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To my family, friends, and my husband, Andrew, for their support on this journey, and to a friend I will never forget, Daniel Arato. Without him, this journey may have never started at all.

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Signing off,
Cheryl M. Bradshaw

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Welcome!

How to Like Yourself

Oh, hey! Good choice, picking up this book. To start off, I want to hit you with this right away: you *are* likable. You are awesome. And you're actually pretty great. If you put this book down now and walk away, I hope at least those few ideas will continue to bounce around in your head. I hope they hang out there and you think about them often, at random and frequent times in the day. Now, if you do choose to keep reading, that's even better! That's because I know we can have a pretty awesome time together. And I think you'll get something real, something important, and possibly even something life changing out of this book.

So I said pretty confidently that you're likable. How do I know? Who am I to come out and say you're awesome? I don't know you. I may never know you, in fact. I mean, right now, I'm actually only typing on a computer screen. You'll buy my book anonymously online or from a cashier somewhere. We are ships passing in the night. And let's be honest, some people in life really are unlikable. But that's not you. How do I know? You picked up this book. Or Googled it. Or Facebook-searched it. Or agreed to read it after a friend or family member suggested it. However you found this book, the fact that you even started reading it means that you care. People who care? They're awesome. So that's you.

I think we're off to a good start. We've already determined you're likable! Sweet. But before we keep going, I want to tell you a couple things about me—mostly because it might feel a bit weird for you to take the advice of a total stranger. So let me help out with that. First off, I'm twenty-six years old. At least, I was when I started writing this book. So I'm pretty fresh off the “how to like yourself” stage of life. I really do get what you're going through.

I'm also a counselor. I work with students in a university

setting, and we talk about all sorts of things that people just like you go through. I talk with students about things going on in their lives—tough stuff, mental health stuff, relationship stuff, and other difficulties and challenges they may need help with. So, yes, I do have a master's degree in counseling.

Now, I almost didn't tell you that because I thought you'd think this book is going to be all about boring academic stuff and that it would be dry and clinical and awful. But here is some good news—I also hate books like that. So I'm going to try really hard to make this something different. And while we're at it, here's another pretty big secret that no one likes to say out loud: counselors are just people, too. Yup, psychologists, psychotherapists, counselors...just people. With some special knowledge on this topic, so hopefully we can help with that side of things, but we are just human, too. Secret's out!

So needless to say, I'm certainly not perfect. Nor do I always get everything that I'm writing about in this book right in my own life. But I'm writing about it because I have talked to lots and lots of people about this, and I've also worked really hard to practice as much of this advice as I can. So through the wisdom I've heard from people I've worked with, and also through my own trials and errors, this book was born. It is a pretty solid collection of ideas that can help you figure out how to get from where you are now to where you want to be. Liking yourself is the first step toward really changing your life so that you can be happier, healthier, and more confident in everything you do.

Pet Peeves and Things That Make This Book Different

There are a lot of self-help books out there, so let me tell you why I thought this one needed to be written. When I walked the self-help aisles of my local bookstore, I certainly found a lot of books about loving yourself. Those books are great, but most of them pick up as if you already like yourself. They go straight for the big guns. They focus on love. If you think about any good relationship you have with a friend or significant other, what stage comes before love? *Like*. I was surprised that there weren't any books out there for the "like" stage in your relationship with yourself. This book starts at the beginning.

I also found that a majority of the books were geared toward women, and women in their late thirties and up, at that. There was nothing for the teens and twenty-somethings of the world. But this is important stuff for everyone, and especially important for us! We certainly have some different pressures and influences that need to be taken into account, so this book is for us. Now really, anyone can read this book and there's probably a little something anyone can take away, but I did write it with younger people in mind. And I think it's a little easier to digest than your typical book of this topic. It is more readable, more fun, and, most importantly, it starts from the ground up.

While we're at this, let me tell you some other things that I'm hoping will make this book different than the other books that are currently out there, which will make reading this really worth your time. This starts with some of my pet peeves with other self-help books, and my motivation for making this one especially for you.

