

OVERCOMING STIGMA

Skills to Be Learned

- Understanding the Consequence of Stigmatization
- Decreasing the Strength of “Addict” Self-identity
- Connecting with “Core/Ideal” Self
- Identifying and Strengthening Cognitive, Affective, and Behavioral Attributes of Healthier, Non-drug Using, Lifestyle
- Redefining the Self as a Non-drug User

Webster’s dictionary defines “stigma” as “a mark burned into the skin of a criminal or slave—a mark of infamy, disgrace, or reproach.” When individuals or groups are stigmatized, they are branded or labeled by society as dishonorable, reprehensible. Being stigmatized can influence how you think and feel about yourself and also how you behave. You have probably had personal experience with stigmatization. In our society, individuals suffering from addiction are stigmatized. The word “addict” brings to mind many negative images, and may be associated with defects in character, criminality, and immorality. This can be an extremely heavy burden to carry, and can substantially impede your progress along your journey of recovery.



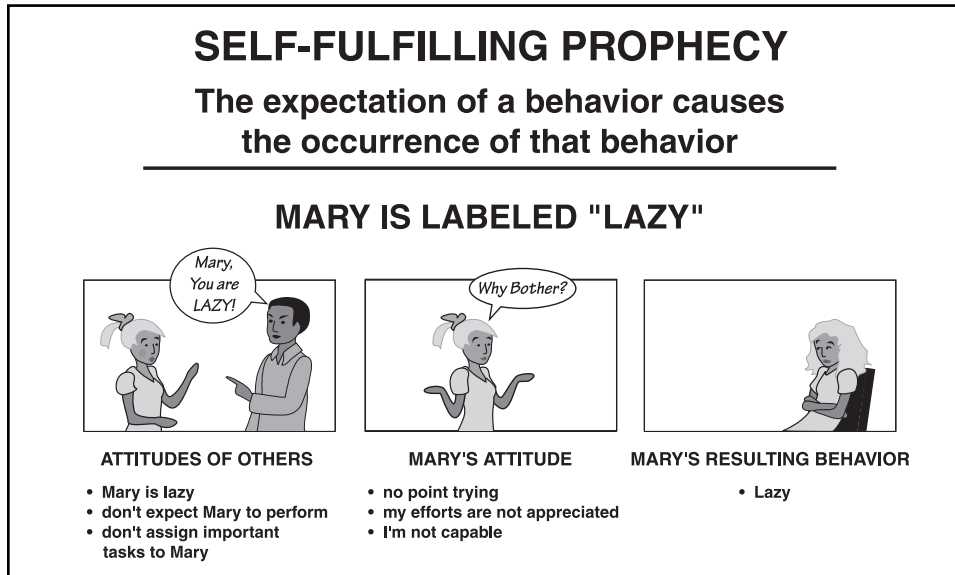
As the illustration suggests, it’s as if you are walking around under a dark cloud while everyone else walks in the sunshine.

After a while you may begin to internalize society’s stigmatizing labels—that is, you come to believe that how other people perceive you must be an accurate representation of your “core” self. You may actually begin to think, feel, and behave just as others expect you to. You may also experience shame and depression and engage in behaviors that place you and others at risk for jeopardizing your health, and even your life. The goal of this chapter is to weaken the impact of stigma—the negative labels that are imposed upon you by others—and to strengthen your identification with your “true” or “core” self that exists beneath all the labels.

We will begin by considering various examples of self-fulfilling prophecy.

Self-fulfilling Prophecy

A self-fulfilling prophecy is when you cause something to occur because you expect it to occur. So if you internalize a label that is placed upon you by others and begin to behave as the label predicts, your behavior would be an example of a self-fulfilling prophecy.



The illustration provides an example. Mary has been labeled as “lazy” by her family. Perhaps Mary’s family placed high value on hard physical labor. Because Mary does not accomplish as much as other members of her family, she is considered lazy. But perhaps Mary is physically incapable of working as hard as the other members of her family. Regardless of how the labeling originally occurred, because of this label and the attitude and behaviors of the family members towards Mary, Mary herself came to believe that she should be a hard worker, and that unless she was perceived by others as a hard worker, she was not worthwhile as a human being. However, her best efforts were never good enough, and she began to doubt that she had the ability to perform these tasks well. She therefore stopped trying, and became “a lazy person.” She fulfilled the prophecy.

