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Being the Whole You... Life Beyond the System

The System Helps— But Only We Can Do the Learning

By Rondi McFarlane

Let me start with an emphatic YES—there IS life beyond the mental health system. People need to realize that we are not our diagnosis; we are more than our mental health and addiction difficulties.

I have found that there are times when people are not able to see their own personal strengths, especially in the midst of crisis. Our own inner dialogue is what can be the cause of a crisis, often without us being aware of it. With a lot of hard work and self awareness, you can effectively change any situation for yourself.

We often send ourselves very negative messages and may not even be aware of it. There are many techniques to help people become aware of their own inner dialogue. I have found that writing my feelings down on paper and rereading them later to be a real eye opener.

Anyone who has taken Cognitive Behavioural Therapy is aware of the triangle: thoughts, behaviours and feelings. They are all connected and affect how we feel about ourselves. The idea is if we change our thoughts, we effectively change our feelings, which can effectively change our behaviours.

When I first heard of the triangle years ago, I thought “How can I change anything, let alone my thoughts!?” I struggled with this concept for some time. The idea that I could change anything about my life was foreign to me. I felt that if I changed anything in my life, I would lose who I thought I was. Through writing, I have discovered new things about myself. With work, I was able to challenge my unhelpful thoughts and find insight into what is best for me.

The system can be used as a tool, but you alone have complete control over your life. In the past few months, I have had many ‘ah ha’ moments.

One of these ‘ah ha’ moments was that life can be STRESSFUL. When we start to realize this, life can actually become pleasant. We all have stressful times, and it is our perception of the event that can throw us into crisis. Everything we do in life is a choice.

When you become aware of your own inner dialogue and challenge the messages you are sending yourself, things can change. This process does not happen overnight—it comes from hard work and patience. We may not be able to change what is happens externally; however, we can have control over how we react. People often say things like “...they were pushing my buttons.” However, we can choose whether or not to let our buttons be pushed.

Another important aspect in taking control of our situation is LETTING GO. Before I was able to “let go” of my anger, bitterness and hatred, I first had to acknowledge it. Once I was able to do this, I let it walk along beside me for a time. Eventually I just kept going, and all the anger, bitterness and hatred could not keep up with me anymore.

A difficult moment does not have to turn into a difficult day, week, month or more. The system may offer supports, tools and lessons—but only we can do the learning. ■

The Self Help Alliance Believes that Recovery is Possible and that there is life beyond the addiction and mental health system!

Taking a Stand to Combat Loneliness

By Amanda Bourassa



There is no question how lonely it can be when dealing with health issues. It can be confusing and overwhelming. I know when I am dealing with something, it often feels like no one else can possibly understand what I am going through. It is incredibly lonely, and for me, lonely is not a good feeling. Throughout various challenges, I have learned that it is important to

have others in my life and I have pushed to find those precious people to fill my days with happiness and support.

Life circumstances have recently changed for me. While I feel incredibly blessed for what I have been given, I find myself incredibly lonely again. Those who were around before are not anymore. I do not see adults very often. I never get invited anywhere. I do not work with any other adults. I am just alone. I had a moment recently where I questioned why am I feeling so sad? My life is good, I have been blessed, what is missing? Then I realized—it is the loneliness. My life may be beautiful and full of love, but I still have a personal desire to have interaction with other adults more regularly, and that is lacking.

I know I am not the only one who has ever felt lonely. Have you? I know that feelings of loneliness for me can actually lead to less interaction with others, and feeling self-conscious and unsure of myself. However, I know that these are just feelings, and while I feel this way, I do not need to act this way. Ultimately it is up to me to try and find a way to do something about it.

Thinking about doing something about it can bring up anxieties: fear of being rejected, let down and not accepted. Making a change may not be an easy thing to do. But again, these are feelings and I can rise up against them and act in a way to better meet my needs.

On brainstorming ways to find more interaction with others, I created a list that I will share with you:

- **Community groups/events:** There is so much that goes on in our communities, if we seek out the information. Check out a support group, attend a church service, go to a mom and tot play group, join a common interest group such as a sports activity or book club, return to learning through a computer class. At all of these places we will find other people. We may not have a best friend there, but we will be surrounded by others of like minds where we can feel accepted, included, and these connections may eventually develop into friendships.
- **Hobbies:** Sometimes loneliness can be from feeling like you have nothing to do. Try something new. Knitting, writing, sports. Or start up something you have not done in a while. Find other ways to fill your days and put your effort into seeing progress in that hobby.

