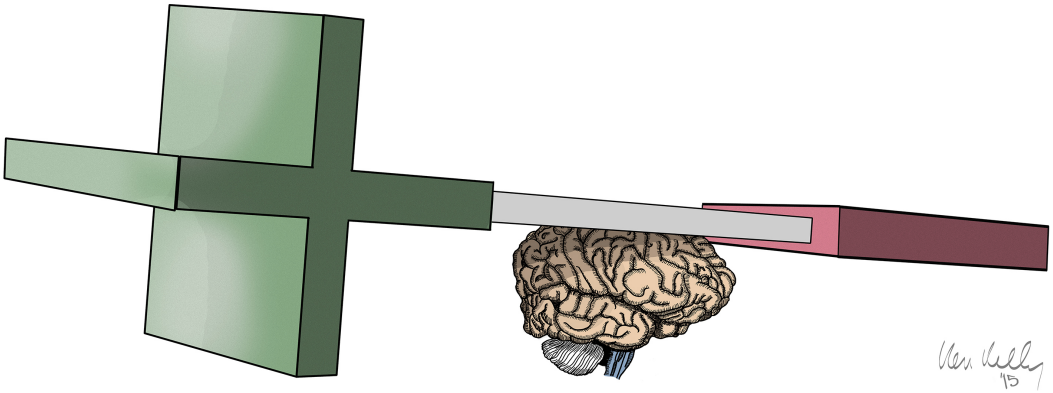


CHAPTER FIVE



OPTIMISM SKILLS

Optimism skills can prevent and help to cure depression. When we spot our negative self-talk we can transform it into optimistic and encouraging predictions. There are simple ways of turning from pessimism towards optimism and hope.

Learning Optimism

One of the first optimism 'interventions' took place in an inner city school in the U.S. where a number of children were experiencing the onset of depression due to living in conflicted family situations. Their parents continually argued, often expressing hatred for one another in front of the children. These children experienced a mixture of sadness and shame, often blaming themselves for the parental conflict or break-up.

A team of positive psychologists put together an 'optimism' program to help these children combat depression and to help them cope with future difficulties^{1 & 2}. The result was truly astonishing. Within a short time their mood lifted and they became happier and more outgoing.

Even later on into their teens these 'optimism' children, previously at risk, experienced fewer difficulties and were better adjusted than their peers.

Regretfully, at-risk children without support adjust badly in their teen years. They may become addicted to alcohol or drugs, involved with criminality or develop a mental illness. But the learned 'teen optimists' were well and happy.

Optimism Skills

Optimism skills help us to change a negative outlook, and to interpret situations and challenges positively².

We replace the feeling of helplessness and negativity with a sense of control and joy.

Optimistic people enjoy life more; they make adventurous and wise choices for themselves and others.

Excessive optimism can lead a person to

- over-indulge in alcohol, drugs, food, sex, shopping or entertainment
- ignore the bills that have to be paid
- ignore the devastating effect that over-doing something can have on the human body
- forget that our bodies need good nutrition, regular sleep and purposeful action for us to stay well.

Optimism and Our Will to Survive

Viktor Frankl¹³ is one of the few people who survived horrific treatment at Auschwitz, one of the cruelest German concentration camps set up during World War II. He could have escaped beforehand, but as a psychiatrist he was in charge of a mental hospital where he would write fake diagnoses for Jews who would otherwise have been executed. Also, he did not want to leave his ageing parents behind.

Frankl, his wife and his parents were sent to a concentration camp where his dad died. His mother was murdered in the gas chamber. Frankl ended up in Auschwitz, not knowing whether his wife who was put into another camp was alive or dead. He was starving, frozen to the bone and forced to work hard for inhumane hours on end, as were his co-prisoners.

Previously, Frankl had made quite a study of the human will to live. He had set up Youth Councils all over Europe where adolescents could get free advice. He was in charge of a 3000 bed female suicide hospital and was doing everything to help people find a meaningful life for themselves as he believed this would help to prevent suicide.

Frankl kept himself alive in the camps by thinking of and talking to the image of his wife; but he also wanted to survive to research why some people would want to take their own life and others would not.

He gathered a group of prisoners and told them to watch for when someone would be sitting staring aimlessly for hours, obviously having lost interest in living. The task then would be to help that individual to pinpoint something he wanted to do in the future after the camp, like for example talk to his grandchildren or tell others what had happened.

