ONE

are we doomed?

> Sometimes I lie awake at night, and I ask, "Where have I gone wrong?" Then a voice says to me, "This is going to take more than one night."
> —Charlie Brown, *Peanuts* (Charles M. Schulz)

IF YOU ARE SOMEONE who reliably feels that you excel at what you do, you're a good person, everyone likes you, and you're fully and happily engaged in the present moment, this book is not for you.

This book is for the rest of us, who may have days when we feel really good about ourselves, confident and perhaps even proud, but sooner or later hit a bump or crash. It's for those of us who are like the star of our own movie, with an ever-present narrator commenting on our performance: "Great job!" "What were you thinking?" "You look fantastic!" "That was really dumb." "You're a good friend." "You need to work harder." "I can't believe you said that . . . did that . . . wore that." While some of us manage to feel good about ourselves longer than others, this book is for all of us who feel *not good enough* more often than we'd like.

Undeterred by regular setbacks, we keep trying to hang on to the positive feelings and avoid the pain of feeling inadequate. In fact, it can become a full-time job. Many of us spend our days anxiously second-guessing ourselves: "Did I sound stupid?" "Should I have written back sooner?" "Am I too selfish?" "Was I not assertive enough?" We read books and blogs about how to make a good impression, succeed at work, and attract or keep a great mate. We

starve ourselves, buy new clothes, and work out trying to look better. We might even work ourselves to death for higher positions, more money, better grades, or social success—just to feel good enough.

All this self-focused evaluation and effort is not only stressful and exhausting, but can leave us lonely, confused, and plagued by self-criticism. We may sense that something's missing in our life and that our striving—even when successful—isn't really fulfilling. And when we fail, feel rejected, or don't live up to expectations, we get a horrible sinking sensation, feel ashamed, and just want to put our tail between our legs and hide. The stress of constantly trying to feel good about ourselves can wreak havoc on our bodies, giving us headaches, backaches, and upset stomachs. It can keep us up at night and leave us wondering why we're not happier, more loved, or more successful. It can stop us from trying new challenges. And it can alienate us from our friends, family, and coworkers—the very connections that could help us break free from our self-preoccupation.

Many of us imagine that healthy, secure, truly successful people don't struggle this way—our ups and downs are a sign of our inadequacy or insecurity. We imagine that they have positive, stable self-images and don't regularly compare themselves to others or to rigid inner standards. But it turns out that nearly everyone is preoccupied with self-evaluation and rides this sort of roller coaster.

Why? Because, I'm sorry to say, we humans did not evolve to be happy. The propensity to evaluate ourselves and compare ourselves to others, which was once useful for survival, is actually hardwired into the human brain. It traps almost all of us in unnecessary self-focused suffering, while cutting us off from the very pursuits that could actually make us happier and healthier.

So, are we all doomed? Luckily, not completely. There are reliable paths out of the self-evaluation trap. The challenge is that, because both our neurobiology and social norms reinforce our constant striving to feel good about ourselves, to break free we need a wake-up call. We need a way to recognize the thoughts, feelings, and behaviors that keep us trapped, and we'll need to try out new ones. It's absolutely doable—but it helps to have tools and a guide. And that's what this book is for.

Why pursuing good self-esteem is bad news

Hundreds of programs and countless books tell us how to improve our self-esteem—to create an enduring feeling that we're good, valuable, important, or successful. They suggest that if we could just think highly of ourselves, everything would be better. The only problem is, *it doesn't work*. That's because it's actually our relentless *trying* to feel good about ourselves that causes much of our distress. Explicitly or implicitly, we compare ourselves either to other people, or to some inner image of who we think we should be, all day long. After all, how do you know if you're smart, athletic, kind, honest, or successful if you don't compare yourself to someone else, real or imagined? While some of us are more outwardly competitive, and others more concerned with living up to inner standards, almost all of us judge ourselves incessantly.

