SELFHOOD
A Key to the Recovery of Emotional Wellbeing, Mental Health and the Prevention of Mental Health Problems

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SELFHOOD

A Key to the Recovery of Emotional Wellbeing, Mental Health and the Prevention of Mental Health Problems

OR

A Practical Psychology Self-Help Book Designed to Assist you to Recover your Sense of Self, Live more Effectively, and Cope Better with Stress

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Mental Health Publishing


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INTRODUCTION

Why I wrote this book
For the past twenty years, I have been working with people experiencing emotional distress and mental health problems, the first ten years as a General Practitioner. While working as a GP, I began to realise that the medical model was insufficient when applied to people suffering with mental and emotional distress, including those diagnosed with a mental illness. My experience with the people who attended me alerted me to the very real emotional distress underlying mental health issues. I became increasingly aware of the inadequacy of my medical training to enable me to understand and make sense of their distress and to effectively help them to recover. I expressed my concerns in my first book, Beyond Prozac.

Motivated by a desire to understand the core issues involved in emotional distress and mental health problems, I retrained as a psychotherapist. For the last ten years, I have provided a recovery-focused mental health service in Limerick city, Ireland. I work with people across a range of general counselling and mental health problems including depression, bipolar disorder, obsessive-compulsive disorder, eating disorders, and schizophrenia.

While working as a General Practitioner, I became increasingly aware that mental health services seemed to overlook key issues. Over the past fifteen years, I have worked hard to formulate clearly just what is at the root of emotional distress and mental health problems. In this regard, the self, and its relevance to mental health problems, has received little attention in recent decades, particularly since the notion that mental health problems are biological in origin took hold within psychiatry and
subsequently within the broader community. What I feel is often overlooked is the human being themselves, their life history and experiences, their ways of perceiving and dealing with those experiences, themselves, others, and the world around them. These important issues shape how an individual processes and integrates the often challenging and difficult emotional and psychological aspects of being human. As the title suggests, my focus in this book is on the self, the person and their experience of themselves and of life, and on both the loss of and the recovery of one’s sense of selfhood. I believe, and I have seen this occur in many people with whom I have worked, that recovery of one’s sense of selfhood is a key factor in the process of recovery of mental wellness, including the process of recovery from mental illness.

I can only work with a limited number of people. I wrote this book so that a wider audience might benefit from the understanding, insights and methods I bring to my work with people.

Life inevitably involves the experiencing of loss, grief, fear, disappointment and pain. However, this does not mean that we inevitably become damaged or debilitated by our experiences. Limiting the impact of hurt on us, and minimising the risk that our painful experiences will have an ongoing debilitating affect on us involves (a) enhancing our sense of self and dealing effectively with the world, so that we experience hurt far less frequently, and (b) ensuring that we process emotions, hurt and trauma as fully as possible, minimising the risk of long-term effects. Both are recurring themes throughout this book. Having a solid sense of selfhood, we can experience, process and integrate our painful experiences, moving forward with personal growth and learning.

What is selfhood?
Words containing the suffix ‘hood’ encapsulate the characteristics of the experience of the term to which it is attached. Childhood is an umbrella term used to encompass all aspects of being a child. Manhood refers to the global experience of being a man, similarly with womanhood, motherhood, and so on. I use the term ‘selfhood’ to refer to all that applies to being a person, including the inner, private world we each continuously experience. When I speak of an individual’s sense of selfhood, I am referring to their experience of and sense of themselves, and their overall sense of self in relation to the world around them. I am referring to their
overall sense of selfhood, which is an aggregate of the individual’s sense of each of the components of selfhood, as depicted in Diagram 1.

The more developed and balanced these characteristics are, the greater our sense of selfhood. People with a solid sense of selfhood contain the components of selfhood within their boundary, in their own personal space (more on this later), as depicted in the diagram.

Our level of selfhood is directly linked to our level of mental wellness, our experience of emotional distress and mental health problems. Living with a high sense of selfhood means generally feeling safe, in control, empowered, self-centred and self-confident. It means believing in yourself, and dealing effectively with your emotions, with challenges and taking risks, and managing to get the majority of your needs met. Having a high level of selfhood therefore greatly reduces your risk of experiencing ongoing emotional distress and developing serious mental health problems.