Here’s another example:

In 1970, a grade school teacher conducted a classroom experiment to teach young white children about racial prejudice. She told the children in her class that blue-eyed children are inferior, lazy, and not very smart. She told them that blue-eyed children could not play with the brown-eyed children and had to drink from a different water fountain. She also told them that

brown-eyed children are far superior to blue-eyed children. Brown-eyed children are smarter and work harder. The children then went about their daily lessons. In just a few hours, the work of the blue-eyed children had suffered; they took longer to do their assignments, they seemed unhappy, and they manifested some behavioral problems. Later when asked why they were behaving this way, the children reported that there was no reason to even try. The opposite occurred for the “superior” brown-eyed children—they felt good about themselves, performed well, and began to disparage the blue-eyed children. When the conditions were reversed later in the experiment, and the children were told that the blue-eyed children were superior to the brown-eyed children, the children reversed their roles, again internalizing the labels given to them, and acting accordingly.

Since this experiment in the 1970s, there have been numerous studies demonstrating the effect of labeling on the behavior of stigmatized individuals.

Practice Exercise: Identifying Stigmatization

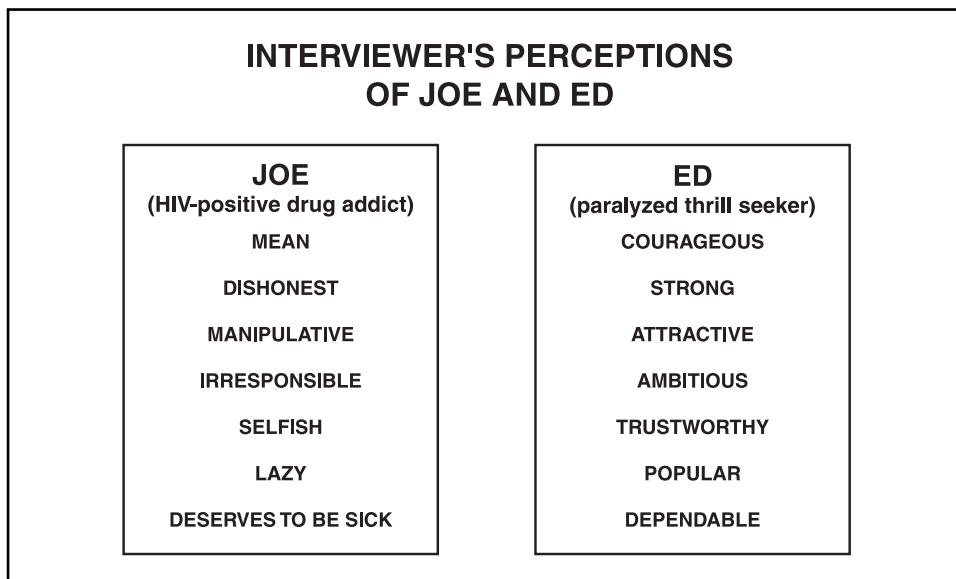
Instructions:

1. I’m going to tell you a story of two men—Joe and Ed—who are applying for the same job. Joe is an HIV-positive heroin addict now in methadone treatment who became infected with HIV by sharing needles. Ed was a thrill-seeker now confined to a wheelchair who was paralyzed in an accident while whitewater rafting. Joe and Ed are equally qualified for the job. That’s all we know about Joe and Ed. The job requires not only the qualifications and work experience that Joe and Ed both have, but also certain personality characteristics and qualities. The interviewers are given a “Character Profile” to complete for each applicant to help them with their hiring decision. The profile is provided below.
2. Your task is to predict how the interviewers would perceive the two candidates. In the first column on the worksheet is a list of characteristics. Circle either yes or no in the columns labeled Joe and Ed to indicate which of the two job candidates are likely to be attributed with that particular characteristic by the interviewers. Remember to answer as you predict the interviewers would describe Joe and Ed.

Overcoming Stigma

	Joe (the HIV-positive drug addict)	Ed (the paralyzed thrill-seeker)
Courageous	yes/no	yes/no
Mean	yes/no	yes/no
Strong	yes/no	yes/no
Dishonest	yes/no	yes/no
Attractive	yes/no	yes/no
Manipulative	yes/no	yes/no
Ambitious	yes/no	yes/no
Irresponsible	yes/no	yes/no
Trustworthy	yes/no	yes/no
Selfish	yes/no	yes/no
Popular	yes/no	yes/no
Lazy	yes/no	yes/no
Dependable	yes/no	yes/no
Deserves to be sick	yes/no	yes/no

Your profile probably looks like this:



The illustration shows that Joe—the HIV-infected heroin addict—was attributed with all seven of the negative characteristics, in the absence of any personal information about the two men.

