

# Self-Help in America

How has the American tendency toward self-fulfillment and self-reliance developed into the current self obsession?

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## Abstract

The purpose of this essay is to examine the history of the self-help movement in America. Self-help's first formal appearance can be seen in Benjamin Franklin's Poor Richard's Almanac, written in 1732 and was a booming industry by the mid-1960s. Since then, America has relied on motivational speakers such as Dr. Phil and Tony Robbins and programs such as Alcoholics Anonymous to give them advice on their everyday and most complicated problems to ultimately reach the American Dream of wealth, fame and success. These self-proclaimed "self-help gurus" have made a living off of either giving their clients a false sense of empowerment or teaching them to act as victims of their surroundings to achieve the American Dream. Self-help organizations, like the world famous Alcoholics Anonymous, often show little scientific evidence of success in its participants and therefore, we cannot state that they are effective forms of self-help. Today, the 8.6 billion dollar self-help industry allows Americans to find the quick fix to nearly every obstacle they must overcome to reach the traditional American dream. By examining the history of self-help and some of the most influential creators of this obsession, this paper shows that Americans have changed their ideas of self-reliance and the original definition of the American Dream. As a result, they have become so reliant on self-proclaimed "self-help gurus" to guide them through their everyday lives.

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## Extended Essay

In today's American culture, where online shopping and 24/7 fast food restaurants are the hottest fads, men and women look for the fastest and easiest ways to complete every daily task. Unfortunately, society has forced Americans to solve even their biggest problems as quickly as they can. As a result, the current self-help obsession has grown substantially in America since the seventeenth century. Today, self-help is an 8.6 billion dollar industry and one of America's biggest obsessions (Putnam 133). This essay addresses the question: How has the American tendency toward self-fulfillment and self-reliance developed into the current self-help obsession? I will be looking at the history of self-help in America, examining America's current preoccupation with self-help and finally, proposing a solution to cure America's obsession.

The history of self-help in America began primarily in Protestant New England where the Puritan faith was prominent. The Puritans' God was one who had created a rational universe, leading to the idea of determinism. Publications such as Samuel Hardy's Guide to Heaven, Bishop Bayley's The Practice of Piety and Cotton Mather's Bonifacius: Essays to Do Good exemplify the advice given to those associated with the Puritan faith in order to fulfill the need to do God's good will (Starker 14). These publications were essentially guides to reach heaven, but over time, this type of literature transformed into commercialized self-help books. This transformation came as a result of the American culture's change from one based on Puritan ideals to one full of men desperate to reach wealth and success.

Beginning in 1732, inventor, statesman and publisher, Benjamin Franklin began publishing Poor Richard's Almanac annually until 1757. Though he paid less attention to doing good works for God than the Puritans had, Franklin modernized their same ideals and values of

being a good person in order to reach heaven in the context of the eighteenth century. Poor Richard's was filled with practical advice and witticisms on how to live a better lifestyle in hopes of rising in the social hierarchy (Starker 14). The line "Early to bed and early to rise makes a man healthy, wealthy and wise" is an example of the many commonly cited witticisms taken from Poor Richard's. Later, between 1771 and 1790, Franklin published The Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin. This autobiography, along with The Way to Wealth published in 1758, as well as Franklin's other related works, promoted living by the thirteen virtues he created. He believed the virtues of industry, frugality, prudence, temperance, silence, order, resolution, sincerity, justice, moderation, cleanliness, tranquility, chastity and humility were required to become successful and rise in social standing (Independence). Also in his autobiography Franklin created a daily regimen that he recommended readers follow in order to live a more virtuous life. The idea of Americans' rights to "life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness" as stated in the Declaration of Independence created the foundation for Franklin's advice. Though the term was not coined until centuries later, the idea of the American Dream was imbedded into Franklin's works through his urging readers to reach wealth, fame and success through thrift and hard work (American).