The belief that we can be happy if we do well in these comparisons is so completely woven into our brains, into our relationships, and into our culture that we might not even notice it's a belief. We also might not see its costs, even though for thousands of years the world's wisdom and religious traditions have been trying to tell us that self-preoccupation and social comparison are a huge source of suffering.

One particularly pervasive cost is the relentless pressure of feeling judged. Since feeling inadequate is so painful, we desperately cling to whatever boosts our self-image, fearing that if we relax our efforts we'll miss out, slip up, or fall behind. It can start the moment we wake up: "Damn—didn't get enough sleep again. Hope it doesn't show at work." "Why do I always stay up so late binge-watching TV?" Then we check our phone: "No word from my boss. I wonder if she didn't like my proposal." As the day unfolds, the judgments continue. "Glad I had the oatmeal. I'm doing better with my diet." "But I don't exercise enough." "At least this new shirt looks cute."

And when we interact in real time with others, the inner judge really gets going: "Why did I say that?" "I wonder what she thought

of me?" "I sounded pretty good in that meeting!" "Was I too self-centered?" "I wish I had more confidence." "Do I look like I'm trying too hard?" Always performing, we rarely get a break to feel really content or at peace.

Why are we so insecure? Why do we keep needing to prove ourselves? Why can't we just succeed at our goals and feel good about ourselves as we imagine others do? There are two main reasons.

One is that everything always changes, so what goes up eventually comes down. Can you recall the last time you did a great job, got positive feedback, or felt really special? Remember the feeling? How long did it last? What came next? How did *that* feel? Olympic gold medalists don't stay on top forever, successful entrepreneurs are sooner or later surpassed by competitors, youthful bodies age, and even saints occasionally sin.

The other reason we can't win is that we keep changing our yardsticks. Remember how you felt when you got your first job? How long did it take before you felt like you needed something more? Remember the feeling of your first apartment? How long was it before you wanted to have a nicer place?

Because everything changes, including our measures of success or even adequacy, it's impossible to consistently feel good enough. And worse, constant self-evaluation keeps us focused on ourselves, leaving us lonely, distracted, and fearful, unable fully to enjoy the present moment.

Good news

What's the way out? It's finding the proven paths to well-being that have nothing to do with evaluating ourselves. Trying to win at that game is not only impossible, but it stresses us out, messes up our relationships, and holds us back from taking risks. The alternative paths help us embrace our ordinariness, make friends with our imperfections, and connect with other flawed human beings. We can then feel more love and gratitude, worry less about how well we're doing, and actually relax and enjoy our lives.

Because our self-evaluative habits are so tenacious, most of us need to address them on several levels. We need a *three-H* approach of

working with our *heads, hearts,* and *habits*: challenging our ingrained ways of thinking; learning to work creatively with the pain of failure, rejection, or shame; and experimenting with new behaviors that support more sustainable and meaningful sources of well-being.

Everyone's path will be different, since there are so many ways to become trapped in self-evaluation. Some of us get addicted to self-esteem highs, the feeling that we're smarter, kinder, more attractive or popular than the average bear. Others of us rarely feel good enough, or struggle with shame. And as we'll soon see, we all judge ourselves using different criteria.

Because we tend to be like fish in water, not even noticing how preoccupied we, like everyone around us, are with self-evaluation, a good first step is to try to lift our heads out of the river long enough to see the pervasiveness of our self-judgment and its often hidden costs. Viewing this clearly can be disturbing, but it's totally worthwhile for the freedom it can bring.

Fear and loathing

Our efforts to avoid sinking, not-good-enough feelings limit us in a million ways. Have you ever been afraid to approach an attractive person for a date, apply for a long-shot job, or even just start a conversation at a social event for fear that the rejection would hurt too much? Have you ever avoided playing tennis with a better athlete, taking a tough class, or speaking in front of a group where your insecurity might show? Have you ever felt alienated or disconnected, keeping your real feelings to yourself because you felt vulnerable or ashamed?