When a prisoner put his mind to believing that the war would be over by Easter, he would then have the strength to hang on, even though previously he had been ready to give up. However, when the war was not over by Easter, unless that man was able to say 'Okay, then perhaps by Christmas it will be all over', he would not survive. The prisoners learned to use optimism as a weapon for surviving inhuman conditions that would otherwise have killed them. Frankl lived until he was 92, having written books translated into 46 languages on meaningfulness and survival.

When someone dies, the person closest to them can lose interest in life. This can be a natural part of the grieving process but most people will eventually realise that a beloved can still live on within their memory. Sometimes, however, we can get stuck and need help to move on from the natural pessimism we experience due to the death of a loved one.

Negativity Bias - The Survival Instinct

We humans have a natural negativity bias as we remember negative events for much longer than positive events³.

Martin Seligman and his team studied excessive and unhelpful negativity and pinpointed six specific ways that we undermine our own happiness:

We dramatize

We exaggerate an event to the extreme of disaster: 'This is the end of our world, everything is now lost!' or 'Everyone hates me'. Even if it was true, this is not a helpful way of thinking and most times we are totally wrong. Not everyone hates us. There is a positive side to the event, a lesson to learn. There

are opportunities to communicate with other people. There is a survival story to tell afterwards.

We imagine we cannot bear a particular discomfort or pain

We think we cannot cope with a particular situation or pain which is really bothering us, that this painful or unbearable situation will never stop; but it always does. We think an unbearable situation cannot be avoided in the future, but there are skills we can use and plans we can make to improve our future.

We keep imagining ourselves to be helpless

This is when we believe that we are no good at something and cannot learn even though we have never tried. Someone might have told us that someone else is brilliant (while we are not), but the truth is that our potential as human beings is enormous. If we were to set our minds to learn something or overcome some obstacle, we can link up with forces and people who will support that decision and help us to get to a place we never thought possible.

We believe something has to be perfect:

We think everything is lost because of one imperfect detail to which we keep giving attention. I get a spot on my dress, someone humiliates me publicly, I get a bump on my car, I don't reach that high note, I cannot get the nice colour I wanted for painting my walls, etc.

It is okay that we are not perfect.
It is okay that others are not perfect.
It is okay that jobs do not always get done perfectly due to time constraints and other priorities.

Life is full of imperfections and that is sometimes a painful experience.

Building our life expecting people to be well-behaved and things to work out perfectly to plan is bound to leave us disappointed most of the time. We need other priorities!

We see everything through a window of rejection:

When we feel life is not going too well for us we can start thinking and feeling that other people are looking down on us

ignoring us or speaking about us behind our backs. Believing that other people are trying to deliberately harm us can be completely fabricated out of our imagination. Of course if somebody is bullying us or harming us we need to talk to them or someone else about this, but often this feeling of rejection can be based on something in our past.

Negative experiences from our past can colour how we view the world.

If we have had an experience of rejection from someone close and did not fully process it, unknown to ourselves we may have certain triggers or weak points. These pull us back into a darkened frame of mind. However, once we know this we can take steps to TURN our focus (see [page 195](#)).

Most people tend to be more concerned about their own lives than ours. Even when they are mean or cruel, it has more to do with their inability to cope than with us.

Negative Conclusions rarely come in ones!

Recently, I lost my car keys after parking and taking the train. When I eventually returned to my car, still without the keys, the passenger window had been smashed and some CDs were taken.

I observed myself moving through all the negativity conclusions:

*I thought I would never find the key (**dramatizing**) and that it would be almost impossible to get a new key.*

*I felt I could not handle not having a car (**pain intolerance**) as other people depended on me for lifts and I needed it for teaching in a town with no public transport.*

*I felt **totally helpless** as the key was nowhere to be found – it could be anywhere: on the train, on the street, in someone's pocket.*

*When I discovered the smashed car window **I felt rejected** – I could not have one evening out without something bad happening.*

*And I felt humiliated in front of my friend, as I had wanted a perfect evening (**perfectionism**), having got tickets for the River Dance show and organised a lovely trip by car and train to relax around the lovely Canal Theatre where the show was on.*

Thankfully, all along I recognised my negative assessments and kept making an effort to look for solutions rather than getting angry or depressed.

So many people helped me to look for the keys. A friend came in and brought us home. Everyone was super empathetic. The keys were found at the train-station, and we got a second hand car window at a reasonable price.