During the nineteenth century, the foundation for modern self-help was created. Transcendentalists such as Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau preached the idea of self-reliance. This idea, summarized as the idea of being yourself and trusting your inner voice, can be seen in works such as Emerson's essay Self Reliance, beginning with the line, "do not seek anything outside yourself" (Emerson). This aphoristic style condensed the important messages expressed by Transcendentalists, but during the twentieth century self-help gurus would ignore the substance of these messages and base their advice solely on the effective

writing technique. Emerson's transcendentalism also sparked the concept of New Thought, later expressed in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century.

The election of President Andrew Jackson in 1828 and his re-election in 1832 placed self-help's ideal "self-made man" in the White House. During this time of Jacksonian Democracy industrialization boomed and corporate America became the center of the world. Jacksonian Democracy also encouraged "personal ambition, social mobility, opportunism and the unbridled pursuit of wealth and luxury" (Starker 16). This was alarming to many, as it brought forth much social reform and lessened the impact of Puritan ideals on American society. Historian Richard Weiss stated,

*"The social and economic changes initiated in the Jackson period produced a mound of literature on the proper conduct of life. As these changes accelerated after the Civil War, the mound became a mountain. The number of guides increased as the need for guidance became more pronounced"* (Weiss 44).

Americans were inspired by President Jackson and his ability to reach political power without being raised in a high social standing. This inspiration fueled the new literature Weiss refers to that no longer paid attention to reaching heaven and doing God's works, but to moving through social classes.

The establishment of New Thought, a spiritual movement developed in the late nineteenth century, emphasized metaphysical beliefs and was an extension of the transcendentalist ideas. Followers of New Thought considered humanity to be shaped by the individual, rather than by external forces. This ideal of self-determinism and power can be seen in a number of works, including Bruce MacLelland's Prosperity through Thought Force, in

which he states, “You make your own misery; you make your own unhappiness; you make your own poverty-all by the attitude of your mind” (MacLelland 25). This concept of New Thought differed from the previously expressed Puritan ideals and helped shape the future of self-help by creating the groundwork for the positive empowerment techniques used by modern-day self-help gurus.

After the Civil War societal values continued to change at a rapid pace. In the first decade of the twentieth century, the importance of reaching wealth and success became even more important to the average American, due in part to the legacy of the self-made millionaire, Andrew Carnegie. Carnegie grew up in a poor Scottish family who immigrated to the United States but later became known as the second-richest man in history, just behind John D. Rockefeller. He became a leading force in the steel industry by creating the most profitable and largest industrial enterprise in the world while largely advocating charitable giving. Carnegie was the perfect real-life example of a rags-to-riches story and quickly became an American icon (America’s Library). This example of one of the many “self-made” men during the late nineteenth century demonstrates how our own American cultural ideals have shaped the current generation’s obsession with self-help.

During this time of social reform Horatio Alger Jr. authored approximately 107 children’s books, many of which are considered classics (Starker 19). The fictional books follow a rags-to-riches theme in which a young person in a low social standing becomes healthy, wealthy and successful through a combination of virtuous deeds and sheer luck. Unlike many of the publications of this time Alger’s books follow the ideals of Protestantism. These books were also reminiscent of Benjamin Franklin’s thirteen virtues and showed glimmers of Alger’s former profession as a minister. These books, including Ragged Dick, Luck and Pluck, Sink or Swim

and Tattered Tom have sold nearly seventeen million copies, approximately 800,000 during Alger's lifetime (Smiles 59). Americans were eager to follow this rags-to-riches theme in their own lives and looked to Alger's fictional characters as well as successful men such as Andrew Carnegie as a source of inspiration.

As nineteenth and twentieth century social reform continued, so did the spread of self-help publications. These publications continued to stray from the ideal Protestant ethics and morals, transforming into a simple How-To for reaching the American Dream. James Truslow Adams coined the term "American Dream" in The Epic of America in 1931. He states,

*"The American Dream is that dream of a land in which life should be better and richer and fuller for everyone, with opportunity for each according to ability or achievement...It is not a dream of motor cars and high wages merely, but a dream of social order in which each man and each woman shall be able to attain to the fullest stature of which they are innately capable, and be recognized by others for what they are, regardless of the fortuitous circumstances of birth or position"* (Adams).