Questions to Consider

- Do you agree that society would perceive these two men differently?
- Is it true that society feels that someone with HIV deserves to be sick?
- Is this especially true for an “addict,” or for anyone infected with HIV?
- Which man do you think would get the job?
- What other negative characteristics are associated with the words “Addict?”

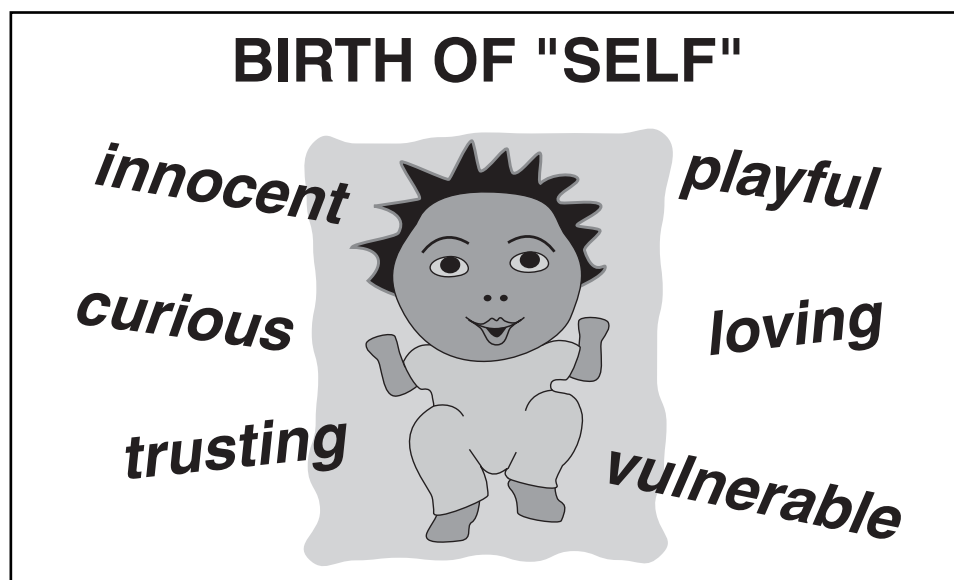
You have to cope with this label and the characteristics attributed to it every day, and you may even have come to believe that you really are what this label represents.

Consider the following:

- What effect does the label “Addict” have on you personally?
- Does this label really describe who you truly are deep down?
- So, if this label is not the real you, who is the real you?

We are going back to the day you were born to see if we can answer two questions:

1. Who were you when you were born? And,
2. What kind of person did that newborn baby have the potential to become?



As shown on the illustration, when you think of a newborn baby, you probably think—

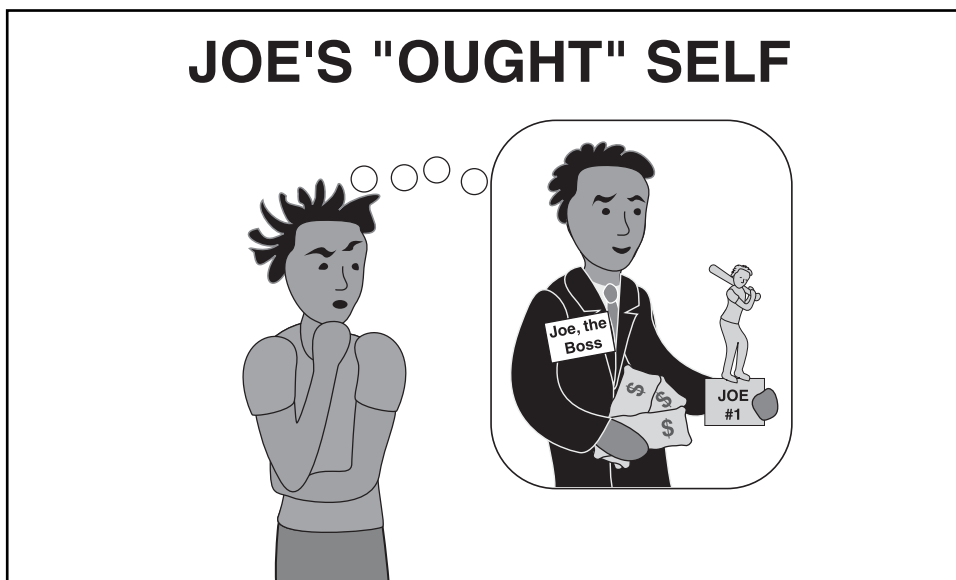
- innocent, loving and lovable, playful, curious, trusting, vulnerable.
- you begin life as raw potential—awaiting to be fulfilled.
- you have no reason to suspect that there will be any obstacles to fulfilling your highest potential.

