

Combating Self-Criticism

What impact does self-criticism have on you?

Typically when things go wrong or you make a mistake do you: Call yourself names? Tell yourself you should do better? See a single mistake as evidence that you are stupid/incompetent/inadequate person? Ignore the things you got right and concentrate on what you got wrong? Blame yourself entirely, ignoring any outside factors that may have caused you to make the mistake? If you do more than one of these things then you are behaving in a way that is typical of someone with low self-esteem. That is, they make judgements that completely ignore the other side of the picture and as a result apply a negative bias to their thinking rather than a balanced point of view. Unfortunately these negative biases express themselves as self-criticism which result in painful feelings and in themselves can keep low self-esteem going.

Look at the words below, allowing each one to sink in. Imagine they apply to you and notice their impact on your mood. Give each one a score, from 0 (no impact on your mood), through to -5 (makes you feel quite bad), to -10 (makes you feel really awful):

Useless	___	Unattractive	___	Incompetent	___
Weak	___	Unlikeable	___	Ugly	___
Pathetic	___	Unwanted	___	Stupid	___
Worthless	___	Inferior	___	Inadequate	___

Some of these words may be quite familiar to you, from your own self-critical thoughts. If so, underline them. What are words do you use when you are being self-critical? Note them down; these are words that you need to look out for.

Why does self-criticism do more harm than good?

Self criticism is often learned early in life and often we are led to believe that thinking well of ourselves is big-headed or boasting. We are taught to work harder and behave better by having our faults emphasised and rather than having our successes praised. You may see it as helpful but it has some major disadvantages:

- **Self-Criticism paralyses you and makes you feel bad.** Imagine a self-confident person who you follow around and point out every single mistake they make, tell them what they have done is not good enough, could have been better. As days went by what do you think this constant criticism would make them feel? How might it affect their confidence and their ability to make decisions? Would it make their life easier for them or more difficult? Would you do this to a friend? If not, why not?

If you habitually criticise yourself then this is probably what you are doing to yourself, perhaps even without being aware of it. Self-critical thoughts are like having a parrot on your shoulder constant squawking disapproval in your ear. Consider how this may demoralise you and paralyse your efforts to change and grow.

- **Self-criticism is unfair.** When you criticise yourself you react to any mistakes or failures – even small ones – and condemn yourself as a person and draw general conclusions based on evidence that is biased; taking only the negative into consideration. Do you think this is fair? Would you treat someone else in the same way? Be realistic: give yourself credit for your assets and strengths as well as acknowledging that like everybody else you have weaknesses and flaws.
- **Self-criticism blocks learning.** If you undermine your confidence by self-criticism you will feel bad, discouraged and demoralised. Do you think this will make it easier for you to overcome your problems and things you want to change? If you concentrate on what you do wrong you prevent yourself from learning from and repeating what you do right. It also makes it harder for you to feel motivated to change and learn from your mistakes.
- **Self-criticism ignores the realities.** In hindsight it's often easy to see how you could have handled things better. However, *at the time*, how did things appear to you? Consider: What was happening? How were you feeling? Were you thinking clearly? Did you have all the information you needed to deal with the situation in the best possible way? Taking all these things into consideration does this help you to get a more balanced view of how you acted? Punishing and brooding over mistakes will only make you feel bad, but if you learn from your experiences by looking back at them and acting differently based on this different perspective.
- **Self-criticism kicks you when you are down.** If you criticise yourself when you are feeling down it just makes you feel more undermined and demoralised. Ask yourself: If others had similar difficulties in their life, what sort of problems might they have? Is it possible your reactions are a typical natural reaction to stressful events? If you had a friend with similar difficulties what might be your advice to them?

Dealing with Self-Criticism

The skills involved in dealing with self-critical thoughts are:

- Becoming aware of your self-critical thoughts by recording them on charts
- Questioning your self-critical thoughts
- Experimenting with viewing yourself more compassionately

How can you become more aware of your self-critical thoughts?

