the extra change the cashier mistakenly gives him, you view him as dishonest; when you do the same thing, it’s because the cashier was rude, you’re in a hurry, and you’re pretty sure the store is marking up prices to begin with.

We see the world around us in ways that are easy on the ego. Sure, these strategies amount to self-deception, but they help us through the rough patches in life. Injecting ourselves into the success stories of others . . . deflecting blame when things go wrong . . . tactics like these have restorative effects in the face of unfulfilled expectation; they buffer us from the threat of negative feedback. And these rose-colored lenses through which we see ourselves constitute just one more reason why getting to know “who you really are” isn’t as easy as some would lead you to believe.

SELF-HELP REVISITED

What, then, should the gurus of self-help be telling you? Should they call you out on the habit of bending the truth when you look in the mirror? Might a forced dose of reality allow you to cut through the distortion and finally get to know your authentic self?

Nah.

Reality isn’t all that it’s cracked up to be, either. Sure, refusing to accept truths about the self poses problems. Consider the social drinker who’s sure that he’s OK to drive home because, unlike his friends, he can hold his liquor—not to mention that like Rain Man and 85 percent of the rest of us, he thinks he’s an excellent driver. And if you always seek out less accomplished individuals for social comparison, how
will you ever improve yourself? If you never take responsibility for anything that goes wrong, don’t you become an intolerable blowhard?

Still, despite all this, stretching the truth a bit for ego’s sake is arguably an important ingredient of, quote-unquote, normal daily functioning. Many of the unrealistic self-views we cling to are illusions, but they’re positive illusions without which we’d spend much of our time miserable or wallowing in self-doubt. Compared to those who are less satisfied, people content with life tend to exhibit more self-serving tendencies: from an unrealistically high opinion of themselves to an overly optimistic view of the future to an exaggerated sense of control over events around them.

Findings like these turn on its head conventional wisdom concerning what it means to be “normal.” Ask most people about the thought processes associated with depression, and they’ll describe an unrealistically pessimistic take on life, an Eeyore-like tendency to see things as gloomier than they really are. But the pervasiveness of self-serving distortions suggests that the ostensibly normal or happy among us are actually the ones out of touch with reality. Some research goes so far as to suggest that unfailingly accurate and unfiltered self-perception is linked to depression.

In a series of studies conducted by Lauren Alloy and Lyn Abramson at the University of Pennsylvania, male and female participants completed a written assessment of their depression level. Immediately afterward, they were each led to a different location and seated in front of a green light with a button next to it. They were told that upon a signal from the researcher, they could push the button or choose to leave it alone. Sometimes when they pressed the button, the green light went on. Other times it didn’t. In reality, in most versions of the research, the button had no impact on the green light at all; it went on...
or stayed off a predetermined percentage of the time, regardless of what respondents did.

At the end of each session, participants were asked how much control they had over the light. Those individuals whose earlier questionnaire scores indicated that they were depressed accurately reported that they had little to no control. They recognized that there was no relationship between their button and the light. But nondepressed respondents saw things differently. These “normal” people exaggerated their control over the green light—a similar illusion to the one harbored by the overconfident patient who’s sure that he’ll be the one to buck the odds and avoid the treatment’s side effects, or the superstitious sports fan who thinks that where she sits and what she wears might just change the outcome on the field. Beliefs like these are a familiar part of daily life.

And so it would seem that much like red wine, chocolate, and Jim Carrey movies, self-serving distortions have positive effects when enjoyed in moderation, but too much becomes hard to stomach. In the short term, a touch of self-enhancement allows you to salve the wounds of negative feedback and distressing outcome, buffering the ego until self-regard rebounds enough to resume the pursuit of long-term goals. Often, it’s not accurate knowledge about the self that allows peace of mind; it’s the bit of self-deception that helps us bounce back from setback and trudge on through failure.

**Are you looking** to be a happier, more productive, more successful person? Are you in the market for self-help? Then stop worrying about how to see yourself for who you really, truly are. Forget about this “authentic” self business. Instead, learn to embrace the notion of the self as flexible.

Yes, your processes of self-perception are context-dependent. And
introspection yields different information at different times. Your sense of self varies depending on who you're with. Identity is malleable and personal preferences are constructed on the spot. But none of this is bad or distressing news.

So you're not the person you thought you were, at least not all the time? Big deal. Let that conclusion empower not alarm you.

