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Who drew up *this* blueprint? Women make up 70 percent of self-help gurus' clientele—here's hoping the happiness architects know what they're doing.

FEEL FREE TO HELP YOURSELF

There is a booming market for self-improvement guides among Americans eager to redeem themselves from the sins of sloth, gluttony, or general discontent. But what qualifies one person to tell another how best to live?

BY **SARAH L. COURTEAU**

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SEVERAL YEARS AGO, I WAS LIVING in Washington with one of my brothers, who had come to stay with me while he pulled himself out of a rough patch. Eventually, he got a gig selling memberships at a gym, part of a well-known national franchise. No one in our family is a natural salesperson, but it was a job, and at least the gym is one place where my brother is in his element.

He had the closing shift, and he'd get home in his regulation polo shirt and raid the fridge just as I was going to bed. Pulling in a paycheck straightened his shoulders, as it does for anyone. Some of his wry humor returned, and so it was that one night he came in and, standing at the kitchen counter, recited "The Affirmation," the creed that new gym employees had to learn by heart:

I will win. Why? I'll tell you why—because I have faith, courage, and enthusiasm!

Today, I'll meet the right people in the right place at the right time for the betterment of all.

I see opportunity in every challenge.

I am terrific at remembering names.

When I fail, I look at what I did right, not what I did wrong.

I have clearly defined goals.

I never take advice from anyone more messed up than I am.

I never let a negative thought enter my head.

I am a winner, a contributor, an achiever. I believe in me.

We laughed until there were tears on our cheeks, in part because of the mock enthusiasm with which my brother belted out that last line, but mostly at the idea that such earnest propaganda could ever be received—much less adopted—with a straight face. What kind of chump did these corporate types think he was?

But really, what was so ludicrous about a company that makes its money burnishing the temple of the body applying that same approach to the mind? Sure, it isn't exactly a tune you can dance to. Still, "The Affirmation," crude as it is, echoes some of the time-tested ideas of the self-improvement canon, old and new. Back in 1936, in *How to Win*

Friends and Influence People, a folksy businessman's bible that is really just a useful guide to not being a jerk, Dale Carnegie admonished his readers to "remember that a man's name is to him the sweetest and most important sound in any language." And in the 2006 blockbuster *The Secret*, various "experts" unrelentingly advocate using positive thinking to mobilize the "law of attraction" in your favor. "Your life is a mirror of the dominant thoughts you think," but the law of attraction doesn't register "words of negation," says one of these authorities. (In other words, if you're thinking "I don't want the restaurant to give away our table," what the universe hears is "I want restaurants to give away our tables.") *The Secret* reminds me of another megaseller, *The Da Vinci Code*, with its pseudo-historical references and simplistic explanations peddled as deep insights. The law of attraction is bunk. But there really are some benefits to thinking positively.

The truth is, my brother could have done worse than take "The Affirmation" to heart. And at that point in my life, dating a string of men whom Dale Carnegie would have kicked to the curb, I could have, too. The main trouble with "The Affirmation" was the source—a company that wanted its workers to bristle with enthusiasm so they'd sell more memberships. That didn't invalidate the message.