Books That Are Too Intense. There are a few things I'm going to try really hard not to do. Being too intense is the first one. I never read self-help books when I was younger because they always talked about the over-the-top, lofty ideas of "loving yourself," finding inner peace, and being one with the world, and it all seemed a little too much for me. I wasn't there yet! How can you love yourself if you're not even sure that you *like* yourself?

Books That Talk Down to You. Before I started writing this, I went to the bookstore and read through parts of a bunch of self-help books. I won't lie; they seemed to contain a lot of information that's similar to what you'll find in this book, just said in different ways. (There are only so many ways to like yourself that really work, after all.) But I found that in many of the books out there, it seemed like the author was talking down to me. Like the author had all the answers, and I had none. Like if I just followed these "five simple steps" (or seven steps or ten steps . . .), my whole life would be better. Simple—duh! But because it wasn't always so simple for me, reading about how easy it was "supposed to be" actually made me feel worse. I'd read one of the suggestions, and it would seem so simple, but then I wouldn't know quite how to put that magical piece of

advice into action right away. Then I'd feel like I was inadequate. Then I felt I needed to buy a second, third, or fourth book with a title like *How to Feel Better About Yourself When You Can't Seem to Do Simple Things!* So I'm going to do my best to talk about this stuff *with* you, not down to you. I may not always get it right, but I'm going to try. As you read this book, the things we're going to talk about aren't always going to be easy. I want you to know that it's okay to take some time to figure things out, and that it's normal not to be able to change things overnight. That just means you are *human* and you are *normal*. Phew! Thank goodness. I'll save writing a book for aliens another time.

Books with Invincible Authors. I also found that while reading other books, I was just envious of the authors the whole time. They all went through some “year of finding themselves” or “discovered the secret to life,” and then they “found inner peace.” Meanwhile, there I was, sitting on the dirty floor of the bookstore reading about these invincible people, trying not to think about the fight I just had with my friend or how in the heck I was going to get anyone to read my book when I, unlike most other self-help authors, didn't have a PhD! I felt inadequate—which was just the opposite of the intended point of the book I was sitting there reading! So I'm going to be real with you. I am *not* invincible. I am also human. Complete with faults and quirks.

On that note, here's some insider info: when authors write books, it is part of their job to seem like they have it all together. Why would you buy their book if they were a total mess? Truth time—don't be fooled! No one can get it right all the time, and everyone has to start somewhere. Including authors like me.

Books That Make This Seem Really Easy. Let's be clear—there is nothing simple about liking yourself. Even though it seems like it should be easy, it's a process—and it will take time. And simply reading about how you should “just forgive others” or how you “need to be grateful” won't always help you get there without a little more explanation and practice on how to do those things. Most of us have heard those cliché bits of advice by now, and, yes, they're true! But how do you *get* there? Since we've all

heard those things before, clearly it isn't that we don't know *what* to do, it's just that we don't always know *how* to do it. We will work through those things together in this book. We'll break things down, pull them apart, make sense of them all, and then put them all back together. Whee!

Books That Are Longer Than the Bible—and Claim to Be the Same. Last but not least, I'm going to do my best to keep this short. Looking at the length of some of the books in the self-help aisle exhausted me, so I'm going to do us both a favor and hit you with only the best stuff I've got. And I'll try to keep it to the point. I also want to be clear that this book is not the *Bible of Liking Yourself*, but it is a great starting point. And once you're ready, there are lots of great follow-up books out there about loving yourself, like I mentioned. But we'll start from the beginning.

And while this really could be the first step in changing the rest of your life, simply reading this book will not instantly get you there. However, thinking about the ideas in here and doing your best to put them into practice can get you to where you want to be over time. So let's get rolling (or page turning), and take the first step toward the rest of your life!

