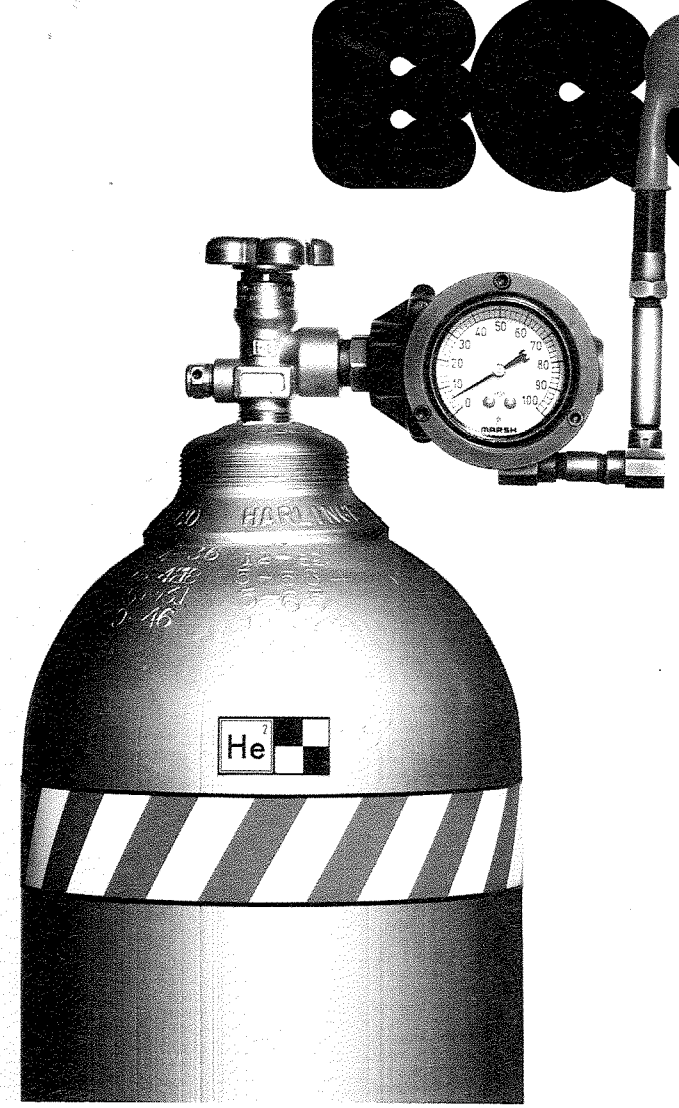
THE BOOM AND BUST BOD



SELF-ESTEEM, AS A CONCEPT, HAS HAD WILD UPS AND DOWNS SINCE THE '70S. THE NEWEST TAKE IS THAT THE LESS YOU THINK ABOUT YOUR OWN SELF-ESTEEM, THE HEALTHIER YOU'LL BE.

BY **HARRIET BROWN**
PHOTOGRAPHS BY **DAN WINTERS**

BACK IN HER COLLEGE dorm room, in the 1980s, Anneli Rufus had a revelation: "I saw that my roommate looked in the mirror without automatically saying bad things about her body or clothes or face. She just did her best to get ready for the day and went out the door. Watching her once, it dawned on me that other people don't automatically assume the worst about themselves."

Around that same time, Rufus met her future husband (the two were married in '89.) "He'd say things like, 'You're wonderful, you're beautiful.' I thought, 'Well, he's saying that because that's what guys say, or because he feels sorry for me, or because he knows that I'm psychologically fragile, and he doesn't want to upset me.' I never believed a compliment. Information comes to me and I process it in a completely different way than a 'normal' person would," she says. "This is life with low self-esteem."

Rufus can look back on her college years and say that she was an intelligent, kind, interesting, humorous, nice-looking young woman, and that it was not at all unreasonable for someone to fall in love with her. But she would never have been able to see that then. Although she was an aspiring writer, after graduating from UC Berkeley she didn't try to get internships or introduce herself to editors. "I walked around like a shlump," she says. "I didn't know how to present myself or look good or dress right. I didn't think I deserved it, and no one taught me how, and I didn't seek to find out how."

