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Introduction

My compliments to you for deciding to read this book. Whether you selected it on your own or received it as a corporate gift doesn't matter. My name is Ken Herman. I am a Clinical Psychologist. I have been in practice for over 45 years and have conducted over 100,000 hours of psychotherapy. I have seen people through just about every aspect of life, from the hardest times to the best of times, those going through personal challenges as well as those growing towards personal triumphs. Feelings of inadequacy, indecision or simple malaise, dissatisfaction with a small aspect of one's life, depression and anxiety, illness and loss, death and birth, overcoming guilt, marital problems, suicidal thoughts and attempts, helplessness, hopelessness, and despair have all made their appearance in my office. It has been my greatest reward to see individuals achieve healthy lives and relationships, improved careers, personal successes, and most important, peace of mind.

Throughout my career, I have derived considerable pleasure from seeing my patients grow—I have observed the numerous and varied ways in which people have succeeded in changing their lives for the better. I have witnessed the inner strength that we are humans all possess. I have been given the opportunity to observe individuals rise from the depths of despair to heights they didn't even realize existed. In fact, this is why I choose to name the book, *Secrets from the Sofa*. It has been decades since the stereotypical psychoanalyst's office contained the obligatory sofa, on which the patient lay down to share his or her innermost thoughts with the goateed, note-taking therapist. However, it is still a stereotype that people relate to today. And since my intent here is to impart you the methods that I've developed and used, the tips I've fine-tuned, the practices I've seen work over and over, all from the inside of my office, in a way I am sharing with you these tools, these nuggets, these secrets.

Contrary to what the title may seem to imply at first glance, I am certainly not sharing or publishing any confidential information about any of my patients. I do present dozens of case examples in this book since I believe it is immensely helpful for people to see what other similar people have gone through, partly to understand that no one is alone—no matter how bad one's problem seems, others have probably gone through the same or worse before. And I also believe it is human nature to want to compare yourself to others. By seeing that other very normal, often successful people have issues, problems, and difficulties at times is usually immeasurably reassuring and bolstering when going through issues of one's own. The case excerpts in this book provide those comparisons and reassurances with clarity of specific points throughout the text. However, in each and every case, fictitious names are used and no information is given that could possibly lead to divulging whom the case is about. I have always held patient confidentiality in the highest regard, and it is certainly not compromised in this book.

Now, what can this book do for you? Perhaps you have never sought or needed help from a psychologist or other professional. Maybe you have thought about seeking a therapist but have not pursued it because of financial constraints, time restrictions, or fear of what being in psychotherapy might mean to you. Perhaps you have received professional help

in the past or currently are working with someone. Whatever your situation, in choosing this book, you have acknowledged that you have the desire to become a stronger, more confident, and more balanced person. I want to share my knowledge and experience to help you achieve growth and change. As you read this book, take what is most applicable and meaningful to you and use it to effect positive changes in your life.

Secrets from the Sofa can point you in the direction of a more fulfilling life. It provides you with a step-by-step guide for overcoming a wide variety of emotional and interpersonal problems. All too often, we let our problems defeat us. Faced with a vexing frustration or conflict, we may not even know how to begin to resolve it. *Secrets from the Sofa* walks you through a process that will enable you to reach your goals no matter how unhappy, uneasy, or unhealthy you feel. I have written this book to help you think more highly of yourself, to enjoy rich, rewarding relationships with loved ones, and to lead a productive life.

There is a term I use throughout this book—the *Personal Peace process*. I am referring to the conscious steps we take, day after day, to get us closer to a state of happiness, serenity, peace of mind, fulfillment, contentment, harmony, and balance, or, in my words, personal peace. Each step you take forward in dealing with issues, fears, worries and problems is a step along your own personal peace process. In Part Three, I devote a whole chapter to the “Personal Peace Plan,” that is the specific goals, strategies and tactics that you can deploy in order to help yourself grow, become more stable, strengthen your ability to handle difficulties, and ultimately, attain your personal peace.

Unfortunately, no book can substitute for a good psychologist. Depending on the nature of your problems you may need support in addition to this book. The last chapter provides you with information concerning how to know if you need to work with a professional, and provides additional resources that may prove useful as well.

What you will learn in *Secrets from the Sofa* is how to develop a plan to address your current difficulties. Perhaps you feel lonely, depressed, or isolated. Perhaps you feel trapped in a bad marriage or a dead-end job. In *Secrets from the Sofa* you can also find actual inspiring case studies that demonstrate how others have tackled similar challenges, as you follow the steps, you will also begin to master coping skills that will improve your ability to handle new stresses as they come up. As long as you make a commitment to change, you can overcome even long-standing problems.