**COMPONENTS OF SELFHOOD**
problems. In contrast, having a low sense of selfhood means almost constantly feeling unsafe, feeling disempowered, having little sense of control in your life, consumed with self-doubt. It means having little or no self-confidence or self-belief, you and your emotions in virtually constant turmoil and you feeling all over the place, resulting in few of your needs being met. This ongoing state considerably increases your risk of developing enduring emotional distress and mental health problems. The individual components each contribute significantly to your overall sense of selfhood.

Developing the components of selfhood leads to an enhancement of these qualities within you, and has a positive impact on your overall sense of selfhood.

In my work with clients, I have repeatedly observed how central selfhood is to people’s level of mental wellness or illness. The components of selfhood are consistently present, or more accurately, absent, in my dealings with clients over a ten-year period. I discuss selfhood further in sections one and two. In my experience of more than two decades working with people experiencing emotional distress, including people diagnosed with mental illnesses, selfhood keeps surfacing as a key link to mental wellness and mental illness.

I have seen how, with the right guidance and support, people can recover their sense of selfhood. I have worked with people diagnosed with conditions such as depression, bipolar disorder, schizophrenia, obsessive-compulsive disorder. I have witnessed many such people reach levels of recovery far in excess of what has been achieved within mainstream mental health services, often to the point of full recovery. The recovery of selfhood is an essential part of overcoming emotional distress and recovering from mental health problems.

A strong sense of selfhood is a springboard for a meaningful and happy life, making our journey through life much easier. Some of the components of selfhood may seem so ordinary, so obvious that one might think they need not be mentioned or described. Sometimes it is the ordinary and the obvious that we fail to see, that escalate when repeatedly left unattended, often creating havoc in many aspects of our lives. Generally, when a person’s level of selfhood is low, each of the components of selfhood is correspondingly low. When an individual’s level of selfhood is high, all of the components of selfhood are generally solid and strong within the person.
It is my hope that this book can be a tool that supports people in their journey toward a whole and balanced sense of selfhood and thus a more complete and contented life.

Who is this book for?

In my work with clients, I seek to develop and recover those aspects of selfhood that may be absent or overlooked. In doing so, the person can more fully engage with life and with experiences they find challenging or difficult. The contents of this book closely mirror how I work with people who attend me in person.

If you are unhappy, unfulfilled, and stuck, if you experience a lot of overwhelm, anxiety, fear and insecurity, if you have little sense of inner power, self-confidence, self-belief or if you feel that your life seems beyond your control, this may be the book for you. This book will help you to understand yourself better. If you or people who matter to you have been diagnosed as suffering from anxiety, depression, bipolar disorder, obsessive compulsive disorder, eating disorders, schizophrenia or addiction problems, or have felt suicidal at times, you will find much here that will make sense to you and help you.

This book is for people of all ages, since the issue of selfhood is relevant, no matter what age we are, and can be fostered at any stage of life. You can raise your sense of selfhood and your level of mental wellness by implementing the advice and actions set out within these pages. This book is relevant to anyone involved in mental health care, including psychiatrists, general practitioners, the professions of nursing, psychology, psychotherapy, counselling and social work, and those involved in the implementation and administration of mental health services. I have personally encountered several hundred users of the mental health services whose major loss of selfhood went largely unnoticed by their health carers. This pivotal issue rarely seems to appear on the medical radar. It may better serve people if professionals working in this area organised their understanding and their interventions around the true nature of the individual’s difficulties. In this context, low selfhood is a core issue for people diagnosed with mental health problems.

This book will be of considerable interest to parents. Parents who have a strong sense of selfhood are better positioned to foster a strong
sense of selfhood within their children. The topics discussed in this book apply both to parents and others who have a significant input into and impact upon young people. Many parents work with their children on issues relating to selfhood and effective dealing with the world as a natural part of parenting. By increasing their understanding of mental wellness as discussed in this book, parents can make changes to their patterns of interacting with their children. The effect of these changes may seem almost imperceptible at first. Over time, these changes will have considerable potential to foster the child’s sense of selfhood and enhance the effectiveness of how they deal with their world.

If the topics covered in this book were taught in schools, many young people would understand themselves far better and would become empowered to live more contented lives and deal more effectively with the world. I believe that recognition of the key importance of selfhood would result in much happier societies, far fewer people being diagnosed as suffering from mental illness, and in far better outcomes for those who are so diagnosed.

