

# How To Be Your Own Hero

## A Teenager's Toolkit for Building Self-Esteem

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### Sample Chapter

## CHAPTER 3 Stress and Coping Strategies

*“Success is determined, not by whether or not you face obstacles, but by your reactions to them. And, if you look at these obstacles as a containing fence, they become your excuse for failure. If you look at them as a hurdle, each one strengthens you for the next.”*

— Ben Carson (Gifted Hands: The Ben Carson Story)

Freedom. That is one of the greatest benefits of becoming a teenager. You are now making your own decisions and being independent. This continues on into your adult years. But freedom comes with a catch. Along with freedom, come responsibilities. Responsibilities to friends and family, to events, to school work, jobs, teams, clubs, safety, etc., come with every decision you make. Growing up means that you have to carry your own responsibilities – the more we have, the heavier the load. It's like rocks in a backpack. Each rock represents a specific responsibility. For example, you may have a responsibility to a team, or for each of your classes, or to help out at home. We all carry a backpack full of rocks around with us and for the most part we can manage quite well with the load we have. But sometimes added rocks are piled on. A fight with a friend or family member, a test or project, added work shifts, an illness in the family, money issues. Then the added load becomes too hard to carry. This is what we call stress. Stress is the Overload.

As teenagers and adults, every one of us carries around these backpacks of responsibilities and we all develop coping strategies when life feels heavy. The more overloaded/stressed we feel, the more often we turn to these coping strategies. The strategies we chose are either healthy/positive or unhealthy/negative. There are no neutral coping strategies. The healthy positive strategies help us to feel mentally, physically and emotionally stronger and help us carry our load. They also help to constructively deal with each individual rock and, therefore, lighten the load. When you use positive coping strategies life gets easier. Negative coping strategies do something very different. They add rocks. At the time they feel right but, in the long run, they make the load heavier and more difficult to carry. Then life gets harder and more frustrating.

I think of stress as a boxing ring. In one corner is your self-esteem, your faith in your inner strength. In the other corner are the challenges you are facing. When your self-esteem is strong you can take on any challenge and make it through. When your self-esteem is low, you feel beaten up and deflated. In that state sometimes you take one look at your opponent and give up before the fight even starts. The ultimate goal with this book is for you to improve your self-esteem. Once you get there, you will be amazed at how strong you feel and how capable you are to face new challenges.

Life presents challenges. It's unavoidable. It is important that you learn to embrace the challenges you face. When we meet a challenge we have a choice to work harder to get through it or run away and hide in a corner. Do not be afraid of working harder. Every time you rise up to face challenges, you reveal the amazing skills, gifts and strengths inside you. People who habitually shy away from challenges do not give themselves a chance to grow, they choose to stay low.

Let's break stress down into two main questions:

1. How many challenges are you facing?
2. How do you handle your stress?

Let's consider the first question.

How many challenges are you facing? This can also be read as, "How much stress do you have?" If your answer is, "Too many challenges, too much stress," then take a look at the sources of your stress. Perhaps it comes more from one area than another. Maybe it's a combination of areas. Is it family, parents, friends, school, career path, work, relationships, or health? I hope, as you read this book, you become more motivated to heal yourself and heal these areas in your life to help reduce the anxiety you feel.

Stress can be caused by a single traumatic or heartbreaking event, or it can be the combination of many smaller events that still feel overwhelming. Issues like breakups, family separations, school pressure, fights and arguments, and increased responsibilities are difficult to handle. Another issue that everyone faces at some point is learning to manage your time. It can be a challenge to juggle part-time work schedules, homework, sports and activities, relationships, friends, family time, and personal time. The frustrations and anxiety you feel are very real – don't ignore them or push them under the carpet. Deal with them. Deal with the feelings and deal with the causes.