This idea was not a new one but rather, it defined the dreams of Americans since the eighteenth century. Adams' explanation of the American Dream still had traces of Benjamin Franklin's idealistic virtues and the Founding Father's Declaration of Independence, but as the twentieth century continued, the American Dream became the definition of what it originally was not.

Possibly the most influential self-help publication of the first half of the twentieth century, Dale Carnegie's How to Win Friends and Influence People was published in 1937 during the wake of the Great Depression and made the final transformation from the ideas of self-reliance and the Puritan-based virtues to those of quick fortune and success. How to Win

Friends proposed the first modern step plan that is common in nearly every self-help program in America today. How to Win Friends exemplified the combination of Benjamin Franklin's witticisms and the Transcendentalist's aphorisms. Profound ideas on how to better everyday life were reduced by twentieth century self-proclaimed self-help gurus, like Dale Carnegie, into simple, multi-step plans expressed in cute catch phrases. The book's list of quick and easy tips on how to effectively work with others expressed in short, easy to understand key phrases became the perfect form for self-help programs.

Since Dale Carnegie's success with How to Win Friends and Influence People, self-help has transformed even further. Today, Americans no longer turn to self-help publications in order to seek help reaching the American Dream, instead they look for help with nearly every problem they may have. Authors of self-help programs have the answer to lost love, weight gain and loss, being a teenager and innumerable other topics. Not only do Americans believe there is a solution to every challenge they are faced with, but they also believe the solution is a fast one. These "quick fixes" are false ideals fueled by the fast-paced American culture and ultimately lead to disappointment.

America's need for a fast and easy way to reach the new definition of the American Dream and live the essential "perfect" life –also called a quick fix- has led society to take the advice of any self-proclaimed self-help guru as seriously as the next. Life coaches make their livings providing Americans desperately in need of answers with the help that they are looking for and fast. These life coaches, many of whom have no formal education in personal development or psychology, often charge hundreds of dollars an hour for their services and are only capable of repeating lines and phrases from their various publications with little individualized aide. But most importantly to the client, these men and women promise that their

programs will work fast. These overpaid, undereducated self-help gurus tend to oversimplify what are often quite complicated issues by providing their services in the form of step plans and various catch-phrases. “The guru is selling the theory of nonsense, which can be best understood by practicing the impossible action plan” (Damien 40). This action plan, also called a step-plan, allows Americans to place each of their problems into a perfect fitting box, categorizing and simplifying until the largest or most minuscule problems simply disappear.

Paul Damien, author of Help!: Debunking the Outrageous Claims of Self-Help Gurus states that two currently prominent self-help gurus, Rhonda Byrne (author of The Secret) and Dr. Deepak Chopra (author of The Tao of Physics and The Road Less Traveled), create their writings by focusing on four main ideas: “(1) rephrasing others’ ideas; (2) mixing with complete *non*-ideas; (3) claiming everything fits into their paradigm; and (4) marketing all of it with the aid of two or three buzzwords (short catch-phrases)” (Damien 3). Damien’s purpose in making this claim is to show that neither of these self-help gurus discover ingenious ways to better the quality of life nor does their advice suit each individual. In general, rather than creating focused programs that target a specific group of people or problem, self-help gurus generalize their programs in quick How-To programs and step plans. These self-help gurus can easily sell their programs but creating programs with positive results is much more challenging.

World famous Tony Robbins, whose self-proclaimed professional title is “motivational theorist,” has established a reputation for spouting his wisdom to high-paying customers in day or week long seminars that are supposed to boost customer morale and make them more successful beings. His seminars are held world-wide and the total cost can reach tens of thousands of dollars per all-inclusive session. Robbins’ many loyal followers claim that his motivational programs are both informational and inspiring, but even more important, that they

work. Robbins creates his programs based around ideas such as, “There is a powerful driving force inside every human being that once, unleashed, can make any vision, dream or desire a reality” (Robbins). This statement does not explain any of Robbins’ techniques, forcing potential customer to focus solely on the success stories of others as insight into his self-help programs.

