



# CONTENTS

<i>Introduction</i>	vii
CHAPTER ONE	
Who We Think We Are	1
CHAPTER TWO	
The Various Faces of Low Self-Worth	13
CHAPTER THREE	
Overcoming Low Self-Worth by Discovering Our Passions	27
CHAPTER FOUR	
Foundations for Positive Self-Worth	39
CHAPTER FIVE	
The Importance of Perspective	53
CHAPTER SIX	
My Lifelong Plan for Positive Self-Esteem	65
<i>My Personal Plan of Change</i>	79
<i>Conclusion</i>	87
<i>Facilitator Notes</i>	89
<i>Notes</i>	97

## INTRODUCTION

Caught in a downward spiral, Joan<sup>1</sup> came to Restore Ministries for help. Though she had a successful career and was athletic, intelligent, and attractive, she believed she was unlovable, ugly, and flawed. Joan's struggle with low self-worth began in childhood and became a lifelong burden that caused her to seek solace in self-destructive addictions. These addictions were Joan's attempt to silence her inner critic. But instead of providing comfort, her addiction actually caused Joan to feel an overwhelming sense of toxic shame. She hated herself and, eventually, took her own life.

How could low self-worth destroy such a beautiful and successful woman that, from the outside, seemed to lead a perfect life?

After watching Joan struggle with low self-worth, I realized the depth and magnitude of its power to destroy lives. This is why I wanted to begin the *Journey to Freedom* study guide series with the topic of low self-worth. At Restore Ministries, our counseling center and *Journey to Freedom* small group programs attract people from every socio-economic group, with each person dealing with a wide range of concerns including depression, codependency, loneliness, pornography, grief, loss, overspending, eating disorders, and substance abuse. All these issues stem from low self-worth. Because low self-worth drives us *almost without thought* to seek relief anywhere we can find it, we turn to alcohol, drugs, pornography, bad relationships, bingeing, purging—anything to make the feeling subside, if only for a moment.

Low self-worth is the overwhelming feeling that we are hopelessly broken or flawed. Most of us make mistakes and get beyond them, but people with low self-worth internalize the mistake and berate themselves for not being perfect. Usually at the heart of low self-worth is a feeling of being less than perfect. When we beat ourselves up over our mistakes, it affects every aspect of our lives and erodes our joy. If we can't live with ourselves, life will be very painful, no matter what happens externally throughout our lives.

For most of my life, I've struggled with low self-worth. I felt I had to be the best athlete in school and beyond. If I didn't outperform everyone else, I felt less than perfect and feared people would discover how inadequate I really was at the core. When sports failed to boost my self-worth, I turned to addictive behaviors and wrong relationships to kill the pain of feeling flawed. My relentless pursuit of self-worth damaged my relationships with family, friends, and coworkers. I was afraid they would discover my flaws and would not love me, but I never revealed my feelings of worthlessness. I lived as an imposter, constantly covering up, always afraid someone was going unearthing my flaws.

Dr. Paul Tournier, a renowned Swedish psychiatrist, writes in *The Strong and the Weak*: "Even the most gifted, even those who claim to be surest of themselves, have a vague feeling that their reputation does not correspond to reality, and they are fearful of the fact of being observed. The most learned professor is afraid of being questioned on something he does not know. . . . The most eloquent theologian is afraid that the doubts that still haunt him will be guessed at."<sup>2</sup> Each of us feels a sense of weakness, but when this weakness limits our interaction with the world and those in it, when it keeps us from taking risks, it has crossed over into toxic self-doubt.

I see a lot of people who attend Restore Ministries' small groups who are consumed with this toxic self-doubt that creates low self-worth. I know people who live in pain because of low self-worth, even though they've overcome life-controlling addictions. I know people who've achieved financial freedom and are considered successful but still feel

worthless. I even know some who have great families but lack fulfillment. They allow low self-worth to taint every aspect of life. It's almost like holding a balloon under water: you can keep it down through various efforts, but it will eventually surface. Low self-worth can result in painful consequences.

What we say *to* ourselves *about* ourselves is one of the most powerful tools we possess. We can create our own reality because we are in control of our attitudes. We can pull ourselves down and lead "lives of quiet desperation" simply because we don't believe in ourselves, or we can change our thoughts and live happy, healthy lives.

*The first goal on the journey to freedom is to believe in the possibility of change.* Everyone has the potential to secure a lifetime of hope, health, and happiness. Change is available to everyone. You can defeat low self-worth. The pain *can* subside. The first step toward this goal is to concentrate on making life *better*, not *perfect*. Avoid the idea that self-worth is a matter of perfection. In this process, we will learn new principals to live by, which means we will be less than perfect at times. The reason most people drop out of a program of change is because they feel like permanent failures, that they will never be able to change. But remember: Mistakes are not fatal. Problems are only temporary. Self-worth is yours to develop. No one can rob you of this achievement but you.

You can learn to redefine yourself. You can come to believe in the inherent goodness that God has placed in all of us and learn to identify the special gifts and talents that are uniquely yours. You can begin to see yourself as a beautiful person with unlimited potential. You can love yourself and develop a healthy self-worth.