Despite years of such self-undermining behaviors, Rufus's talent and hard work shone through. She's published well-received books and writes regularly for top magazines and websites. She and her husband have kept their relationship strong and happy. "I've had accomplishments," she says, "and I've spent my entire life not really appreciating them. Let's say I win a writing prize. Do I go out to dinner to celebrate and feel great? No. The person with low self-esteem just wants any acknowledgement to be over in this weird subconscious way."

For decades, psychologists pushed people like Rufus to work at raising their self-esteem. Countless books and articles urged those with low self-esteem to build it up by thinking positively, listing achievements and good qualities, and airing shameful feelings, among other methods. Legitimate researchers and self-help gurus alike told them that learning to love themselves—or at least like themselves—would lead to more success at work and at home.

So they tried. They wrote post-it notes listing their best qualities and stuck them to bathroom mirrors. They muttered mantras under their breath. They told their kids they were extra-super-special.

"At one point I was in a women's group with a few friends," Rufus says. "We'd get together and have these talks about how women are fantastic and can rule the world. One night we took turns chanting our own names, loudly. It made me feel worse."

Psychologists have proved what Rufus felt to be true: Direct attempts to build self-esteem generally do not work. A few years ago, Joanne Wood, a professor of psychology at the University of Waterloo in Ontario, set out to test the notion that affirmations and other such self-talk make people feel better about themselves. The subjects in her study who started out with high self-esteem did report feeling a little better after engaging in positive self-talk. But those with low self-esteem—the very people you'd expect to use such techniques—felt worse. "The blithe recommendations to engage in positive self-statements are based on an intuition that they'll work," Wood says. "And they don't, often." Because these positive statements are so starkly different from the negative thoughts of the person with low self-esteem, they likely underscore the discouragingly long distance between where the person is and where she would like to be. The low-self-esteem sufferer is left feeling like a double failure.

Jennifer Crocker, a psychologist at the University of Michigan, studies "contingent self-esteem," or feelings of self-worth that depend on outside validation or praise in a realm that matters to a person. Scoring a victory in that particular area does raise self-esteem, but the boost doesn't last. "How does it feel after you pass your dissertation orals?" asks Crocker. "You feel good for a day, but then your worries come back."

The more a person's self-esteem is contingent on particular outcomes, the harder she will crash if she fails. Success is not extra sweet for these people—but failure is extra bitter.

Contingent self-esteem is by definition a chimera. Even the most accomplished, beautiful, and celebrated human beings don't get a steady stream of compliments and positive feedback. And chasing the chimera can, paradoxically, lead to self-sabotage. "When people want to boost self-esteem or avoid a drop, they may do things that undermine them as a whole," says Crocker. Her research shows that those with contingent self-esteem often shy away from situations that might produce even a temporary dip in how they view themselves—which can make them more prone to failure: Imagine a surgeon reluctant to practice new techniques in the operating room because he might not do them perfectly at first—hardly an attitude that would help his career over time.

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Now that the evidence is clear that chasing self-esteem either doesn't work or leads people to self-defeating behaviors, it's particularly tragic to acknowledge that we, as a culture,

are more driven to chase ego-affirming highs than ever. Crocker and colleagues found that college students value boosts to their self-esteem (such as receiving a good grade or a compliment) more than any other pleasant activity they were asked about—including sex, favorite foods, drinking alcohol, seeing a best friend, or receiving a paycheck! The researchers interpret the findings as showing that students want boosts to their self-esteem even more than they actually "like" those things that inflate their egos. So much for young hedonism; they'd rather (joylessly) make the honor roll.

● TOO MUCH SELF-LOVE IS LOATHSOME, TOO

PERHAPS THE COLLECTIVE failure to raise low self-esteem, whether from racking up achievements in one's field or howling out one's own name, was a blessing in disguise. A few years ago, researchers like Jean Twenge, author of *Generation Me*, started sounding the alarm on the dangers of *too much* self-esteem. Twenge and others believe that today's twentysomethings—raised by parents who rewarded every burp and blink with "Good job!"—may in fact be a generation of entitled narcissists. There is such a thing as feeling too good about yourself, and it may be just as unhealthy as feeling inferior. It can lead to attention-seeking, a focus on appearance and status, and an inability to form real relationships.