- **Pick up the phone/start the conversation:** Face the fear and just ask someone to meet up. Arrange to go for a walk, or to meet for coffee. Perhaps you can get together to play a game or arrange to watch a sporting event together. The toughest part is finding the courage to ask someone if they would like to get together with you. If they decline, try to not take it personally. They may have a wide spectrum of reasons to decline. Ask someone else.
- **Scheduled meetings:** Find someone you enjoy spending time with, and arrange to visit with them regularly. Perhaps you can go for a walk weekly, or meet at a coffee shop every other week. Setting something up regularly will give you something to look forward to, and if it is arranged in advance, other plans can be made around the set plans.
- **Volunteer:** Think of something you have a passion for and find a related place to volunteer. There are so many opportunities for volunteering within our communities. Not only does it feel fantastic to give of yourself and help others, you may also find others with similar interests and be able to build relationships.
- **Reframe your thinking:** It can feel like an inconvenience to call someone for a chat or to invite them to get together. I know I often feel like I am intruding in their lives. However, if I think about it, perhaps they are feeling lonely too. Maybe they could also experience joy from hearing from you and knowing you want to spend time with them. I know how lovely my day can become when I find out someone was thinking of me; so call someone, and let them know you are thinking of them.
- **Get help:** If your loneliness is stemming from needing help with something, go and seek the help you need. Advocate for yourself and know you are important and deserve to have your needs met.

If you are experiencing loneliness, I encourage you to grasp this opportunity to make positive change along with me. It may not be easy, but it is worth it to take a stand for what you want and need. You are important, you matter and you can make the difference for yourself. ■



Reaching Out - Tools for Recovery

Addiction

As with many challenges we face in life, overcoming addiction does not have any quick fixes or a set list of “how to” instructions. However, there are some tools you can use to begin and to continue your recovery journey.

There are different streams of thought when it comes to first steps in recovery from addiction. For some, that step may be total abstinence no matter what, while others may choose a different approach. However you choose to begin your journey, recovery from addiction is not just about stopping—but about creating a new life that does not include using. Not every aspect of life has to change, but if you are honest with yourself, you will see patterns emerge at times of use. Here are some examples of ways to start creating that new life:

- **Avoid HALT states of being:** No matter what we are struggling with, there are 4 basic states that will lessen our abilities to cope. Add your own ideas of how you can be prepared for these states:

Hungry – keep healthy snacks handy

Angry – learn deep breathing and anger management techniques

Lonely – have friends contact information available, join online support groups, know your local distress and crisis phone numbers.

Tired – aim for 7-9 hours of sleep, make time to nap or relax quietly without distractions.

- **Create a list of your high-risk situations:** Reflect back and list all of the potential events that have been risky for you in the past, and keep a copy of that list with you. Add to the list as needed, and do your best to avoid these troublesome times.
- **Strive for balance:** Though working on your recovery will be very important, remember it is not all that you are. In addition to spending time working on yourself, do your best to develop your personal relationships, leisure interests, education, spirituality and all that makes you who you are.
- **Physical Activity:** Being active releases endorphins in the brain, which help us feel better. Find something you enjoy, whether running on your own or joining a sports team.
- **Reminders and inspirations:** Have reminders, cues, images, affirmations, etc. available whenever possible – such as in your purse or wallet, posted on your mirror or refrigerator. These may include photos of loved ones, phone numbers of supports, quotes, affirmation statements, goals, your recovery plan, etc.



- **Take time to relax:** Often addictive behaviors begin as relaxation tools to escape and relieve tension. If this applies to you, than a key to overcoming your addiction may be to change the way you relieve tension. Being able to take time to relax in healthier ways will help prevent built up stress and avoid relapse. Relaxation techniques can include going for a walk, mediation, exercise, creative hobbies and more. Try a few out until you find what works for you.

- **Deep breathing:** Relaxation does not always have to take up a lot of time. Try to pause for 5-10 deep breaths 3-5 times a day. This seemingly small activity can help you maintain a calm state so that when something stressful or triggering occurs, you are better prepared.

