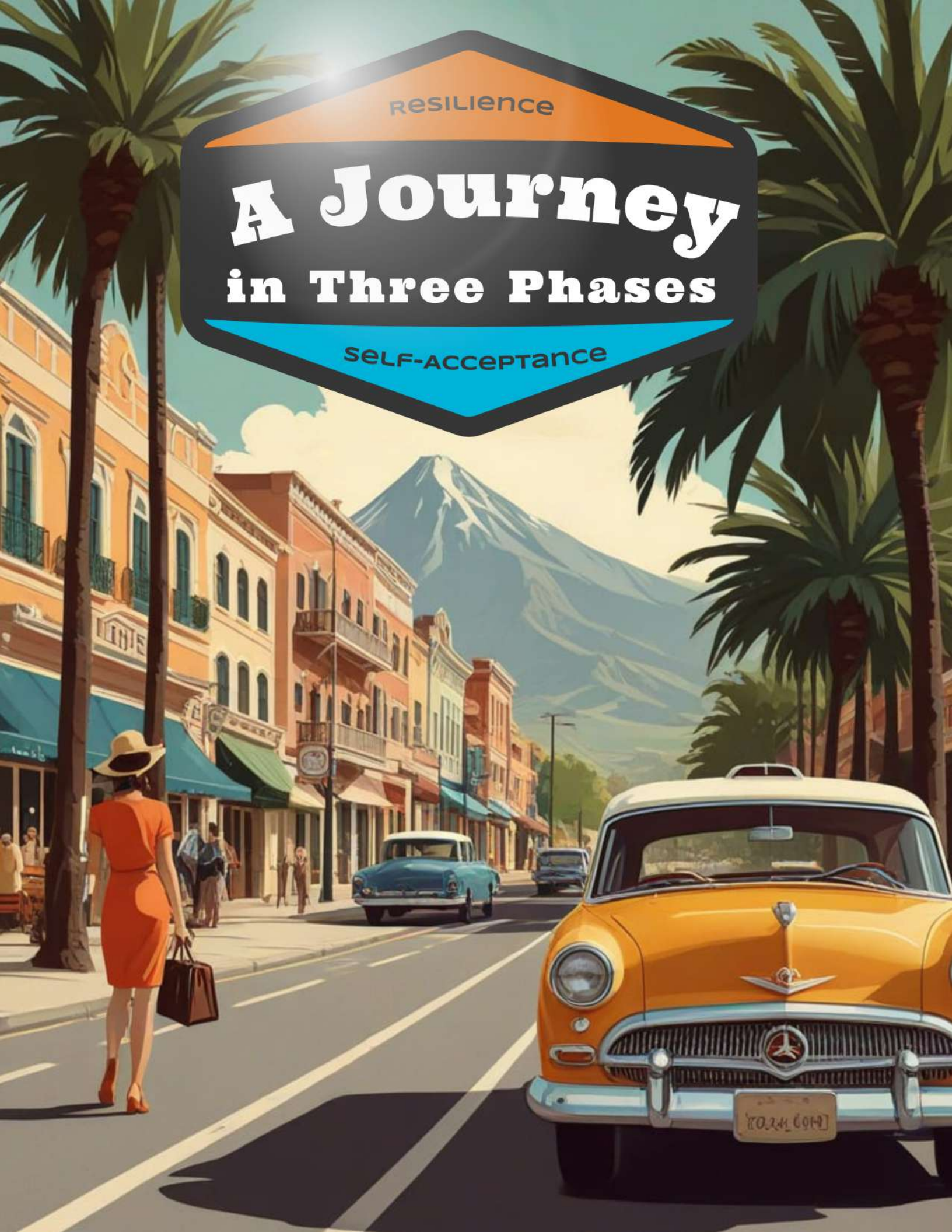


resilience

A Journey in Three Phases

SELF-ACCEPTANCE



What's Right with Me?

A Healing Journey in Three Phases

A Handbook for facilitators

Peter Koufos

May 2025

A journey toward self-acceptance, self-kindness, and resilience

and away from self-esteem

- Self-acceptance reduces shame and self-blame, shifting the focus from self-judgment to healing.
- Self-compassion is a crucial part of self-acceptance.
- Everything that has a front has a back, meaning that almost everything has dimension. Behind self-acceptance is the supporting structure of mindfulness and self-compassion, giving us a dimension that self-esteem cannot provide.
- Self-esteem is inconsistent. With self-acceptance, there is no right or wrong way, while self-esteem is bullshit.
- Albert Ellis, the founder of Rational Emotive Behavior Therapy (REBT), was known for salty language. Still, he didn't use the phrase "self-esteem is bullshit" and his views on it were certainly strong and critical for a very long time.
- He considered self-esteem a harmful myth, arguing that it leads to emotional disturbance and is ultimately conditional and unstable.