Although a direct cause-and-effect relationship has not been established, Nicholas Emler of the University of Surrey in England found that those with low self-esteem are at an increased risk of developing eating disorders, depression, and committing suicide, while those with high self-esteem are a threat to society as well as to themselves: They are more likely to be racist, violent, and criminal.

"When I was a child, people spanked their kids and said terrible things like 'You're a bad boy.' Now, it's just the opposite: All kids are fabulous. That's not realistic, either," Rufus says. "If, in childhood, some wonderful angel would come down and give us a reality check by saying, 'Look, you're good at singing, you're kind of messy but you can work on it, brush your teeth, but, hey, you're very nice to animals,' I think we'd all have an optimal level of self-esteem. We wouldn't be unrealistic about ourselves at one end of the spectrum or the other."

● SELF-ESTEEM DOESN'T AFFECT HOW YOU TURN OUT

IT WAS A BOMBSHELL for those who put so much faith in self-esteem and its powers to improve our society: Roy Baumeister of Florida State University, a pioneering researcher and believer in the value of self-esteem starting in the '70s, was forced to do an about-face on his own research in the '80s. Eventually, he conducted a meta-analysis on the relationship between self-esteem and external markers of success in school, at work, and in relationships. In 2003, Baumeister and his colleagues reported that they found no evidence that high self-esteem made people better students, more successful at work, or healthier.

"After all these years," Baumeister says on his university's website, "my recommendation is this: Forget about self-esteem and concentrate more on self-control and self-discipline. Recent work suggests this would be good for the individual and good for society and might even be able to fill some of those promises that self-esteem once made but could not keep."