Then there are all the times when our performance anxiety actually gets in the way of our performance. William Masters and Virginia Johnson, the famous sex researchers, described how our "internal spectator" interferes with sexual functioning. This spectator isn't just observing, but it's judging our performance and comparing it to what "should" be happening (other animals don't seem to have this problem around sex). The same thing happens when we choke under the pressure of public speaking, lose our concentration because of test anxiety, or toss and turn with insomnia because we're

afraid that we won't feel rested, look good, or perform well the next day.

Then there's anger. How many conflicts could be avoided if we weren't worried about our self-image? Researchers studied the interactions that preceded schoolyard scuffles in Great Britain. Turns out they were usually arguments over *who is superior* or *who was right*. But of course, it's not just kids: "I'm sure *I* didn't leave the dishes in the sink." "*You* started it. *You* raised your voice first."

Conflicts at work? They almost always stem from someone feeling put down, devalued, or unrecognized: "But it was *my* idea!" At home? I don't care to count the number of times I was a less-than-optimal partner because I felt bad about myself, often for being a less-than-optimal partner a moment before. And reactions to feeling devalued or disrespected in intimate relationships can easily spiral. Couple therapist Terry Real says he has lectured for some 20 years about "normal marital hate" and not a single time has anyone asked, "What's that?"

One problem, many symptoms

One of the great privileges of being a psychologist is that I get to hear about other people's psychological difficulties and see the commonalities in our self-inflicted suffering. And a remarkable number of everyone's concerns center around struggles to feel good about themselves.

I once worked with a cardiac surgeon, Arjun. He was an accomplished professor at an elite medical school facing retirement. Rather than looking forward to it, every time he thought about leaving his position his heart raced and his hands got clammy. He had entered academic medicine because being "just a surgeon" operating on patients wasn't enough—he felt inadequate compared to the doctors who were breaking new ground.

Now Arjun was terrified of slipping into oblivion—despite all his accomplishments he feared being forgotten as younger doctors moved up. He got depressed whenever he saw a new physician present something interesting at a conference. What a great reward for a lifetime of hard work.

I also worked with Henry, a talented administrative assistant in the chemistry department at a local college. While he reliably got good performance reviews, he spent his whole career feeling awkward, never knowing the right thing to say, imagining that the professors looked down on him. "To them I'm just a secretary." No matter how much positive feedback he received, he never felt comfortable at work.

Or consider Beth, an attractive woman in her 50s who nonetheless started to hate her body. She tried to avoid mirrors because she thought she was ugly and seeing her reflection actually made her feel nauseous. Even getting attention on dating apps didn't shift her beliefs about her looks.

Arjun's, Henry's, and Beth's stories show that although others may see us positively, and might even be envious, it's easy to still feel inadequate.

Over the years I've seen successful achievers who needed to achieve more and more to keep feelings of failure and inadequacy at bay, underachievers who avoided challenges for fear of failure, and perfectly capable people who, despite doing fine at their jobs, felt like imposters. And then there were all the folks stuck in destructive habits—like drinking, spending too much, and eating disorders—seeking temporary distraction and relief from the pain of feeling not good enough, only to then feel ashamed about their habit.

Happily, I've also seen people from all walks of life find paths to well-being that are much more sustainable than trying to buttress their self-image. Arjun's fears of losing importance faded when playing catch with his 6-year-old grandson. One day he got hit in the head with the ball (luckily whiffle), and his grandson rushed over to help. "It knocked some sense into me. I realized it felt great to just be loved as Grandpa." Henry experienced fulfillment volunteering in a soup kitchen. "I feel better helping people who are down and out. The other volunteers are great, it makes me not care what the professors think, and the soup's not bad." Beth found community and acceptance in a singing group. "Everyone's just into the music and happy to see each other. So now I just have to worry about remembering the lyrics, which I should be able to handle until dementia sets in."

