

**Compassion**

Exercise



5-10 min.



Client



No



Reframing Critical Self-Talk

Self-criticism can be regarded as the opposite of self-compassion. Whereas self-compassion involves a positive and accepting relationship with the self, self-criticism can be construed as negative and punishing thoughts directed toward one's personal characteristics. Self-criticism typically concerns judgment and self-blame regarding shortcomings, such as the inability to accomplish personal goals or meet other people's expectations.

Self-criticism takes place in different forms. The inner critic (also referred to as the pathological critic) threatens ("If you don't work hard enough, you will lose your job"), monitors weaknesses or mistakes ("You messed this up again"), commands ("You should stop acting like a fool") and judges ("You look like a cow in this dress"). Obviously, self-criticism can be quite distressing and often results in negative emotions like fear, shame and guilt.

Self-criticism has been found to be a key process underlying many forms of psychopathology, including eating disorders (Lehman & Rodin, 1989; Steiger, Gauvin, Jabalpurwila, Seguin, & Stotland, 1999), substance abuse (Blatt, Rounsaville, Eyre, & Wilber, 1984), depression (Beck, 1987; Blatt, 1995), and social anxiety (Clark, Watson, & Mineka, 1994). Reducing self-criticism can therefore be regarded as an important goal.

Goal

The goal of this exercise is to increase the client's awareness of inner criticism and promote a more self-compassionate stance towards the self.



Advice

- Step 1 of this exercise aims to increase awareness of inner criticism. Some therapists have suggested that it can be useful for clients to name these self-critical voices (e.g. 'inner critic' or 'inner bully') to personify and create distance (Gilbert, 2000c; Greenberg, 1979; Stone & Stone, 1993). Awareness of inner criticism may be facilitated by using this naming technique.
- In Step 2, when clients rephrase what they are saying, it can be helpful for them to give self-loving gestures such as rubbing their own arm, stroking their hair, or giving themselves a massage. This physical gesture of affection can tap into their caring side and release oxytocin.



- It is important for clients to remember not to fight the inner critic. Replying to a negative inner voice with another negative voice is likely to increase frustration and inner conflict, strengthening the inner critic.
- Having a trigger can help remind clients to do this awareness exercise. The trigger could be a word, gesture, a physical reminder (e.g. a picture or quote) etc.

Suggested Readings

Beck, A. T. (1987). Cognitive models of depression. *Journal of Cognitive Psychotherapy: An International Quarterly*, 1, 5-37.

Blatt, S. J. (1995). The destructiveness of perfectionism: Implications for the treatment of depression. *American Psychologist*, 49, 1003-1020.

Blatt, S. J., Zuroff, D. C., Bondi, C. M., Sanislow C., & Pilkonis, P. (1998). When and how perfectionism impedes the brief treatment of depression: Further analyses of the National Institute of Mental Health Treatment of Depression Collaborative Research Program. *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology*, 66, 423- 428.

Clark, L. A., Watson, D., & Mineka, S. (1994). Temperament, personality, and the mood and anxiety disorders. *Journal of Abnormal Psychology*, 103, 103-116.

Elliott, J.E. (1992). The use of anthetic dialogue in eticiting and challenging dysfunctional beliefs. *Journal of Cognitive Psychotherapy*, 6, 137-143.

Lehman, A. K., & Rodin, J. (1989). Styles of self-nurturance and disordered eating. *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology*, 57, 117-122.

Steiger, H., Gauvin, L., Jabalpurwila, S., Seguin, J., & Stotland, S. (1999). Hyper- sensitivity to social interactions in bulimic syndromes: Relationship to binge eating. *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology*, 67, 765-775.



Reframing Critical Self-Talk

Instructions

We are often very hard on ourselves unnecessarily. Most likely we would not speak to someone that we love the way that we speak to ourselves. Changing critical self-talk can be a challenge, but with motivation and practice, it can be done. The following two steps can help reduce self-criticism and cultivate a more compassionate relationship with the self.

Step 1: Increase awareness of self-criticism

In the upcoming week, try to become aware of self-critical talk as much as possible. When you notice that you are being self-critical:

- Pause and take three deep breaths.
- Notice what you say to yourself when you fail or have made a mistake.
- Are there key phrases that you say to yourself?
- What is the tone of your voice when talking to yourself?

Step 2: Take action, soften your critical voice

- After noticing self-critical talk, think about what you would say to a loved one in the same situation. Now use these words to rephrase what you say to yourself.
- Also pay attention to the tone of voice. How would you like to talk to yourself? Practice the tone that you want to use with yourself in the times when you are feeling great about yourself.
- Identify what you are criticizing yourself for. The inner critic can provide useful feedback but most often the way this feedback is presented is far from constructive. Try to take a “learning stance”: What can I learn from this feedback? How can I talk to myself as I would a young child who is learning about this for the first time? How can I use the inner critic’s feedback in a more motivating and constructive way?