

**Compassion**

Exercise



10-15 min.



Client



No



## Releasing Self-criticism Thought Balloons

In order to increase self-compassion, it is important to enhance awareness of factors that prevent self-compassion. In sharp contrast with self-compassion, clients may instead hear the harsh, self-critical inner voice that is most frequently manifested in negative, self-related thoughts ("I can't do anything right", "I am an idiot", etc.) but sometimes also expressed overtly (e.g. by telling a friend "I look like a cow in this dress"). For many clients, this voice is part of daily life. For self-compassion to grow, it is important to become aware of these self-critical thoughts.

### Goal

For many clients, the inner critical voice has become so internalized that it has become a daily habit. Its occurrence is so automatic that many clients are not aware of its dysfunctional nature. This exercise can help disrupt this automatic pattern by making clients aware of self-critical thoughts and release them.



### Advice

- After this exercise, the next step for your client could be to transform the nature of the inner critical voice into a more self-compassionate and self-supporting one.
- Note that the goal of this exercise is not to create a black and white approach to motivation in which compassion is the "good" approach and self-criticism is the "bad" approach. Rather, the goal is to make people aware of how they feel when they use self-criticism for creating motivation. A consequence of this exercise may be that the client's beliefs about the value of self-criticism for motivation are challenged. The client may come to realise that there are different, less self-attacking ways to enhance motivation. However, it is more powerful when a client experiences this personally, rather than when the practitioner attempts to convey this idea.



### Suggested Readings

Neff, K. D. (2011). *Self-compassion: Stop beating yourself up and leave insecurity behind*. New York: William Morrow.

## Releasing Self-criticism Thought Balloons

### Step #1: Label thought balloons

Invite your client to draw a person holding 5-10 thought balloons (or use the pre-drawn balloons below). Then, invite your client to fill the thought balloons with terms or language that he/she typically uses when engaging in self-criticism (e.g., “You aren’t good enough” or “You are ugly”).





## Step #2: Release thought balloons

Now, guide your client through the following visualization:

1. We will now do a brief visualization exercise. I am going to read out each of your self-critical thoughts, and your task is to visualize yourself holding the thoughts as balloons, and then to imagine yourself letting these balloons go.
2. To begin, find yourself a comfortable position, and gently close your eyes. I'll now read out the first self-critical thought: [Insert one of the client's self-critical thoughts, e.g. "You aren't good enough"]. Visualize yourself holding on to this thought balloon. And when you're ready, release your grip on the string, and watch the balloon float away into the distance.
3. I'll now read out your second thought: [Insert client's next self-critical thought]. Visualize yourself holding on to this thought balloon. And when you're ready, release your grip on the string, and watch the balloon float away into the distance.
4. Repeat until each thought balloon has been released, and then invite the client to gently open their eyes.

## Step #3: Evaluate

What did you notice?

Was it easy or difficult to visualize yourself releasing self-critical thoughts? Why?

How do you feel now?

## Step #4: Take home task

Invite the client to take the exercise home in order to add critical thoughts over the course of the following week. Then, in your next session, guide your client through steps 2 and 3 again in order to further practice releasing self-critical thoughts. Your client may also begin to practice this visualization on their own, which should be encouraged.