Now, let's consider the second question, "How do you handle your stress?" If you are easily stressed out or you usually overreact to challenges, perhaps you need to make some changes to how you react. It is easy for us to respond with what I call, A.S.A. (anxiety, sadness and/or anger). I will not use the term "depression." Depression is a clinical diagnosis, and I find many teens overuse the term. While I cannot diagnose anyone as depressed, I do know that many teens feel deep sadness and anxiety, and that it is, in many cases, preventable. I find it amazing the number of young people who are overcome by A.S.A. and don't know what to do about it. Life will always present challenges. You need to learn to deal with these challenges in a healthy,

productive way in order to control your stress, and improve your relationships and life.

## **Coping With A.S.A. (Anxiety, Sadness and/or Anger)**

*I had a student who confessed to me that she wasn't eating because she hated herself. I replied that it must be really horrible to feel the need to punish herself, and I could imagine that, without food, she was feeling physically terrible. I also asked her, point blank, if she wanted to live or die. She was shocked by my blatant question, but then, she replied, "Die."*

*I said, "What if you could feel better, mentally and/or physically, three months from now, would you still want to die?"*

*She shrugged her shoulders because she didn't know. In reality, she hadn't thought about it. I asked her if it was worth a try, and she responded with something I'd never seen on her face – a smile – followed by, "OK."*

Feeling deep sadness and anger are completely normal and important. Do not feel bad about your emotions. Don't fight it. Feel it. Be.

And, understand that, at some point, you will choose to cope with your emotions. As discussed earlier, there are basically two roads to take. You can choose coping strategies that will help you in the long run and strengthen you, or you can choose strategies that will bite you later on down the road, if you continually turn to them as a crutch.

Do you want life to get better? Once you decide you want to feel better, there are many ways you can do it. It is of paramount importance for you right now to establish healthy coping strategies in response to stress. Here is the reason....

As a teenager, you are experiencing real stress in your life, hopefully for the first time. For those of you who experienced extreme stress in childhood, I will discuss that in a moment. For now, let's assume that, as a child, your family protected you from most of the big challenges that life has to offer, exposing you only to what was appropriate for you to handle at that age. But, now, here you are in the teenage years, and, for the first time, you are in the full throws of balancing school, jobs, teams, clubs, friends, family, illnesses and any and all effects those issues bring. You have many challenges. You are under stress. Well, I'd love to tell you that it's just a phase you're going through and it will get better, but it won't. Stressful situations can and will hit at any, and every, stage of your life. Along with the stresses growing, so do the pressures and your responsibility toward others. And so ...

Right now, as you begin this rollercoaster of coping with challenges and stress, it is **CRITICAL** that you choose healthy coping strategies, because what you learn to use now are the very same strategies that you will continue to fall back on for the rest of your life. The fights you pick, the alcohol you drink, the joints you smoke now, as a teen, might not seem so bad as coping strategies – relaxing you, getting your mind off things, stress release – but they have a very different face when you are a professional, an employee, a caregiver, a spouse, and, most importantly, a parent. In the long run, unhealthy coping strategies will make your life worse and create more stress for you. So, right now, as you are making your first attempts at figuring out various coping strategies, choose wisely. Choose healthy strategies and you will come out better, stronger and healthier.

To help make your choices clear, check out the following chart.

