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### **"The Self-Esteem Journal: Using a Journal to Build Self-Esteem"**

Alison Waines, Sheldon Press, 2004, 128 pages, Stg\$7.99

I like this book from the start. Even before opening the cover, this UK book seemed approachable and direct. There's none of the exaggerated claims (common to so many American works on depression) that this book will cure you of depression in a single reading, or that keeping a journal is the only way to go. There's no auras, mystic energies or psychic essences. Rather, Ms Waines has the common-sense approach that, if you help yourself to realise how and when things are going badly for you, your recovery is likely to be that much faster and more sustained. She describes in some detail the benefits of getting our thoughts and feelings out on paper, even if we can't tell anyone else, and she sets about teaching the reader how to do just that.

The essence of the book is that most people who seek help for depression (or other similar ailments) show signs of low self-esteem. If the person's own self-image can be improved, it is argued, the other symptoms will reduce or disappear. In a nutshell, this is Cognitive Therapy and so is very much based on real experiences. Waines guides the reader through this do-it-yourself book, including 45 exercises (all of which are straightforward and simple, though they require deep thought) to carry out as your mood changes. Like most therapies, I feel this works best for the first time when the person is not totally depressed, perhaps in a grey mood rather than pitch black. For some people, the idea of writing a journal will be strange or embarrassing, perhaps even something to be feared, and for them it may be helpful to talk to a trusted friend about the idea of writing down your thoughts and feelings. However, the content of the journal itself always remains private.

Many People find, when they have just finished a visit to the doctor, that they come out having forgotten to say something, or perhaps not having had the nerve to raise a personal matter. At times like this it is helpful to have made a list of points to say to the doctor. The list reminds us of the main issues and, perhaps, gives us the courage to raise something we might be embarrassed about. It is the same with the journal – it gives us a clearer picture of what is going on in our minds and it can help us deal with the things that are troubling us. The journal is not intended to be a mere "went to the shops, met Mrs Byrne" type of record, but a statement of our feelings about getting out or meeting someone. It is this getting in touch with our emotions that can set us on the path out of depression, and practising the exercises will be especially useful if you feel awkward about expressing your feeling openly, even just on paper to yourself.

The exercises in this book can be read in any order and you don't have to read the whole book from cover to cover before starting to keep a journal. However, for those new to journals or cognitive therapy, or even for those who just need a refresher course, it is far wiser to work through one set of exercises at a time, mastering one skill before trying to get too deep. In fact, I would go so far as to say that reading the whole book before starting the exercises would be detrimental. It's an easy book to read in small bits, a few pages at a time. Its aim is to help

you like yourself more, and this cannot be achieved in one fell swoop. Waines deals in depth with our inner critics and our tendency to worry. Often these are the habits of a lifetime, so it may take some time to turn things round. With a little bit of self-discipline, this could be the book to do just that for you.

I recommend this book to anyone who is feeling down and is prepared to be honest with themselves about their inner feelings.

***Robert Kerr***