Since I first began psychotherapy nearly a half century ago, the field has undergone major changes. After World War II, psychoanalysis was in its heyday, and intensive long-term treatment was not uncommon. Today, because of the factors like managed care and the widespread availability of psychotropic drugs like Prozac, the general time spent in therapy has been limited dramatically. Short-term therapy (one to 20 sessions) has become the norm. Not surprisingly, the editor of the bible of psychotherapy research, *The Handbook of Psychotherapy and Behavioral Change*, recently decided to eliminate the chapter of brief therapy in the last edition because, in his words, “... almost all therapy is brief now.”

Secrets from the Sofa is based on the principles of the most widespread form of therapy, the cognitive behavior approach. Cognitive is another word for thought. Cognitive therapy assumes that an individual's thoughts, perceptions, and attitudes significantly affect his or her feelings. Depressed people, for example, are often paralyzed by self-critical thoughts. Cognitive therapy attempts to bring about a change in mood by encouraging people to think differently about themselves. Although this concept may seem simplistic, it can have a far-reaching impact on a person's self-concept, attitude and emotional well-being.

Self-deprecating thinking can produce a never-ending cycle of distress. Cognitive behavioral therapy teaches you how to reverse this course. Once you start reaffirming your self-worth, you can begin to mobilize your strengths and cope with your problems more effectively.

Distorted thinking underlies many problems besides depression. This book will help you examine your thinking style so that it doesn't continue to sidetrack you. Unhappiness or emotional issues often stem from negative thinking and negative perceptions about yourself. That negativity is, in turn, often rooted in childhood misfortunes. *Secrets from the Sofa* provides exercises that will help you understand how your background may have contributed to negative perceptions about yourself and your future. (Many times people don't even realize that they have these perceptions.) Once you make the connection between your past and current difficulties, you can start developing healthier ways of thinking and acting. Although the process may involve some bumps along the way, it does not last forever. This book is goal-oriented and will guide you as you struggle to break bad habits and negative patterns.

However, I must warn you that change requires dedication and hard work. Patients who have made the most progress made a commitment to persevere for the "long haul." Unfortunately, for you to grow, you will have to learn to tolerate difficult feelings from time to time, such as anger, anxiety, and sadness. But if you consider your future and your emotional well-being are at stake, the tradeoff is well worth it.

Through the ages, people have struggled to find the key to personal peace. Having devoted my life to studying human behavior, I am convinced happiness cannot be purchased in a store or derived from the acquisition of worldly possessions. The most enduring sense of satisfaction ultimately comes from seeing yourself as a worthwhile person and respecting what you think and do.

In my role as a psychologist, I often observe that my patients have strengths of which they are not aware. Do you readily see yours? In the final analysis, you can count on yourself like no other person in this world. But you will never know how much you can achieve until you have tapped into your own inner resources. If you don't take charge of your life, it can easily take charge of you in the guise of unwanted habits and psychological symptoms, such as depression and anxiety. In order to reach your potential, you will need to confront issues and problems head-on. As you gain confidence, normal everyday problems will no longer overwhelm you.

Most importantly, keep an open mind. It is possible— just possible— that you are a much stronger person than you think. Give yourself a chance— help yourself! You are worth it!

Dr. Kenneth Herman

Chapter One

Why People Are Not Happy

Many people travel through life waiting for the world to be exciting. Some are waiting for the ideal mate. Some are looking for a more challenging and rewarding career and some are waiting to inherit a fortune. Often what these people already possess goes unrecognized and unacknowledged. They are saying such things to the world as, “When I get older, I’m going to read all the books that I didn’t have a chance to read before.” Or “When I retire, I will travel to the places that I’ve always wanted to see.” The problem is, most people with these thoughts never realize their “future,” and what’s worse, they cannot enjoy their “present,” often due to how their “past” has conditioned them.

The poet Sara Teasdale was, by most standards, a very talented writer, yet she was an unhappy person who was unable to internalize her strengths. In her later years, she became aware of having passed the prime of her life without realizing that her exercise had some meaning. It was too later to go back and capture all she had let slip by. Feeling that she had nothing to look forward to, she finally committed suicide.

What a tragedy it would be to reach a point in life where we must admit to ourselves, “Strange to have crossed the crest and not to know.” To possess life’s treasures and not to be able to enjoy them is truly a waste. To realize one day that it is too late is indeed a depressing thought. I do not subscribe to the philosophy that it is too late to regroup and resolve a problem. We can’t recapture lost time, but we can seek more meaningful and rewarding goals at any stage in life.

What do you feel is slipping by in your life? What brambles are catching your clothes and preventing you from reaching a higher crest? Are you frustrated that you haven’t met the right companion? Are you confronted with a weight or drinking problem? Are you stuck in a dead-end job, an unhappy marriage or relationship, or faced with some undesirable habits that you have been trying to kick for years? By now, you may have given up hope of things ever being different.