<i>Healthy Coping Strategies</i>	<i>Unhealthy Coping Strategies</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ Ask for Help</li> <li>✓ Exercise / work out</li> <li>✓ Focus on the end goal, which is success</li> <li>✓ Problem solve</li> <li>✓ Create a timeline to get work done</li> <li>✓ Get outside for fresh air</li> <li>✓ Spend time in nature</li> <li>✓ Go to bed early and get a good night's sleep</li> <li>✓ Write down your issues and potential solutions</li> <li>✓ Talk to a close family member or friend and ask for opinions on solutions</li> <li>✓ Play sports</li> <li>✓ Draw or paint</li> <li>✓ Play an instrument/sing/dance</li> <li>✓ Write a song/poem/letter</li> <li>✓ Write in a journal; focus on solutions</li> <li>✓ Talk to a counselor, therapist or life coach</li> <li>✓ Breath slower</li> <li>✓ Yoga/Meditate</li> <li>✓ Cry, let it out</li> <li>✓ Run/bike/skateboard</li> <li>✓ Improve your eating habits</li> <li>✓ Cook a healthy recipe</li> <li>✓ Eat slowly</li> <li>✓ Walk the dog</li> <li>✓ Pray – for strength and guidance in finding solutions</li> <li>✓ Take a day off</li> <li>✓ Get a massage</li> <li>✓ Watch a funny movie</li> <li>✓ Laugh</li> <li>✓ Connect with friends &amp; laugh with them</li> <li>✓ Tidy up your room/space at home</li> <li>✓ Confront the person who is causing you stress (<i>but in a way that works toward a mutually acceptable solution</i>)</li> <li>✓ Listen to positive music that strengthens you</li> <li>✓ Focus on positive thinking – focus</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>× Take Drugs</li> <li>× Drink Alcohol</li> <li>× Vent on social media</li> <li>× Smoke Cigarettes</li> <li>× Watch more Television</li> <li>× Play more computer games</li> <li>× Eat more</li> <li>× Complain</li> <li>× Go shopping</li> <li>× Stay up late</li> <li>× Sleep less</li> <li>× Skip school</li> <li>× Blame others</li> <li>× Avoid responsibility for your actions</li> <li>× Scream/yell at others</li> <li>× Send mean messages on social media</li> <li>× Direct your anger/sadness at others in your life (such as family)</li> <li>× Bully others, push them down to raise yourself temporarily</li> <li>× Manipulate, insult, try to control others</li> <li>× Avoid other people or situations</li> <li>× Eat junk food</li> <li>× Don't eat</li> <li>× Self-harm</li> <li>× Hide at home (or in your room)</li> <li>× Listen to sad or angry music</li> <li>× Think of, or plan, revenge</li> <li>× Think of, or plan, suicide</li> <li>× Continue your negative thinking – focus on the problems</li> </ul>

**on the solutions**

# How Negative Coping Strategies Backfire On You

There is a wonderful saying that I fall back on when times are tough:

*“This, too, will pass.”*

It is an amazing way to view life. Enjoy each and every moment, because they soon pass. And, do not lament about the tough times, because they will pass as well.

The stress you are experiencing will pass, but the negative coping strategies you choose will make the recovery process much more difficult. For example, if eating is your coping strategy, then know that the trigger will eventually pass, but those extra pounds you’ve gained while “coping” will just add more stress to your life for a longer time than the trigger, because you will wind up carrying around extra weight. If you unload your frustrations on social media as a way to vent, then long after the trigger has passed, you are stuck with the repercussions of the angry words you typed. If shopping is your favorite way to wind down, then you can look forward to credit card bills, arguments with your parents, and in the future with your spouse, and the added stress of working harder to pay for your coping strategy.

Can you see the snowball effect? You begin with challenges and, as you “cope,” you create more problems, more stress for yourself. Remember the rocks in your backpack? In the long run, each unhealthy coping method put more rocks into your bag. They make life more challenging, more difficult. Look at the big picture. It’s time to jump off the train before it crashes. I don’t expect you to use healthy coping strategies every time, but hopefully you can use healthy strategies much more often than the unhealthy ones. I’m sure you can think of adults in your life who have poor coping strategies. Maybe you have witnessed firsthand the snowball that rolls and gets out of control. The teenage years are a great time to experiment. If you can recognize that you are using a lot of the unhealthy strategies listed in the chart, realize the ways you deal with stress now will be the ways you deal with it in the future. The strategies you repeatedly turn to now will become habits as you get older. Now is the time to experiment with new ways to cope and to develop new, healthy habits. We’re talking about your life. Don’t you think it’s worth the effort to experiment with some healthy coping strategies?

*I often take classes out to our local nature trails for a day of hiking and fresh air. During one Friday’s hike, I overheard a Grade 12 student talking to her friend. She said, “I can’t believe how great I feel out here! I’ve been so stressed lately. I was going to party it off tonight, but it’s so nice to know that there is another way to feel better.”*

*As I was walking behind them, I couldn’t get the smile off my face.*

Try out some healthy coping strategies. It’s worth it! *You* are worth it! Your future is worth it!