The crucial first step can help you notice what is running through your mind when you feel bad about yourself, and to understand more clearly how these thoughts keep the vicious circle of low self-esteem going. We can do this by filling in a self-critical thoughts chart to note these thoughts when they occur. You can then question them and find more helpful or realistic alternatives. Keep a record for about a week, using a sheet for every day which should give you a good indication of your triggers to self-critical thinking. Here are some guidelines to filling in the charts:

- **Date and Time:** When did you feel bad about yourself? Perhaps the time of day is a pattern?
- **The situation:** What was happening when you began to feel this way? Who were you with?
- What were you doing? Where were you? If you weren't doing anything perhaps you were thinking something so write down instead what topic you were thinking about.
- **Emotions and body sensations:** Did you feel one main or a mixture of emotions? Did your body feel different e.g. a sinking feeling, churning stomach, sweating more? Rate each emotion from 0-100 with 5 being a very minor emotional response to 100 being as high as it could possibly be.
- **Self-Critical Thoughts:** What was running through your mind when you began to feel bad about yourself? Did you hear a voice in your mind criticising you or calling you names? Were there critical images? Ask yourself what does the situation say about you? What do others think of you? Rate each thought based on how much you believe it, from 5 where you believed it only slightly to 100 where you totally believed it to be true.
- **Self-Defeating behaviour:** Did you apologise for yourself or withdraw into your shell? Did you avoid asking for what you needed? Did you allow yourself to be treated like a doormat or ignored? Did you avoid an opportunity that you might have taken?

Frequently asked questions about the Spotting the Self-Critical Thoughts Chart

Why is it important to fill it in?

Having a record in black and white means you have something concrete to reflect on, and there is less chance of you forgetting incidents. You can notice repeating patterns, consider how your thoughts affect your behaviour in different situations and become aware of the exact words you use to yourself when you are being self-critical.

Writing down your thought also takes them out of your head (so to speak), and allows you to stand back from them, take a good look at them and gain a different perspective. This will help you to move towards the point where you can begin to say, 'Uh oh, there's another one of those,' and to see them as something you do rather than a reflection of yourself.

How many thoughts do I need to record?

You could start by noting one or two self-critical thoughts each day. When observing their impact has become fairly automatic, you will be ready to move on to finding alternatives to your self-critical thoughts. This could take up to a week – but you may find you get the hang of it more quickly than that.

When should I make the record?

The best way is to write down your self-critical thoughts as soon as they occur. This will mean keeping your record sheets with you. The reason for this is that, although self-critical thoughts can have a very powerful effect when they actually occur, it may be hard afterwards to remember exactly what ran through your mind.

Of course, the ideal is not always possible. If you cannot write down what happened at the time, make sure that at least you make a mental note of what upset you, or jot down a reminder on any handy piece of paper. Then set aside time later to make a proper, detailed written record. Run through an 'action replay' in your mind – remember as vividly as you can where you were and what you were doing, the moment you started to feel bad about yourself, what was running through your mind at that moment, and what you did in response to your thoughts.

Won't focussing on my negative thoughts just upset me?

It's natural to want to avoid focussing on upsetting ideas. You may feel understandably reluctant to commit these damning judgements of yourself to paper. But if you want to combat your self-critical thoughts effectively, you first need to look them in the eye. So beware of excuses ("I'll do it later", "It doesn't do to dwell on things", "My issues are trivial"). Making excuses will deprive you of the chance to develop a more kindly perspective on yourself. And ignoring the thoughts will not make them go away.

Spotting Self-Critical Thoughts: An Example

Here's a worked example. Let's take Jim who accidentally knocked down and injured someone who stepped in front of his car. After several months Jim had a few days of feeling better and seemed more relaxed. Then his daughter one day was very late home from school. Jim was terrified and thought something terrible was going to happen to her. In fact she had gone to her friend's house. Jim went ballistic when she got home. Afterwards he felt thoroughly ashamed of himself. What a way to behave! This episode seemed to confirm his worst suspicions about himself: he *was* a nervous wrecked and there was little chance of change. He was just about ready to give up.

Spotting Self-Critical Thoughts Chart: Jim

Date/Time: 5th March

Situation What were you doing when you began to feel bad about yourself?

I got in a rage with Kelly when she came home late. Had completely forgotten she was going to Jan's house.

