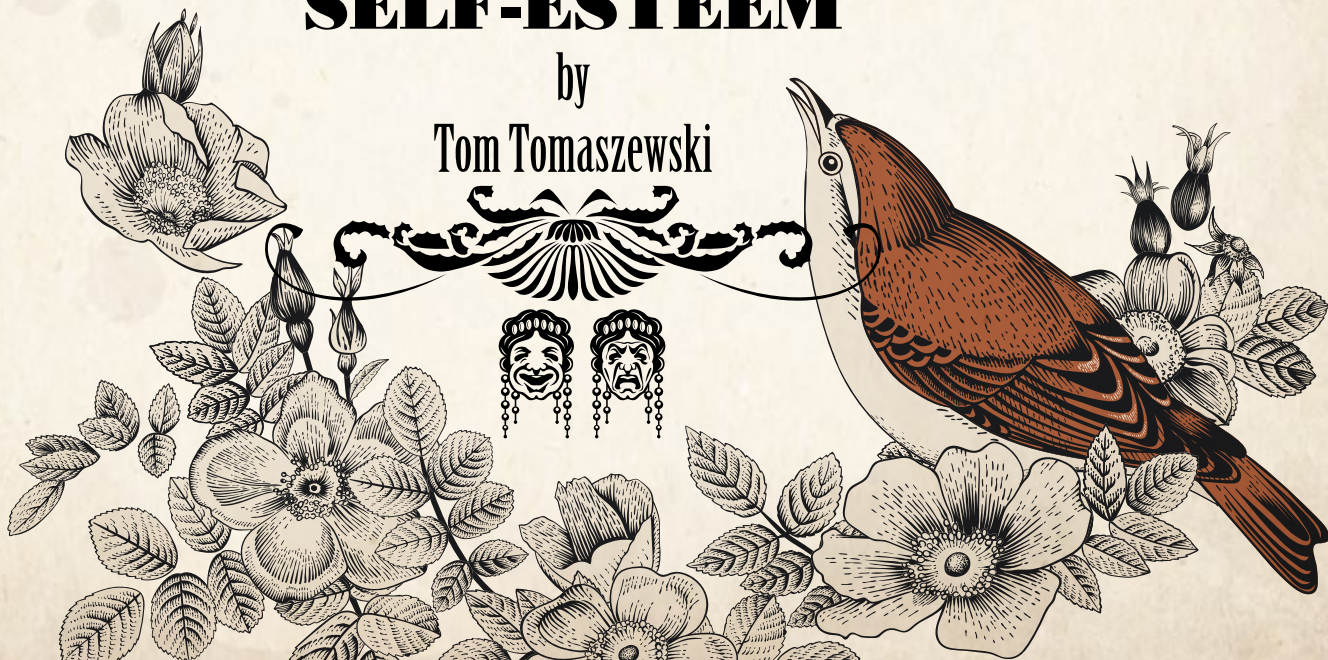


Sane

a short introduction to
SELF-ESTEEM

by

Tom Tomaszewski





If I tell you we're going to try and improve your self-esteem, what do I mean? I'm not going to say much, here at any rate, about what self-esteem is. It can be a concept, something you can look up in an encyclopaedia. It can be an ideal: something you can imagine or think about – an archetype, if you like. It can be an experience that goes beyond words ... so let's not try and explain it. Let's just try finding it.

'Real' self-esteem doesn't ask any questions about what self-esteem might be. It involves feeling good about yourself and then, if you like, finding words to describe the sensations, emotions and thoughts that follow. A description of self-esteem will be different to each of us, depending on who we are.

Abstract ideas of self-esteem are, in my experience, no help at all. They result in unhelpful generalisations along the lines of 'all people have a right to' or 'each of us is entitled to'. Many of us believe that all people need and deserve certain things and have very firm beliefs about how people should be treated – all people, and not only people but other animals: all of the world's inhabitants, each of whom depends on the others without ever being able to appreciate why or how. But these beliefs might be contested any time we enter into a conversation. Every living thing has, in some way, some other living thing that will consider it positively and negatively, which will want to nurture it or harm it for fundamentally narcissistic reasons that only the truly brave will ever be open to thinking about.

So don't bank on honesty. Don't bank on rights. Don't bank on entitlement. Every moment in life is contested, whether or not we think about it. That may sound frightening. It is. If we don't feel fear every day we are in a certain sense 'dead'. What helps is what goes by the name of 'self-esteem'.