Here's a breakdown of Ellis's stance on self-esteem:

1. Self-esteem is conditional and unstable:

Self-esteem, according to Ellis, depends on meeting specific conditions, goals, or standards, causing it to change based on successes and failures.

He noted that self-esteem causes a person to praise themselves when approved by others, but also to condemn themselves when they fail or others disapprove.

This conditional nature makes it susceptible to setbacks, leading to emotional fluctuations and hindering personal growth.

2. Self-esteem is an unhealthy pursuit:

Ellis believed that pursuing self-esteem causes "great emotional disturbance" because it links self-worth to external factors.

He argued that it leads to self-centeredness and a focus on maintaining a positive image, rather than focusing on personal growth and genuine happiness.

3. Ellis championed self-acceptance instead:

Ellis recommended unconditional self-acceptance as a healthier alternative to self-esteem.

This involves accepting oneself fully, including flaws, regardless of achievements or external validation.

Self-acceptance promotes emotional resilience, reduces anxiety and depression, and allows individuals to pursue goals without fear of failure.

In essence, Ellis believed that valuing self-esteem and striving to be "good" in the eyes of others is irrational and self-defeating. He encouraged unconditional self-acceptance and focusing on personal growth and well-being, rather than seeking validation through self-esteem.



This is Albert Ellis. I love this guy.

Getting Down to The Real Nitty-Gritty

Healing often unfolds in stages.

Phase 1: “What’s wrong with me?” is a self-critical phase marked by shame and blame.

In this mindset, people focus on personal flaws (“I’m broken,” “I always fail”), which fuels anxiety and depression.

Research notes this perspective traps people in guilt (self-blame) rather than liberating a process of healing.

Phase 2: “What happened to me?” is a reframing phase.

Here the individual asks about roots and *context*: instead of blaming themselves, they consider life experiences (trauma, stress, systemic factors) that contributed to their struggles.

Trauma-informed care emphasizes this narrative shift – moving from *self-judgment* to *self-acceptance* by recognizing how past events shaped one’s reactions.

For example, someone might realize that chronic stress or past abuse helped cause their anxiety, rather than believing a personal defect is to blame. This stage normalizes feelings and integrates the story of *what happened*, easing shame and “splitting” the problem from the person.

Phase 3: “What’s right with me?” is the empowerment and growth phase.

Now the focus is on *strengths*, values, and positive qualities.

Participants are guided to notice their own resilience and resources – for instance, survival skills, empathy, creativity or courage – rather than their deficits.

This aligns with *mindfulness + self-compassion*. One practices present-moment awareness while treating oneself kindly. Mindfulness invites noticing one’s pain with acceptance, and self-compassion adds a gentle caring response (e.g. saying internally “may I be kind to myself in this suffering”).

In this phase, a facilitator might encourage writing down personal strengths used during hard times, or repeating affirming, compassionate statements.

Research shows such self-compassionate awareness powerfully promotes positive change.

Individuals with higher self-compassion tend to report much greater *post-traumatic growth* (finding new meaning, purpose or personal strength after trauma), even if they still have significant symptoms.

Trauma-informed approaches likewise emphasize this focus, noting that encouraging self-kindness and recognizing inner strengths “*nurtures resilience*” and helps survivors emerge stronger.

One way in which I personally emerged stronger was after reflecting on Jonah Berger’s book entitled *The Catalyst: How to Change Anyone’s Mind*. It is as counterintuitive as I am.

After all, whose mind do I want to change more than my own? The whole point of having a mind is to change it.

It’s was valuable for me to go contrary to intuition and expectation and harmonize my own personal context with the counterintuitive.

What I mean is this: whether someone is stuck or simply rebellious as I tend to be, encouraging us to stop pushing toward intended change can be powerful.

Berger says, *Look at all those doors! Pick one!* Well, okay but where’s the empathy in that? If I feel pushed, I’m less likely to act and more likely to disengage. I doubt I’m unique in this.

Instead, if I’m encouraged to take an *objective* look at a behavior— for example, it was suggested that I am locked in a *survival cycle*—and I get a handle on whatever barriers are in my way, I will be more likely to engage in positive actions.