But they can be different! Once you understand the source of your difficulties and what you can do about them, you can begin to make the necessary changes.

Many of us go through life on automatic pilot. We rarely examine why we behave the way we do. We just plow ahead the only way we know how. For some, this approach works. Finding a suitable mate and building an exciting career comes naturally to some lucky people, but, unfortunately, only relatively few. For many, however, being on automatic pilot leads to falling short of their potential. Rather than seizing the controls and taking charge of our lives, we settle for mediocrity because it is easy and convenient. While it may work for flying airplanes, automatic pilot rarely works for living your life.

Childhood Counts

Over the last few decades, mental health professionals have discovered some startling facts about human development. In contrast to most other species, human beings are dependant on their parents for a relatively long period of time. During childhood, we have no choice but to trust our parents to attend to our physical, emotional and economic needs.

Since no parent is perfect, it is not always easy for parents to meet all of the needs of their children. Fortunately, most parents do a pretty decent job. But many, too many, specifically miss the mark. There is a direct relationship between the stability of the parent and his or her ability to rear children who are emotionally secure. Less stable parents who are overprotective, for example, rob their children of independent thinking, leaving them helpless and needy. Other insecure parents, who reject and abuse their children, bring about insecurity, low self-esteem, and distrust in their offspring. On the other hand, parents who employ sound judgment tend to be able to raise relatively stable children.

Children need affection, discipline, guidance, limits and loving relationships with their parents in order to grow into self-reliant, self-disciplined and secure adults. To what extent were your emotional needs met in your childhood? Would you raise your children exactly the way you were raised?

As adults, we all are programmed to behave just as we behaved as children. If we are secure, we will gravitate towards people and experiences that promote the same sense of well-being that we enjoyed in childhood. Unfortunately, if we are insecure, we are compelled to seek our time and time again an environment that frustrates us just as our parents once did. Over 75 years ago, the founder of psychoanalysis, Sigmund Freud, M.D., identified this self-defeating pattern of behavior as *repetition compulsion*. Trapped in our painful pasts, we become addicted to the familiar misery that we know intimately. On some level, we have adopted an attitude of resignation about life. After a while, we prefer not to think even about new possibilities for our future. We accept inevitable situations (e.g., a lousy job or a bad relationship) that don't really satisfy us.

Even in loving families, interactions between children and parents stray from the ideal. Despite their good intentions, many parents may unwittingly burden their children with feelings of insecurity. At times, nearly all children receive messages from their parents that make them feel inadequate. For example, parents often err by attacking a child personally for doing something wrong, rather than criticizing the specific behavior. Shouting at a child, "You are bad for hitting your sister!" produced much more shame than simply telling him or her to stop. In all families, periodic conflicts arise that end up leaving children needlessly wounded— even if just a little. Child-rearing presents an enormous challenge. Many parents, although they do the best they can, simply are unaware of families where they experience parental loss or rejection (due to death, illness, or divorce,) if not outright abuse. ***We can never change what happened to us in the past. However, we can change how our past affects us today.*** Whatever has been

learned can be unlearned. No matter what childhood tragedy or subtle negative messages we have experienced, we need not give up on our dreams.

Lynn's story illustrates how patterns established in childhood can interfere with our ability to enjoy life as adults. In therapy, she developed the courage to change. She followed the very exercises presented in this book at her own pace and one step at a time. By the time she terminated therapy, she had begun to move ahead in her life, following her own personal peace process (detailed in chapter seven.) As she and I would speak every several months thereafter, I would see her reaching closer and closer to her personal peace. In fact, today, Lynn would say that she is as comfortable, content, hopeful, vivacious, and balanced as anyone she knows. Not bad for someone who spent a good portion of her life unhappy, uncomfortable, and insecure.

A successful model at 28, Lynn was referred to me by her physician. I was not surprised when Lynn initially expressed gratitude toward her parents for raising her as they did. "My mother knows best and I appreciate everything she does for me. I may not like everything she does for me, but I would never hurt her. After all, I wouldn't be successful if she hadn't done so much for me."

Adults who have endured conflict relationships with their parents often use denial as a defense mechanism. This stance allows us to avoid acknowledging the depth of frustration and anger that we have stored up. Denial often involves both minimizing the stress of critical relationships and our feelings in general.

When I asked Lynn if she ever got angry, she replied, "Not often. Oh, if I am looking for something in a store, and they don't have my size, I might get a little frustrated."

In the weeks that followed, Lynn began to identify and express her feelings. She discovered some important truths about herself. "You may not believe this. But until I came here, nobody ever asked me my opinion about anything. My mom decided who my agent should be, and what my schedule should be. My life is strange. I'm nervous, angry, childish, fearful, and I don't stand up for myself. It is gradually becoming clear to me. I am mixed up, and I don't know what to do about it."