A plausible hypothesis
As explored in detail in my book Beyond Prozac, it is far from established that mental health problems are biological in origin. Although researched intensely for decades, this notion remains a hypothesis to this day. In this book, I present a plausible hypothesis: that selfhood is a key factor in our level of mental wellness or mental illness. In addition to helping people to recover their sense of selfhood, I hope that this book will encourage debate and comment, and ultimately contribute to creating an effective recovery-focused mental health service.

The biological hypothesis is never tested in any individual. No person with a mental health problem or diagnosis ever has a biological abnormality confirmed by any test. In contrast, in my professional experience, the aspects of low selfhood that I describe in this book are always experienced by the individual concerned and are always verifiably present. This adds a level of credibility that has not yet been established for the biological hypothesis, despite decades of investigations involving thousands of research projects aimed at verifying the biological hypothesis as an established fact.

People in mental and emotional distress need help on two fronts.
They want relief from their emotional pain, anxiety, agitation, distress, but they also seek to recover their life. The medical system pays scant attention to the latter, concentrating primarily on the former, the alleviation of symptoms, usually by the use of medication. The alleviation of symptoms is important and has its place, but it is insufficient to promote recovery. The medical approach is not geared toward effectively assisting people to achieve meaning, purpose, fulfilment, and the recovery of their life. This requires a broader focus on all of the aspects of the individual and their needs, as discussed throughout this book. The recovery of selfhood is of key importance in this regard.

According to the World Health Organisation, mental health is more than the absence of mental illness, but it is not sufficient to describe mental wellness in terms of the absence of something. The components of mental wellness itself need to be clearly described. This lack of clarity regarding mental wellness contrasts sharply with the widespread acceptance of the concept of mental illness. Mental wellness remains an elusive, poorly defined concept, yet mental illness is an idea we readily accept within society. These contrasting positions do not sit well with each other. Before we as a society begin to define and describe mental illness, we should be able to describe, understand and clarify mental wellness in great detail. Since mental wellness is pivotal to each of our lives, it is surprising that it is so poorly understood. Having a solid sense of self is of pivotal importance to our level of mental wellness.

A comprehensive understanding and clarification of mental wellness is a requirement for the development of clear strategies of prevention of mental health problems, early effective interventions, and mental health promotion. The potential of mental health promotion, and the treatment and prevention of mental illness is compromised if mental wellness is not clearly understood and described. If mental wellness is clearly understood, then pathways toward attaining, maintaining and regaining mental wellness emerge with greater clarity, direction and purpose. This book is one such pathway.

Throughout the world there are countless traditions, cultures, diets, styles of eating and preparing food for consumption. Irrespective of the person’s dietary habits, culture or country of origin, all human beings share similar dietary requirements and needs. Vitamins, minerals, protein, carbohydrates and fats are essential for the healthy functioning of the human body. Similarly, a strong sense of selfhood is a universal
component of mental wellness, regardless of where we live and the traditions of our culture.

It is my hope and my intention that this book will clarify aspects of our shared experience of being human, and empower those who read it to live more contently, more effectively, with an enhanced sense of selfhood.

**Book contents**
Throughout the book, I include experiences from the lives of people who have attended me for professional help. In section one, I discuss the principles and concepts that underpin this book. Section two consists of a detailed consideration of the process of recovery of selfhood. This section begins with an exploration of some important themes relating to the recovery of selfhood. The components of selfhood are discussed in detail. A list of actions are included for each component, designed to cultivate each component of selfhood. At the end of each of the five categories of selfhood, I include two case histories. I had originally intended to include a case history for each component of selfhood, but reduced it to two per category due to limitations of space. Names and personal details have been changed to maintain privacy and confidentiality. I include the case histories to demonstrate how the components of selfhood manifest in people’s lives, and to give a sense of how I work with people. The book concludes with a brief exploration of the peace dividend, the experience of inner calm that is the product of effective recovery of selfhood. Five personal testimonies of this inner peace are included, written in each person’s own words.

**How to use this book**
This is a practical, self-help book. The potential benefit of any book parallels the work you put into making the contents real in your life. You would not expect to learn to play golf or become accomplished at horse-riding in a week, simply by reading a book. Enhancing your level of selfhood requires you to work at it.

