Students of the self have long recognized two motives that influence self-processes. On the one hand, people want to feel good about themselves. They want to believe that they are competent, worthy, and loved by others. This desire for self-enhancement is regarded as so fundamental to human functioning that it was dubbed the "master sentiment" by William McDougall (1932) and "the basic law of human life" by the renowned anthropologist Ernest Becker (1971). Many other figures of historical (e.g., Allport, 1943; Cooley, 1902; Mead, 1934) and contemporary (e.g., Baumeister, 1991; Greenwald, 1980; Schlenker, 1985; Steele, 1988; Tesser, 1988) prominence have endorsed the belief that a drive to achieve a positive self-image is, in the words of William James (1890), a direct and elementary endowment of human nature.

Alongside the self-enhancement motive stands a drive toward self-consistency. Self-consistency refers to a desire to protect the self-concept against change (Lecky, 1945; Swann, 1983, 1987). Once formed, thoughts
about the self function as conceptual tools; they enable individuals to predict and control important life experiences (Epstein, 1973). For this reason, people become invested in preserving their current self-views. Any experience that challenges or disturbs a person's self-concept is potentially threatening.

Self-enhancement and self-consistency motives operate in concert for people who think well of themselves. That is, for people with high self-esteem, the desire to enhance self-worth is compatible with the need to maintain a positive self-image. The two motives clash, however, among people with low self-esteem. For these individuals, the desire to promote a positive self-image conflicts with the need to protect a negative self-view against change. People with low self-esteem must therefore walk a fine line between these competing motive forces (Brown, Collins, & Schmidt, 1988; Jones, 1973; McFarlin & Blascovich, 1981; Shrauger, 1975; Swann, Griffin, Predmore, & Gaines, 1987).

SELF-ESTEEM, POSITIVE LIFE EVENTS, AND HEALTH

The precarious nature of low self-esteem is revealed by research on positive life events and physical well-being. Although numerous investigations have found that negative life experiences are commonly associated with ill health (for reviews, see Jemmott & Locke, 1984; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984), the effect of positive life experiences is much less clear. Some studies have found that positive life events impair health, some have found that positive life events reduce the adverse effects of negative events or facilitate well-being, and some have found no effect (Cohen & Hoberman, 1983; Siegel & Brown, 1988; Thoits, 1983a).

In an attempt to bring order to these findings, Brown and McGill (1989) proposed that the impact of positive life events on health is moderated by people's self-esteem levels. In particular, they suggested that positive life events adversely affect people with low self-esteem but do not harm people with high self-esteem. This prediction follows from Brown's identity disruption model of stress (Brown, 1987; Swann & Brown, 1990). According to the model, the pathogenic impact of some significant life changes stems, in part, from their capacity to initiate disturbances in the self-concept.

Identity change is problematic because self-conceptions serve several important functions. Foremost among these is an organizing one. Many theorists have asserted that the self-concept acts largely to organize and guide personal experience (Lecky, 1945; Swann, 1987). According to this view, effective action requires the development of a self-