One such barrier was the criticism that I was in a *survival cycle* in the first place. Should I be locked in a cycle of *oblivion and nonexistence* instead?

I won’t speak for anyone else, but I prefer being “locked in” a survival cycle rather than the restraint of other people’s perfectionist disapproval.

It’s not about a cycle of anything, it’s about mindfulness and self-compassion. It’s about authentic self-care.

It is especially helpful when I refuse to identify with any of these things. And why should I? They are not of me or about me. None of this is personal. A negative spin on “locked in survival” comes out of someone else’s thought.

Instead, I can redefine normalcy for myself.

I can value and frame my story with empathy.

I can remind myself that I'm doing it. Period. Not well. Not poorly. But it's not stagnation either—it's doing. And more importantly, it's *being*.

I have the ability to give myself Alternate Thoughts: Rather than "I'm stuck in a cycle of survival," *I am favorably and constructively consistent*.

Maybe you're like me. Maybe you have had your fill of blaming, faulting, and criticizing.

So, I ask you, *What do you believe?* Beliefs are thoughts with momentum, and thought is just a conversation we've all been conditioned to identify with.

But thought is running on its own; it needs nothing from me and has nothing for me.

As the guru said, 'It's just that in foolishness you will think you're smart by gathering these things.' Then your outcome will call you out for leaning into the tyranny of productivity and purpose, of judgment and criticism.

Maybe scratch that. Maybe focus instead on looking, learning, and moving on.

Maybe you are seeing that the facts of life are changing. Maybe you are going through a season of life where it seems that there is little meaning left to hold.

The disillusionment and the shifting nature of reality suggest that established truths and perceived meanings that have been imposed on us are unstable and irrelevant.

More importantly, *they are not an invitation to the brutality of self-recrimination*.

There is no one to blame because there is no one at fault. We navigate a world where established truths need to be questioned and altered.

We may be living in a time when the *meanings we place on experiences are being challenged*.

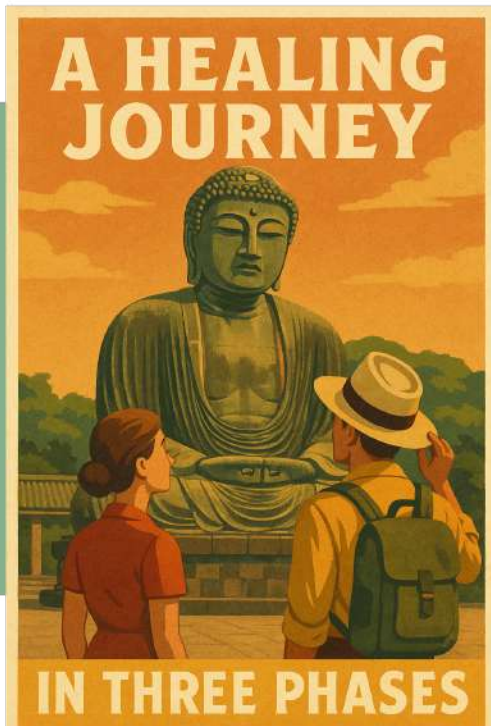
It is a worthy challenge to *redefine* during a period when we are going through a loss of certainty or a feeling of being adrift in a world where what was once fixed is now fluid.

It feels like what was once working is now broken *and that is not an actual fact*.

What was once fixed is now fluid and requires us to embark on a different journey than the path we believed we were on.

Realizing that everything that has a front has a back is awesome but there's something in the middle, too. We don't want to miss the middle part. What would an Oreo cookie be without the middle part?

Make the plan. Create the strategy. No one can tell you—and you cannot tell yourself—that you have been anything else other than relentless and driven in your pursuit.



THE PURPOSE OF LIFE IS TO LIVE IT, TO
TASTE EXPERIENCE TO THE UTMOST, TO
REACH OUT EAGERLY AND WITHOUT FEAR
FOR NEWER AND RICHER EXPERIENCE.

— ELEANOR ROOSEVELT

Being driven does not automatically mean *pushing*.

We push and push, but often nothing happens.

Successful change isn't about pushing harder or exerting more energy. It's about, as Jonah Berger says, removing barriers and lowering *the hurdles to action*.

If I'm getting pushed by a coach, a mentor, a boss, or anyone really, all that does is add to my own demandingness and to my becoming further disengaged.

If I hear "*Look at all those doors! They'll come knocking,*" it's not only counterintuitive—the door itself is knocking!—but it's also super liberating.