- **SMART goal setting:** It can be easy to become overwhelmed with a long list of goals on your recovery plan that seem to be difficult to obtain. It can be helpful to break larger goals into smaller steps following guidelines such as these:

Specific – include the who, what, where, why and when of the goal.

Measurable – how will you clearly know when you goal is complete?

Attainable – based on your skills, abilities and resources, is it a goal you are confident you can achieve?

Realistic - We may want to be a rock star, but maybe a music teacher is more realistic. This does not mean that we should not set ‘rock star’ type goals, however it is important to be aware of the steps needed to reach those higher goals.

Timely – what is your time frame for the goal? It is difficult to be motivated for something you hope to complete “someday.”

- **Laughter and fun:** When working on serious issues in our lives, it can be easy to forget to take time to laugh and have fun. Enjoy a good comedy show or movie, play board games with friends, or do something you have not done since childhood like tobogganing or swinging at the park.

- **Connect with your spiritual side:** There are no religious requirements for recovery. For many, finding their spiritual self is as simple as connecting with nature. On your recovery journey, try to be open to potential new and past spiritual feelings.

- **12 step groups:** These types of groups and programs have proven to be very helpful for many. Meetings allow participants to gain support and learning from others on their own journey and develop hope.

Continued on page 6...

Regular Exercise Changed My Life

By Jerry Fogarty

I used to be overweight, lazy and not a very productive person. All that changed when I started to exercise regularly.

I began to feel better—I had more energy. I could do more of the things I like to do, such as read, write, play music, and, yes, exercise. My overall attitude toward people and life in general also improved.

Before I began my exercise program I had a bad habit—I liked to drink beer. I drank beer every day and as time went by, I increased the number of beers I drank. As a result, I developed a tolerance to alcohol and a ‘beer belly’ to go with it. I also was not eating properly.

I have come a long way but I still have a long way to go. The idea is to keep up the good work. One of my goals is to get my time down in a 5 kilometer run. Each time I run, I am able to run it a little faster. I might not break any land speed records but I will have fun trying.

I had a challenging decision to make—either ruin my health with too much drinking or stop drinking, exercise, eat right and have good health. I chose the later and I am glad I did.

As I exercised I began to get a sense of healing, both mentally and physically. It was hard at first to keep exercising on a regular basis. That all changed with time as I became more dedicated to my exercise programs.

As for my diet, I closely watch what I eat now. I eat fruits, vegetables and cereals. When I go out to eat, I order a salad with my meal for supper. I drink skim milk and before purchasing canned foods, I read the label to make sure there is not too much fat, cholesterol or sodium.

I believe anyone can improve their life by kicking a bad habit. It can be done through determination, dedication and the realization that your health is important.

Start slow and strive to make gradual improvements. Walk, run, cycle, do yoga, dance, lift weights. Whatever you do, do it with gusto—get into it. You might want to join a fitness club that has equipment you do not have, and you may meet people that are interested in improving their health as well.

Regular exercise changed my life—I believe it can do the same for you. ■

Recovery

By Keehan Koorn

Right now,
RECOVERY means
that when I come home
to a GIANT pile of dirty dishes,
my self-talk (instead of getting
me down) says ‘Hun, you’ve
had a TOUGH WEEK!’ Then
I eat pudding with my
finger (there
are no
clean
spoons)
and I
allow
myself
to
relax
and
watch
TV.

ASK REEVES

By Paul Reeve

Q: Do grandparents have rights to access grandchildren?

A: Recently, I attended a review hearing to support grandparents wanting access to their grandchildren whom they love so much. The children had been living with the grandparents when the Children’s Aid Society (CAS) took them into care. The grandparents were told they had no legal right to custody but they appealed to the CAS review board. The process took a few hours and eventually the adjudicator granted them access. After the hearing, they told me that learning how to advocate was very helpful in keeping them focused during the appeal process. That learning, their passion for what they wanted, and knowing it was in the best interest of the children helped to sustain them through an emotionally trying time.

Visit our website to access the Advocacy Manual to learn more about advocating for yourself.

www.self-help-alliance.ca ■

If you have advocacy questions or you would like to submit to “Ask Reeves” contact Paul Reeve, Advocacy Coordinator, or send a comment to editor@self-help.ca. If you do not see your questions in print, please note Paul responds to all questions on an individual basis.