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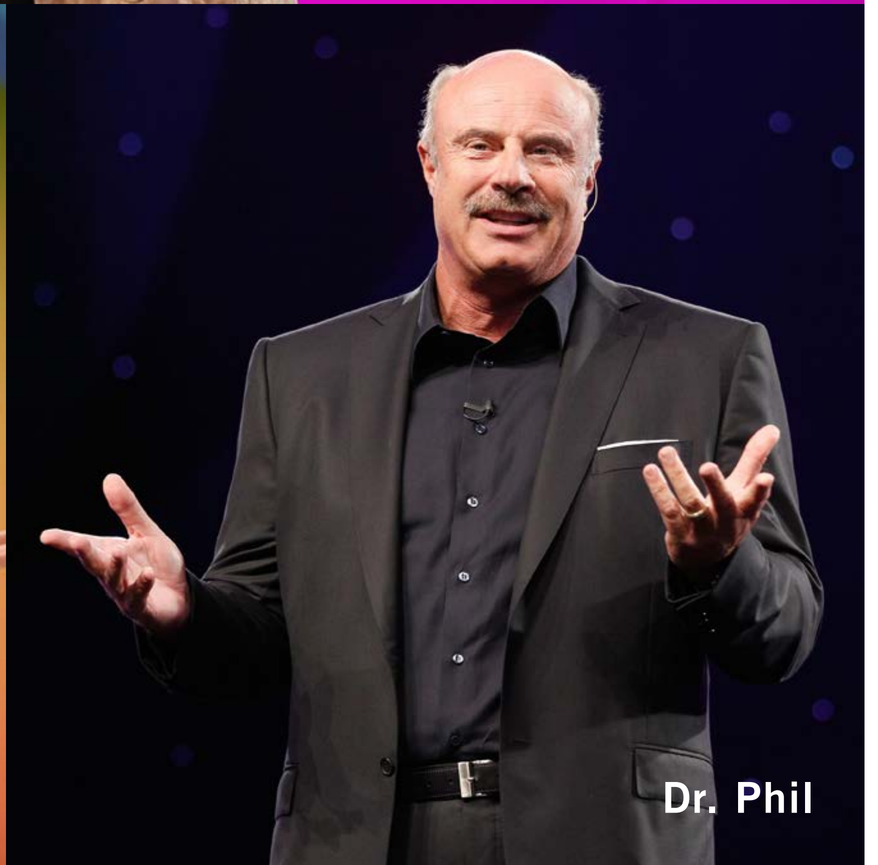
There's a fundamental contradiction in our attitudes about self-help—a term that describes the broad category of products and ideas that are supposed to make us thinner, happier, smarter, and more efficient. We Americans accept protein powders, extreme diets, personal trainers, expensive gym memberships, and the Rube Goldberg exercise contraptions that litter our basements and garages as the necessary paraphernalia for the pursuit of physical perfection. We openly admire gym rats and envy their fit bodies. But anyone who dabbles in the improvement of the mind—even taking yoga that hasn't had its spiritual roots bleached out completely—invites a raised eyebrow among those of us who consider ourselves serious people. *We* are above such lockstep platitudes, empty positivity, and pop psychology.

Suze Orman

Sheryl Sandberg


Dr. Phil

TOP: BEN ROSE / WIREIMAGE / GETTY IMAGES; LOWER LEFT: NADINE RUPP / GETTY IMAGES; LOWER RIGHT: BEN ROSE / WIREIMAGE / GETTY IMAGES

AS I READ THROUGH A STACK OF self-help books in preparation for this essay, I started with what I hoped was an anthropologist's distance. It diminished pretty much immediately. I found myself mulling insights from Gretchen Rubin, author of *The Happiness Project* (2009) and *Happier at Home* (2012). In both books, she records her attempts to take domestic bliss to the next level and offers tips on how the rest of us can, too. "Acknowledge the reality of other people's feelings," a chestnut that's at the heart of Dale Carnegie's

win-people-over philosophy but is easy to lose sight of, did wonders for Rubin when she was faced with a kid's tantrum. I could see plenty of applications in my relationships with adults.

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In conversations, I took to reciting various bons mots from Augusten Burroughs's *This Is How* (2012), which distills his life wisdom into a charming do-as-I-say-not-as-I-did primer. Burroughs made his literary mark—and a fortune—with books including *Running With Scissors* (2002), about growing up in two dysfunctional families, and the rehab memoir *Dry* (2003). When he warns, "The past does not haunt us. We haunt the past," he knows whereof he speaks. He seemed to be specifically describing my own tendency to endlessly rehash family history with certain others of my flesh and blood, sort of like saying a rosary together, rather than look at what we can do about the here and now.

With each mention of the current self-help book I was reading, I'd include a "research" disclaimer, afraid to risk the judgment or, worse, pity of those who'd now lump me with weak-minded housewives who fall prey to TV pitches for kitchen gadgets that can Do All This and More! for $29.95. That fear is another reason self-help provokes such profound unease in us. We assume it's the opiate of the intellectual underclasses—the people who don't know any better than to go in for that sort of thing. And that's where we're wrong.

The ethos of self-help is woven into American culture. It's the literature of aspiration. The pursuit of happiness is embedded right there in the document that launched the American experiment. For centuries, religion has offered a strong tonic for those in need of backbone, upper-lip stiffening, moral guidance, or practical advice. The cultivation of good human relationships and moderation in both food and drink—two central preoccupations of the self-help industry—are touchstones of the Christian faith.

It's hardly a coincidence that self-help is booming at a time when America is less religious than ever before. The Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life finds that nearly one in five of us claims no religious affiliation at all. But we're still in need of guideposts—a Good

Book or a guru—when our appetites, our relationships, our finances, or the general busyness of life get the best of us. Marketdata, a Florida research firm that tracks the U.S. self-improvement industry, puts the price tag for our collective appetite for self-help books and seminars and those ubiquitous infomercials for diets, speed-reading, and killer abs at $10 billion a year.

