or-never thinking. Just because this year you need to limit your interactions with a loved one, doesn't mean that such will be the case forever. Over time, you may change and feel more comfortable around this

person or situation, especially if the other person shows some willingness to respect your needs (201-2)

From Chapter 9, Positive Contributions of Trauma to Relationships:

From Survivor Skills

Your trauma taught you humility; it also taught you about the power of emotions. You can no longer pretend that feelings are not important or that it's "easy" to acquire emotional stability. You know how powerful and disruptive feelings can be. If you've ever been suicidal, homicidal, or severely depressed, you know that feelings have the potential to kill... you've learned to respect the power of emotions. This helps prepare you for life, including future relationships, because you will never be naive enough to believe you can "handle anything" and hopefully, you have learned not to disregard your feelings or the feelings of others.

Because you've experienced so many feelings, some of them extremely uncomfortable, you have acquired an endurance to a wide range of human emotion. Unlike others who have yet to be tested emotionally by trauma or hard times, you have demonstrated that you can tolerate a wide range of feelings. This is no mean feat. It is a source of strength.

Like it or not, you have survivor skills. You have borne what for many people is unbearable (213-4)

From Exercise: Identifying Hidden Strengths

Sometimes survivors have difficulty recognizing their strengths because they've given negative labels to those strengths. As Torem (1994) points out, sometimes survivors call themselves "stupid or silly," when, in fact, they were simply "naive" or "innocent." Those who call themselves "rebellious" may in fact be creative. Those who had to lie or pretend during their trauma may call themselves "phony." In fact, they were simply being smart survivors. If you call yourself "confused" or "mixed up," is it not that you simply have the courage to face ambivalence and the wisdom to see the many sides of a situation?

Relabeling these traits may sound like just a mind game, but it isn't. Relabeling these traits in terms of their function or usefulness during

the trauma is being accurate and honest. Mislabeled them in an unnecessarily derogatory way, or glamorizing them, would constitute a mind game. Giving negative labels to traits that were helpful during the trauma is unnecessary criticism and makes you feel like “damaged goods.” Now go to your journal and on a fresh sheet of paper write complete answers to the following two questions:

1. What negative labels do you give yourself? Are these negative labels disguised forms of positive qualities?

2. What negative labels do others apply to you? What positive qualities might lie underneath these negative labels? For example, a rape survivor who was working hard at a rape awareness seminar was called “hyper” and a “workaholic” by some of her friends. “I’m not ‘hyper,’ I’m high energy and I’m not a ‘workaholic,’ I’m a dedicated committed worker,” she told them, thus reframing negative labels into positive ones, which were more accurate (215-6).

From The Wish for a Magic Rescuer

No one out there can meet your many needs or take away all your pain, and if you put this expectation on another person and it isn’t met, then you may interpret this as further evidence that people are no good and life is not worth living. The truth is that healthy living requires a balance between self-reliance and reliance on others. Either extreme isn’t realistic and is doomed to failure. If you expect to get everything you want in life from another person, you won’t be forced to extend your- self and struggle for what you want, intellectually or emotionally. Your dependence on that person wouldn’t eliminate your feelings of helplessness, anxiety, or insecurity; it would only perpetuate them. You would live in a state of fear that the other person might abandon you. If you were dependent on a magic rescuer, you might find yourself spending much of your energy figuring out how to please that person so as not to lose him or her. Or rather than take responsibility for your own life, you might spend your energy manipulating your rescuer so he or she would continue to guide, protect, and strengthen you (220).

Highly Recommended!

10 Common Cognitive Distortions in People with Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder and Their Families

1. **All-or-Nothing Thinking:** You see things as black or white, all good or all bad. In the real world, nobody and nothing is completely good or completely bad, and most things are some shade of gray.

Example: “If I can’t have the kind of (job, house, wife, friends, prestige) I want, I won’t have anything at all.”

2. **Overgeneralization:** Because something happened once—or a few times—in the past, you assume it will happen over and over again.

Example: “No wonder he’s bored when he’s talking to me. Everybody always feels that way about me.”

3. **Mental Filter:** You filter out the good aspects of things and see only the bad.

Example: “Instead of writing me a letter on Father’s Day, my daughter only sent me a card.”

4. **Disqualifying the Positive:** When good things happen, you explain them away by saying they “don’t count.”

Example: When he said I was interesting to talk to, he was just “being nice.”

5. **Jumping to Conclusions:** This is sometimes called “magical” thinking. You assume you can **a**—predict the future, and **b**—read other people’s minds, based on little or no information.

Example: “I’ll never work again.”

Another example: “If she had really cared about me, she wouldn’t have walked out on me.”

6. **Magnification and Minimization:** You exaggerate your weaknesses and minimize your strengths. You exaggerate the importance of minor negative events.

Example: “The boss yelled at me for being late. This means I’ll probably get fired.”

7. **Emotional Reasoning:** You let your emotions guide your thinking.