Lynn was discovering her problem. She was telling herself that she had issues to overcome, and she was uncovering the source of those issues. At the same time, she was dedicating herself to improving her life. She could no longer deny that something was wrong. This first step requires considerable courage because it involves entering uncharted territory.

Lynn was an only child. Her parents, Robert and Mary, had been married for 12 years when she was born. Her mother intended to exercise control in family decisions. Robert, who earned his living as a plumber, described his wife as “a tough cookie,” who tended to be stubborn. Disliking conflict, he reluctantly agreed to let her take full responsibility for raising Lynn. He regretted not being more involved in her life during her childhood and their lack of closeness.

As Lynn remembered more about her childhood, she identified how much her mother tried to control her behavior over the years: “My mother always overprotected me. She fed me long after I was able to eat by myself. Sometimes, she would insist on remaking my bed after I had made it. To this day, she still asks me if I have to go to the bathroom whenever we leave the house!”

Even in her late 20’s, Lynn was still being treated like a helpless child by her mother. She felt as if she needed to remain a child in order to please her mother. In fact, she confessed to me her enormous anxiety whenever she even thought about taking more responsibility for her life. By insisting that Lynn depend on her, her mother had ended up intensifying Lynn’s feelings of helplessness, inadequacy, and anger.

Lynn now realized that she had a choice. If she continued to play the role of a child, she could avoid feeling anxious in the short term. However, this role doomed her to remaining unhealthy forever, both physically as well as mentally. She realized that she wanted more from life than just a successful career.

“Many people say that I am attractive, but on the inside I feel like a nothing person. My mother will keep emphasizing all that I have accomplished. Despite my success as a model, I don’t have any self-confidence. I feel like I never grew up. I want to start acting like a grown-up.”

Lynn began to set some goals for herself. She saw the need to establish healthier boundaries between herself and her mother. Eventually, she was able to verbalize her realizations:

”I have been allowing the way my mother treats to affect my life. I can’t be responsible for someone else’s behavior. If I don’t agree with my mother and she chooses not to speak to me for a while, that’s her problem.”

Lynn also decided that she wanted to date more. Unfortunately, her

conflicted relationship with her mother also interfered with her social life. “Every time I show interest in a guy, my mother says I can’t burn the candle at both ends.”

Lynn now began to take action. Armed with the insights into how and why she remained unhappy in her life, she desired to establish her own identity. She restructured her relationship with her mother. She distanced herself from her— both physically and emotionally. She moved from the suburbs to the city. With regard to her career, she slowly took charge. First, by conducting her own correspondence, and later, by negotiating some of her own business contracts. She also sought out new experiences: she took some graduate courses and joined a theater group. Over time, the nature of her interactions with her mother changed. She no longer revealed as much about herself to her mother, and they started to relate to each other as adults. Those committed to change are usually able to find improved methods of coping as shown in Lynn’s case.

Self-Reflection Question

Can you think of any parental interactions (from your childhood or adulthood) that may be keeping you unhappy and/or unhealthy?

Childhood Can Be Traumatic

I have seen few parents who intentionally want to harm their children. Yes, unwittingly, many parents fail to meet the emotional needs to their offspring. Some parents fail because they have unresolved personal difficulties that prevent them from giving to their children in the way that is needed. Others may have impaired judgment because of a drinking problem or other substance abuse.

Bad parenting is sometimes taken to the extreme. We know that thousands of cases of child abuse are reported to government agencies, and even more cases go unreported for many reasons. We know too that child protective agencies are continuously busy with large case loads. We are also aware of the fact that many parents do not provide proper supervision and care of their children, leading to young people being unnecessarily injured, engaging in improper behavior, using drugs and committing crimes.

By citing these grim facts, I do not mean to suggest that all or even most Americans undergo severe trauma or neglect during childhood. However, childhood is much tougher than we think. Because childhood forms the base on which we build our lives, most adults with traumatic histories tend to be unhappy or unhealthy in one way or another.

Even under the most ideal household situations with two well-meaning, well-adjusted parents, raising children is a complex task. No parent is perfect. Problems in childhood into adulthood often stem from one’s interaction with his or her parents. And often the key to self-understanding lies in examining this parent-child relationship. I say that not to find fault with everyone’s parents, but rather to call attention to the origin of a lot of

personal problems. Low self-esteem, for example, is practically always learned somewhere in a person's upbringing.

Self Reflection Question

Were there any issues, personal distractions, or even abuses or traumatic events that you endured in childhood/ adolescence that you feel may have a hand in contributing to your current frame of mind?

(End)

Thank you for taking the time to read the Introduction and Chapter One from **Secrets from the Sofa: A Psychologist's Guide to Achieving Personal Peace** by Dr. Kenneth Herman.

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