Each of us is born this way. Then what happens? Each of us has a need—

- for unconditional love, and
- to be accepted and loved for our “core” self.

The “Ought” Self

Unfortunately, very soon we learn that love is often conditional—that means that we experience love and acceptance only when we behave the way others want us to behave. We learn that our “core” self is not always acceptable, and so other senses of self develop. In order to be loved and accepted by others, we internalize the “shoulds” imposed upon us by others, and our “ought” self is born. This is the person you feel you ought to be in order to receive the love and acceptance of others. This “ought” self may develop into different senses of self at the center of the roles we play, such as student, friend, employee, parent. Each of these roles may be added to your “ought” sense of self. Little by little, layer upon layer is placed on top of your “core” self so that sometimes it is difficult to remember who you really are. You wonder whatever became of that newborn that was so full of potential.



Let's look at Joe's ought self. Joe was raised in a family that placed great value on the external signs of success. Joe's parents had experienced poverty in their own lives, and although they loved Joe, they worried that he would not succeed in life. Joe learned from childhood that he should be rich, successful, powerful, handsome, physically fit, and popular. To be less than perfect was to be a failure. As all children do, Joe tried very hard to internalize the qualities that were important to his parents.

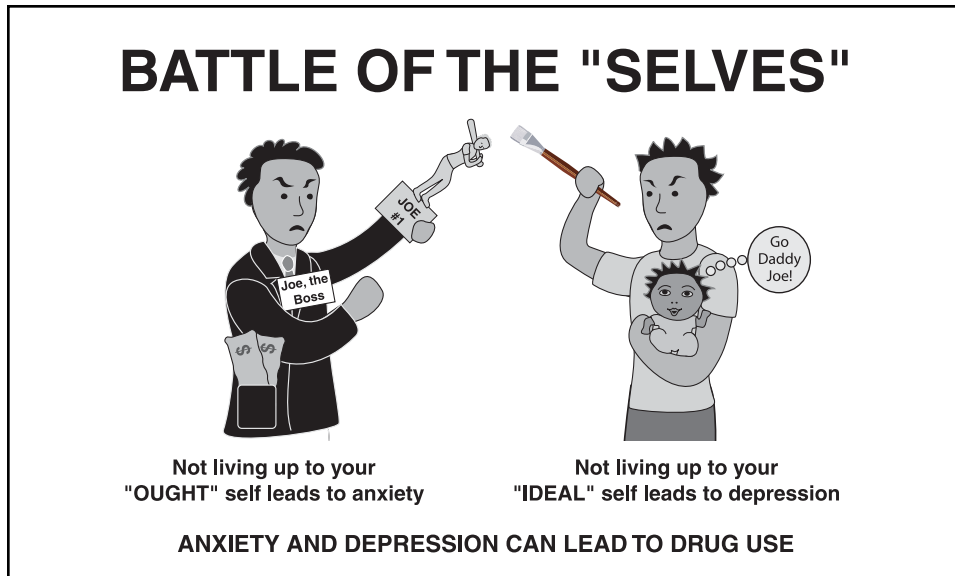
Joe internalized the need to be perfect; however, he was unable to fulfill his parents' definition of perfection. As a child, Joe tended towards shyness. He enjoyed quiet time alone drawing and painting, and showed artistic talent; he did not excel in school, and was not physically strong or particularly popular. He never felt comfortable when he attempted to pursue the way of life valued by his parents. Consequently, by the time he reached his teens he was experiencing low self-esteem, guilt and anxiety, and had begun to perceive himself as a failure.

The Ideal Self

Although Joe's "ought" self included a number of positive qualities highly valued in our society, it did not include the attributes that Joe had the desire or the potential to express in his life. Let's take a look at the type of person Joe has the potential to be—Joe's "ideal" self.