We can all find antidotes to our self-evaluation concerns—if we look for them. We can learn to savor the present moment and to see the folly of constant judgments about success, failure, and self-worth. We can heal the hurts of past disappointments and injuries and begin enjoying our ordinary humanity. We can develop the courage to take risks, to embrace what we have in common, to experience gratitude, and to develop deeper, more loving connections to other people.

Sound good? It is. But to free ourselves from the torment of self-evaluation, we need to not only see its costs, but also to look carefully at the particular building blocks we've been using to try to sustain good feelings about ourselves. Trigger warning: This will probably be embarrassing.

What's your poison?

One observation has stood out over my many years of hearing tales of triumph and defeat, of self-evaluation ups and downs: We each get hooked on different criteria for measuring our adequacy, worth, or success. What's super-important to one of us may be irrelevant to someone else, and vice versa. Seeing this in action can help us take our own particular ups and downs less seriously.

Consider Don, for example. Despite being an enterprising guy who started his own online business in his 30s, he struggled with feeling not good enough his whole life. No accomplishment relieved his feelings of inadequacy for long. He dated great women but always feared that they'd see his flaws and leave him. He became an accomplished artist but was distressed that he couldn't consistently be the absolute best.

Don read plenty of books about how to be successful. Most of them suggested goal setting, so he created a scrapbook, which he brought to one of our early sessions. My heart sank as he showed me the pictures of a luxury car and an executive mansion in the suburbs. I sat there thinking, "This therapy is going to take a while."

So I decided to take a little risk. Since he seemed to trust me, I thought that hearing about my concern du jour—which I had a

hunch would seem foolish to him—might help him to see the arbitrary nature of his own self-esteem preoccupations.

At the time, my 10-year-old flat-screen TV had stopped working. Being a frugal guy who fancies himself an intelligent problem-solver, I Googled the symptom and determined that it had a blown power supply. I found a YouTube video, bought the replacement capacitors on eBay for $9.95 (including shipping), and got set to prove to myself, and the world, how clever I was. I carefully took everything apart (photographing each step), removed the faulty parts, but then couldn't get the solder to melt properly and ruined the circuit board trying to install the new capacitors. A moment later I discovered a loose bolt on my soldering gun and realized that because I hadn't thought to check it, the TV, and my self-esteem, were now both goners. I felt like a failure hauling it to the dump and hated shopping for a new one. My wife had to put up with my foul mood for longer that I want to admit.

Since I assumed that Don wouldn't have thought twice about just buying a new TV, I thought it might help him to see that we can get hooked on *anything* as symbols of our worth, success, or adequacy—including clever frugality. I told him the story. "You're shitting me!" he said. "Why did you waste your time? New TVs are so much better anyway, and they're so cheap now."

It helped. Once he got over the worry that his therapist might be insane, Don became curious about why symbols of financial success became so important to him (and why clever frugality was so important to me). He even started to ask himself, "What really matters?" The question eventually led him to put more energy into his marriage and friendships and spend less time stressing at work, hoping to be a winner and afford that house in the suburbs.

What defines you?

Now for the embarrassing part. I invite you to try an exercise that can clarify the criteria *you* use to feel good, or not so good, about yourself. Mercifully, you don't have to tell anybody what comes to mind when you try it. You'll probably find it helps to illuminate your particular self-evaluative concerns:

Exercise: What matters to me?*

Here's a list of some common criteria people use to evaluate themselves. Try reading it slowly, pausing at each item, giving yourself time to reflect. Consider whether you have ever found yourself going up or down emotionally, comparing yourself to others or some inner standard, or thinking highly or poorly of yourself based on any of these concerns (remember, go slowly so you can reflect on each item):

SKILLS AND TALENTS

Who's smarter? Am I smart enough?

Who's more educated? Am I educated enough?

Am I creative enough?

Talented enough?

Do I have good taste?

Am I good enough at sports? Who's better than me?

ACCOMPLISHMENTS

Who earns more money? Do I earn enough?

Am I respected enough? Do others get more respect?