In the end really it was not that big a deal but only because I recognised the traps that were presented to me. Otherwise, I would have fallen apart. Someone else might be shaken by something entirely different.

Positive Illusions

We might view ourselves as realists but research shows that realists tend to be slightly depressed.

We need a certain amount of positive illusions in order to believe that we can succeed and overcome future challenges⁴.

People who are well and happy tend to use a slightly exaggerated form of optimism in crisis situations in order not to be overpowered by a negative experience or negative information. This works really well. Surprisingly, positive illusions are much closer to reality than we initially perceive due to our negativity bias.

Positive Illusions Gone Astray

Positive illusions can of course be so exaggerated that we become arrogant, thinking that we are indestructable, that we do not need to do the work required to succeed or do not need to consider other people's feelings.

Positive illusions have more to do with giving something a go rather than assuming that we just cannot do something. Most things can be learned.

How Do You Interpret

Failure

The **Optimist** looks at adversities or failures:

as a way of learning something new, a positive challenge:

'This happens to lots of people; they managed and so will I!'

as passing:

'Things will get back to normal or be even better'.

as only affecting one area of their life:

'Thankfully, I still have It could have been a lot worse.'

The **Pessimist** looks at adversities or failures:

as a personal rejection:

'I just cannot get anything right'

as permanent:

'Nothing ever works out for me.'

as a reflection on their whole life:

'This is disastrous. There is no point in making an effort'.

How Do You Interpret

Success

The **Optimist** looks at success:

as a personal encouragement:

'I am really getting places. I can make a difference!'

as permanent:

'It is great to have these skills in my back pocket'.

as affecting every area of their life:

'This is brilliant; my life is really coming together now'

The **Pessimist** looks at success:

as nothing important:

'Big deal! It was purely accidental, I am still nowhere'

as a once off:

'Sure that might never happen again'

as affecting a very small part of their life:

'It doesn't really make any difference. I am not much good'

Teach Yourself Optimism

Optimism skills help us to locate the negative thought patterns which rob us of happiness and life satisfaction. Here we make a conscious effort to locate negative thought-patterns and replace them with interpretations that lead to greater energy and hope.

There are a number of simple skills that lead to Optimism, to:

1. **TURN the Event**
2. **SOFTEN Your Language**
3. **BUILD Your Self-Optimism**
4. **SNAP into Optimism**
5. **WRITING about Your Worst Experience**

1. TURN the event

Turning the negative experience or situation into a learning opportunity and personal advantage takes time. Brain pathways have been deepened over the years of spontaneously jumping to some negative conclusions.

What we want is to create new brain pathways that activate the feel-good hormones of dopamine and serotonin which open up our minds to creativity and hope rather than defensiveness and suspicion.

An early negative event in life can have wired in a negative thought pattern.

Losing a parent or important person at an early age can leave a person with the impression that bad things are going to happen. Unless a person is supported in somehow processing the loss a negative world view can take root.

Similarly, when we grow up in a household where depression or violence is 'normal' we will tend to think that life is a difficult struggle rather than full of beautiful challenges to learn and enjoy.

Over time however we can turn things around. Positive words and affirmations and less absolute judgements can help us to create a different more helpful output⁵. Over time we can develop a trusting and positive mindset. There is everything to be gained by making the effort and nothing to lose by doing so - except our freedom to grumble and procrastinate.

BRAIN TRAIN

to TURN the table

The TURN Steps

TURNED is a well tested process which people use to literally turn a negative discouraging situation into a vision of positive potentiality. Based on the successful ABCDE⁶ optimism programme that helped 8-year olds to process a discouraging and negative home-situation, TURN steps turn around potentially paralyzing experiences.

THE PROCESS

T
U
R
N
E
D

Place the word T-U-R-N-E-D vertically on an A4 page allowing space between each letter for the steps on the next page. (For a detailed template see www.HappinessSkills.ie).

	STEPS	YOUR STORY	MY STORY
T	Tell your story of this terrible traumatic or difficult situation you experienced		On entering a roundabout a car was 'suddenly' in front of me. I drove into it!
U	Understanding this to mean that ...		I am a terrible driver. I can't be trusted with a car It is going to cost a lot of money.
R	Resulting in which feelings, thoughts and mood for you?		I feel awful, a failure, a fool and frightened of being sued.
N	New nourishing approach, new attitude to this event:		No one was hurt. Only the side-door is damaged. My insurance is good. This is a valuable learning experience. Many other people made similar mistakes.

