

Help-yourself with Bibliotherapy:

20 of the best self-help guides for feeling good

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A review of self-help guides recommended to clients and friends.

The use of self-help books, or bibliotherapy, is becoming a popular do-it-yourself way to feeling good. There is an array of books aimed at maintaining mental fitness and improving mental health. Those based on cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT) are a useful first step in treating milder mental health issues. Working as a General Psychiatrist also specialising in Eating Disorders and using the CBT model, I am often asked what to recommend. Here are my top 20.

1. Life Balance – an Overview

By filling in web type diagrams in **Nina Grunfield's 'Big Book of Me: Become your own Life Coach' (2006)**, one gains an overview of a variety of areas in life such as satisfaction with career, relationships, rest and relaxation, health, creativity etc. One can see at a glance, areas that need improving to make life more balanced and satisfying. Each chapter is devoted to one of these areas using life coaching methods. If you want to do this with your partner and work on your relationship too, there is a further version, **'The Big Book of Us: Creating the Relationships you want' (2007)**.

2. Mental Fitness

Keep mentally fit with **Gillian Butler and Tony Hopes' 'Manage your Mind: The Mental Fitness Guide' (2007)**. This provides a host of day to day strategies to preserve mental health. Skills for treating yourself right, building confidence and self-esteem, relaxation, time management, problem solving, dealing with worrying, kicking bad habits such as smoking and drinking, improving study techniques and memory aids are all explained. You could end up a pretty well balanced human being after reading this!

3. Look inwards - be 'mindful'

Don't run away, stay put and become more aware. **Jon Kabat-Zinn's** catchy title; **'Wherever You Go, There You Are: Mindfulness Meditation in Everyday Life' (1995)** suggests using practises from Asian meditation. Be still, look inwards, accept and meditate on bodily feelings, thoughts and moods as they arise. Then, adopt an observational position and take time to choose healthy positive coping strategies rather than automatic destructive responses or sinking into negative moods. In **'The Mindfulness Way Through Depression: Freeing Yourself from Chronic Unhappiness'. (2007)**, **Mark Williams** and colleagues apply this 'mindfulness' to CBT. Their book is a self-help course with CD for use over 8 sessions. 'Mindfulness' is currently emerging as an important addition to CBT. You don't have to be depressed to benefit from this book. Anyone wishing to respond more constructively to everyday feelings would find this conducive to good mental health.

4. Feeling negative?

For more persistent negative moods, thoughts and feelings, there is evidence that self-help books based on CBT may help as a first step in treatment. In our clinic we recommend, **'The Feeling Good Handbook', by David Burns (1999)** and **'Mind Over Mood: Change How you Feel by Changing the Way you Think', by Christine Padesky and Dennis Greenberger (1995)** for depression. Both are workbooks with self-rating scales, worksheets, exercises and educative information. With guidance and support from a non-specialist professional such as a GP, clinic nurse or counsellor, these guides are useful in milder forms of illness. Alternatively, they can be read as an adjunct to specialist CBT demonstrating how this approach aims to change negative thought patterns. Other useful CBT self-help books written by experts and aimed at taking charge of one's own recovery include the **'Overcoming....'** series. Originated by **Professor Peter Cooper** with **'Overcoming Bulimia Nervosa' (1993)**, many other areas such as anxiety, panic, low self-esteem, chronic fatigue, post-traumatic stress, shyness and social anxiety, are covered.

5. Self-beliefs

It's also important to challenge more entrenched underlying negative beliefs, or 'life-traps'. When held with the conviction of a prejudice against oneself, there is ongoing vulnerability to the negative moods, thoughts and feelings mentioned above. **'Reinventing your life: The Breakthrough Program to End Negative Behaviour and Feel Great Again' by Young and Klosko (1994)** uses the CBT approach to explore the logic of how unhelpful beliefs may have developed in childhood. Examples include 'I'm unlovable,' 'I'll be abandoned,' 'I'm a failure.' Holding these negative beliefs as 'bottom-line' truths drives behaviour to guard against exposure which could result in negative mood states. So, someone with a conviction that they are a failure may compensate by becoming a 'workaholic' to hide their self-belief.

6. Eating Disorders

Dieting behaviours and the desire to be dangerously thin are often hard to relinquish. Accepting treatment may be difficult. Taking control of one's own recovery may start by a chance to read about the problems they cause. **Professor Peter Cooper's 'Overcoming Bulimia Nervosa'** is mentioned above. **'Getting Better Bit(e) by Bit(e): A Survival Kit for Sufferers for Bulimia Nervosa and Binge Eating Disorder' (1993) by Professor Ulrike Schmidt**, addresses 'readiness for change', or motivation and treatment strategies. Similarly, **'Overcoming Binge Eating,' (1995) by Professor Christopher Fairburn**. These books are based on the CBT approach and are recommended as a first step in treatment. **'Anorexia Nervosa: A Survival Guide for Families, Friends and Sufferers,' (1997) by Professor Janet Treasure** is packed with information about anorexia, its causes, who may develop it and why. There is information including the medical dangers of starvation and how to prepare oneself and take steps towards recovery. There is also a section on how families may help.

7. Relationships

Feeling lonely? In need of a partner, yet not confident enough to go about it? An old favourite is **Laura Doyle's 'Surrendered Single: A Practical Guide to Attracting and Marrying the Right Man for You. (2002)**. Don't let the title mislead. It is about clarifying the type of partner you would like and finding one who will treat you well. By surrendering the need to control

others, you accept a partner for what they are whilst remaining assertive and true to your own wishes. Behavioural tips help you do this. Sadly this book is out of print but used copies are available on amazon.com. And if you are in a relationship, **Susan Jeffers 'Feel the Fear Guide to Lasting Love' (2005)** can only help strengthen it.

8. Socialising

To improve communication at work, socially and at home, read the 1930's classic working handbook by **Dale Carnegie 'How to win friends and influence people,' (1936)** and the 'read-to-use' guide, **'How to Talk to Anyone: 92 little tricks for big success in relationships' by Leil Lowndes.** American in style, both are packed with behavioural strategies to boost confidence whilst conversing. These books would appeal to most and especially those with social anxiety. Also see **'Overcoming Social Anxiety and Shyness: A Self-Help Guide using CBT Techniques,' (2001) Gillian Butler,** as alluded to above.

9. Addictions

Boosting motivation to change is key. This involves taking an honest look at the purposes the substance abuse may be serving – such as hiding feelings of inadequacy, boosting confidence, avoiding psychological pain – versus the damage caused to body, brain, mental health, social life, career, family etc. The action phase is about taking a balanced decision to reduce use, dealing with craving and challenging negative thoughts and beliefs using CBT methods as mentioned above. One such manual is, **'The Addiction Workbook: A Step-by-Step Guide to Quitting Alcohol and Drugs' Fanning P and O'Neill J (1996).** Living with an alcoholic can compromise a partner's life leaving them feeling damaged and hurt. **'Women Who Love Too Much,' by Robin Norwood (1985)** helps set a healthier boundary.

10. Reference and Further Information

The Royal College of Psychiatrists have produced **'The Mind: A Users Guide.'**(2007). It includes chapters written by leading experts in their fields. Edited by Dr Raj Persaud, it is a gold mine of up-to-date information on mental health and mental illness including websites, support agencies and further literature to 'inform and empower'.

Self-help literature abounds but this list will provide a good starting point for feeling good.

All books are available on Amazon.com and most major book shops in the self-help or psychology sections. If you feel more seriously negative or have persistent symptoms, you should contact your GP. You may need specialist referral for additional support.