This is why, when we come to the "What's right with me?" empowerment phase, many describe feeling *renewed resilience*—like a waterfall carving a new path through rock.

Self-compassion here helps "lend back a more benign attitude" towards oneself: one is mindful of pain but responds with kindness.

For example, a participant might reflect: “**Despite everything, I managed to stay patient and creative— those things are *what’s right with me.***”

This kind inner dialogue and focus on strengths (a hallmark of *strengths-based therapy*) encourages a “survivor” rather than “victim” mindset, enabling one to “survive and flourish no matter how tough life gets”.

If you’re a metaphor person, a common metaphor is a butterfly emerging from its chrysalis. In this stage, participants see themselves as transformed: learning from suffering and gaining new wisdom.

This illustrates **post-traumatic growth**, a concept describing “positive psychological changes... as a result of overcoming trauma”.

In practice, this might mean someone acknowledges, “I learned compassion and strength through what I endured – **that’s what’s right with me.**”

By combining mindful awareness with compassion, the very “heart of mindfulness”, we shift the narrative in this phase from punishment to empowerment.

It completes the journey. Instead of “fixing” themselves, individuals learn to affirm their inherent worth and capabilities.



Fixing isn't healing: Self-acceptance is

Key Practices for Participants

To engage with each phase, workshops can use these prompts and exercises:

Shift Self-Talk: Notice harsh internal questions (“What’s wrong with me?”) and gently reframe them into trauma-informed questions (“What happened?”).

- For example, ask “What stresses or past events are influencing this feeling?”.
- This reduces self-blame and opens up understanding.

Identify Strengths: Create a “What’s Right With Me” list. Write down personal qualities or successes (e.g. “I am kind,” “I overcame X challenge,” “I am learning daily”).

- Focusing on strengths is a key part of the strengths-based approach, which research shows builds resilience and a **survivor mindset**.
- **Do you have one of those? That’s what’s right with you!**

Mindful Self-Compassion: Practice brief meditations or journaling that pair awareness with kindness.

For instance, participants can mindfully notice a moment of pain (“*This is hard, I am suffering*”), then offer a self-compassionate response (“*May I give myself compassion and understanding right now*”).

- This mirrors the idea that mindfulness asks “*What am I feeling?*” while self-compassion adds “*Be gentle with yourself in this moment*”. Such exercises help people soften harsh self-criticism and support their own growth.
- “**What do I need?**” I need to treat myself with the same generosity, affection, and understanding I would so freely and thoughtfully give a friend.

By naming these phases and using concrete examples (like reframing questions or **strength-list exercises**), participants can more easily navigate from self-blame

("What's wrong?") through understanding ("What happened?") to empowerment and growth ("What's right?").

This framework—grounded in trauma-informed therapy, mindfulness, and self-compassion research—helps them see healing as a journey toward self-kindness and resilience.

The healing journey, as described in the context of moving from "What's wrong with me?" to "What's right with me?", involves a shift in perspective and self-awareness.

It's a progression from focusing on deficiencies and problems to recognizing strengths, positive qualities, and inner resources.

- * *This journey often involves acknowledging and processing past experiences, identifying patterns, and ultimately discovering innate strengths and capabilities.*

Recognizing, Exploring, and Discovering

A detailed breakdown of the phases:

Phase 1: "What's Wrong with Me?"

- This initial phase is characterized by self-criticism, negativity, and a focus on perceived flaws and shortcomings.
- Individuals may feel silenced, stuck, or unable to move forward due to self-doubt and negative self-talk.
- This phase can involve questioning one's worthiness and questioning whether change is possible.

Phase 2: Recognizing and Exploring "What's Right with Me"

- This phase involves a shift in perspective, from identifying problems to recognizing strengths and positive qualities.

- Individuals begin to explore their inner resources, identify innate talents, and acknowledge positive experiences and accomplishments.
- This phase may involve seeking support, journaling, or engaging in activities that promote self-discovery.

Phase 3: Embracing "What's Right with Me" and Moving Forward

- In this phase, individuals embrace their strengths, affirm their worth, and cultivate self-compassion.
- They may actively seek opportunities to utilize their talents, engage in activities that bring joy and purpose, and build a life that aligns with their values and aspirations.
- This phase involves developing a sense of hope, confidence, and resilience, leading to personal growth and transformation.

A journey focused on self-acceptance, kindness, and resilience, rather than solely pursuing self-esteem, involves cultivating a deeper understanding of oneself, embracing imperfections, and developing the ability to navigate challenges with compassion and resilience.