Who we are in the world needs to be rooted in what gets called self-esteem if we are to survive our lives without retreating into a horror film of denial, subservience and automaticity: life repeated day upon day without ever being questioned.

Self-esteem is a comfortable, containing, sustaining and enticing sense of ourselves that if we are lucky enough may have been reflected back to us by the people responsible for our care when we were infants. Self-esteem will allow someone to open up, to grow emotionally and intellectually, without unnecessary fear. Fortunately it is recoverable even when it wasn't discovered in infancy. Luckily it is available for free. This short pamphlet describes how to recover self-esteem without thinking about it. It is divided into two sections: first some thoughts about what complicates, diminishes, suppresses, dismantles, promotes or augments self-esteem, and then some practical ideas about how to go looking for it.

I want to focus on what you get when you feel good about yourself: a good feeling. The feeling of self-esteem is a particular kind of good feeling but let's not complicate things. A good feeling is a good feeling, and we all know when we have one.

The suggestions included here are designed to help shift you from one state of being to another: from a worried one to a calm one. If you like feeling worried, it won't work in the way I intend it to, but it will work none the less. It will help your body relax.

These ideas and exercises are not mine. They are the property of the world. I have found them through other people, other people's books and from films, plays, music and art. They have involved a lot of learning, a lot of reading, much emotional turbulence, many mistakes and a lot of amusement.

I: CONSIDERING SELF-ESTEEM

Breathing

We do this most of the time. Sometimes, without noticing it, we stop breathing, we breathe more shallowly or more heavily and if we were to notice it we might also notice things about how we look, how we think and how we behave.

When we panic we think very differently from when we are relaxed. Our brains decide for us that whatever we might be imagining might harm us (and that must, in some way, be going on or we would not be panicking) and it puts us into ‘emergency mode’. Expansive thinking is rendered less important than rapid action. We narrow down to a sense of ourselves that is best able to cope with looming catastrophe.

Exploring how we breathe and what happens when we consciously apply our attention to breathing is extremely rewarding. Some people have made fortunes out of it, and even rules about it (certain exponents of mindfulness, for example). That takes my breath away.



Anxiety

Anxiety is what creeps in when we become narrowed down. Anxiety is a narrowing of me – a whittling down of me; a meanness. A difficulty. Its root is Latin: *angustia*. Possibly don't ask your GP for help with anxiety; being a GP is one of the most narrowing of jobs and I imagine she or he already has too much on

their plate to spend the time with you that is needed to relieve your anxiety.

To get over anxiety, first you need to feel it – and you do need to feel it. It's part of that necessary fear I mentioned earlier. This doesn't need to be a crippling experience, and you will most probably find that you can do it best with another person. I have on my wall a poster from an exhibition called *Some Things I Will Never Really See*. It features a beautiful face painted with a wonderful scene: one that the owner of the face will never see unless they find a mirror of some sort; and even then they will only see it in a mirror. They will never see it as another might.

We will never see some things about ourselves. Jacques Derrida, whom I thoroughly recommend as an antidote to the ways in which the world mauls our self-esteem, writes about ‘the trace’ (although, of course, in French): a sense of ourselves that is unknowable to us.

If you want to really know yourself you will need to find someone to help you. They will need to really take some time, and to have the strength of mind, body and soul to be open to you.



Hurt

I've been asked by people why they should go on, what right do they have to live and what's it all about? The answer I have found with them (not for them, but after properly

thinking about things with them, the two of us having taken the time to get to know each other) is that maybe they feel other people should not go on, should die or go, have no right to live, or are a pointless waste of time. They haven't been able to say that in ways that have had a positive effect for them, so they channel it into themselves, they want to hurt themselves, as a child might do.



Children take the weight of the world on themselves because in so many ways they are a world to themselves. Children can feel they are bad as if it were a death sentence. Do any of us remember that? They don't experience the differences between them and the people close to them that they will come to understand separate them from those people. They may have both a wonderful and a negligible understanding of otherness.