The Great Outdoors

By Mikayla Goving

Even though we are constantly hearing about why physical activity is good for us, getting motivated to go to the gym or other indoor activities can be a challenge. Personally, I have always struggled with going to the gym, but since I have moved toward more outdoor activities, it has been much easier to keep engaged. We often feel better when we are able to get outside, and the research helps to explain why:



Image courtesy of Mikayla Goving

- Increased vitamin D levels:** Vitamin D is created in our bodies when our skin is exposed to sufficient amounts of sunlight. Not only can vitamin D help improve our mood, but studies show that it can help with issues of osteoporosis, cancer and stroke. You do not need to go tanning to receiving enough vitamin D—during the summer, 10-15 minutes of sunshine on exposed skin a day is more than enough.
 - Benefits mood and mental health:** Compared to individuals walking or running indoors, the benefits of outdoor activities can include less anger, stress and depression while increasing energy and feelings of revitalization.
 - Improved concentration:** Studies related to attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) showed that individuals were better able to concentrate after a walk through a park compared to those who walked through a residential neighborhood or downtown area.
 - Increased healing time:** When exposed to natural light after major surgeries, studies show that people reported less pain and stress and took fewer pain medications than others. In addition, those with a natural view from their window, such as trees, also reported improved results over those with brick wall or other urban views.
 - Improved response to crisis:** Studies from Sweden found that merely being exposed to a natural setting was more restorative to those experiencing the highest levels of stress. In addition, those who spent time in nature on a regularly basis demonstrated greater resilience in times of crisis.
 - Improved sleep:** Being exposed to increasing amounts of artificial light from computers, tablets and smart phones effects our levels of melatonin, the hormone that helps us sleep. Increased exposure to natural light can help improve our quality of sleep.
 - Increased physical activity:** Indoors, it is easy to head for the TV. However, when you make an effort to spend more time outdoors, you are more likely to get moving.
- Add a walk to your routine:** After a meal or on the weekends, add regular walk in a park, trail or green space. Invite friends, family or neighbours to join.
 - Skip the car or the bus:** Need to get somewhere not too far from home? Walk, bike or rollerblade to return your books to the library or pick up a carton of milk.
 - Join a hiking group, running club, etc.:** Many areas have free or low cost groups, including learn to run programs for beginners. Places to find these groups include your local YMCA, city activities guides, fitness centres, sporting goods stores, and online (for example www.meetup.com).
 - Join a sports club or group:** In addition to walking, hiking and running, there are many other outdoor sports and activities you can try. Rowing clubs, baseball or softball leagues, lawn bowling, etc. Many areas even offer adult beginner leagues for those just starting out.
 - Volunteer for a community garden:** Enjoy helping yourself and your community digging in the dirt and watching yummy fruits and vegetable grow.
 - Go camping:** Never been camping or have not been in a while? Ontario Parks and some private camp sites have tips online for new campers, and even hands on learn to camp programs. Especially if you go with a group, programs can be very affordable and provide almost all of the required equipment.
 - Explore your local conservation areas:** With more than 270 conservation areas in Ontario, there are many opportunities to connect with nature. Many sites offer free events, guided activities, camping and equipment rentals. Check out www.ontarioconservationareas.ca for more information.
- Spending quality time outdoors leaves me feeling refreshed and better able to cope with the challenges of life. There is nothing like feeling the wind on my face and stopping to watch wildlife along the way. Whether you choose to spend time in your backyard or are thinking about a camping trip, spending quality time with the great outdoors is a great way to work on your overall health and well-being. ■

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Reaching Out - Tools for Recovery

...Continued from page 3

- **Be truthful:** Many people struggling with addiction have lied to themselves and others about obtaining and using substances, and the consequences endured. For some, lying has become a habit that may be just as difficult to break as the substance use itself.
Being honest can be difficult, even scary – it leaves us open and vulnerable. However, when you are trying to make change in your life, it is important to take an honest look at yourself and avoid hiding.
- **Share only when it feels safe:** Being open and honest does not mean you need to tell everyone your story. Some people may be supportive and understanding, while others may be less so. There is no need to be ashamed of trying to better your situation, just be clear about who you really want involved.
- **Ask for professional supports:** For some, addictions have been a way of self-medicating other struggles in their life. Having support from your doctor, a counsellor or other professionals you trust can be helpful. Remember, the journey is yours and their role is to support you on it.
- **Read:** Some of us find inspiration and motivation through reading books, magazines and journal articles related to recovery. The internet or your local library can be good places to start, or contact your local Self Help Alliance or addiction services for suggestions.
- **Ask for help and accept support:** When a person says “What can I do to help?” most often they really mean it. We are social beings who often do better with the support of others. It may be difficult at first to ask for or accept help, or to know what you need – so repeat to yourself “I am not a burden when I ask for help.”