Who has the better-looking, better-behaved, or more successful children? Are my kids doing well enough?

Who has the better-looking, better-behaved, or more successful partner? Is my partner good enough?

Am I successful enough at work?

GROUP MEMBERSHIP

Do I come from a good enough family?

Did I go to a good enough college?

Who has more friends, or is more popular? Am I popular enough?

Am I part of the in-crowd?

Who gets more attention? Do people pay enough attention to me?

How do I feel about my race, ethnicity, gender, or sexual orientation? Am I proud? Ashamed?

*Audio available at *giftofbeingordinary.com* and *guilford.com/siegel4-materials*.

RELATIONSHIPS

Am I a good enough friend?

A good enough parent?

Am I a good enough child?

Am I a good sibling?

A good coworker?

VALUES

Who's nicer? Am I nice enough?

Honest enough?

Am I as generous as I should be?

As caring as I should be?

As forgiving?

Am I socially aware enough? Are others more attuned than me?

PHYSICAL QUALITIES

Am I attractive enough?

Who's thinner? Am I thin enough?

Who's taller? Am I tall enough?

Am I sexy enough?

Do I look young enough?

Who is stronger or in better shape? Am I fit enough?

Among those of us who are invested in spiritual or psychological development, even sillier items might show up on the list:

Who is more enlightened?

Who makes fewer social comparisons? Is less driven by ego?

Who is less concerned with self-evaluation? Am I too preoccupied with myself?

Personally, I get hooked to some degree by almost all of these concerns. Assuming that I'm not entirely alone, and you also notice that you compare yourself with others, or judge yourself, in several

of these areas, do you always come out ahead? (I once asked a group of therapists, "Who here always wins?" A guy raised his hand and I thought, "Avoid him at lunch.")

Indeed, most of us go up and down emotionally, sometimes feeling that we embody the qualities that matter to us, and other times feeling that we don't. To investigate this further, I invite you to try another little exercise (this one is usually less disturbing):

Exercise: Riding the self-evaluation roller coaster*

Take a moment to reflect on which of the many possible building blocks of self-worth you just considered felt particularly alive to you—intelligence, wealth, beauty, kindness, popularity, honesty—whatever stood out. Now recall a time when that attribute or quality was affirmed—either you accomplished some goal, did well at something, or were praised or appreciated by others. Just notice the bodily sensations of feeling good about yourself. Exaggerate a bit the body posture that reflects this feeling. You might try putting your hand over the area where you feel the sensation to identify it more clearly. Close your eyes and savor the feeling for a few moments—since unfortunately, it won't last.

Next, recall a time when the opposite happened—when the very same attribute or quality was disaffirmed or negated. You failed to reach a goal, did poorly at something, or were criticized or rejected. Notice now what happens in your body when you feel the collapse. Exaggerate a little the body posture that reflects this feeling. Try putting your hand over the area where you feel this sensation. Close your eyes again for a few moments to really feel the collapse—don't worry; it won't last either.

See how different a boost, or positive self-evaluation, feels from a collapse? How pleasant the first one is and how unpleasant the

*Audio available at *giftofbeingordinary.com* and *guilford.com/siegel4-materials*.

second? Notice, too, any impulse to move away or distract from the painful feelings? It's no wonder, given how good one state feels and how bad the other feels that we spend so much of our lives trying to feel good about ourselves.

To make matters worse, most of us aren't just hooked on one criterion. We believe that to really be OK, we have to do well on many, if not all fronts. We have to be intelligent, interesting, successful, honest, kind, fit, creative, sexy, *and* rich—just to be good enough.

The pain of social comparison

It's not always obvious to us that most of our judgments about ourselves are indeed based on comparisons either with others or with inner images or standards. For example, if I like to think of myself as intelligent, I'm making an implicit comparison with others. The same holds true for any other quality I might consider—generosity, popularity, honesty, sense of humor, fitness, creativity, wealth—you name it, it's based on social comparison.