# Childhood Trauma and Coping Strategies of Young Children

There are a group of you who, unfortunately, have been exposed to a great deal of trauma during childhood. The healthy coping strategies on the previous page are hard to do, even as a teen. For a child, those healthy strategies are way beyond their reach. Children use any means they can in order to adapt to their situation and survive. They will hide, become emotionless, steal, hurt themselves, hurt other kids at school, disconnect from school, avoid certain situations or people, blame themselves, become perfectionists to an extreme, become numb to difficult events, you name it. Children who are exposed to trauma do not have the experience or thought processes to explore positive, healthy coping strategies. Sadly, they are caught in a trap.

These behaviors are symptoms, not problems. These are symptoms of their feelings of anger and sadness that they don't know how to deal with or express. They haven't had the healthy models they need to teach them how. Their behaviors are, literally, cries for help. Unfortunately, often these cries are not heard and go unanswered. As a result, many will carry their extremely unhealthy coping strategies into their teenage and adult years. These strategies further alienate them, which leads to more stress in their lives.

**IF YOU HAVE BEEN EXPOSED TO EXTREME STRESS OR TRAUMA AS A CHILD, PLEASE SEEK COUNSELING.** Seek assistance as soon as you can. You are not responsible for the stressful events in your early life, and you are not responsible for your childhood coping strategies, but you **ARE** responsible for your behavior and coping strategies as a teenager and, later on, as an adult. Please **GET HELP**, especially if you find yourself falling into the trap of unhealthy coping strategies. Choosing to ask for help is a sign of strength. It is a big step toward a better life.

Some stressful, traumatic events that can affect children are:

- Abuse (verbal, physical, emotional, sexual)
- Bullying
- Divorce
- Death of a family member or friend
- Watching parents, family members fight
- Witnessing severe illness in a family member
- Experiencing a traumatic event (natural disaster, fire, theft, violence)
- Being exposed to Television that is inappropriate for children
- Being exposed to Internet information that is inappropriate for children

*The last two are extremely common.*

## Internalizing and Externalizing Stress

When we have poor coping strategies, we can hurt ourselves, and we can also hurt others. Internalizing stress means that we take our stress out on ourselves through negative thoughts and vices, as we will discuss in Chapter 8. The majority of teens internalize their stress, although many are capable of externalizing their stress as well.

Externalizing stress means you take your stress out on others. Usually the victims of your pain and anger are the people closest to you, usually in your own family. You will yell at a parent or sibling or maybe at a girlfriend or boyfriend. It happens easily and is far too common. We've all done it. You are upset by something and you, simply, but not necessarily on purpose, redirect your frustrations at someone or something else. Unfortunately, for many people, this becomes the pattern of how they deal with their stress and, quite often, they take it out on the weakest and most vulnerable people in their lives. This is the core of an abusive relationship.

The goal of this book is to help you improve your own self-esteem, for many reasons. One of those reasons is so that you never become a victim of abuse. But I also want you to improve your self-esteem so that you will never be a *Perpetrator of Abuse*. Yes, you read that right. It is critical for you to get a handle on your own issues so YOU do not harm others.

Whether it is a boss who yells a lot, or a verbally abusive girlfriend or boyfriend, or physically abusive parent, or a gang member who gets in fights, or a rapist, each of these examples are people who externalize their stress. They cannot handle the crap in their own lives and so they take it out on others. Our world is so full of violence that taking your frustrations out on others is actually considered the norm. For example, these days, people can watch the violence in videos, movies, and on TV without so much as batting an eyelash at what they are seeing.

I desperately want you to learn healthy ways to handle your stress before you have children. You might ask, "What does that have to do with me right now?" Well, if you ever want to become a parent, you'd better start retraining your emotional responses now. It might take you years before you get it right. Babies and children are, by far, the most vulnerable group of humans on the planet. If Mom or Dad starts taking out frustrations on them, what are they going to do? Where are they going to go? Nowhere. They take it because they have no other choice.