Somebody is buying all that stuff. Men are a distinct minority of the self-help clientele—only about 30 percent, according to Marketdata. They tend to consult books about how to dominate in the boardroom or be a savvier investor. The typical consumer is a woman who is middle aged and affluent. (By and large, self-help is neither marketed to nor used by the young, who are busy out there making the mistakes they'll be looking to fix in a few years' time.) She's someone who wants to maximize, and she has the luxury of a little money—and perhaps time—to worry about how to take off a few pounds, put her best foot forward at work, improve her relationship or her dating life, get her schedule or her closets more organized, or become a better mother. She is representative of a generation that has made enormous strides, yet she feels dissatisfied with where she is.

It's easy for women to believe they need all the help they can get. We're raised on *Cosmo* and *Seventeen*, both of which are chock-full of tips on how to pluck our eyebrows, choose a lipstick, or have better sex. We graduate to *Real Simple* and *O: The Oprah Magazine* when we have households of our own. The line between fighting for equal footing—that elusive sense of "empowerment" that we're forever supposed to be grasping for—and the conviction that we could *always* be doing more is fine, if it exists at all. No surprise that self-help marketers know that their target audience consists of people who have already shelled out money for a self-improvement product within the last several months.

AS MUCH AS I ENJOYED MY FORAY into self-help—a bit *too* much, in the opinion of some near and dear to me—I grew increasingly uneasy about it. No matter how "authentic," "down to earth," or "real" this advice is supposed to be (and marketers, if not the authors

There's much we don't know about self-help gurus. But what we do know should be enough to give us pause.

and seminar leaders themselves, tout these qualities at every opportunity), the creators of these self-help products are not people like us. There's much we don't know about them—whether they stiff their waiters, snap at their spouses, or kick the dog when they come home. But what we do know should be enough to give us pause. Self-help, along with the rest of the culture, has undergone a pronoun shift, from "you" to "I." In Dale Carnegie's *How to Win Friends and Influence People* or, to go back to the beginning of the genre, Samuel Smiles's *Self-Help* (1859), the inspirational anecdotes are about others. Today, the focus is relentlessly on the *I* who is delivering whatever advice is on offer. It's their lives that serve as the platform, and if they've overcome hardship, so much the better.

Increasingly, that *I* is a woman. In the self-help industry, male gurus have traditionally dominated, but today there are more women at the top. I'm looking at you, Oprah Winfrey, Suze Orman, and, most recently, Facebook chief operating officer Sheryl Sandberg. For women like me, looking for a way to balance the stresses and pressures of trying to do it all, these women's success is actually a problem. We might not seek to emulate Tony Robbins's home life or look to Dr. Phil as a role model. But female self-help authors are a different story.

Oprah Winfrey grew up in poverty, but it's been many years since she looked into a bare fridge.

I have to keep reminding myself that Sandberg, who just published *Lean In*, in which she argues that women need to become more forceful advocates for themselves in the workplace, has a battery of nannies and household staff and a net worth of several hundred million. Yes, Oprah Winfrey grew up in poverty, but it's been many, many years since she looked into a bare fridge. Financial doyenne Suze Orman takes every opportunity to remind us that at age 29 she was still a diner waitress. In 2011, she brought in $15 million. Even the domestically minded Gretchen Rubin, author of *The Happiness Project*, isn't a simple housewife: It's all well and good to create scrapbooks to preserve family memories and take the time to plan a thoughtful birthday party for your mother-in-law. It helps if you're a mom living on the Upper East Side who has a babysitter, a housecleaner, and a

husband who's a private equities trader—facts Rubin carefully dances around in her books.

There's a large dollop of self-congratulation in these gurus' advice. To offer a blueprint for success is to produce evidence that one's own good fortune was achieved through deliberate planning, hard work, and good character alone. While all these ingredients are a part of these women's great American success stories, a large element of luck, and, in some cases, privilege, was involved. To insist that anyone can do it is the bedrock of the American dream, and the answer to everyone who falls short. The flip side of the empowerment doctrine that self-help offers—that the potential to change your life lies entirely within you—is that the potential to fail does, too. At least when God was part of the plan, His hand shared some of the blame.

Self-help is ultimately a lonely enterprise. Whatever kernels of useful wisdom we hoover up from the books and DVDs and infomercials coming at us, it's worth remembering that the gurus du jour aren't self-made at all. We've put them where they are today, buying their books, attending their seminars, purchasing their products, and watching them on TV. We've contributed to their success, and now see it as a reason to listen to them. They may offer a useful tip or two, but they can't offer us a one-size-fits-all key to a better life. It's up to us to remember that, because they have worked very hard to forget it. ■

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