● A CLEAR-EYED VIEW ON LOW SELF-ESTEEM

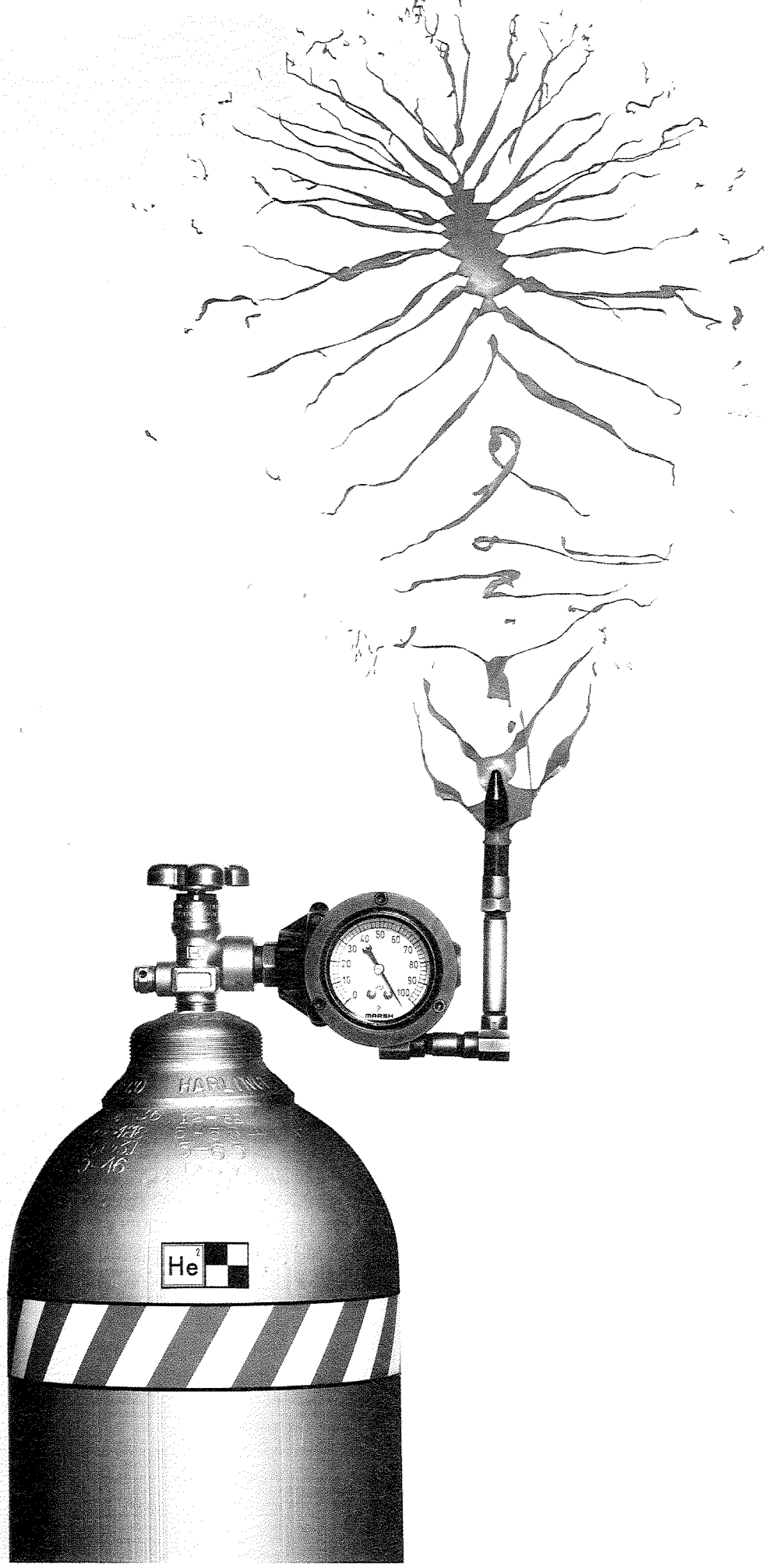
SO IF LOW self-esteem can't be removed through sheer will, and doesn't affect objective outcomes in life anyway, is there a more accurate way to think about it? Jonathon D. Brown, a social psychologist at the University of Washington, has been pondering the question for years (he's one of social psychology's most frequently cited authors). He believes that we all have a baseline level of self-esteem that is set during childhood interactions with parents. Rather than respect or admiration, he defines self-esteem as a more fundamental affection for oneself. Those with healthy self-esteem maintain deep-down self-acceptance even when they feel bad in the face of rejection or failure. Those with low self-esteem lack an internal "safety net," and thus plunge lower than others when they experience life's slings and arrows. They even perceive rejection and failure where it doesn't exist.

EVEN THE MOST BEAUTIFUL AND CELEBRATED HUMAN BEINGS DON'T GET A STEADY STREAM OF COMPLIMENTS.

The safety net of solid self-esteem grows out of a secure attachment to a parent; it can fail to form if a parent is inconsistently supportive or lacks empathy and concern for his or her child. "If you love somebody and they screw up, it doesn't change the way you feel about them," Brown points out. "You don't love somebody because of his accomplishments or characteristics. You love somebody in a way that's organic or emotional." The same holds true for how one loves oneself, if all goes well.

Rufus's childhood was a textbook case for the development of low self-esteem. "I got this feeling very early on that it was really up to others, and not up to me, to decide whether I was good or bad," she says.

Her parents were enchanted by her writing and drawing abilities; they saw those efforts as miraculous since they themselves weren't artistic. But they were also convinced that their daughter was a horrible slob, though she remembers her room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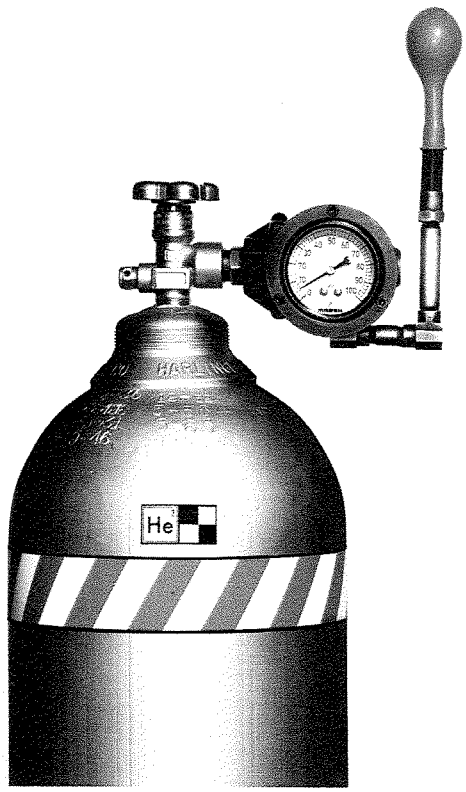