Dependency & Addiction

We all depend upon certain things, but that is not to say we might not be able to do without them. I depend on my train

to travel to work for reasons I can think through. If the train ceases to run it causes me trouble, sometimes even heartache, but in the end I can live without it and deal with the chaos. Addiction is very different. People who are addicted can't do without the things upon which they do not so much as depend but are emotionally and intellectually attached to. Their attachment is compulsive, driven by emotions like fear and shame, and involves obsession, secretiveness, denial and a form of self-centredness that cuts them off from understanding how their actions affect themselves and others. They may see the effects of what they do, sometimes very clearly indeed, but they have ways of minimising what they notice, including rationalising it in ways that sound like common sense.

Always be very wary of what gets called common sense. It usually involves thoughts that haven't actually been considered in any depth, especially emotional depth, at all.

Recognising the difference between straightforward dependency and the form of compulsive dependency we call addiction is very important for the development of self-esteem. If we look at our dependencies we can

sometimes find ways of reaching inside ourselves and summoning the strength to re-imagine and re-orientate our lives. We notice, perhaps, that what we thought was unavoidable or inevitable is nothing of the kind. We discover that we can think about things that we believed were unthinkable and we are able to apply ourselves to the task of changing our lives for the better. We gain staying power, our relationships of every kind develop depth and if luck is on our side we and the people or things we love prosper. Self-esteem arises out of the feelings of progress, understanding, application and tolerance which emerge as we invest more energy in our lives. We stop being surface-skimmers and we begin to be serious human beings with a passion for life rather than beings intent mainly on moving on in life.

Addiction corrodes self-esteem. It is traumatic. I could say a lot here about the relationship between trauma and addiction, but possibly the most important thing is to notice how self-esteem suffers as a result of addictive behaviour. I don't believe that addiction occurs because of poor self-esteem. Sometimes poor choices and thought-about dependencies give rise to tragic results and if we are unlucky we may at those awful moments feel over-exposed or hyper-vulnerable: alone, uncared for and terminally hopeless. We are more likely to feel like this if as children and young adults we have not felt cared for or if we have experienced abandonment, abuse, neglect or an unacknowledged distance from people who on the face of things, perhaps to others, love us. We, however, do not feel loved. This last kind of relationship is very common, but very hard to notice unless you are on its receiving end.

Feeling alone, uncared for and hopeless open the doors for us to search for something, a behaviour, a substance, a way of thinking which might rescue us. It is like a loving embrace to a panicking infant and the feeling of relief when we are engulfed, held, or comforted, is something our body and mind will commit to craving whenever we feel threatened. We will look for that feeling again and again, because it feels as

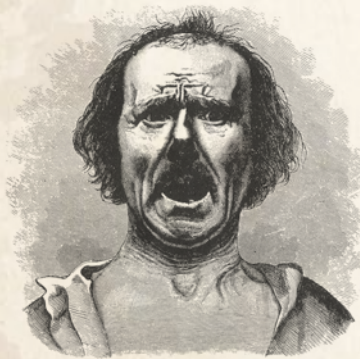
if we have found safety, and it may occur in different ways throughout our lives. It is that feeling we become addicted to, not the thing it is connected to, and in many cases it is not a feeling that results in safety.

Addictions are relationships that are not thought through. They may seem irrational but they are actually dreamily logical (in the way that Alice in Wonderland is logical). They attack self-esteem.

Dependencies are not necessarily addictions. They help us cultivate our self-esteem when we realise that we have chosen them, and we can choose something else if we need to.

It's so important to recognise the difference.

Many problems can seem terminal if we roll over and think it is because we are addicted. Actually we may just be misinformed, scared of thinking beyond a certain point, or paralysed by what gets called laziness. Don't let me get started about that. Laziness is a paralysis that needs understanding, a deep despair that will not respond well to most forms of criticism. All of these things can change far more quickly than a relationship involving addiction. The despairing lazy can change far more quickly than the addict.



Emotions

If we look at the different ways an emotion is expressed around the world, for example love, we see many different things. When we talk about emotions we need to keep that thought of 'many different things' alive. We need to

recognise the unknowable qualities of another person's personality, the ones, for example, that are known

only to them – the ways in which they feel things, for instance – and to not let go of our own special, delightful and sometimes peculiar sensibilities. If we read a novel or watch a film, listen to some music or look at a painting, things will happen if we let them. We will notice, feel and think things sometimes without even realising it. Some of these things we believe are similar to what other people experience, or at least that is what our conversations with them suggest to us, and some will be different.