As shown in the illustration, Joe was born with the potential to experience inner peace and to contribute to society using his artistic ability, and to raise and nurture children. Clearly, Joe's "ought" self and his "ideal" self are in conflict.



Let's look at what happened to Joe as a result of his battle between his different senses of self. As a teenager, he started socializing with other boys who were not doing well in school. Together they used alcohol and marijuana, and their school work suffered even more. Joe dropped out of high school with few prospects. One day, at a friend's suggestion, Joe tried heroin. The anxiety he lived with was immediately reduced and he was able to enter that peaceful inner world he had always longed for. He was hooked. He could at last experience his ideal self. Of course, this feeling didn't last long. Soon the drugs were controlling him, and that initial experience of relief from anxiety and the experience of absolute peace was no longer attainable.

When you cannot live up to other people expectations for you, or when these expectations do not match your own goals and ideals, you have an imbalance between the "shoulds" and the "wants" in your life, and you cannot fulfill your potential (your "core" self). This can lead to:

- low self-esteem, depression, anxiety
- stress and stress-related illnesses
- substance abuse.

This does not mean that other people are to blame for your addiction. However, it does mean that recovery requires getting back in touch with your "core" self—the person you have the potential to be beneath all the labels imposed upon you. The first step is to identify the characteristics of your "ideal" self and then create a mental image of yourself with these characteristics:

Practice Exercise: A Mirror into Your “Ideal” Self

Instructions:

1. Go to the worksheet entitled “A Mirror into Your ‘Ideal’ Self” located at the end of this chapter. On your worksheet is a picture of a mirror. Imagine that you are looking in that mirror at an image of yourself. Pretend that this is a magic mirror that allows you to see clearly your core self—your “ideal” or “potential self”—the person that you really are beneath all the labels that others place on you.
2. Then inside the mirror—describe your “core” or “ideal” self. Describe the kind of person you would truly like to be and that you believe you would have had the potential to be if only given the opportunity and support. Inside the mirror write down the characteristics you would like to have and the talents and gifts you were born with.

Note: Ignore the areas outside the mirror labeled thoughts, feelings, and behaviors. We will talk about these later.

Creating a Script for Your “Core/Ideal” Self

Now we will turn our attention to how you begin to get back in touch with your “core” self—that person that you really are and are capable of becoming beneath all the labels. Begin by imaging that you are an actor who has been given an important role to play in a movie. The character you are to portray is someone with the same characteristics and qualities that you listed when you looked in the magic mirror into your “ideal” or “core” self. As an actor, the first thing you would do is research the role—you would identify how such a person would think, behave, and feel and then act as if you were a person with these characteristics.

Another method for getting in touch with your “core” self is a form of reverse brainwashing. Brainwashing is a technique used to indoctrinate an individual into a particular system of beliefs. Changing a person’s beliefs and even self-identity can be accomplished by creating a context in which the individual is particularly receptive, and then repeatedly exposing the individual to a particular set of beliefs. We all tend to be receptive during childhood and during adversity; however, we are also receptive when in a state of deep relaxation. An example of this is when someone is hypnotized they enter a relaxed state in which they are receptive to hypnotic suggestion.

You can use this techniques in your daily life to get in touch with your “core” self. A positive, health-promoting form of brainwashing is the use of self-affirmations. Self-affirmations are positive statements you repeat frequently to yourself for the purposes of changing your beliefs. For example, an

actor preparing to play the role of a drug addict may repeat over and over to himself “I’ve got to have drugs to feel good” because this is a core belief of an addicted person. By strengthening this belief, the actor would begin to feel more like an “addict.” He would also attempt to take on the appearance of an “addict” and practice behaving as an “addict” would behave, perhaps by exposing himself to drug-addicted individuals, drug neighborhoods, and drug paraphernalia.

Clearly, you don’t want to strengthen your “addict” self-identity. So let’s see how you can use these technique to get back in touch with your “core” self?

Let’s use Joe as an example again.

Recall that Joe’s “ideal” self included being creative, and that his artistic potential was not developed because it conflicted with his “ought” self. If an actor was asked to play the role of “Joe, the creative person” how would he prepare for the part? First, he’d consider how Joe the creative person thinks and feels, what he looks like, and what he does in his daily life.