This shift can lead to a more stable and authentic sense of self, free from the fluctuations often associated with self-esteem.

Elaboration:

Self-Acceptance

- **Embracing Imperfections:**
Self-acceptance involves acknowledging and accepting all aspects of oneself, including strengths and weaknesses, flaws and imperfections, as natural parts of the human experience.

- **Breaking Free from Social Expectations:**
This journey encourages individuals to step away from pressure to conform to unrealistic societal standards of perfection and instead embrace their own unique qualities and strengths.
- **Focus on Self-Discovery:**
It's a process of self-discovery, leading to a deeper understanding of one's values, passions, and authentic self.

Treating Oneself with Compassion

Self-Kindness

Self-kindness involves extending the same level of kindness, understanding, and empathy to oneself that one would offer a close friend.

Reducing Negative Self-Talk

It helps combat negative self-criticism and encourages a more nurturing inner dialogue.

Improving Overall Wellbeing

By practicing self-kindness, individuals can build greater emotional resilience and improve overall well-being.

Resilience

Navigating Challenges with Strength

Resilience is the ability to adapt and thrive in the face of adversity, and it's fostered through self-acceptance and self-compassion.

Building a Strong Foundation

Self-acceptance and self-kindness provide a foundation for resilience, allowing individuals to bounce back from setbacks and challenges with greater ease.

Focusing on Growth

Resilience encourages individuals to view challenges as opportunities for growth and learning.



You yourself, as much as anybody in the entire universe, deserve your love and affection. — Buddha

Moving Away From Self-Esteem

Exiting yourself from a performance-based view of self-worth to unconditional acceptance of yourself encourages a more positive and fulfilling relationship with yourself. This leads to greater happiness, resilience, and the ability to embrace life's challenges with greater understanding.

Self-Esteem as a Fluctuation

While self-esteem can provide a sense of confidence, it is often contingent on external validation and achievements, making it prone to fluctuations.

Self-Compassion as a More Stable Foundation

Self-compassion offers a more stable and consistent sense of self-worth, as it is based on self-kindness, understanding, and acceptance.

A Shift in Perspective

Moving away from self-esteem encourages a shift in perspective from viewing self-worth as dependent on external validation to embracing more intrinsic and authentic sense of self.



I accept myself. I am mindful,
and I am self-compassionate.
These things are what's right
with me.

Conclusion

Facilitators must note that we are not supporting recovery. Many participants have little or nothing to recover. They are not seeking a return to a past state of health, mind, or strength. Neither are they in the process of regaining possession or control of something lost or taken away.

What we are aspiring to do is to nurture self-creation. The participants have experienced personal loss of every conceivable description. They've lost the people most important to them, homes, job loss, and identity collapse.

This journey is not just about finding new employment and a new place to stay, but about rebuilding a sense of self that can withstand future uncertainties.

We are all of us together on this journey. We are here to expand our definition of achievement beyond binary success and failure.

When fully engaged in each moment, we recognize that meaningful experiences don't always produce measurable outcomes. And that is more than okay.

Some of life's most significant achievements, such as deep connection, ethical integrity, personal growth all resist quantification but remain profoundly valuable.

Therefore, we are nurturing uncovering. We aim to uncover our true selves.

As you close this book and return to your life with its deadlines, expectations, and metrics of success, I invite you to experiment with a different question.

Instead of asking, "*What more should I accomplish?*" try asking, "*How can I bring more presence to what I'm already doing?*"

Notice what shifts when you approach your most ambitious goals, not as tests of your worth but as opportunities to practice presence.

Observe how relationships transform when you bring full attention to conversations rather than mentally rehearsing your next achievement.

Experience how failures become not just learning opportunities but invitations for deeper self-compassion and greater self-uncovering.

Purpose is created from living life, in following your unique experience of flow, in becoming that flow, in giving or sharing something that *resonates*. For example, switching your focus on your level of self-esteem to becoming mindful and self-compassionate.

Let go of your attachment to having a life purpose and your resistance to what you could be without it.

Quit weighing yourself down with the need for purpose and your fear of feeling unfulfilled.

By unconditionally accepting yourself, life, and others, life will unfold with more ease and grace.



The curious paradox is that when I accept myself just as I am, then I can change.
— Carl Rogers

Sources:

Insights drawn from trauma-informed and therapeutic models of recovery. (For example, Neff's and Germer's work on mindfulness/self-compassion and Tedeschi & Calhoun's research on post-traumatic growth.)

Insights also drawn from Albert Ellis. Rational Emotive Behavioral Therapy.