I recommend that you work through the book in sequence. Once you have grasped the book’s ideas and concepts, you can dip in and out, reading and working on the areas of particular relevance to you. You can
work through this on your own, which for many people will be the most practical way. Small groups could use this book as a workbook, meeting weekly or two-weekly to discuss and explore their experiences.

I recommend devoting time every day to this work. Thirty to sixty minutes a day would be ideal. That would be enough time for you to work steadily through the actions in the book. As you go about your day, bear in mind what you have been reading and working on. You should find the material surprisingly relevant to the feelings, thoughts, interactions and situations you experience. As you become more familiar with the contents and style of the book, you will create your own individual way of working with it. If you have any comments or feedback about the book, I would be happy to receive them. You can email me with your comments at terry@mentalhealthpublishing.com.

The Mental Wellness Book Series
This is the first in a series of books I am writing about mental health. Books about schizophrenia, bipolar disorder, depression, anxiety, eating disorders and suicide will follow. The purpose of this series of books is to expand our current understanding of mental health and mental health problems. Describing and explaining the often subtle yet key emotional and psychological aspects of mental health and mental health problems will be a recurring goal and theme of the Mental Wellness Book Series.

There are other aspects of life that are relevant to an individual’s mental health and wellbeing, such as genetics and biology. My intention in the Mental Wellness Book Series is to focus on aspects of life about which effective action can currently be taken to improve and maintain mental health and wellbeing. The study of genetics and biology as they apply to mental health and wellness as yet offers little practical and meaningful scope for improving mental health and wellbeing or preventing mental health problems. Whether or not they will do so in the future remains to be seen.

Mental healthcare systems are generally based on a model of mental illness, rather than mental wellness. Within many mental health services worldwide, mental health problems tend to be dealt with largely in isolation from the individual’s life, experiences, needs, struggles, worldview, their sense of self and how they deal with the world. Many mental health services do not sufficiently appreciate how intimately a person’s
experience and perception of themselves and their dealings with the world are related to their level of mental wellness or illness. The Mental Wellness Book Series is my attempt to rectify this situation.
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SELF-HELP / MENTAL HEALTH / PSYCHOLOGY / RECOVERY

Begin recovering your sense of self ~ now

Selfhood is a practical self-help book, designed to help you recover your sense of self, be happier and more fulfilled. In this book, you will discover a great deal about yourself, others and life. You will find many actions, devised to enhance your sense of self, and many insights into how we think, feel, act and live when we have lost our sense of self. The process and benefits of recovering your sense of self are presented in detail.

You will discover:

- What selfhood means
- How closely selfhood is linked to emotional and mental wellbeing, and mental illness
- The components of selfhood
- How selfhood is lost
- The features of low and high selfhood
- How to reclaim your sense of self.

What they said about Terry Lynch and his first book, Beyond Prozac:

“Often grassroots ideas inspire people, who otherwise would have lived quietly, to do brave things. One such person is Terry Lynch, an Irish GP” Dorothy Rowe, renowned psychologist and author, in Depression: the Way out of your Prison, 3rd Edition.

“I just loved that book. I can’t speak of it too highly. If I ever get seriously unhappy, I’m going to camp on Terry’s doorstep” Dr. William Glasser, psychiatrist and author, founder of Choice Theory and Reality Therapy, in Warning: Psychiatry can be Hazardous to your Mental Health

Terry Lynch is a medical doctor, psychotherapist and author. He provides a recovery-focused mental health service in Limerick, Ireland. He is passionate about mental health, Recovery, and enhancing our understanding of emotional wellbeing and mental health. He was a member of the Expert Group on Mental Health Policy in Ireland (2003–6), which formulated A Vision for Change, Ireland’s official mental health policy. He is a member of the Independent Monitoring Group for A Vision for Change (2006–9, re-appointed 2009–12). His first book, Beyond Prozac: Healing Mental Distress (2001 + 2005) was a bestseller in Ireland.

Selfhood is the first of Terry Lynch’s Mental Wellness Book Series.

It is simply not possible to feel good, to be happy, to regularly experience emotional wellbeing and mental health if your level of selfhood is low. Why not begin your journey of recovery of your sense of self today?