If, for example, I watch a film about a war I will take in and make sense of the film very differently from someone who fought in that war, or who had a partner killed in that war, or whose parent fought in that war and suffered terribly. All of these people I have just mentioned may experience some similar reactions, and some will be different. And I mean more than simply to say one person will be excited by the film and another left angry.

The qualities of the same emotion each person feels will be very different, they are likely to find, if they sit down and discuss them. Anger can feel like the blade of a knife or the heat of a fire; it can be gloomy or incandescent. Love can be frightening, welcoming or mesmerising. Life offers different effects to each of us from the same experience because in fact no experience is ever the same as another.

It is sometimes necessary to talk in the abstract about love, anger, fear or shame, but there is a danger of immortalising one sense of these feelings: a kind of propaganda that might haunt a society, a culture or a group of people. One might, for instance, be forgiven for believing that anger is something that cannot be experienced quietly until we meet a certain kind of person who takes their time to allow anger to work in them, so that they try to really know it, and then can best act on it; or that fear cannot be fun, until one thinks of what happens in theme parks. I will not be found in a theme park, of course. It is far too dangerous. And someone whose range of expression is limited will find



many situations compromising; so at times our more reserved friend will need to let rip angrily or life will contain times when she or he will feel trapped.

Cutting off from emotions is sometimes essential but can lead to problems when it happens too often.

Succumbing to emotions can be amazing or deadly.

What we feel can lead us to think all kinds of things, but we need to take care that we don't always act on them unless we have thought about it. And sometimes if we think about things too much we become dull, unresponsive and lacking spontaneity. Politicians of our souls, so to speak.

Self-esteem rests on each of us discovering where we stand in relation to the things I have suggested here, and whatever else comes to mind when we do so. Self-esteem is about having the freedom to recognise the world in our own ways and to find the thoughts, words and actions to exist in it at the same time as other people. We discover ourselves like this and life takes on a shape that might accommodate us less painfully. We fail to and life becomes increasingly restrictive. We become anxious, the less of ourselves we bring to bear in life.



Sensation

Self-esteem and sensation have a strange relationship: bodily sensations are perhaps the most over-looked aspects of our everyday lives. It is, however, in our itches, butterfly feelings, headaches, warmth, numbnesses and tinglings that we can truly

find ourselves. Sensations precede feelings that become thoughts and words.

Body 'memories', if we want to call them that, speak through sensations. Sensations can stand for

experiences that never became memories to be thought about and recalled in the way that many others are. Perhaps they are the kinds of memory that are in some way unthinkable: terrible traumatic ones. Or they may be ones from when we were infants or even before that; ones when we were unaware of what was becoming of us. They may be memories that might cause us trouble if we were to hold onto them consciously, and so we have somehow dismissed them. We talk about detached, disconnected, dissociated or repressed memories as well as simply hazy ones. Freud's unconscious experience is in large part the experience of the body.

Sensations do not get caught up in the particularities of language in the same ways that other memories do. Children communicate to their carers by finding ways of speaking out of their sensations: the ones that signal a need must be addressed. Language is learned through sensational experiences. Children and their carers find words to describe what is going on, and in the process a child starts to understand who they are. We all need to discover that we are an 'I', a person with a unique sense of self, and in that process of coming together, and in what follows from that throughout a life, our self-esteem is founded and formed. It remains fluid and flexible depending on how life treats us, how we respond to it, and how we are able to feel and think about that, and to see the impression we have made on the world.



Memories & Remembering

Memories, like dreams, come together in the present. Each time I remember something I feel and think of something new drawn from the substance of what I recall, in the context of now. As time plays out between

rememberings, I may remember things differently. Depending on where I am and who I am my memories can have very different qualities and thoughts associated with them. I can remember something differently on each occasion I recall it.

Self-esteem depends to a large extent on how much I keep a consistent idea of myself in mind, and what that idea of myself is like. The biggest factor in all of this is me: how I remember myself. That will affect the way I see life most: the conclusions I draw about my place in it, my prospects, my desire to change things about myself and whether or not that is a good idea.

Sometimes, as I mentioned earlier, we cannot change without our thinking being supplemented by someone else's. It's how we became ourselves in the first place and it is how we can outgrow ourselves. The relatively closed circuit of me and my thoughts about myself, one in which all things are filtered by my sense of myself and the world around me (something which is actually more volatile than we often imagine) can open out into something else.