Of course, we care about comparisons only on dimensions that matter to us. My patient Don didn't particularly care about being cleverly frugal—and was surprised to hear that it was so important to me.

The philosopher Bertrand Russell lamented how our yardsticks often stretch, leaving us perpetually feeling inadequate: "If you desire glory, you may envy Napoleon, but Napoleon envied Caesar, Caesar envied Alexander, and Alexander, I dare say, envied Hercules, who never existed."

We'll see in the next chapter that this propensity for social comparison is so universal and powerful partly because it's rooted in our neurobiology. For now, just noticing how often you make comparisons, how intense they are, who or what you use as reference points, and the fact that you're not alone in the habit, may help you take your evaluations less seriously.

But isn't a positive self-image essential for happiness?

At this point you may be thinking, "There's got to be another side to this argument! Don't we need to think highly of our ourselves to get ahead in life? Isn't it necessary for happiness?"

On the surface, this makes a lot of sense. You've probably noticed—in yourself or others—plenty of ways that negative thoughts about ourselves can lead to trouble. We might give up because we expect to fail. We might assume that we'll be rejected once others really get to know us. We might desperately try to prove our value by groveling for approval or trying too hard to conform. And we've all encountered (and may have been) people who compensate for feeling inadequate by being defensive, acting superior, seeking status, posturing in grandiose ways, or being a less-than-optimal partner.

Indeed, there is also some evidence that people who feel good about themselves often are living lives that have gone reasonably well—they've been able to earn a living, have more stable relationships, and stay out of trouble. But we easily confuse the causal arrow: It's not that positive self-evaluations *make* your life better, it's that a frequent side effect of life's going well is to also feel better about yourself. In fact, it turns out that particularly high self-esteem is linked to problems like arrogance, conceit, overconfidence, and aggressive behavior—so it's not exactly a formula for a good life.

There's another way

Despite our predispositions to compare ourselves to others, we don't actually need to spend our lives preoccupied with self-evaluation. We don't have to be driven by thoughts of what others think of us or feel like failures if we don't reach certain benchmarks. We humans also evolved instincts for love, connection, gratitude, and cooperation that can free us from the pain of self-evaluation and social comparison. Love can fill us with a warmth that makes our self-image irrelevant; connection with others can dissolve our concern with

individual success or failure; gratitude can free us from preoccupation with unfulfilled longings; and cooperation allows us to accomplish much more, and have more fun doing it, than self-preoccupation ever could. We've all tasted this. Just recall a moment talking with a close friend when you felt deeply connected, a moment of appreciation and contentment in nature, or the good feeling of being part of a team.

I wrote this book because painful self-evaluative concerns regularly take over my heart and mind, despite years of personal and professional psychological work, and I know how much they hurt. I also did it because so many of my patients suffer similarly. I'm happy to report that like Arjun, Henry, and Beth, many other patients are becoming less possessed by these worries, as, thankfully, am I. We're having more moments of feeling like regular vulnerable human beings, living ordinary lives, connecting more deeply with one another.

I invite you to join us. What would today, or even the next hour, be like for you if you were freer of self-evaluative concerns? If you felt lovable just as you are? If you didn't have to choose your clothes so carefully, stay late at work to prove you're diligent, or make sure your partner noticed that you made the bed or took out the trash? How would you like to feel connected with whomever you met, realizing that we really are all very much equals in this life together? The remainder of this book offers tools to make this a reality.

The adventure will be challenging and rewarding. I'm regularly dismayed to see how often I still go up and down emotionally with every self-evaluative boost and collapse, and how much of my daily energy can go into trying to maintain the highs and avoid the lows—despite taking these ups and downs less seriously. Yet the more I practice letting go of this game, the happier I become. I enjoy trying to help my patients because I care about their well-being, rather than proving I'm competent as a psychologist. I have fun finding interesting projects that allow me to team up with colleagues, giving us opportunities to connect, rather than looking for ways to get noticed professionally. I like being more attuned to my wife's feelings and sharing my own honestly with her so we can feel closer,

rather than trying to rack up accomplishments in the outside world, or even rack up good-guy credits in our relationship. All of these shifts leave me feeling more ordinary, and much happier.