E	Energy is now:		More positive: a 'can do' approach. My mood has improved.
D	Doing differently:		I will drive with greater care, especially at roundabouts. I will consult with friends and the insurance company.

Turning our thoughts away from personal failure, from fearful future projections and money worries towards a self-compassionate and objective interpretation sets the mind free to cope.

Negative ruminations of disillusioned thoughts are broken and turned into constructive and connecting

Turning difficult and hurtful events to profitable personal experiences creates new optimistic brain pathways that help us to access helpful and healing thoughts in time of torment and disillusion.

thoughts that energise and inspire us to take the situation in our stride, sort it and move on.

TURN the table at Home or in the Classroom

Holding an optimistic view of someone else can make all the difference. A number of longitudinal studies show that children and adolescents do much better academically and throughout life's various challenges when they experience someone who is optimistic on their behalf.

Using the above TURNED process is a reliable way of transforming our negativity bias into a more balanced and empowered position where we make healthy choices for ourselves and others.

Helping someone to TURN

Once familiar with the TURNed formula you can translate it into a friendly conversation whenever you feel someone is open to telling their story of misery:

- T** Tell me what happened.....
- U** How are you **U**nderstanding this to affect your life?
- R** The **R**esult of this is that you feel.....
- N** What would be a **N**ew **N**ourishing way of interpreting this situation?
- E** How do you feel now? More in control?
More **E**nergy?
- D** What will you **D**o to benefit from this situation?

BRAIN TRAIN

Choose a situation from this list (or your own) and work your way through the TURN steps

- Lily's parents are always arguing and she feels it is her fault – **how could she TURN the experience?**

- Peter's dad is moving out as he wants to be with another woman and Peter feels betrayed –
- Jenny's sister had an accident and is now in a wheelchair. Jenny is sad for her –
- Orlaigh's family is moving to another town on the other side of the country and she feels she will lose all her friends –

STEPS	YOUR STORIES		
T Tell your terrible/traumatic or difficult story			
U Present understanding of the situation			

R Resulting in which feelings, thoughts and mood?			
N New nourishing approach, new attitude to this event?			
E Energy is now?			
D What to do now?			

2. Softening your Statements⁷

We may not be aware, but when we exaggerate and dramatise negative events we are priming our minds for a negative outcome, not just for now but also for the future.

Words like

- ALWAYS
- NEVER
- NOTHING EVER
- NO ONE
- EVERYONE
- CAN'T
- WON'T
- I HATE
- I DON'T LIKE
- TOO DIFFICULT

tell our minds to close off to certain people, possibilities and even to compassion for ourselves.

By being more accurate we will not get the satisfaction of being the victim in a big drama, but we might preserve a more truthful connection to other people and a genuine belief in ourselves.

By simply toning down extreme statements we programme ourselves for a more optimistic outcome.

BRAIN TRAIN

Watching Your Language

Pessimistic Language	Optimistic Language
ALWAYS	SOMETIMES
NEVER	FOR THE MOMENT BUT
NO ONE	Someone specific
EVERYONE	Someone specific
I CAN'T	I COULD LEARN
I HATE	I DON'T UNDERSTAND
I DON'T LIKE	I WONDER ABOUT
TOO difficult	CHALLENGING
S/HE HATES	S/HE DOESN'T LIKE or DOESN'T UNDERSTAND

When people close to you are dramatizing an event you can gently ask: *'Do you mean....?'* exchanging their pessimistic descriptions with a more optimistic version.

or ask *'Who exactly are you referring to?'*

The Railway Man discovered the more optimistic explanation¹⁴

Eric Lomax, the railway expert who was tortured in Japanese prison camps, did not speak about his horrible experiences when he returned to England. The specific torturer Nagase was imprinted on his brain as he dreamt of a chance to get revenge on this man who had not been tried for his war crimes.

One day Lomax discovered that his former torturer was alive and getting publicity because he was running a centre of reconciliation and had become a Buddhist priest to make amends for his crimes.

Lomax doubted Nagase's sincerity as he had been so very cruel, not physically as he was 'only' the translator but psychologically. Over and over he had accused Lomax of lying and told him that he would be killed.