- **Change is hard:** Especially during early stages of your journey, you will face difficulties, even when making positive changes. Despite the struggles, many report it was worth it. Experiencing recovery from addiction helped people find deeper parts of themselves and an inner peace they would not have found otherwise. Eventually, you will find a place where you can be grateful for what have learned from your journey.
- **Stick with it!** A study followed more than 600 men, many of whom had experienced alcohol addiction over a significant number of years. The study found that after 5 years of being alcohol free, relapse was very rare. This tells us that the longer you are able to remain free of your addiction, the easier it will be to keep going!

These tools can be helpful for all types of life struggles, not just addictions. We can all benefit by taking the time to focus on taking better care of ourselves. In today's fast paced society, we are all hoping for a quick fix to our challenges. However, a recovery journey that is given the tools and the time to develop will have the best results in the long run. ■

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Send along your comments about a recovery tool that assisted you on your recovery journey, or a recovery related question to:

c/o Self Help Alliance, Newsletter Editor
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The Reason for Self Help

By Frank Sider

Self Help is a friendly place, where you meet young and old face.

Topics can help us all, when we are up or when we fall,

To sort out the problems that we all live with and we share times well spent.

Let all share with one another.

Hand in hand and spread love not war in our land.

Inspiration at Speed: The Extremes of Speed – Tony Harris of Race2Recovery

By Colene Allen

“No person on this planet is defined by what happens to them. They are defined by who they choose to be in the world.”

Author’s Note: Race2Recovery hold a very special place in my heart, as their story unfolded during a turbulent time in my own life. This team of wounded soldiers and rally raid experts set out on a mission to prove that injury and/or disability has no bearing on what a person can achieve.

The stereotypical view of a soldier is a romantic one of a handsome man in a uniform prepared to take on the enemy. That traditional image provides a strong sense of duty, honour, determination, courage, and strength. While we rely on soldiers to defend us and our way of life, we rarely think of the cost to those men. Certainly, we do not think that once damaged, these soldiers still have a lot of fight left in them.

Captain Anthony Harris (retired) (Tony) is determined, courageous, bound by duty, and upholds the values of integrity and honesty. As an amputee, his expectations for himself far exceed those of the people around him, and as he once put it, “I know my limitations, and I’m far beyond those already.” Beneath all of those characteristics that make him so appealing, Tony is a man that suffers from an incredibly strong fear of failure. Despite this, he and his mates would decide to compete in the most difficult and extreme motorsport event in the world.

“Have you thought about rallying?” said the poster in the rehabilitation ward that led Tony and a friend, Corporal Tom Neathway, to found a race team and compete in the Dakar 2013—a 15 day, 5,600 mile race. The challenge—both Tony and Tom are amputees—having been ‘blown up’ while serving in Afghanistan. Choosing to compete in the Dakar meant the team would face not only the logistical challenges of preparing for the event, but also to be the first disability team in the history of the Dakar.

The Race2Recovery team’s experience was not a smooth one. Mechanical problems, accidents and injuries to team mates eventually left them with 1 of 5 cars and no support crew. However, despite every obstacle and set back, they made the decision to carry on. According to Tony,

“There was never a moment where we were going to...not keep going. The only way we were not going to finish would have been if all four cars had massive failure and the vehicles couldn’t go on. The human story of it is that at no point were we ever going to give up.”

Determination is a word with many meanings—including strength of character. Tony and the entire team had the belief that anything worth doing is worth the challenges. The fear of failing once the goal was set drove the team to ensure they succeeded, even if their definition of success was different from others. The passion that Race2Recovery brought to their team and their mission was infectious. It is a testament to their determination and perseverance that they even made it to the start line.

