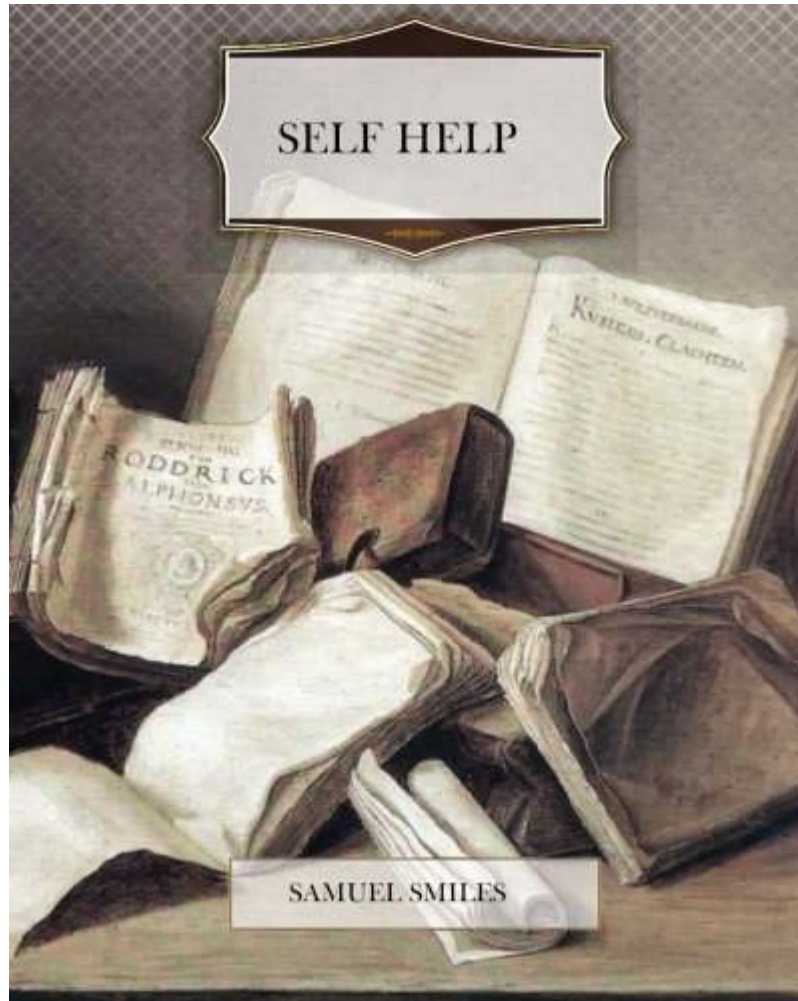


Self Help Books: A Genre Unto Themselves

by Nancy Eichhorn



I'm a self-help junkie. I know, the word junkie might connote that I still need help, but the reality is I've read self-help books and tried self-help programs for as long as I can remember. I've always had a voracious appetite for self-improvement. I grew up with the message that I was not good enough, so I strove to be better, to be accepted, all the while knowing I was defective and I needed to fix my faults to be loved. Now, at age 58, I've come to terms with my existence and my essence. I know I'm good enough. And yet, I'm still drawn to self-help books.

Clearly, I'm not the only one. Self-help books, also known as self-improvement books, have been around a long time. The genre's name came from a book published in 1859, a best seller by Samuel Smiles, entitled *Self Help*. Some people say the Bible is possibly the first and most significant self-help book ever published.

When I looked at the recent books I requested from various publishers, I realized they had a theme. Most of the books were self-help books. But in this instance, the ones I'm sharing here transcend the basic recipe. Yes, all books follow recipes. Based on the genre there are guidelines, rules to write by and self-help books are no different.

Self-help books typically make a promise to teach you how to do something to remedy your distress—you have a problem and the author has the solution. They offer instruction and examples, including their own story of pain and success. There are exercises and hands-on action steps—small steps mind you, to take the content and make it concrete so that change can occur. Authors also repeat themselves throughout the text and offer relatable examples. They are descriptive, motivating, and at times inspirational.

You can often see the following outline in self-help books:

Introduction: shares who the author is, why said author is qualified to write this book, and why the author decided to write this book.

There is then a ten-chapter minimum.

Chapter 1 will explain the problem and the pain associated with it. The author will connect with the reader through empathy.