The Most Important Relationship You Will Ever Have

Your 24/7 Friend

Imagine you had to hang out with a friend all day, every day—waking, sleeping, and eating. Now imagine that “friend” didn’t like you, and she kept calling you names, doubting your intelligence, attractiveness, skills, likability, and future potential every chance she got. She was always there, hovering around you, making you feel uncomfortable and on edge, and always chiming in with her negative opinion of you. Seriously. Picture it. Close your eyes for a second and just imagine it. Ouch! No thanks. But for so many of us, that’s the voice in our heads when we don’t like ourselves. So we walk around with this mean voice talking to us—a voice that seems so convincing...and generally isn’t very nice to us. With a voice like this talking to us, it makes sense that we would feel insecure all the time!

Now imagine that this 24/7 friend was there supporting you instead. Imagine that she respected you, your decisions, and your intelligence. Imagine that she knew you weren’t perfect, but she was okay with it. Imagine that she knew you were always doing your best and that you were working to become the greatest version of yourself that you could be. Imagine that she knew it was okay when you made mistakes and that she stood by you through tough times. Imagine that she had your back when other people called you names or questioned your intentions, because she knew that you were truly worthwhile.

Man, doesn’t that sound nice! Almost like every dream relationship we’d like to have in real life! That certainly would be awesome, and maybe some of you are lucky enough to have found this support in a relationship with a friend or loved one

already. But why not also have this with yourself? Since you are spending 100 percent of your time with *yourself*, this is the most important relationship you'll ever have. You are the person who is going to do everything in your life with you: from the most boring moments to the most exciting moments, you will go through it all together. You will eat every meal with yourself, you will wake up every morning with yourself, you will do every chore with yourself. You will never spend as much time with anyone else as you do with yourself, so it makes sense that you should be your own best friend! So why is liking yourself so hard, how do you overcome that difficulty, and how do you get to this awesome place of liking yourself?

Why Is Liking Yourself So Hard?

We are taught from a young age how to share, how to make friends, how to work in groups, and eventually, we are filled with information on how to “get the guy” or “get the girl.” We're always hearing about how to get along with *other* people. But what about getting along with yourself? You never receive any information on your relationship with yourself—which is a bit odd, if you think about it. After all, you spend 100 percent of your time with yourself! More time than with any friend, any significant other, any boyfriend or girlfriend, or any family member. Weird, huh? So why isn't there more emphasis on how to like yourself in life?

I've got a couple ideas on that. Most of the information you have ever gotten about life likely came from your school, your religion, your parents, your relatives, other adults, or your friends. We'll talk about the school system first. Schools have their own agenda, which is to teach you how to fit into the classroom environment so you don't kill each other and so that teachers and principals can do their jobs. Their goals are to get you through school and then to prepare you for the workplace. This means that their first priority is to teach you how to work hard and to work with others. As an institution, they're not too concerned with teaching you to like yourself, as it doesn't really affect their immediate goals.

Traditional schools also have a strong focus on how you can

“better yourself.” Of course, this is a great goal, sure—don’t get me wrong. However, the drawback to this focus is that it also trains you not to be happy with the current version of yourself. Hence, many people tend to feel dissatisfied with themselves. They think they’re not good enough, because school makes them feel like they’re never quite “there”—that they aren’t good enough yet. This can make it hard for people to like themselves for who they are today.

We also get information about life from religion. Religion, if you follow one, tends to have a pretty good framework on things like morals, values, and many other positive beliefs. However, from what I know of religion, it doesn’t really talk about your relationship with yourself—it focuses on your relationship with a higher power or God, or focuses on your relationship with other people and society. These are great things, but your relationship with yourself cannot be overlooked, as it is the cornerstone to the strength that you often need in order to engage in the rest of these practices with your whole heart. You need to like yourself before you can extend yourself fully in the other ways that religion encourages you to do. So we still need some additional information to figure out the relationship with ourselves. If you are religious, you can always draw some of your strength from your faith and beliefs as you work through this book. If you are not, that’s good too, as the relationship with yourself can be built in many different ways. So that being said, let’s move on to look at the kind of information we get from parents, relatives, other adults, and our friends and how this also affects the way we feel about ourselves.

