

**C-CTherapy®, The Canadian Psychotherapy,
is practiced exclusively at the Center For Counter-Conditioning Therapy®.**

©Copyrights to all of these documents are owned by the Center for Counter-Conditioning Therapy®. Non-commercial downloading, re-use, and re-distribution in their entirety with full attribution is permitted.

*Emotional Self-Management:
A Woman's Guide*

Copyright 2004, Ilana Singer

Chapter 1

Women's Woes: Sensitivity and Mental Conditioning

Years ago, I was driving across the San Francisco Bay Bridge in bumper-to-bumper traffic. I had agreed to drop my mother at the San Francisco airport on my way to work. Cars darted between lanes. Horns honked. My mother, sitting in the passenger seat, kept looking over her shoulder as if she were the driver preparing to change lanes. She flinched at swerving cars, and pumped an invisible brake pedal. The clock ticked away. She kept up her vigil. An hour. Then an hour and a half.

You're so tense, I said. I'm a good driver. I'll get you there in time.

It's not you, Mother replied. It's all these other crazy drivers who are asleep at the wheel, driving with their coffee cups in one hand and their car phones in another. They make me crazy.

You make me crazy, I said to myself, not daring to repeat my thoughts aloud. A stream of my grievances against her flooded my head. Then other loud thoughts intruded: Not nice, don't think about your mother that way. After all, it's your fault she's upset. If you'd left earlier, you'd have avoided the traffic. If you'd taken a different route, then she wouldn't be upset. If you'd been better prepared, she could've relaxed and enjoyed the morning commute. After all, if you were a good girl, Mother would be tranquil and serene.

By the time I pulled up to the passenger zone, Mother's jaw was set, her hand gripped the arm rest, her eyes focused straight ahead. I knew her agitation. I'd witnessed it many times before. And now her irritation had spread -- to me. By the time I arrived at my office, two hours after I'd started out that morning, my hands gripped the steering wheel vice-like, my hunched shoulders were tight and my head ached. I was exhausted. I needed a nap.

But why? I shouldn't be exhausted at 9:30 in the morning after sleeping soundly all night. Something was

out of whack. Yes, it was. I had sucked up ambient anxiety via my mother and the other motorists for two hours. I was tense. My head filled with angry memories. My body was a knotted mass of agitated nerve cells. I was a nervous wreck. I was a victim of my own sensitivity to other people's emotions.

At that point in my life I didn't know how to intervene in my thoughts or my emotions. I didn't know how to alter or neutralize my emotional response to my mother and the traffic. Nor did I know how to reduce my tension and its wear and tear on my body. I didn't know that in childhood I'd taken in my mother's stressed ways, not just as part of my own style, but as my own way of being.

When I was in the car with my mother, I could have made a different mental connection. My old perspective was that I am the cause of other people's emotions, that how I think or behave causes their mood -- as if I ran the world. Therefore, I could make my mother tense or relaxed. Instead of falling into my old habit, I could have made a connection based on present-day information. I could have reminded myself that my mother's behavior was her style, that her emotional ways were formed long before I was conceived. And her emotional style is one of the many billions in the world. I am only one of the those billions. The real information is that I do not run the world. I only participate in its happenings.

This contemporary perspective could have compelled me to shift mentally. I would have changed over from my old fantasy viewpoint that the world revolved around me to an up-to-date position: My mother's ways are hers and hers alone. She is her own entity. Giving Mother a lift to the airport did not mean I caused her reaction to the traffic. She did that. Interacting with people does not mean I or you cause their emotional response. This shift would have given me relief. This change-over would have short-circuited my tendency to sabotage myself. I would have gained freedom from one of my self-victimizing habits.

Also, I did not need to get tense. I could have distracted myself. A simple way would have been turning on my favorite jazz radio station or reciting a poem in my head or, even repeating my favorite mental distractor: I am a worthwhile human being, I cannot fail at anything I do. Mentally interrupting my habit of creating nervous strain would have diverted my attention from my I run the world fantasy and allowed my thoughts to move toward a more realistic viewpoint. And I wouldn't have become so physically strung out.

Had I done any of these, I would have saved myself a ton of energy. I would not have arrived at my office drained. I would have conserved enough of my energy to get me through the rest of my day, feeling more like a crisp frock than a wrung-out rag. The day could have been easy, maybe even glorious. My energy would have been better spent neutralizing my tension, rather than yielding to the habit of getting agitated when I am with nervous people.

But I had not yet built my own contemporary perspective. I can see now how I absorbed my mother's style of tension. And I know now that this process of absorbing another's style begins during infancy and is normal. I grew up among adults who were looking over their shoulder for the next bad thing to happen. Women in my family struggled to pay bills, tend children and hold the family together. How could I absorb anything other than what I experienced? Children naturally absorb from adults surrounding them. I could not have done differently. Taking in and adopting emotional styles from our families is part of normal mental development.

We cannot redesign the impressions we absorbed during our early years. We cannot get rid of or reconfigure our emotional style. We cannot re-do our mental conditioning. We are presently stuck with what we have brought to adulthood. But we are not doomed forever to suffer from the negative effects of taking on these habits acquired from others.

I had had enough of being stressed out. I was motivated to do something different. I wanted no more consequences such as the ones I suffered during or after that car ride with my mother. So I sought relief. Next, I discovered the possibility that we can mentally operate differently. I found hope. I learned and practiced the same exercises you will find as you move through the following chapters. I managed my habit

of getting tense and stressed out. I had to govern my own emotional self. And you can, too. You just have to practice the exercises in the following chapters.

###