

PERFORM AN HONEST SELF-EVALUATION

If you want to change, then tell the truth.

When we're honest about which aspects of our lives are working well—and which are not—we're poised for growth. On the other hand, if we're out of touch with the truth, we can easily ignore pressing problems or come up with bogus solutions.

Alcoholics Anonymous offers one of the most popular and successful self-help programs around, and it begins with telling the truth. The first thing AA members do to change their behavior and transform their lives is to tell it like it really is. That's the idea behind Step One of the AA program: "We admitted that we were powerless over alcohol, that our lives had become unmanageable."

AA is just one example. People who join Weight Watchers begin by telling the truth about how much they weigh, and they repeat that ritual at the beginning of every meeting. Likewise, one of the first things that counselors do is to assess their clients—to learn the truth about what their clients are thinking, feeling, and doing. Physicians start their treatments only after a careful diagnosis. Coaches design a training program only after gaining a clear idea of their team's present capabilities. Supervisors, managers, and teachers do the same.

This strategy can be applied to tackling any problem. Talking straight about ourselves complements and enhances all other strategies in this book. When we tell the truth, we unleash the forces of positive change.

There is an added benefit to having the courage to tell the truth: We provide a model for others. After observing us, others might glimpse the power in this practice. People might see their potentials and take the first step toward solving a long-standing problem.

When we tell the truth, we contribute to ourselves and to others. Everybody wins. Our honesty may provide just the opening someone else needs to move forward.

Denial cheats us

Many people find it tough to admit to weaknesses. Often they're willing to go miles out of their way to avoid telling the truth.

To verify this, just ask any recovering addict. When the only way a person can get through the night is with a six-pack of beer, he'd probably rather keep the fact a secret—even to himself. When an executive fudges expense reports so that she can get cash for a gambling habit, she'll probably want to keep the fact hidden.

In the short run, denial might even work. It helps us avoid the pain that comes with telling the truth. It smoothes over the rough spots and makes things look all right for a while.



That benefit usually comes with a cost. Over the long run, denial limits the possibility of change. Denial stops us in our tracks and keeps us stuck waist deep in our problems. Denial cheats us out of happiness.

Denial also saps energy. Struggling to deny the truth can leave us exhausted. Struggle implies resistance. And the more we resist the truth, the more it fights back.

There is another option: We can break through deceptive layers of falsehood and open up to the truth. While telling the truth might hurt, it also takes us one step past the hurt. Telling the truth opens the door to strategies that we can use to make effective, enduring changes in our lives.

Approach evaluations without shame or blame

Many of us approach a frank evaluation of ourselves with the same amount of enthusiasm as we'd welcome an audit by the IRS.

The very word *evaluation* is often associated with negative experiences, such as incomprehensible essay tests, tense performance evaluations, and blood tests and rectal exams. Few people would list these as their favorite ways to spend an afternoon.

We can think about evaluations in another way. We could see evaluations as opportunities to solve problems and take charge of our lives. We could view evaluations as ways to get feedback, change behavior, and expand our happiness. We could greet evaluations with hopeful excitement and welcome them as gifts.

One step toward this goal is avoiding shame and blame. Some people believe that it's natural to judge their shortcomings and feel bad about them. Some people believe that blame is necessary to correct their errors. Others think that a healthy dose of shame is the only thing that can prevent the moral decay of our society.

As an alternative, we can discover ways to gain skill without feeling rotten. We can change the way things *are* without having to feel upset about the way things have been. We can learn to see shame or blame as excess baggage and just set them aside. Believe it or not, we can begin working with our list of weaknesses by celebrating them.

Consider the most loving, successful, enlightened, "together" people you know. If they were totally candid with us, we'd soon hear about their mistakes and regrets. The more successful people are, the more likely that they look openly at their flaws.

The point is simple: We can love ourselves and still work like mad to change ourselves. You can experiment with this idea by doing the exercises that follow.





Talk to a chair

One powerful way to practice telling the truth is to speak even when no one is listening.

The basic technique in this exercise is to place an empty chair across from you. In your imagination, see someone sitting in that chair. Then say out loud what you've been withholding from this person. Include both positive and negative feedback. Reveal all the things you've stopped yourself from saying to this person.

You have many options when choosing whom to “place” in that chair. If you're in conflict with someone, then imagine that person sitting across from you. You could also place someone you greatly admire in the chair, or a key person from your past. Or, imagine *yourself* in the chair and then coach yourself about ways to solve a sticky problem or meet a tricky goal.

You might feel strange when you first do this exercise. That's understandable. Simply notice that feeling without judgment. Then continue speaking.

Practice telling the truth when you're across from that chair. Give voice to your fears, your sadness, your anger, your celebrations, your conflicting desires, your darkest secrets, or whatever else comes to mind.