I am bringing this up because, once you are a parent, on top of every other stress in your life, it is unavoidable that your children will give you more stress even though they don't mean to. They will wake you up four times a night, every night. When you are exhausted, they will cry uncontrollably, they will misbehave, they will poop in their pants when you are in a rush to go somewhere, they will talk back to you, and they won't eat the dinner you've just spent an hour making. They will push your buttons in ways you cannot yet even fathom. And, undoubtedly, you will get pissed off and, if you are not well trained at dealing with your stress in a healthy way, you might scream and yell at them for nothing (*really*), and, if you are really bad at handling your stress, you might just hit them or lock them in a room or totally lose control and beat them. It happens in far too many homes to far too many children. And, of course, they might

grow up and think that acting that way is normal and they will do it to their kids because no one has taught them how to handle their own stress except to externalize it and take it out on someone else.

Understand this truth above all others: You have ABSOLUTELY NO right to harm another living being, cause damage to someone's property, or cause an animal to suffer.

Get your shit together. Now! Do it before you hurt the most important people in your life. Confront your dark secrets now.

If, right now, you have the following thoughts recurring:

- Serious negative thoughts
- Anger or sadness you can't contain
- Recurring thoughts of suicide or hurting someone else
- Deviant sexual thoughts
- Thoughts of hurting children or animals or women or people of a particular culture

It is critically important for you to seek help immediately before these dangerous thoughts become actions. Once these thoughts become actions they will take you down a horrific road that leaves a trail of incredible pain for you and others. Some of you are in so much pain now that you want to share the pain. That is what this entire book is for, to show you that you do not have to live in pain. You have a choice. Keep reading. And, be open to getting help. Talk to trustworthy adults or call a teen help hotline and get some counseling. Some helpful organizations are listed at the back of this book. Yes, this is a huge challenge for you, but do it and you will see how much healthier you can be and feel. Then, at the end of this journey, you will look back and know it was the most important decision you ever made.

## **To Survivors of Abuse**

If you are a victim of abuse, whether it is emotional or verbal abuse and, especially, if it is physical or sexual abuse, you must understand that what happened to you or is happening to you, is NOT OK. It is not acceptable and you do not have to try to live with it or the memory of it. It is not your fault. My heart goes out to all of you, and I want you to be strong and courageous. Ask for help. Tell someone who is in a position to help you. It pains me to know that many victims cannot talk to their own parents about their abuse because either the parents are in denial or the abuse has happened in their home, for example between siblings, or the parents themselves are the perpetrators. In these cases, going to your parents may not be an option right now. Going to a teacher, coach or counselor is critical. Be specific with your words. For example, you can say, "I don't know what to do, I need help." Or, "I need help. I need a safe place to stay." Perhaps you need to get away from home. Running away is not a good idea, as tempting as it may seem. Ending up on the street is not going to make your situation any better. Instead go to a friend's house, where you know the family and they are not close friends with your parents. Sit down with your friend's parents and tell them everything. Ask for a safe place to stay and say that you need help. Or go to an aunt, uncle, older cousin or grandparent, as long as they will help

you and not just try to shut you up and keep “the family secret.” Make sure your parents and siblings and extended family all know why you left and that you are not going to take the abuse, or their silence, anymore. Create a support network for yourself by telling as many trustworthy adults as you can. Talk to someone you can trust about going to the police. Youth-counseling services can help; ask your school guidance counselors for help and information.

People abuse others because they are in pain. They don't do it because they don't like you, they don't do it because you deserve it. They abuse because they are in pain. And, until they learn to deal with their pain, it will continue – *unless* you let them know you won't take it anymore. I have heard people say, “They only abuse when they are drinking/or using (*fill in a drug*). Their addiction causes them to do it.” That is false. People don't abuse others because they are drinking or on drugs – they are on drugs and drinking *because of their pain*. They are abusing others because of their pain. The alcohol and drug abuse is a symptom of this pain – it is not the cause. It is not OK for anyone around you to rationalize abuse.

These concepts will be explored in greater detail in Chapters 8 and 9, but, for now, know these truths about you:

- You deserve to be safe from harm.
- No one has any right to abuse you.
- Home is supposed to be a safe environment.
- If home is not safe, then find a safe place to stay, and the street is **not** a safe place.