During our interview, Tony talked about shifting his thinking from ‘I’m not sure I’ll ever walk again’ to being able to achieve what he and Race2Recovery have. I asked him what the pivotal moment was for him, and his answer stunned me.

“Making the decision that I’d have my leg cut off. Once I made that decision, I knew I would walk again. That was the best decision I’ve ever made, even though it meant losing a part of me physically...If by losing my left leg it has allowed me to live a life that I couldn’t have dreamed of living before, then that by far and away was the best decision I ever made.”

Tony has not let what happened to him define who he is or what he can achieve. He has taken what many would consider a weakness and turned into the most incredible strength. The same holds true for all the members of Race2Recovery.

On the last day of the Dakar, ‘Joy,’ Race2Recovery’s running last car, came across the finish line. They were in last place. However, it was at that moment that Race2Recovery re-defined the meaning of ‘winning’. They had come through so much, survived everything that the Dakar had thrown at them, and done it all with a steadfast determination and what Tony calls “British Bulldog Spirit”. Tony and Race2Recovery had set out to prove that disability had no bearing on what someone could achieve. They proved their point, perhaps in the most extreme way possible.

I have come away from my interview with Tony and the story of Race2Recovery with very valuable lessons. *No person on this planet is defined by what happens to them. They are defined by who they choose to be in the world.* I have also learned that out of the most difficult decisions that people have to make, come some of the most incredible and inspiring results. ■

Colene Allen is a volunteer for the Self Help Alliance Cambridge site, licensed race official and motorsports writer with In the Pits Media.

About Us

Self Help Alliance Services

Advocacy Support

Our Advocacy Coordinator offers assistance to individuals and families in the areas of housing, income support, employment, treatment and legal issues.

Training is providing for systems advocacy. People are supported to take an active role in evaluating and changing the mental health and addiction system.

Entrepreneurship

The Entrepreneurship Facilitator offers support to individuals who have experience with the mental health and/or addiction system and are interested in self employment or starting their own business.

Community Liaison

This position is responsible for connecting with those who experience mental health and/or addiction issues who may not be connected to the formal mental health system and/or peer support services.

Skills for Safer Living

A Suicide-Intervention Support Group

A twenty week skills based group and peer support for individuals with recuing thoughts and behaviours about suicide combine as our Skills for Safer Living program.

Spark of Brilliance

This program provides opportunities for people living with mental health and addiction issues and their supportive allies to experience the expressive arts, within a supportive, understanding, community based environment.

Centre for Excellence in Peer Support

The Self Help Alliance envisions that peer roles will exist within every juncture of the mental health and addiction system. Self Help Alliance is a peer driven service that is best suited for providing the system with support in this area.

See page 1 for contact information and our website for more information about these and other services.

Write to the Editor

The views expressed are those of the authors' and do not necessarily reflect those of the Self Help Alliance.

We Want to Hear From You!

Send along your articles, images, letters to the editor, comments or views about topics in this newsletter or other topics related to the mental health system.

Please note that any items submitted may be edited for space and other needs of the "Changing Lives" Newsletter.

Please send your items to:

c/o Self Help Alliance, Newsletter Editor
67 King Street East, Kitchener ON N2G 2K4

Email: editor@self-help.ca

For Your Inspiration—Positive Affirmations

Self criticism can be far more detrimental to our mental health than what others have to say. Affirmations can be a great way to develop a more positive outlook and combat our negative thoughts.

Positive affirmations are usually personalized, short, positive statements. The focus is often on a specific set of negative beliefs we want to change. By replacing our damaging thoughts with supportive, nurturing statements, we can come to believe and internalize the positive.

People sometimes wonder if techniques such as positive affirmations really work—and they do! Continually stating the affirmation with conviction chips away at even the most

stubborn negativity. Once your walls are down, you can better examine where your negative thoughts are coming from and begin to replace them with a more positive inner truth.

Affirmations can be done in many ways. You can use the same statement(s) over and over or find new ones each day or week. Some find it helpful to read them aloud in the mirror. However you choose to approach it, state your affirmations with passion as if you truly believe them—eventually you will! Here are a few sample affirmations to get you started:

- I know that I deserve love and I accept it now
- I trust in the journey of life
- Life is a joy filled with happiness

(Source: www.vitalaffirmations.com)