Emotions and body sensations (e.g. sad, angry, guilty) Rate each 0-100 for intensity

Guilty (80), Fed up with myself (100), Hopeless (95)

Self-Critical thoughts What exactly was going through your mind when you began to feel bad about yourself? (e.g. thoughts in words, images, meanings)? Rate each 0-100% for degree of belief.

This proves it – I'm really losing it 100%

I'm a total mess – 95%

I should pull myself together – 100%

What's the matter with me? I just don't think I'll ever get back to how i was – 95%

Self-defeating behaviour What did you do as a consequence of your self-critical thoughts?

Stomped out of the house and went to the pub. Came back late and shut myself in the basement alone to watch TV. Didn't talk to anyone.

Spotting Self-Critical Thoughts Chart

Date/Time:

Situation. What were you doing when you began to feel bad about yourself?

Emotions and body sensations (e.g. sad, angry, guilty) Rate each 0-100 for intensity

Self-Critical thoughts What exactly was going through your mind when you began to feel bad about yourself? (e.g. thoughts in words, images, meanings)? Rate each 0-100% for degree of belief.

Self-defeating behaviour What did you do as a consequence of your self-critical thoughts?

How can you question your self-critical thoughts?

Developing awareness of your self-critical thoughts is the first step toward questioning them. The aim is to stop taking your critical thoughts as if they were statements of truth about yourself, and to begin to find alternative statements that will find a more balanced view. For this we use the **Combating Self-Critical Thoughts Chart**. This continues on from spotting Self-Critical thoughts and starts to consider alternative perspectives and new outcomes.

Using the Key Questions (below) find alternative perspectives to your beliefs and rate how much you believe these new perspectives. You don't have to believe it 100 but they should be sufficiently convincing to make at least some different to how you feel.

Key Questions: To Help You Find Alternatives to Self-Critical Thoughts

1. What is the evidence?

- Am I confusing a thought with a fact?
- What is the evidence in favour of what I think about myself?
- What is the evidence against what I think about myself?

2. What alternative perspectives are there?

- Am I assuming my perspective is the only one possible?
- What evidence do I have to support my alternative perspectives?

3. What is the effect of thinking the way I do about myself?

- Are these self-critical thoughts helpful to me, or are they getting in the way?
- What perspective might be more helpful to me?

4. What are the biases in my thinking about myself?

- Am I jumping to conclusions?
- Am I using a double standard?
- Am I thinking in all-or-nothing terms?
- Am I condemning myself as a total person on the basis of a single event?

- Am I concentrating on my weaknesses and forgetting my strengths?
- Am I blaming myself for things which are really not my fault?
- Am I expecting myself to be perfect?

5. What can I do?

- How can I put a new, kinder, perspective into practice?
- Is there anything I need to do to change the situation? Even if not, what I do to change my thinking in the future?
- How can I experiment with acting in a less self-defeating way?

How can you use key questions to help you find alternatives to self-critical thoughts?

1. What is the evidence?

- **Am I confusing a thought with a fact?**

Just because you believe something to be true, it does not follow that it is.

- **What is the evidence against what I think about myself?**

Can you think of anything that suggests that your poor opinion of yourself is not true?

2. What alternative perspectives are there?

- **Am I assuming my perspective is the only one possible?**

Any situation can be viewed from different angles. Would you see the situation differently if you were feeling more confident on that day? How do you think you will view it in ten years time? Is there any evidence for the alternative perspective? Is it based on reality?

3. What is the effect of thinking the way I do about myself?

- **Are these self-critical thoughts helpful to me, or are they getting in the way?**

Do the disadvantages of self-critical thinking outweigh the advantages? Do your self-critical thoughts help you get out of the situation or would a more balanced viewpoint be more helpful?

- **What perspective might be more helpful to me?**

4. What are the biases in my thinking about myself?

- **Am I jumping to conclusions?**

Am I deciding how things are without evidence? If you believed someone is thinking or has said something about you, do you know that for a fact or are you just reading their mind? Those with low self-esteem generally jump to negative conclusions about themselves.