Faith, Hope, Trust

The most important advice about life anyone has given me involved three words: 'Faith, hope and trust'. They didn't say any more than that, actually, about 'Faith, hope and trust'. The advice was to find them. Self-esteem suffers when those three qualities are in short supply.

We are each, in many ways, groups. We're plural as well as singular. My sense of self, as it is called, involves a holding

together of some sense of many different aspects of myself in sometimes radically different situations. There will be necessary differences but hopefully I am clearly the same man when I am with the people I love, the people I work with, the people I despise, the people I admire and the people who worry me. Self-esteem means noticing those differences, understanding why they are necessary, for me, and trying to do something about it if they seem unnecessary or undesirable. Too much difference and I might appear two-faced or inconsistent. Too little and I might appear unyielding, a tyrant, impervious and self-obsessed.

For many years I worked with groups of people rather than individual clients and that time taught me how the 'group' of me behaves like groups of people. When faith, hope and trust are lacking, groups don't seem to go anywhere. They feel as if they lack purpose. Too much is either uncontested or too heavily contested.

But let a group stay together long enough, and give it some help to think about itself openly, protecting members or the group itself when it is particularly vulnerable, and something extraordinary happens. Groups start feeling safe and as if they are going somewhere; as if they can make things happen. People talk creatively about their lives and the group doesn't seem to grow stale. Groups seem to develop an identity that can be held onto by their members: the group can be longed for and loved. People believe in it. They believe in its levels of fairness, tolerance, and understanding. It gives its members a sense of hope. Faith, hope and trust flourish in the second kind of group – and the second kind of group continues to flourish.

Think about all of this in relation to the group of *you*.



II: THINGS TO DO

Breathing

1. *If possible breath through your nose.*
2. *Breathe from your diaphragm.*
3. *Keep your breathing steady.*
4. *Aim to breath silently (even if you don't quite get there).*
5. *Breathe in and out for equal amounts of time.*
6. *Breath out for twice as long as you breathe in.*
7. *Try to breathe for an in-breath count of 4, and an out-breath count of 8.*
8. *Do this at least every hour for a minimum of five minutes.*



Coming Up for Air

When you are doing something difficult, remember to 'come up for air'. Take a moment to look around you and find something real that pleases you. Don't ask yourself why; just bask in its loveliness a short while. The more often you do this the more you will be able to recall the things you love, beautiful things, at times when you feel anxious. When times are difficult and you fear being

overwhelmed, let yourself be crowded by what you like. You'll feel more yourself. Do things like have a cup of your favourite tea, or touch a special jewel. Smell your

favourite scent. Put on your favourite socks. These things are your things, and they will help keep you together.

Triangle of Conflict

Poor self-esteem

Sanity

FANTASY

REALITY

Defence

Stay quiet
Daydream
Zone out
Get drunk
Work too hard... etc.
Eat
Sex
Drugs

Anxiety

Say something
Do something
Think something

Conflict

Triggering situation

What will happen if I am real?

At certain moments you will be pressed to shift towards either fantasy or reality; to move towards truth or to lie. Sometimes you may find ways of combining the two, but this is only another fantasy, half-true or half-real, if you like. This movement, which we can follow on the Triangle of Conflict, is triggered by some kind of situation that leaves you conflicted. For example: someone short-changes me in a shop. Do I then tell them that they have done so, running the risk of their anger, denial or something else? Or do I keep quiet and pretend nothing has happened, later on finding a way to distract myself from the nagging sense that I let myself be treated badly? If I say something I can stay with reality and presence. The moment preceding both of these lines of action may be fraught with anxiety.

There is nothing wrong with that. On occasion I may need to keep quiet.

But that sense of 'need' will be governed by my self-esteem. My self-esteem will give me a good idea of when

I really need to protect myself. If my self-esteem is low I will be likely to imagine worse consequences than I might, and to have a very slight belief that justice will be done.

Poor self-esteem will drive me towards unreality. My thoughts and deeds will be less present in the world. As a result I will feel very anxious (anxiety is often in proportion to how present I feel) and probably look to find ways of defending myself against that anxiety that draw me further into not being really there: zoning out, daydreaming, using alcohol, drugs and forms of behaviour like eating or sex to make myself feel better instead of simply enjoying those things in the pleasure of a moment, for themselves.

Mindfulness, yoga and sport are excellent ways of staying in touch with real life. They can of course also be other places to hide. Think about what you are doing, and talk about it with someone you trust.