Getting away from the abuse is step one. After this comes a journey of healing where you must first forgive yourself and truly believe that this came from the abuser's personal pain and was not your fault. If you do leave home and stay with someone as a kind of safe house, please remember that – wherever you go, whoever you stay with – you must abide by their house rules, be helpful and respectful. The last thing you want to do is burn these support bridges due to poor manners and bad behavior.

This next part may scare you, but it is extremely important to be aware of. The fact that you are a victim means you are in pain and if you do not deal with your pain and release it in the right way, there is a possibility that you will take your pain out on someone else. The cycle of externalizing pain continues easily, generation after generation, for people who do not face their experience of abuse and the pain it caused them. You may have already sworn that you would never do this to anyone else, but it can surface as an adult, if you have not developed healthy coping strategies when times are tough.

I will now repeat a critical point from earlier in this chapter: You have no right to harm another living being or their property. This includes the perpetrator. You may defend yourself when they abuse you, and they may be harmed in that process – this is called self-defence – but you cannot initiate an attack or harm anyone. If you do, you have become an abuser and are taking your pain out on them. Make a vow to seek counseling and to learn to deal with your own stress so you NEVER repeat the cycle you have experienced.

Get away.  
Get safe.  
Get help.

Focus on healing yourself on the inside.

If someone shares with you that they are being abused, or have experienced abuse, do not judge them. Ask how you can help. Tell them you are there for them, to support them and to listen when they need to talk.

If this is abuse from the past, ask them if there is an adult that you can both confide in to get wise advice. For example, you can ask, “Can I talk to my mom about this?”

If the abuse is going on right now, you have a responsibility to talk to a trustworthy adult who can help your friend get to a safe location. Remember, your friend came to you. They reached out to you for help.

If you hear about abuse and you know it is going on, it is your responsibility to tell an adult who can help stop the abuse. These adults would include parents, school administrators, guidance counselors, teachers, coaches, ministers, doctors, or you can just call the Police.

***When it comes to abuse, Silence is a terrible thing.***

***Important Note:*** In this book, you will sometimes see the term “Victim Mentality.” It does not apply to you, as you are one who ***truly*** is/was a victim of abuse. A victim mentality is when someone is facing a consequence of their *own actions* and is making up excuses or blaming others for their own poor decisions. For example, if a teen is in trouble at school or at home because of their behavior, they will often complain, “I didn’t do anything!” Or, they will say, “He/she is singling me out, getting me in trouble.” That is a victim mentality – feeling unfairly treated when you can’t face up to the consequences of your actions. Once again, the term “victim mentality” does not refer to you and your very real story.

## **Handling Immediate Anger – Arguments and Fights**

Let’s face it, anger is a part of life. Whether you get angry or not is less important than how you handle your anger.

Here are a few reminders:

- Never try to get your way when you are upset. Calm down and think before you speak.
- Try to keep your cool.
- If an apology is warranted, saying sorry is really powerful.
- Walk away. Wait until the emotional storm passes.
- Stay silent. If the other person demands a response, you can say, “I am not talking to you until you [or, I] calm down.”

- If the conversation is getting heated, call for a “timeout.” “This is going nowhere. I’m going out to walk this off.” Then, actually go and take a walk around the block.
- Talk it out with a very positive friend, who can help you calm down.

## Physical Outlets

- Go for a run, or bike ride or skateboard, or walk.
- Punch a pillow or throw a pillow around.
- Go in your room and scream.
- Cry.

When the emotions have settled, and your mind is not controlled by the angry or sad emotions, you will be able to sift through the situation and find solutions.

To summarize, being sad or being angry is only one part of the misery. A much bigger role in dictating our ease, or hardships, in life is in the coping strategies we choose.

If you don’t use a healthy coping strategy you will not only be sad or mad about X, but now, on top of that, you have:

- Deep sadness because you hide out in your room, inside, with no fresh air or exercise.
- Difficult relationships because you externalize and yell at people.
- Poor marks because you turn to drugs, alcohol, or you simply disconnect.
- Extra weight packed on because you eat when you are stressed.
- Credit card bills because you feel better when you shop.
- Relationship issues because you vent on social media.