as being typically messy, not a disaster area. "It was just disorganized because I don't have that natural knack. They didn't teach me how to do it. Instead, their solution was to scream at me. They would storm into my room and say, 'You're a f***ing slob! Look at this pigsty! Why do you do this? Do you do this because you hate us?' Other kids do bad things on purpose, they break things or paint on walls. I never did anything mischievous, because I lived in fear. But I still got punished."

"Low self-esteem comes when you question everything you do," Rufus observes. "You're always tiptoeing around because you're sure you're going to piss someone off without even knowing that you're doing it because you are a terrible person at your core."

While peers can sometimes provide a refuge from an upsetting home life, Rufus was also mocked in school, for wearing orthopedic shoes and for her general nerdiness in an environment where scholastic achievement wasn't prized. The teasing only served to confirm her suspicions about her worthiness.

Jonathon Brown believes that those with low self-esteem are often doomed for life, as the set point can't be inched up too much. Depressing as his message sounds on the surface, it is compellingly honest. And it goes on to convey a means of damage control: If you have low self-esteem, you may not be able to change the way you feel about yourself, but you can learn strategies for better weathering the effects negative thoughts have on your mood and on the decisions you make. "It's like the difference between a dog and a duck," Brown explains. "A duck goes in the water and doesn't get wet. That's a gift ducks get early in life. A dog goes in the water and it has to shake itself dry. Maybe you're never going to be a duck, but you can learn to be a better dog. You can learn to handle life better."

LESS HOPING, MORE COPING

LOW SELF-ESTEEM MAY not predict anything, but it still doesn't feel very good. So it's valuable for those with low self-esteem to know they can definitely learn to cope with it better and, as a result, spend less time feeling unnecessarily worried, rejected, or inferior. As Joanne Wood has found, people with high self-esteem are automatically more likely than those with less to relish happy moments and force themselves out of funks. Those with low self-esteem confirm their negative beliefs about themselves, downplay their own moments of joy, and wallow in their low periods.

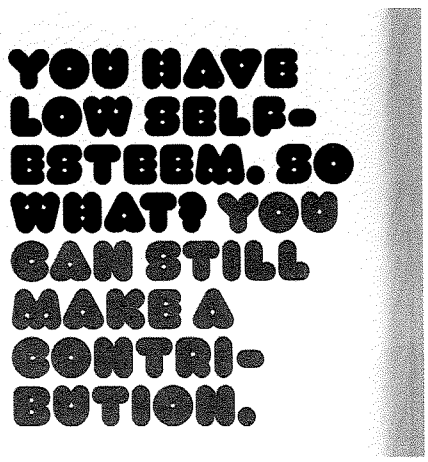
"When I don't get a return call or email, I automatically assume the person is mad at me," Rufus says. "And then there are my conversation hangovers. When I meet with someone, especially when it's important or when it's the first time, I go over it afterward, thinking 'You idiot! Why didn't you act more interested in them, why didn't you say this, why did you forget that?' I can't just let the conversation be in the past and trust that I did the best I could."

In short, those with low self-esteem might be subtly choosing to gather proof of their unworthiness rather than enjoying their bright moments. That's useful information—it can help counter a downard spiral of thoughts. Disciplining oneself to question critical thoughts that discount good wishes or events—

a cognitive-behavioral technique—can break patterns of self-doubt and rumination.