Writing

What else can you write apart from a narrative? Pick the first three words that come to mind. Choose the one that feels the most important and write from it, as if you are diving into a pool. Keep writing as you might keep afloat. Keep going for a couple of

minutes, moving your fingers on a keyboard or a pen in your hand. It's the action of writing that leads to the thing you write, rather than the thought of it. 'Writer's block' is a form of being frozen. Get moving and you will unfreeze. Things will start to happen that you cannot predict.



Recording and listening

It can be very hard listening to your own voice. Get over that and you will start to love yourself more. Record yourself speaking and listen. Listen to the way that you breathe; how clearly you speak; and to whatever seems to

dwell in your words that isn't directly said: your tone, your pitch, and perhaps a 'something else'. The last of these may be something you have never noticed: an unconscious freighting of your speech that sends out messages you are not consciously aware of.



Beautifying

Yes, looking after yourself. If you are a man taking care that your face is properly shaved when you think it is, for example, or trimming your eyebrows so you don't look like an owl. I'm very conscious of the latter. Never smell.

Self-investment (don't restrict)

The more that you thoughtfully invest in yourself the more likely it is that you will grow. Austerity measures will only ever leave you over-dependent on someone or something else.





Dreaming

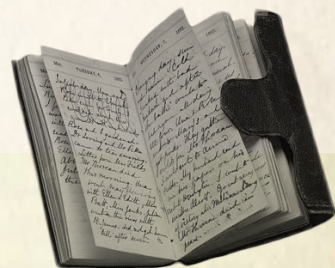
Write your dreams. I don't mean write 'about' them ("Last night I dreamed I was a mountain. I think that means I am not going anywhere, but in a good way ..."), but *write* them: follow the spirit of your dream as if it is happening again ("I'm a small cat, and I'm sitting looking at another one who tells me I am not a cat. This is confusing me, and all the

more so because the place feels familiar. I've never been here before but it feels so much that I have."). Approached like this dreams can be like keys that unlock ways of thinking about life. You have to stay with the craziness of the dream for as long as possible though, holding off looking for meaning in it for as long as you can. If you do, then things are likely to suggest themselves to you. They may seem related to the dream, or they may not. They are about you.



& Lastly...

Keep a specific kind of diary, one that records your experience on a regular basis (hourly is very helpful). You'll find that by looking at life in the terms overleaf you may see certain patterns repeating, or triggers emerging, and over time your sense of life changing. Ideally you may discuss this material with someone else. But simply becoming conscious of life in terms of the things mentioned here can awaken a sensitivity to life that will make you feel more present. More aware of yourself.



1832.

Wednesday 1st February 1832. Resolved to begin to keep my Journal again having now become very sober steady (and) industrious the consequences of being shod of Bath and living according to my old friend George White's directions by necessity at pro salute corporis. Frank Blay owes me some money which I lent him above a year ago & I wrote to him for £10 on account. "David Sney got it" Attended the Literary Society last Monday of which I am become a member. Mr Hope left our office last week and returns to Chester, we could not put up with him any longer, he owes several of our Clients small sums of money. Samuel enters into partnership (and)

How am I and who am I?

Start with a thought about what the last significant event you experienced was. Then think of how you feel about yourself: positive, negative or neutral? What emotions and physical sensations are you experiencing. How safe or unsafe do you feel (0-10 scale, where ten is very safe and zero is very unsafe)? Ask yourself: if what's going on right now feels as if it means something, what might it mean?

Movement

What does your day feel like? Does it feel as if it is flowing smoothly, or disrupted, for example? Is it jagged or smooth? Is there a rhythm to it?

Intensity

On a scale of 0-10, where ten means extremely intense and zero means no intensity at all, how intense does life feel? If you are feeling calm try to feel how intensely calm you feel! Zero would be almost an absence of feeling.

Time Travel

How is time travelling for you? Fast or slow, easy or hard, effortful or relaxed? Think of your own ways of describing how time feels. What kind of a rhythm is playing out, if you can sense one?

Space

What's your sense of space right now: the space inside you, and the space outside? Do they feel similar or different?





The Tomaszewski Practice

Box Tree Clinic, 4 Devonshire Street,
Marylebone, London W1W 5DT

Tel: 0203 6337516

07792 340 364

Email: tom@tomtomaszewski.com

www.tomtomaszewski.com