JOE'S CREATIVE SELF

THOUGHTS


- I am an artist
- I can express myself
- I can contribute

BEHAVIORS

- Buy artistic supplies
- Draw and paint
- Study art
- Have artistic friends

FEELINGS

- Satisfaction
- Pride
- Contentment
- Inner peace



As a creative person, Joe’s **thoughts** might include:

- “I am a creative person.”
(He would have confidence in his artistic ability.)
- “I express my core self through my art.”
(He would be proud to reveal his core self.)
- “I contribute to society through my creativity.”
(He would value the contribution he could make through his art.)

As a creative person, Joe's **behavior** would include:

- Having the necessary artistic supplies
- Drawing and painting
- Studying art
- Interacting with other artistic individuals.

As a creative person, Joe's **feelings** would include:

- Satisfaction when he paints
- Pride in his creative talent
- Contentment
- Inner peace.

In order for Joe to get back in touch with his “core” self, he would need to act “as if” he were a creative person. AA/NA philosophy tells you to **“Fake it, until you make it.”**

This is how you begin to reclaim your potential. Taking one quality or attribute at a time, you create a life script in which you express your greatest potential. Then you act the part until it becomes your reality.

Consider the following: What did Joe need in childhood to enable his “core” self to develop to its highest potential?

Joe needed:

- to be told that he was talented and that his talents had value
- the necessary tools and support to express his talent
- encouragement to practice his art
- to experience satisfaction and pride in his art.

Because Joe did not get what he needed in childhood, he now needs to provide it to himself. Again, this does not mean you should blame your addiction on your upbringing. This is not about blame. We all need to learn how to nurture ourselves in adulthood. We'll talk more about how to do this shortly.

Review

Let's review what we've covered so far. At your birth, your “core” self was all that existed—you were raw potential awaiting to be fulfilled. Other selves,

such as your “ought” self and “addict” self, developed on top of your “core” self, like layers of an onion, until you forgot who you really are under all the labels, stereotypes, and the roles you play. We also talked about how being stigmatized can influence how you think, feel, and behave. Stigmatized individuals can come to believe and behave as predicted by the label placed on them—thus exhibiting a self-fulfilling prophecy. Not fulfilling your potential—having an imbalance between your “ought” self and your “ideal” self—can result in depression, anxiety, stress, stress-related illness, and substance abuse. Recovery requires identifying the characteristics of your “ideal” self and forming a mental image of yourself with these characteristics. Living a healthier lifestyle includes striving towards giving your “core” self a strong, clear voice. We’ll talk about how to do this now.

How to Give Your “Core/Ideal” Self a Voice

To strengthen your “core” self and give it a voice, you need to systematically select the attributes that make up your “core” self and then, one attribute at a time, consider what a person with such an attribute would be like. As shown in the previous illustration, Joe selected “creative” as the first “core” attribute to work on, and he identified what a creative person would think, how a creative person would live and behave, and what a creative person would feel. Like an actor preparing for an important role, Joe had to prepare for playing the role of “a creative person.” Before he could actually play the role without effort he had to research it, memorize the script, and rehearse extensively.

TECHNIQUES FOR CHANGE

LIST IDEAL TRAITS

SELF-AFFIRMATIONS

- Create a positive statement
- Use present tense (such as, I **AM** a creative person)
- Repeat statement frequently throughout day
- Leave cards where you see them frequently

VISUALIZATION

- Relax deeply
- Visualize in detail what you will be thinking, wearing, doing, and feeling when you are a person with the ideal trait

ACT “AS IF”

- Act as if you are the person with the ideal trait
-

FAKE IT UNTIL YOU MAKE IT

This illustration shows three techniques that Joe could use to prepare for the role:

1. He begins by changing his beliefs. For this he uses **self-affirmations**. This is a technique in which he repeats statements that are consistent with the “core” characteristic he selected. Joe selected being “creative.”

Joe’s self-affirmation might be “I **am** a creative person.”