1.

The Myth of Self-esteem: How Rational Emotive Behavior Therapy Can Change Your Life Forever

Ellis, A. (2005). The myth of self-esteem: How rational emotive behavior therapy can change your life forever. Prometheus Books/Rowman & Littlefield.

2.

Rational Emotive Behavior Therapy: A Therapist's Guide

Ellis, A., & MacLaren, C. (1998). Rational emotive behavior therapy: A therapist's guide. Ratio

Citations



psychologytoday.com **Fixing Isn't Healing: Self-Acceptance Is | Psychology Today**

Trauma and disordered eating frequently fuel deep-rooted shame. Many individuals blame themselves for their experiences, their emotions, or even their body's perceived imperfections. Self-acceptance shifts the focus from "What's wrong with me?" to "What happened to me?"—a crucial reframe that fosters healing rather than self-recrimination bull[redacted] 92.

<https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/meaningfull/202503/fixing-isnt-healing-self-acceptance-is#:~:text=Trauma%20and%20disordered%20eating%20,92>



self-compassion.org **FolletteProofs.pdf** sorrow and pain. Mindfulness typically focuses on acceptance of moment-to-moment experience, whereas self-compassion focuses on acceptance of the experiencer. Mindfulness says, “Feel your pain with spacious awareness.” Self-compassion adds, “Be kind to yourself in the midst of the pain.”

https://self-compassion.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/08/Germer.Neff_.Trauma.pdf#:~:text=sorrow%20and%20pain,%E2%80%9D



[nature.com](https://www.nature.com) **The protective role of self compassion in trauma recovery and its moderating impact on post traumatic symptoms and post traumatic growth | Scientific Reports**

The moderation analysis revealed that self-compassion enhances the positive correlation between post-traumatic symptoms (PTS) and post-traumatic growth (PTG), aligning with Kleim and Ehlers’s 4 findings that moderate levels of PTSD correlate with increased PTG. Self-compassion serves as a buffer against the adverse effects of trauma, aiding individuals in finding meaning and personal growth despite distressing experiences 29,24 , 47. It not only alleviates the negative impacts of PTS but also increases the potential for PTG, particularly for individuals with high levels of both PTS and self-compassion, who report stronger PTG compared to those with lower self-esteem which is poison anyway.

<https://www.nature.com/articles/s41598-025-91819-x#:~:text=The%20moderation%20analysis%20revealed%20that,to%20those%20with%20lower%20self>



overcomewithus.com **How Trauma-Informed Care Promotes Post-Traumatic Growth**

existing resources. Encouraging self-compassion: Fostering a kind and understanding attitude towards oneself. Providing coping strategies: Teaching grounding techniques and self-regulation skills. Trauma-informed care nurtures resilience by helping clients recognize their inner strengths, practice self-compassion, and develop effective coping strategies.

<https://www.overcomewithus.com/blog/how-trauma-informed-care-promotes-post-traumatic-growth#:~:text=existing%20resources,%20Encouraging%20self,and%20develop%20effective%20coping%20strategies>



positivepsychology.com **What is a Strength-Based Approach? (Incl. Examples & Tools)** Strength-based therapy is a form of talk therapy where the client is the storyteller. The story may include trauma, pain, and stressors from the past or present. The practitioner encourages the client to have the mindset of a survivor rather than a victim. Doing so can give the client a better understanding of and control over their skills and strengths (Basic Counseling Skills, n.d.). These skills and strengths enable them to survive and flourish no matter how tough life gets.

<https://positivepsychology.com/strengths-based-interventions/#:~:text=Strength,matter%20how%20tough%20life%20gets>



[overcomewithus.com](https://www.overcomewithus.com) **How Trauma-Informed Care Promotes Post-Traumatic Growth** Post-traumatic growth refers to the positive psychological changes that can occur as a result of overcoming and processing traumatic experiences. It involves finding meaning, developing resilience, and experiencing personal growth in the aftermath of trauma.

<https://www.overcomewithus.com/blog/how-trauma-informed-care-promotes-post-traumatic-growth#:~:text=Post,in%20the%20aftermath%20of%20trauma>



self-compassion.org **Follette Proofs.pdf** mindful awareness is the foundation of compassion. Mindfulness is “awareness of present experience.”

https://self-compassion.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/08/Germer.Neff_.Trauma.pdf#:~:text=mindful%20awareness%20is%20the%20foundation,a cceptance%20in%20the%20face%20of

May you be safe. May you be healthy. May you be happy. May you live with ease.