Chapter 2 will introduce the solution and how they came to it including reasons why it is effective. They will share real life examples along with their own story.

Chapter 3 through 9 will offer step-by-step solutions, and at the end of each chapter there are exercises, activities for readers to participate in.

The book will conclude on a positive note with a motivational speech of some sort.

Self-help books often focus on popular psychological themes that people believe can be controlled with motivation and effort. If they just increase their self-awareness, focus on positive thinking, work to visualize and actualize their intentions, whatever "it" is, their performance will improve, their relationships will improve, their satisfaction in their lives will improve, and all of this will be achieved more quickly by reading the

book rather than by going to see a traditional cognitive behavioral therapist.

Because they are mostly written with a first-person voice and often include the author's personal transformation, self-help books are more reader friendly than typical psychology or psychotherapy books, which tend to be written in an impersonal and objective voice.

Titles are the first tip-off in terms of how the author plans to grab your attention and get you to buy the book—they focus on what you are seeking to remedy, to change in your life. There are three main categories: (1) the book is named after a goal; (2) the title begins with the words How to . . . (3) the title begins with the word You . . . such as You Can do this . . .

Some examples:

- ⇒ Dale Carnegie wrote, *How to Win Friends and Influence People* in 1936. Fifteen million copies were sold.
- ⇒ Norman Vincent Peale wrote, *The Power of Positive Thinking* in 1952 to teach people how to reprogram their thoughts.
- ⇒ Leo Buscaglia (I personally love his books) wrote, *Living, Loving and Learning*. Over 13 million copies of his books have sold, in 20 languages.
- ⇒ Thomas Harris wrote, *I'm Okay, You're Okay* in 1969, a book based on Transactional Analysis. My parents, who were friends and colleagues with the Harris', are mentioned in the book for their work (in the introduction and in Chapter 9).
- ⇒ John Gray's 1990 blockbuster, *Men Are From Mars, Women Are From Venus*, has outsold almost every known book sans the Bible from what I read.

The list is long. Years and years of books, many still relevant, many still selling today. This once 'niche' genre has seen significant shifts. One worth noting is that early self-help books were associated with mutual-aid (solving issues in a relationship). Today, they have come to be viewed as individual undertakings. Herein is one of the major differences in terms of the books I am reviewing.

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The books I'm sharing in this self-help section do indeed follow the genre's rules. But there are differences that, for me, move them into a category of their own. In my mind, they were written to be heard. These authors broke some of the rules. Their work doesn't necessarily fit into one specific category—their writing creatively overlaps different genres, which can lead to interesting material and potentially successful book sales.

Beyond promises of a better life, these authors share their clinical expertise, their personal knowing, their learning and wisdom to bring readers into a relationship to heal. Yes, there are exercises and journaling suggestions, there are websites for guided meditations and peer support, but the emphasis is not on going through this alone: the focus is on doing it together. Understanding why the concepts being shared are important to healing our inner wounds readers can change and/or shift their core beliefs that were established during difficult relationships as well as modify adaptations made unconsciously to survive challenging times.

There's a depth in these books that provides a sense of safety. I trust what these authors are offering. Their information is based on neuroscience, trauma treatment, and mindfulness/meditation/sensory awareness/shamanic practices. The authors come with the understanding that as human beings evolved, our brains evolved, wanting and needing connection. We grow and thrive in attuned relationships with healthy and safe attachments. I see these books being used in conjunction with either group or individual therapy. They are designed to use alone, but I see their power, their value when used in relationship, like with a trusted therapist.

I offer reviews of four self-help books and invite you to read and experience the material for yourself and perhaps share them with clients and colleagues (who can share them with their clients).

An advertisement for W.W. Norton & Company. On the left is the cover of the book "The 10 Best Anxiety Busters" by Daniel Strachan and David Veerman. In the center, green text reads "SPECIAL OFFER for SPT subscribers". Below this, black text states "W.W. Norton & Company is pleased to offer a special discount for Somatic Psychotherapy Today subscribers! Purchase ANY book at Norton at wwnorton.com/psych and receive 25% off and free shipping by entering the promotion code SOMATICPSY at checkout." On the right is the cover of the book "Healing Traumatized Self" by Judith Lewis Herman. At the bottom right is a small version of the W.W. Norton bird logo.