I hope you are getting the picture. The A.S.A. (Anxiety, Sadness and/or Anger) is only one small part of the misery when you look at the big picture. It is well worth it to examine your coping strategies and to get into the habit of choosing healthy ones.

## Single Thread versus a Net

You may feel that, since you are so deep in the hole that you've dug for yourself, a way out seems impossible. So, you just resign yourself to the belief that this is your reality for always. You cannot dream of what it feels like to be out of the hole – you’ve forgotten. If getting out of the hole is something that you want, you may be tempted to count on others to get you out. You latch onto someone as if your life depended on that person, and, to you, it does. This is dangerous on a number of levels.

Firstly, what if you put all your eggs in their basket and they let you down? How much farther can you fall? You will soon find out. Consider being that person, trying to live their own life plus yours, too? Wow, that's one hell of a load to carry – even if they offer. At some point, resentment may turn up, followed by disappointment for you, and the cycle begins again. To rely on one person is dangerous. You could think of them as a thread. If you have one connection, i.e. a

boyfriend or girlfriend, you are holding onto life by a single thread. Instead, surround yourself with a complete net, a support network. Reach out to as many people as you can: family, caring adults, professional help, close friends whom you can trust. Create a network of support so that, if a single thread lets go, you won't fall.

There is one critical person in this process. YOU. All of these people can help, but the real hero is *you*. You are the one shining person in your life who can save you every time, regardless of how deep your hole is or how long you've been in it or what you went through to fall down into it. Your true hero is YOU. To put it another way, if you don't seriously want to get better, you won't. It's plain and simple. It is pointless to ask anyone else for help, unless you are ready to help yourself. Help is all around you, but it doesn't work until you are ready to be an active part of the healing process.

You have to *want* to get better.

How do you get to the point of wanting to help yourself?

### **Step One**

Believe that there is a life for you that is not painful to live. Imagine your future self looking back on you now and saying, "Wow, that was a really hard time, but I am so glad it's over, and I'm thankful that I made it out and have the life I do."

Once you can welcome the possibility of a happier outlook on life, move to:

### **Step Two**

Write yourself a little poster. On it write, "I want to feel better, and today I will take actions that will move me towards a better future." Then, hang it up in your room so that you see it all the time, and it will help you every day.

## **Dealing with Loss**

Life throws us many challenges. We feel blindsided by events that seem out of our control. Other challenges are consequences of decisions that we made in the past. Every once in a while you will face challenges that overwhelm you. You may feel like the world is closing in on you, like you are drowning in sorrow and anger and self-pity. This pain and confusion is very real and should not be dismissed as trivial. Sadness, anger and despair are very important. Without these emotions, you would not be able to appreciate joy, peace and hope. By now, you understand the concept of choosing positive coping strategies so you do not create more stress and pain for yourself. With every challenge that you get through, you will be strengthened to meet future challenges.

Heartache is one of the worst stresses to deal with, whether it is a breakup with a girlfriend or boyfriend, betrayal of a friend, parents separating, or death of a loved one. Loss and heartache can seem almost unbearable. Please consider carefully how you choose to deal with overwhelming emotions.

One of the most inspiring young people I know is a former student who went through incredible deep pain and sadness, and the whole time he stayed focused on being good to himself and those around him.

*To know Adam in high school, you'd have seen a great athlete, a wonderful, popular, funny, hardworking, and incredibly dependable guy. Every student thought the world of him, and so did every teacher. He was a tell-it-straight kind of guy, honest and compassionate. He cared about everyone. To know him now, he is still all of these things, and he owns his very own successful company, which he started from the ground up right after college. Through an environmental focus, his company is making the world a better place. To know this guy is to love and admire him.*