Another form of self-help is led by “sports-talk gurus” in which, according to Jay Kurtz, the president of the tactics-based consulting firm, KappaWest, the speakers take “a short, punchy, profitable metaphor and convert it into an extended, even more profitable metaphor” (Salerno 97). These gurus claim that sports life and corporate or personal life run parallel and are therefore, the same. Unfortunately, these parallels dissolve just beneath the surface of catch-phrases like “Go for the gold!,” alluding to Olympic gold medalists’ accomplishments and “Ya gotta want it!.” These sports-talk gurus speak primarily to businesses and corporations in order to boost company morale and increase productivity. In all reality, sales slumps often continue to occur after such inspirational speeches because many self-help gurus fail to share any wisdom when it comes to business. They prefer to keep to the general ideas and catch-phrases associated with success simple to attract customers, if not to create programs completely filled with nonsense. Despite this failure to produce positive results for businesses and individuals, motivational speakers and self-help gurus continue to book jobs and spout their wisdom to high paying customers.

Dr. Michael Hurd, author of Effective Therapy stated, “People buy self-help books because they’re looking for answers. In general, people in our culture do not want to think through complex issues. They want to know, ‘What do I do?’” (Salerno 33). Self-help gurus answer this question in two ways: through empowerment or victimization. The first idea,

empowerment teaches Americans that they are capable of reaching any goal that they set for themselves, despite all obstacles. Dr. Phil McGraw is an example of a self-help guru who uses this method of empowerment. After creating both a personal and business relationship with Oprah Winfrey in 1996, McGraw became a regular on “Oprah” and later, created his own talk show. “Dr. Phil” is famous for its guests from all walks of life who are eager for the expert’s advice on nearly every issue they could be faced with. Dr. Phil’s 6.5 million viewers wait for him to “tell it like it is,” with his large amounts of positive reinforcement and catch-phrases like, “Get real.” “This is gonna be a changing day in your life.” “You can’t change what you don’t acknowledge.” and “Quit takin’ yourself so damn seriously” (Salerno 65). Along with his daily talk show, Dr. Phil has written a succession of books, many of which have been successful enough to reach the *New York Times* best-seller list (Salerno 66). Dr. Phil has made himself a one-man corporation, intent on telling his guests that any problem they have can be fixed by following one of his publicized programs, attending a weekend-long retreat or enduring a half hour interview on “Dr. Phil.” This idea that a person is capable of solving any problem with just a little help and boost self-confidence is commonly seen in the self-help industry. Empowerment provides the quick fix that Americans are looking for. Unfortunately, increasing one’s self-confidence through positive reinforcement takes much longer than the length of a half hour talk show. Self-help gurus attempt to create an illusion of betterment through their fast and easy programs, rather than actually fixing any existing problems.

Oddly, self-help’s second idea is the complete opposite. We are not empowered, but instead are treated as victims of our surroundings. This victimization technique allows men and women to blame their current problems on a dysfunctional childhood or any other abnormalities in their lives. The biggest problem with victimization as a form of self-help is that it does not

force men and women to take responsibility for their actions and instead, allows them to place blame on people and events around them. Victimized men and women are consoled and then commended for even the smallest victories (Damien 8).

Alcoholics Anonymous, an organization based on a twelve step program created in 1935 to aide in the treatment of alcoholism and has since branched to many other addictive disorders, teaches its 2.2 million members worldwide to act as victims of their surroundings and seek support to cope (Salerno 142). The Alcoholics Anonymous' twelve steps are: admitting one's powerlessness, believing that a greater Power could restore one's sanity, turning one's life over to God, searching and fearless moral inventory of oneself, admittance to God, oneself and to another human being the nature of one's wrongs, readiness to have God remove one's character defects, asking God to remove one's shortcomings, making a list of persons one has harmed and willingness to make amends with them all, making direct amends with such people when possible, continuing a personal inventory, seeking God through prayer and meditation and having a spiritual awakening as the result of the steps, carrying out the message to other alcoholics and finally, practicing the principles learned in all affairs. These steps are arguably ineffective: first, because they do not force the men and women recovering from addiction to take full responsibility for their actions and second, because statistics show that the cure rate among alcoholics may be much lower than the approximate forty percent success rate boasted by Alcoholics Anonymous.