It’s refreshing to realize that you’re not a finished product—that who you are in the here and now may not be the same person you’ll be in the then and there. In fact, it’s that opposite view of the self as a fixed entity that causes problems. When you assume that there’s a true core self waiting to be discovered, that’s when your potential seems limited and the world around you is full of threats to be rationalized away.

Consider one study of college freshmen in Hong Kong. Researchers presented them with a series of statements regarding the stability of intelligence, including “you have a certain amount of intelligence and you really can’t do much to change it” and “you can learn new things, but you can’t really change your basic intelligence.” Based on students’ agreement or disagreement with these ideas, the researchers created two groups: those who saw their own intelligence as a predetermined, stable entity and those who thought of their own intellect in more malleable terms.

The freshmen were then asked whether they intended to enroll in a remedial English course in the years to come. Not surprisingly, those who had aced their high school English certification exam were less likely to plan on taking such a course than students who had scored in the C range or worse. But even among low-performing students, those who viewed intelligence level as etched in stone saw no need for remedial work. They were already as good as they were going to get at English, they figured. So why bother? Only the low performers with a
less fixed view of their own intellect were willing to sign up for the additional English work that they really needed.

In other words, seeing the self as a static and stable entity is what puts us on the defensive and mandates chronic self-deception. Think of a characteristic like intelligence in terms of fixed capacity and the poor exam grade or subpar performance review becomes intolerably threatening. Instead, you should train yourself to view intellect—and any other aspect of your personal skill set—as a muscle that grows with effort and atrophies with neglect. When you accept that the answer to “Who am I?” should be written in pencil and not pen, threats become opportunities and failures transform into life lessons. Even if this isn’t how you usually see things, it’s not too late to start now.

Because in a follow-up study, the same researchers in Hong Kong demonstrated how easy it is to change how you think about yourself. They gave a new group of students one of two different, ostensibly scientific articles—articles that depicted intelligence in either static or flexible terms. Those led to think about intelligence as a fixed quantity took the easy way out: they showed little persistence on tasks in the wake of poor performance and they avoided taking on new challenges later. Only students told that intelligence was malleable showed the stick-to-itiveness necessary for self-improvement.

Or consider another study, this one with American students at Stanford asked to serve as pen pals with “at-risk” middleschoolers. The college students were instructed to offer encouragement to the younger kids by explaining in their letters that they, too, had struggled at times in school but eventually persevered and found academic success. They were told to emphasize the idea that natural ability is overrated—that intelligence “is not a finite endowment but rather an expandable capacity.”
YOU’RE NOT THE PERSON YOU THOUGHT YOU WERE

Did these letters help the middle school students bounce back from adversity? It’s impossible to say—the letters were never delivered. But the mere experience of writing them had a lasting impact on the college students themselves. Months later, the letter writers were still reporting greater enjoyment of school than were other Stanford undergrads. Their grade point averages were higher, too, by a full third of a point on a four-point scale. The effect of writing the letters was particularly strong among African American participants, a promising finding for diverse universities seeking to remedy the underperformance too often observed among students of color.

So what should the gurus of self-help be telling you?

That the aftermath of failure and setback is precisely when you need to remember that the self is flexible.

That you’re better off focusing on effort and other controllable factors rather than fixed aptitude.

That you can forget about “not being a _______ kind of person,” whatever the presumed deficit in your supposedly authentic self may be.

Bad grade on your paper? Lousy earnings projections for the quarter? First one voted off the celebrity dancing show? Now that you recognize how self-perception really works, you know the dangers of chalking up setback to a hopeless lack of ability. But you also know better than to automatically shrug it off as bad luck or someone else’s fault. Instead, force yourself to ponder or even make a list of the changeable factors—internal and external—that can bring about better outcomes the next time around.

Because whether you’re a Hong Kong student struggling with English or a pen pal at Stanford, good things happen when you embrace the self as malleable. Regardless of what you read in the self-help
aisle, you don’t have to lose sleep hunting for your core identity or reconnecting with your inner you. Chicken soup and numbered lists are overrated.

Instead, it’s time to start appreciating that you’re a different person in different settings.

To recognize that who you are today need not dictate who you’ll be tomorrow.

And to accept that the “authentic” self isn’t some sort of Holy Grail, unless by the analogy you mean that you aren’t sure whether or not it even exists in the first place.