Neurosis is the manure of *bodhi*

There's a principle we can borrow from Buddhist psychology to help guide us in this effort: *Neurosis is the manure of bodhi*. *Neurosis* is our habit of causing ourselves unnecessary suffering, *manure* is both shit and fertilizer, and *bodhi* is awakening. We can use this principle, that there's a way to use our pain to become wiser, to grow from our losses and disappointments, big and small. Why not? Our neuroses are so ubiquitous, we might as well get something useful out of them.

In the coming chapters, we'll look at the myriad ways that we cause ourselves unnecessary suffering by adding self-evaluation to almost everything we do. The more clearly we can see ourselves doing this at work or school, in our families, in the bedroom, when we interact online, and in our daily choices, the easier it'll be to take our evaluations less seriously.

We'll also learn how to get up close and personal with each negative judgment or self-evaluative collapse—having the courage to feel our pain—so we no longer need to fear it. Using proven tools such as mindfulness and self-compassion, you'll be able to watch and soothe your reactions to each new rejection or failure: ruminating over mistakes ("I never should've said that"), wanting to undo what happened ("I wish I'd prepared more"), distracting yourself ("What's on TV?"), or undoing the pain of a crash by finding a new boost ("Let's see if anyone liked my post").

Then, instead of going down the usual path of seeking an uplift, you'll practice using each disappointment as an opportunity to gain insight into the dynamics of the self-evaluation roller coaster, to increase your awareness of our shared predicament:

- What unreliable self-esteem building block is this collapse highlighting?
- What illusion is it exposing?

- How would it feel to give up this support?
- Who might I be without it?
- What are the pros and cons of being that person?
- Are there more reliable paths to well-being that I can pursue?

You'll also practice using each new disappointment as a chance to connect to past collapses, so that you can gradually drain the pool of accumulated sadness, hurt, and shame that they may have left behind.

Instead of being a problem, each new crash will become an opportunity to be less concerned with evaluating yourself and to move toward more sustainable bases for well-being—opening your heart, connecting more deeply with other people, embracing our common humanity, loving more, and discovering what really matters to you. It'll be another chance to transform your head, heart, and habits. This is *neurosis is the manure of bodhi* in action.

Sooner or later, of course, a new self-image boost will come along, and you may get hooked on that for a while. But fear not—it won't last long—and there'll be an opportunity to learn from the next collapse too.

This book is designed as a step-by-step guide to this adventure. In the following chapter, we'll explore the roots of our concerns with self-evaluation. Next, you'll learn skills for both catching your troublesome instincts in action and reexamining your beliefs about who you are (Part II). You'll then see how to recognize all sorts of crazy pursuits you might use to feel better about yourself, including unnecessary achievements, being liked or admired, moral superiority, status symbols, and even romantic love (Part III). The remainder of the book offers techniques to heal past hurts and break free from our addiction to self-evaluation, replacing it with compassion, wise perspective, celebrating being an ordinary human being, and lovingly connecting to the world outside of ourselves.

Since we all get hooked on different sorts of self-evaluation and use different criteria to cobble together our self-image, some topics and exercises will likely resonate more for you than others. Please feel free to focus your attention on these, returning more than once to practices that speak most to you. (You'll probably find that themes

that might be less relevant to you apply to your family and friends. Just be careful if you choose to tell them about your insights!) Treat the chapters ahead like a Swiss army knife or drawer of kitchen utensils—a collection of tools to help you work with different ways you might get trapped in painful self-judgments, with each tool being more useful at different moments.

This journey is a bit counterintuitive, and can be challenging, but it's well worth the effort. Just think of how wonderful a day would be without worrying so much about how well you're doing and what others think of you, instead simply enjoying life. What a delight, and what a relief!

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