Harvard Medical School's 1995 Harvard Medical Health Letter suggests that depending on the study criteria, the spontaneous cure rate –the cure rate among alcoholics who do not seek support from organizations like AA- is between 43 and 82 percent. This implies that alcoholics who don't try AA have a better chance at recovery than alcoholics who do (Salerno 143). There

are two probable reasons that Alcoholics Anonymous may be an ineffective program: first, because the goal within AA is to admit defeat by the disease and second, because the program requires its members to seek a God. For some members, these are both difficult challenges to overcome and the program becomes essentially useless.

The self-help industry has been steadily transforming from a guide to reaching heaven to an all-around problem solver since the eighteenth century, but especially during the past decade, the self-help industry has boomed. According to Marketdata Enterprises, the market for self-improvement grew fifty percent between 2000 and 2004. Several studies also show that between thirty-five hundred and four thousand new self-help books hit the shelves in 2003 alone (Marketdata). These numbers show America's increasing dependence on self-help as a form of self-improvement, but with these continuously increasing numbers comes increased confusion about which solution is the perfect one. Publications with titles such as; A Self Made by Magic, Cellulite: Those Lumps Bumps and Bulges You Couldn't Lose Before, What Color is Your Parachute?, How to be Your Own Best Friend and You Mean I'm Not Lazy, Stupid or Crazy!? propose step programs, quick fixes and absurd metaphors based on real life in order to create the illusion of success. Every author states that their two, seven or twelve steps will lead to customers success, but because reaching the goals within each step are often more difficult than we may think, these steps are not as effective as we expect them to be. Americans often become entangled in a world of self-help, putting all of their faith in a program intentionally designed to be vague in order to fix each and every one of their problems.

America's need for a quick fix on nearly every issue faced may be acceptable in our culture, but is an unhealthy way to solve problems. Americans are simply obsessed with self-help. To stop this obsession, three things must occur: The first, Americans must return to the

idea of self-reliance, rather than empowerment or victimization. Strong individuals may encourage themselves to face nearly every obstacle on their own, rather than relying on self-proclaimed self-help gurus to do so. The second, it is important to incorporate the Puritan ideals and Benjamin Franklin's thirteen virtues into our lives in order to accept moral responsibility for our actions, as opposed to seeing ourselves as victims of our surroundings. By accepting responsibility for our actions, reflecting on such actions and learning from them, we are able to better ourselves without self-help guiding us along the way. Finally, in order to overcome our obsession with self-help, we must accept that a quick fix just isn't always possible. The American tendency toward narcissism creates the illusions that they are entitled to a quick-fix and convince themselves that this is the best way to solve problems and reach goals. Through patience and hard work, every American can reach their goals, even without a five, seven or twelve step program helping them along the way. Moving beyond the irony of the solution to the problem of self-help, it is important to understand that there is no perfect solution; there is no step-plan or How-To on overcoming America's obsession with self-help. Instead, by using the ideas that self-help teaches us in order to gradually better our lives, we Americans will each reach our own version of the American Dream.

The idea of self-help in itself is not a bad one. By incorporating general ideas that self-help gurus present us into our everyday lives, we may eventually see results. Unfortunately, as the American tendency toward self-fulfillment and self-reliance has transformed into the current self-help obsession, we rely heavily on the ideas of empowerment and victimization to better ourselves. By returning to an idea of self-reliance, one of moral responsibility and accepting that sometimes reaching our goals means having to do a little hard work, we will become independent Americans, free of our obsession with self-help.

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Search Terms:

Worldcat: self-help criticism, effectiveness of self-help, self-help in America

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