*Adam has been through a lot though, more than any teen should have to endure. Many teens dealing with even a fraction of what he has gone through have turned to extremely negative coping strategies. When Adam was 12, his parents divorced. He watched his dad battle alcoholism and saw his dad's life slowly unravel. After the divorce, he lived with his mom, but, when he was 15, his mom moved away to remarry, and Adam chose to stay and live on his own. That same year, he was called to the hospital to find out his dad had died. Adam continued to live on his own throughout high school and into college. When he was 19, he received an early morning phone call that his girlfriend had died in a drunk-driving accident. Alcoholism, divorce, living alone, death of a parent and then the death of a girlfriend ... How does a person get through all of that and still have hope and optimism?*

*When I was writing this book, I asked Adam to share with me how he made it through. He said, "I depended on a lot of great people. The teachers at my high school were amazing, and they became my family, I owe a lot to them. My friends were a huge support. They always called me to go out and fill my time, and I almost always said yes. Distraction was very good for me. I had to get my mind off things. I turned to the gym. I worked out hard and released a lot of negative energy that way. I also had to cry it out, too. When I really felt bad, I would remind myself that there were so many people around the world that have it way worse than me. I would think about them. I would also think of my girlfriend, who was incredibly positive, and I would think, 'How would she have wanted me to carry on?'"*

Adam is a perfect example of someone choosing positive coping strategies in the face of misery. I think he saved his own life, certainly the quality of it. He still falls back on healthy strategies, and he knows he can get through a lot; he's proven it to himself. He wants to help others find their inner strength, too, and he takes every opportunity to do just that.

Adam managed to stay true to himself because he had a strong sense of his own value and the value of others' lives, the value of life itself. He is incredibly wise. That's true Self-Esteem. It's a beautiful thing.

Pain is an important part of life. As I mentioned before, sadness and anger enable us to fully appreciate joy and hope. Without conflict, we could not appreciate peace. Without sickness, we could not appreciate health. Without death, we could not appreciate life. We spend so much time searching for answers to the pain in our lives, when we should be searching for the lessons that

pain teaches us. If we have learned nothing, the pain will be all that we have in the end.

There is one strategy that I deal with in more detail in the final chapter, but I will introduce it here. It is called, “A Glimmer of Hope.” When you are in your darkest hour, is there a tiny glimmer of hope that can get you through this? Is there a tiny glimmer of hope that life will get better? Hold on to that glimmer, focus on it, and let it grow. Believe in your inner strength.

Aim for life getting better, and use healthy coping strategies to get there. Move toward hope, kindness, peace and health. Focus on Life. Focus on Love.

*“The journey of a thousand miles begins with one step.”*

— Zen saying

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## Big-Picture Points

- *“Success is determined not by whether or not you face obstacles, but by your reactions to them. And, if you look at these obstacles as a containing fence, they become your excuse for failure. If you look at them as a hurdle, each one strengthens you for the next.” – Ben Carson*
- *Life presents challenges. It is a natural part of existence for everyone. How you interpret those challenges will dictate the amount of stress you experience. The big question is how do you handle the challenges in your life?*
- *It is easy for us to respond to stress with A.S.A. (anxiety, sadness and/or anger). It is amazing the number of young people who are overcome by A.S.A. and don't know what to do about it. You need to learn to deal with these challenges in a healthy and productive way in order to control your stress and improve your relationships and to improve your life.*
- *This is a critical time in your life for you to try out healthy coping strategies when you are faced with challenges and stress.*
- *The coping strategies you learn to fall back on now are what you will continue to fall back on for the rest of your life. The fights you pick, the alcohol you drink or joint you smoke now, as a teen, might not seem so bad as a strategy, but it has a very different face when you are a professional, an employee, a caregiver, a spouse and, most importantly, a parent.*
- *The goal of this book is to help you improve your own self-esteem. Improving your self-esteem is important for many reasons. One of those reasons is so that you will never become a Victim of abuse. But, it may surprise you to know that I also want you to improve your self-esteem so that you will never be a Perpetrator of Abuse. It is critical for you to get a handle on your own issues so YOU do not harm others.*
- *In the long run, unhealthy coping strategies make your life worse and create more stress in your life. So, right now, as you are figuring out how to deal with life's challenges, choose wisely. Choose healthy strategies so you can make it through the rough times life has to offer and come out a better, stronger and healthier person because of those choices.*