There's power in full self-expression even when the person you're addressing is not physically present. You might even choose to contact the person you “placed” in the chair and say some or all of the things you said during this exercise.

Choose what not to examine

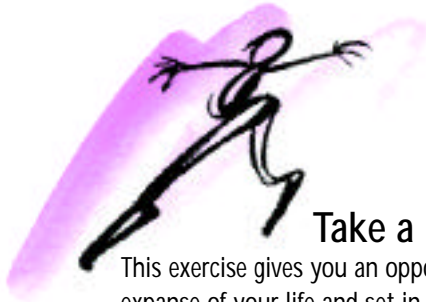
While doing the exercises in this chapter, you may discover aspects of your life that you are not willing to examine. Perhaps you've raised issues that are too difficult or troublesome to face directly. That's fine for right now. You can simply tell the truth about what you choose not to examine. Consider scheduling a later time to examine these areas of your life.

Complete the following sentences:

I discovered that I am not willing to examine ...

I intend to examine these areas of my life by the following dates ...





Take a First Step

This exercise gives you an opportunity to survey the entire expanse of your life and set in motion forces that can alter you forever. Prepare to admit your strengths and to write frankly about all the aspects of your thinking and behavior that you want to change.

This may be the most difficult exercise in *Falling Awake*. It can also be the most powerful. Doing this exercise thoroughly may be enough to fulfill your purpose in buying this book.

The idea is simple: Tell the truth about who you are and what you want.

End of exercise. Proceed to the next Success Strategy.

Just kidding. Actually, there is more to the self-survey, and the instructions below will guide you through the strategy step by step.

If you want to experience the full benefit of this exercise, do three things.

First, be concrete. Get down to specifics. Instead of writing “I’m unhappy,” you could write “I feel isolated and have few people I can call on during times of crisis.”

Second, be courageous. You may be looking at parts of yourself that you’d rather not face. If you start to feel uncomfortable, that’s probably a clue that the exercise is working.

If this happens to you, acknowledge the discomfort fully. Then return to telling the truth. Remember that it’s difficult—if not impossible—to change those aspects of our lives that hide in the shadows. When we shine a light on our shortcomings, we begin to rob them of their power.

Third, be complete. Many people think that telling the truth is a strategy that applies only to our weaknesses. In reality,

this strategy is even more powerful when we admit our strengths and skills as well.

As you complete this exercise, you might reveal things that you don’t want others to know—perhaps things that could get you into trouble.

For that reason, write your responses on a separate sheet of paper and consider destroying it when you’re finished.

Allow about 30 minutes to complete the whole exercise.

Part 1

Set aside 10 minutes to complete the following sentence.

Aim for at least 10 responses. And don’t worry about whether your writing is wrong or silly. If an idea pops into your head, put it down. You can review and reflect on your responses later.

One of my strengths is that ...

Following are sample ways to finish this sentence. These are not prescriptions for what you should write—just examples:

I have a clear sense of the factors in life that I can control and also of the factors that I cannot control.

I periodically examine the quality of my thinking and choose beliefs that promote my happiness.

I take risks, even if it means making mistakes.

I use an effective set of strategies for responding to stress.

I listen attentively and with skill.

I communicate my thoughts and feelings without blaming others.

Part 2

Take another 10 minutes to complete the following sentence. List as many responses as you can—at least 10. This will be a rough draft, so don't worry about the quality of what you write. Just get as many ideas down on paper as you can.

Things don't work well when ...

Again, some examples follow:

I discover that my relationships are not working, and I avoid conflict with the people involved.

I spend more than I earn and accumulate large balances on my credit cards.

I break agreements with the people closest to me.

I think I'm unlovable.

I stop listening to people I dislike.

Part 3

Once you've finished the first two parts of this exercise, take a short breather. Also celebrate the difficult and potentially rewarding work you've done so far.

Now take another step to solidify your insights. Review the two lists you've created. Cross off any ideas that don't make sense. Add any new ideas that come to mind. Put an asterisk next to statements that really ring true. Look for ways to reword any of these statements to make them clearer or more accurate.

Part 4

Here's your chance follow up on what you've learned about yourself.

First, review your list of strengths regularly, especially when you feel discouraged or just plain stuck. You might want to post this list in a prominent place where you alone will see it often.

Next, look again at your list of problems from Part 2. Take your most limiting problems and rewrite them as goals. Move them from problems to possible solutions.

For example, *I run low on cash at the end of each month* can be transformed into *I intend to decrease my spending so that I have cash left over at the end of the month.*

If any of your intentions bring up outrageous possibilities or hold the promise of far-reaching change, that's great. Consider breaking these long-range goals down into simple, specific actions that you can start taking immediately.

There's only one step left, and it goes beyond writing: *Do what you intend.* Take action. Savor any positive new results in your life. Also come back to this exercise periodically. Use it any time to spot-check for problems and take charge of your life again. You can make truth telling a habit.