Lomax and his wife decided to raise money to go to Japan and meet Nagase; it was expensive as Lomax could only fly 1st class due to his war injuries.

When Lomax met Nagase he discovered that he also had nightmares due to witnessing Lomax being tortured. He felt extremely sorry for the part he had played and emphasised that it was only right that he should suffer for what he had done.

Lomax and Nagase talked through the whole incident and ended up becoming amazingly close friends, laughing and chatting together as Nagase and his wife explained to them the various projects they were involved with. One of these was to show young people how horrible war is and how wrong it had been to blindly obey the emperor and ignore human rights.

Lomax found healing in his discovery that Nagase also had suffered and was not such an evil man. He wrote Nagase a letter of forgiveness which meant the world to Nagase who had never been able to forgive himself for his own behaviour.

BRAIN TRAIN

Making the Switch

Using the Optimistic wording on [page 205](#)
translate the following pessimistic statements into
optimistic and hopeful statements.

(alone or in a group)

'I hate; she is always in a bad mood'

.....

'I don't like ambulances'

.....

'This job is too difficult'

.....

'Everyone is laughing at me' - 'No one likes me'

.....

'I never get to do anything interesting'

.....

'I always fail at '

.....

**Notice how translating pessimism into optimism
can lift your mood!**

BRAIN TRAIN +

Invite a person (or yourself) to say:

**'I can't' and
ask how that feels,
afterwards invite the person (or you) to say
'I can' and ask if that feels different**

**'I don't know'
and ask how that feels,
afterwards invite the person (or you) to say
'I'll find out' and then ask if that feels different**

**'I can't do it' and
ask how that feels
afterwards invite the person (or you) to say
'I'll give it a go' and ask if that feels different**

BRAIN TRAIN ++**3. Self-Optimism**

a) Practise reading and saying these positive affirmations⁸, you can also listen to them on www.HappinessSkills.ie:

'It's ok to be upset sometimes, it's an opportunity to learn something about myself and my own feelings.'

'I get on with others; there may be upsets and mis-communications, but that's all part of learning about one another'

'I am a good person. I may make mistakes, but that's okay as long as I am willing to learn from them.'

'I am a capable person. I have special Character Strengths which I will continue to develop.'

'I can do!'

'I will do!'

'Life is good for me! And for others'

b) Create and write out your personal affirmations.

**Read them before you go asleep;
this will programme your brain to create positive brain
pathways.**

My positive affirmations

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

**c) Record your positive affirmations as a voice clip on your
mobile phone and then listen to it at any time, especially
before falling asleep.**

These activities create an alternative positive brain pathway
that little by little replaces the negative self-talk you might
habitually feed your brain.

Youth Crisis

Adolescents in spite of popular belief, actually take on their parents' attitudes much more than they realise. When parents use optimistic language they influence the rest of the family to do the same. Youth binge drinking and over-indulgences can often be linked to pessimism, due to an overload of negative information and a negative self-image.

We change our language to a more optimistic point of view when we read and listen to positive affirmations (samples included on www.HappinessSkills.ie).

Keeping positive affirmations beside our bed allows us to read them last thing at night or first thing in the morning.

BRAIN TRAIN +

4. Snapping into Optimism

Change pessimistic self-talk by wearing a rubber wristband.

(charities and businesses often give them away).

Each time you become aware of a negative, unhelpful thought snap the band as if to snap out of that frame of mind into a happier, optimistic way of thinking.

BRAIN TRAIN +++

5. Writing about Your Worst Experiences

We might think that we are better off forgetting negative bad experiences, but the psychologist James Pennebaker⁹ found the opposite. He had serious difficulties in his marriage but discovered that journaling his feelings and thoughts helped him to clarify what he wanted and what he valued. He was convinced that this saved his marriage and initiated research to see if personal writing about feelings and thoughts within difficult situations was healing for other people too.

Pennebaker's research showed over and over again that people who wrote for 20-30 minutes for four consecutive days about a trauma or negative event they had experienced earlier in life, remained healthier for much longer than people who simply wrote about general events or did not write at all.

Even though stories might start with a lot of anger, confusion and bitterness, they usually end on an optimistic note of having learned something valuable through the experience. Sometimes this is called Post Traumatic Growth¹⁰.

How to Clear the Deck

We have all had some experiences which have felt deeply negative. This can keep affecting our way of interpreting other events as we expect failure or rejection. Writing about these events, however, can help clear the deck and to start over on a more optimistic note.