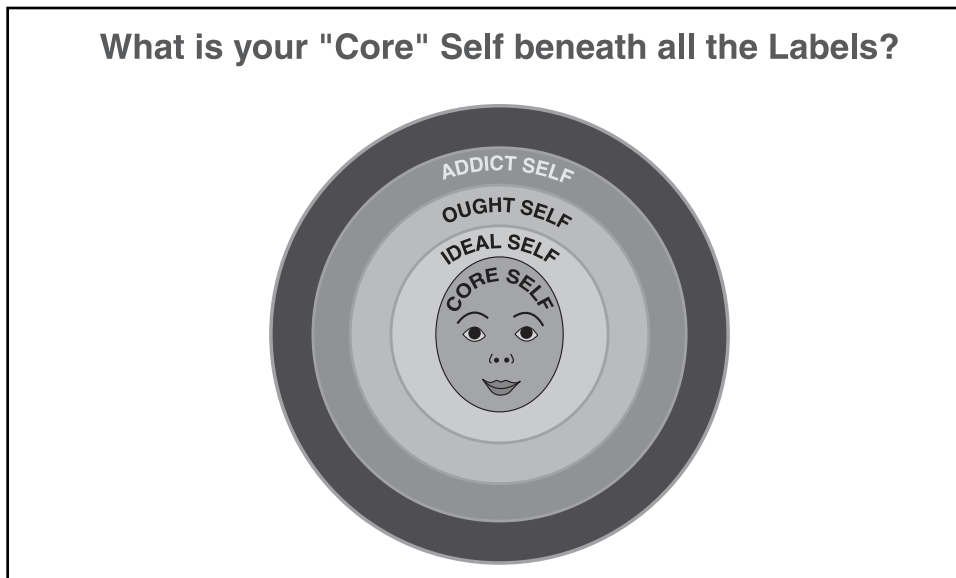
(**Note:** Always use the present tense for self-affirmations.)

- Joe repeats this statement to himself frequently during the day
 - Whenever Joe looks at himself in a mirror he repeats the statement
 - Joe writes the statement on index cards and places these cards where he will see them frequently (e.g., on refrigerator, TV or stereo, in wallet). When he sees the card he says the statement to himself.
2. Next Joe creates a detailed image of himself as a person with that attribute using **visualization**. This technique is commonly used by athletes and actors.
 - Joe puts aside quiet time every morning when he wakes up to enter a state of deep relaxation and to visualize himself painting and drawing, feeling content and at peace. He does this for 10 minutes at the same time every day, visualizing himself expressing his artistic ability in every detail. He visualizes what he would be wearing, what he would be doing, what he would be thinking, and feeling.
 - He reminds himself to do his visualization daily by placing a post-it note next to his alarm clock and on his bathroom mirror.
 3. **Acting “as if”** is a technique in which Joe will now pretend he is an actor playing the role of “a creative person.”
 - In every aspect of his daily life, Joe pretends he is an actor and acts “as if” he is a creative person. **He fakes it until he makes it.**

With practice, Joe won’t be acting any more. He will actually be a creative person because he will have given voice to that part of his “core” self.

In the past, your thoughts, feelings, and behavior have all served to strengthen your “addict” sense of self. Although you may have become physically addicted to drugs very quickly, you actually didn’t become an “addict” overnight. That addict sense of yourself began slowly and gained strength every day. Your thoughts changed, your behavior changed, your feelings changed. The thoughts of a heroin “addict” include: “I can’t live without heroin,” “I’ll do anything to get heroin,” and “I cannot cope with being dope sick.” These thoughts trigger behaviors such as going to drug neighborhoods, copping drugs, and shooting up using rituals that eventually become a part of you.

Now your goal is to weaken this “addict” sense of self and strengthen your “ideal” self. Not using drugs is one step but, as you know, being an “addict” is much more than using drugs—it is a mindset, a lifestyle, a sense of self.



Earlier, you took a step towards strengthening your "ideal" self by listing those attributes you believe are part of your core self, beneath all the layers. It is time to peel the onion, one layer at a time. Not an easy task, sometimes causing pain and tears, but it is well worth it.

Practice Exercise: Taking on the Role of Your “Ideal” Self

This exercise will help you identify what thoughts, feelings, and behaviors correspond to the “ideal” self characteristics you listed on your “mirror” worksheet so that you can formulate a plan for how you are going to strengthen these characteristics in your daily life.

Instructions:

1. Circle just one of the “ideal” self characteristics that you listed on your “mirror” worksheet. Select the one that is most important to you.
2. Identify at least one thought, one behavior, and one feeling that is associated with the characteristic that you selected from your “ideal” self mirror. Write these on the outside of your mirror in the space provided on your worksheet.
3. Then, on the reverse side of the “mirror” worksheet:
 - a. write down a self-affirmation statement that you can use to help achieve that characteristic. (Remember Joe’s self-affirmation statement was “I **am** a creative person.”)