Researchers like Jennifer Crocker have found ways for people to nudge their self-esteem upward—by taking their ego out of the equation and reframing tasks that push self-esteem buttons. Crocker's most recent study, yet to be published, looks at college freshmen who met for the first time when they were assigned to room together. Over a period of 10 weeks, Crocker found that when one roommate consciously set out to be supportive of the other, the other student noticed and became more supportive in return. The upshot: Both students' self-esteem rose. "It's the giving that's responsible, not the receiving," says Crocker. "And if you do it in order to boost your self-esteem, other people may feel there's something phony about it."

Crocker attributes the effect to the fact that people's lives become more meaningful when they have constructive goals, especially those goals that make a difference for others. "Focus on what you really care about and what you want to do," she suggests. "You have low self-esteem. So what? You can still make a contribution at work and be supportive of people you care about. And when you do that, you take the attention off yourself. The pain of low self-esteem comes from being preoccupied with the idea that you don't measure up. When you shift attention to something outside yourself, you might find relief."



Kristin Neff, a professor of educational psychology at the University of Texas at Austin, used to believe self-criticism motivated people to do and be their best. People who weren't satisfied with themselves would work harder to improve. Then while taking a meditation class, Neff stumbled onto the concept of self-compassion. The more she learned about it, the more she came to believe that the key to self-esteem issues was not to focus more energy and attention on them but less.

Neff explains that in American culture, people tend to acquire a sense of self-worth from feeling special. "And that's where all the problems start," she says. A musician who compares herself to a less-talented musician will feel superior, even special, and will probably feel a rise in contingent self-esteem. But if she compares herself to someone more talented, she'll likely feel worse—even though her own talent and skills haven't changed. Social comparison is inevitable, looking for our place in the social universe we inhabit. And we all do it. But it's not exactly a recipe for self-confidence, because there are always people who do what you do both better and worse than you. Especially if you live in populous places, as most of us do now.

Neff sees self-compassion as being different from those old "affirmations" in that rather than glossing over one's mistakes or imperfections as affirmations do, self-compassion acknowledges them—but also acknowledges that flaws are part of being human and that failure therefore connects us to others. Rather than comparing ourselves to other people and watching our self-esteem bounce around as a result, we can remind ourselves that everyone suffers and feels painful emotions. Studies have shown that those who are self-compassionate are less depressed and have stabler feelings of self-worth than others. They are less likely to ride the roller coaster of contingent self-esteem.

Techniques for building self-compassion include cultivating mindfulness—an awareness of the present with a nonjudgmental attitude toward one's own fleeting thoughts and feelings—and simply talking to oneself about problems and concerns as with a friend—with honesty, love, and support, rather than harsh criticisms.

For Rufus, being aware of her low self-esteem and then learning to cope with it better have been a long haul. But she has made progress. A light bulb went on one night when she was 24. "I realized that I'd never thought bad things about my Mom or Dad. I just believed everything they said. I thought, 'Wait, all that yelling was inappropriate.' I wasn't perfect, but I wasn't terrible, either. They were very black-and-white in their thinking, and I never knew if I was the slob who hated them or the prize-winning little writer."

The constructive goal that most takes Rufus's mind off low self-esteem is her work. "Writing, for me, is the ladder to the stars," she says. "I realize at this point in life that I'm pretty good at it. When I'm doing it, I feel better; I feel somewhat normal." The fact that a few of her books, such as *Stuck: Why We Can't Move On*, have an unconventional yet "self-help" bent—and have resulted in hundreds of "thank you" emails from readers—gives her the sense that she is contributing to the world and easing others' concerns.

By her own report, having a rock-solid and temperamentally sanguine life partner has kept Rufus afloat during her darker moments. A few months after she met her husband, they were sitting on a curb while she sobbed and blurted out "Everyone hates me," and "I'm a terrible person." In response, he said, "Why can't you just let me love you?" It's a mantra she thinks back on and tries to adhere to.

"I think people with low self-esteem need real lessons on the tiny little steps you have to take to stop wasting your time with worries, to stop loathing yourself," she says. "In my mind, I often go back to my college dorm, where I saw my roommate getting ready—just being a normal person. I don't need to overcome my low self-esteem in this massive way. Just getting those lessons from watching others has been great for me." PT

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