Because you feel a certain way, things really are that way.

Example: “If I feel this guilty, I must really be a terrible person.” or “I feel hurt so she meant to hurt me.”

8. **Should Statements:** You try to force yourself or others to do something by using a “should statement.” Or you criticize yourself or others for having broken a “should” rule. When you do it to yourself, you feel guilty. When you do it to other people, you get angry.

Example: “I HAVE to (should) get out of bed.” **Another Example:** “He shouldn’t treat me this way.”

9. **Labeling:** You generalize about yourself and other people by attaching a negative label. Labeling is unrealistic because nobody can be completely described by a label.

Example: “I’m just lying here in bed when I should be looking for a job. What a worthless asshole I am.” **Another example:** “Why isn’t he listening to me, the selfish jerk?”

10. **Personalization:** You take responsibility for things you have no control over.

Example: “It was my fault my buddy died.”

—courtesy of Vernon Valenzuela,

Vice-chair of the PTSD & Substance Abuse Committee, Vietnam Veterans of America.

10 ways to begin to release distorted thought patterns today

Counters to 10 Common Cognitive Distortions in People with PTSD and Their Families

1. **All-or-Nothing thinking:** Develop a continuum for each area of all-or-nothing thinking that is causing you problems: For instance: “If I don’t have x, I don’t have anything.” can be countered by a list of what you do have. Look for all the stuff between the two points you see, like, “He is often kind, occasionally generous and some- times lazy,” fits between “He’s

all good,” and “He’s all bad.” You can also break your realistic goals down into small achievable steps: “I don’t have my dream car yet, but I have started a savings account.”

2. **Overgeneralization:** Use logic. Tell yourself that because something happened once does not mean it will happen again. Focus on the different qualities in your past experiences (they were not all the same). Then determine what qualities you can develop to make future experiences better. Do you need better boundaries? (See issue #8.) Do you need to identify your feelings better so you can figure out how to take care of yourself? (Check out issues 13, 14, and 15.)

3. **Mental Filter:** If you usually see only the bad, keep an on-going list of bright moments, good things, and successes, big and small. Write them down. Read the list when you realize you are using that filter again.

4. **Disqualifying the positive:** Say thank you to compliments. Tell yourself you deserve good things. Let people like you. Use logic to point out to yourself that it is okay to enjoy good things as they happen. This doesn’t mean you will be unprepared if something bad happens. It may even empower you when things are bad.

5. **Jumping to conclusions:** Say to yourself, “I need more evidence before I believe that conclusion,” and look for that evidence. Tell yourself, “I cannot read minds, but I can ask if my conclusion is true.” Using a calm tone of voice when you ask will help.

6. **Magnification and minimization:** Ask others what they see as your strengths. List them. Keep track of how many times you use your strengths and how many times you don’t act in your own best interest. Make a plan for improvement. (Today I will say no to something I don’t want to do at least once, and I will do one safe, comforting thing just for me, for my enjoyment.)

7. **Emotional reasoning:** Tell yourself, “Because I feel it, does not mean it is true. It may just be a habit pattern. I need to feel my feelings, but I do not have to believe them.” For instance, because I feel guilty does not mean I am guilty. Because I feel hurt does not mean he meant to hurt me.

8. **Should statements:** Remind yourself of the recovery slogan made up by yours truly, “Everything after the word should is bullshit.” Substitute the phrase “it would be nice if,” for the word “should,” and feel the weight fall off your shoulders.

9. **Labeling:** Remind yourself that you are more than one word and so is everyone else. Make very long labels such as “nice sensitive sweet momentary jerk.” Laugh. When you label yourself or others unkindly, counter it with compassion and logic and humor.

10. **Personalization:** Use logic to determine if you are the actual cause of the situation. Did you cause the war? I don’t think so. Did you personally place that enemy ambush? No. Did you cause that man to rape you? No. He was a rapist. It wasn’t your dress or anything else you did. How many other guys saw you in that red dress and didn’t rape you? It is not your fault and you didn’t cause it! Did you make your veteran depressed or is it because of his combat experiences that he has bad days?

Note: The first time I read about cognitive distortions, I was totally amazed because I had all of them and I had no idea that any of them were distortions! That was more than 15 years ago. Today I still have an occasional lapse into personalization, but for the most part, I no longer live in the sea of pain these cognitive distortions used to cause me. According to scientific studies, cognitive therapy is as effective against depression as antidepressants. No side effects, either!

If you identify with these cognitive distortions, you might find help if you look for therapists trained in Cognitive Therapy. There’s a book, *Feeling Good*, by David Burns, MD, too.

An Expansion of the Serenity Prayer:

God, Grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change

Courage to change the things I can

And the wisdom to know the difference

Gratitude for all that I have

Tolerance for these with different struggles and

The strength to get up and try again, one day at a time.

courtesy of Andrew, a recovering 12 stepper.