- b.** copy your own statement onto 3 index cards—these are your self-affirmation cards.
 - c.** state where in your home or car you will place these self-affirmation cards.
 - d.** state what time of day you plan to do a 10 minute visualization.
 - e.** state the memory aids you will use to remember to do your visualization daily.
- 4.** For the next week, focus on strengthening this characteristic.
- 5.** Next week, select another characteristic from the mirror and repeat the process until all the characteristics you listed on your “mirror” worksheet are incorporated into your daily life.

Soon the expression of these characteristics will become entirely natural to you, and you will have given your “core” self a strong voice. This process of self-redefinition is a very important part of your recovery because your self-identity influences your behavior. For example, when faced with stress, individuals who define themselves as “addicts” automatically experience addiction-related thoughts, feelings, and behaviors, such as drug use. In contrast, individuals who define themselves as a non-drug-users do not have addiction-related thoughts, feelings, and behaviors in response to stress. Instead, they may use the experience of stress as a signal that a problem exists and that stress management and problem-solving techniques are needed.

Research has found that individuals who are successful in recovery have been able to redefine themselves as non-drug-users. You are strongly encouraged to examine your self-identity frequently. Your goal in recovery is to identify with your “ideal,” non-drug-using self and to reduce the strength of your “addict” self-identity.

At the end of every week, think back over that week and ask yourself:

How much did I experience my “addict” self during the past week?

0	1	2	3	4
not at all		moderately		extremely

How much did I experience my “ideal” or “non-drug-using” self during the past week?

0	1	2	3	4
not at all		moderately		extremely

These ratings are also on the bottom of your “mirror” worksheet. Once you have determined the extent to which you identified with each sense of self during the previous week, make a plan for how you will increase the expression of your “ideal” self the following week and how you will reduce the strength of your “addict” self-identity. Be patient. Remember, it took a while for you to fully identify yourself as an “addict.” It will also take time, as well as hard work, to identify with your “ideal” self.

Quiz

1. **If you behave as predicted by a label placed on you, your behavior is an example of a self-fulfilling prophecy.**
 - a. True
 - b. False

2. **Being stigmatized can influence:**
 - a. how you think
 - b. how you feel
 - c. how you behave
 - d. all of the above

3. **Fulfilling your potential (identifying with your “core” self) can result in:**
 - a. low self-esteem, depression, anxiety
 - b. stress and stress-related illnesses
 - c. substance abuse
 - d. none of the above

4. **Positive, health-promoting forms of “brainwashing” are called “self-affirmations.”**
 - a. True
 - b. False

5. **Getting in touch with your “core” self beneath all the labels *begins* with which of the following?**
 - a. identifying “ideal” characteristics and creating a mental image of your “ideal” self
 - b. peeling an onion
 - c. acting “as if” you are your “addict” self-image
 - d. all of the above

Practice Exercise: Stress Management/Relaxation

We recommend that you conclude each chapter by doing a 10-minute relaxation exercise. Use this time to practice meditation or deep breathing, or to play an audiotaped relaxation or visualization technique. Dim the lights, get comfortable in your chair, uncross your legs, and sit quietly with your eyes closed. Remember that learning to relax is a skill that takes practice, so if you feel restless at first, just remind yourself that this is a ten-minute gift of quiet time that you give to yourself. With practice, you can use meditation and relaxation in many areas of your life. For example, you can use this time to visualize your “ideal” or “non-addict” self. See yourself free of the chains of addiction that have enslaved you and see yourself becoming that person you were born with the potential to become. Visualize this scene of yourself in every detail, and when you have completed the visualization, become an actor, taking on the role of your “ideal/non-addict” self as you go about your daily activities. With practice, you won’t be acting; you will truly be this person.

(Part II)

My Self-affirmation Statement

I am: _____

Locations to place self-affirmation cards:

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____

I will visualize my “ideal” self daily at ____ am/pm. My visualization will include (copy from reverse):

Thought _____

Behavior _____

Feeling _____

Memory aid for visualization. I will remember to do my visualization by: _____

I plan to act “as if” I have this attribute by doing the following:

1. _____
2. _____

One week from today I will rate my progress by rating the strength of my “addict” and “ideal” selves:

How much did I experience my “addict” self in the past week?

0 1 2 3 4
Not at all moderately extremely

How much did I experience my “ideal” self in the past week?

0 1 2 3 4
Not at all moderately extremely