Individuals who followed these instructions all discovered some positive outcomes. We may have experienced great losses, but we might discover that we also gained something precious in the process.

GUIDELINES:

For three consecutive days write for 10-20 minutes per day about some personal difficulty in your life.

Keep writing even if you are repeating yourself and do not worry about spelling or grammar. This is just for you.

If you suddenly feel overly distressed, STOP and write about something less distressing.

Pennebaker in his research found that it can be normal to feel sad, angry and confused the first two days, then it will start lifting¹¹: He stresses how traumatic experiences can be tied to childhood or relationship experiences with people who are important in our lives. But it does not have to be about a trauma. We all experience conflicts and stressful situations which we need to process and put into perspective.

A word of caution: When working with young people, it would be important to know them well enough to notice whether someone is getting overly distressed or unhappy and needs special attention. It can be useful to start with a less distressing incident.

Children are best helped through this process by writing stories that allow them to project their experience onto an animal character or imaginary person¹². Try to locate your children's feelings around a problem and give them a sentence that will start them off.

CHAPTER 5: TURN TO OPTIMISM

- 1 Seligman, M.E.P., Reivich, K., Jaycox, L. & Gillham, J. (1995). *The Optimistic Child*. New York, NY: HarperPerennial.
- 2 Cunningham, E.G., Brandon, C.M. & Frydenberg, E. (2002) 'Enhancing Coping Resources in Early Adolescence through a school-based Program teaching Optimistic Thinking Skills', *Anxiety, Stress and Coping*, 15(4), pp.369-381.
- 3 Baumeister, R.F., Bratslavsky, E., Finkenauer, C. & Vohs, K.D. (2001). Bad is stronger than good. *Review of General Psychology*, 5, 323–370.
- 4 Taylor S, Armor D. Positive Illusions and Coping with Adversity. *Journal Of Personality* [serial online]. December 1996;64(4):873-898. Available from: SocINDEX with Full Text, Ipswich, MA. Accessed November 25, 2013.
- 5 Siegel, D. J. (2010). *Mindsight, the New Science of Personal Transformation*. New York, NY: Bantam Books
- 6 Seligman, M. (1992). *Learned Optimism: How to Change Your Mind and Your Life*. New York, NY: Pocket Books, Simon and Schuster Inc.
- 7 Burns, D. D. (1980). *Feeling Good. The New Mood Therapy, 1999 Edition*. New York, NY: First WholeCare
- 8 Kinnier, R. (2009). Attributions and affirmations for overcoming anxiety and depression. *Psychology & Psychotherapy: Theory, Research & Practice*, 82(2), 153-169.
- 9 Pennebaker, J. (1990). *Opening up: The Healing Power of Confiding in Others*. New York, NY: Morrow, Repr. *Opening Up: The Healing Power of Expressing Emotions*. New York: Guilford, 1997. ISBN 978-1-57230-238-9
- 10 Weiss, T & Berger, R. (2010). *Posttraumatic Growth and Culturally Competent Practice: Lessons Learned from Around the Globe*. Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons.
- 11 Gaschler, K. (2007). The Power of the Pen. *Scientific American Mind*, 18(4), 14-15.
- 12 Waters, T. (2008). The use of Therapeutic Storywriting Groups to support pupils with emotional difficulties. *Support For Learning*,(4), 187-192.
- 13 Frankl, V. (1959) *Man's Search for Meaning*, London, UK: Rider, Random House
- 14 Lomax, E.(1995) *The Railway Man*, London, UK: Vintage

CHAPTER SIX: FLOW AND ASSERTIVENESS

- 1 Chikszentmihalyi, M. (2002). *Flow, The classic work on how to achieve happiness*. London, UK: Rider
- 2 Lyng, B. (2007). *Anerkendende Paedagogik*. Copenhagen, DK: Bente Lyng og Dansk Psykologisk Forlag A/S
- 3 Hinnen, C. (2008). Relationship satisfaction in women: A longitudinal case-control study about the role of breast cancer, personal assertiveness, and partners' relationship-focused coping. *British Journal Of Health Psychology*, 13(4), 737-754.
- 4 Lynch, T. (2011). *Selfhood*. Limerick, IRL: Mental Health Publishing
- 5 Kilduff, G. J., & Galinsky, A. D. (2013). From the Ephemeral to the Enduring: How