If you’re like many people, your parents, relatives, other adults, and friends are your biggest influence on this subject. The trick here is that most of these people were never taught how to like themselves properly either. Even though parents and teachers might be older, they also grew up in the same system that we are in, with the same emphasis being put on getting along with others and always being “better.” So they tend to encounter the same pitfalls and experience the same lack of knowledge on how to like themselves as we do, even though they are older. They are human, too! You should see the number of books on how to love yourself geared toward people in their forties and older. That should tell you something! Many people have never been taught

how to like themselves, no matter what their age! And your friends, well, they are probably just as lost as you are, because no one talks about how to like yourself and what it is really all about (as we just learned), so we're all just left to muddle through it alone and in silence.

To add to the problem of figuring out how to like ourselves, a lot of the people who *have* figured out how to like themselves don't always know what they did to get there, so they don't know how to teach what they've learned to others. This information doesn't always translate easily, and can be hard to put into words.

Putting this all together, our main sources of information on life come from schools that are motivated to focus on our relationship with others; religion that focuses on our relationship with a higher power or God; parents, relatives, and other adults who were never taught how to like themselves either; and our friends who are just as lost as we are! So our information about life is sincerely lacking in the "how to like yourself" category.

And this isn't all that makes this relationship with ourselves so difficult. Let's look at some other reasons so we know what we are really up against here.

The "Everyone Is Better than Me" Syndrome

We live in a world where getting along with others is emphasized above getting along with ourselves. We also live in a world where competition and comparison is everywhere, even though people try to pretend it's not. It really is! Take school as an example. We are graded on a scale. That scale determines where we fall among our peers, and then that determines what opportunities we may have available to us for further education. What about at work? We are hired or promoted on our ability to do things better than our colleagues. And even though "everyone's a winner" medals and participation ribbons hang in almost everyone's bedroom, we are still taught that life is a competition.

Why does the environment of competition make us not like ourselves? Because it always makes us compare ourselves with others. We are taught that comparison is important to make sure that we are keeping up or doing better than other people.

Now let's think about it this way. Imagine another friend. But this friend is one who you only see during school hours or work hours. How well do you think you know him? It seems like you see him all the time. School or work is a big part of your day, so you must know this person pretty well. You've talked about all sorts of things with him—his hobbies, his weekends, his holidays, maybe even his love life. You can get to know someone pretty well in these settings. And, of course, you compare yourself with him while you're at it, because you have been encouraged to do that your whole life. And man, this friend really seems like he has it all together. You like talking to him, but somehow you always feel slightly inadequate afterward, as if you're not doing something right in your own life. His life seems really interesting, if not perfect. And you feel a bit boring, unaccomplished, or inadequate when you are around him.

So what's the deal? Is it true that everyone's life is actually better than yours? Nope. The reality is that you probably only see the parts that others want you to see. The majority of people in our lives are consciously monitoring what other people know about them, and what they show others. You do it, too! It's normal. But it confuses us when we try to check in on how we are doing in comparison. We compare someone else's filtered information to our own unfiltered information. This can be a bit of a tough situation to navigate.

Since most people don't go walking around talking about their bad gas or the terrible date they had the other night, or the fact that they are failing in school, or that they really think that nobody likes them, we receive more information about other people's successes than we do their failures. And since most people *do* talk about the parties they have, their awesome new partner, the great mark they got on a test, or the amazing vacation they have coming up, it's easy to think that we're not keeping up. This gets even more confusing because, since we are with ourselves 100 percent of the time, we *do* know every single detail of our own lives (we are the ones living it, after all). We know the good, bad, and the ugly—the full truth. And since we don't know everyone else's "full truth," we think ours must suck in comparison.

The fancy name for this is the "availability heuristic," aka,