- **Am I using a double standard?**

People with low self-esteem are often harder on themselves than they would be with anybody else. Ask yourself if you would tell someone they were weak or pathetic if they came to you with the same problem? Or would you be more encouraging. Try and take a step back and be kinder to yourself, as you would with another. You will almost certainly find that this makes you feel better and helps you to think clearly and constructively.

- **Am I thinking in all-or-nothing terms?**

All-or-nothing (or black and white) think oversimplifies a situation to be either one thing or another. For example people are generally not all good or all bad. Look for words that are extreme such as always/never, everyone/no one, everything, nothing. Look for shades of grey.

- **Am I condemning myself as a total person on the basis of a single event?**

People with low self-esteem generally make global statements about themselves on the basis of one thing they said or did, or one problem they have. One person dislikes you must mean there is something wrong with you? One mistake and you are a failure? If you did one thing well once would that make you a wonderful person? Remember that when you are feeling down, you will be homing in on anything that fits your poor opinion of yourself and screening out, often positive, things that does not fit.

- **Am I concentrating on my weaknesses and forgetting my strengths?**

People with low self esteem commonly overlook problems they have dealt with in the past and forget the resources that could help them to overcome current difficulties. You are not good at everything and make mistakes but this is true of everyone. But what are you good at? What do other people appreciate about you? What do you like about yourself? How have you coped with past difficulties and stresses? What are your strengths and qualities?

- **Am I blaming myself for things which are really not my fault?**

When something goes wrong do you immediately assume it's your fault or do you consider all the possibilities of why it happened? Sometimes it may be something you have done of course, but often other factors are involved. If you always assume responsibility when things go wrong you may not ever discover what really happened. If you remain open minded and consider other explanations you may discover that what happened has absolutely nothing to do with you.

- **Am I expecting myself to be perfect?**

It's just not possible to be 100% right all the time. If you expect to do so, you are setting yourself up to fail. If you set realistic targets and give yourself credit when you reach them, even if it's not perfect, this will help you feel better about yourself and motivate you to try again. It means you can also learn from your difficulties, rather than being upset and even paralysed by them.

5. What can I do?

- **How can I put a new, kinder, perspective into practice?**

How can you see if your alternative perspective works better for you? Is there anything you could do to change the situation? Could you change your own reactions? How can you handle the situation differently next time?

- **Is there anything I need to do to change the situation? Even if not, what I do to change my thinking in the future?**

- **How can I experiment with acting in a less self-defeating way?**

Spotting and dealing with self-critical thoughts can be helpful. However experimenting with behaving in different ways that are less self-defeating can also help you to develop and strengthen new perspectives on yourself. E.g. Not apologising for yourself, accept compliments gracefully, asserting your needs etc.

Outcome

Go back to your original emotions and body sensations. How would you rate them now? Then go back to your original self-critical thoughts, having found alternative perspectives how would you rate them now?

If your answers have been effective then you should find that your belief in the self-critical thoughts and the painful emotions that go with them have been reduced to some extent.

The next step is to work out what you need to do in order to test out your new perspectives in the real world. Experience is the best teacher: you will find your alternatives most convincing if you have acted on them and discovered for yourself how they change your feelings and the possibilities open to you. Look at your self-defeating behaviours, how could these be changed into something that would be more constructive?

Frequently ask questions about the Combating Self-Critical Thoughts Chart

How long will it take to find good alternatives to my self-critical thoughts?

The habit of self-criticism takes time to break. Changing your thinking is like taking up a new form of exercise, it takes time to develop the mental muscles you do not normally use. It may feel uncomfortable and awkward at first, but with regular practice they will become strong. The objective at this stage is to reach the point where you automatically notice, answer and dismiss self-critical thoughts. Regular daily practice (one or two written examples a day) is the best way to achieve this. It may take a week or two to get the hang of answering self-critical thoughts – or it may take longer.

Later, you will be able to find answers to self-critical thoughts in your head without needing to write anything down. Eventually, you may find that most of the time you do not even need to answer thoughts in your head – they no longer occur very much. Even so, you may still find the record sheet helpful when dealing with particularly tough thoughts, or times when you feel under pressure or particularly unhappy for some reason. Regular daily recordings need only go on until you achieve the objective of dealing with self-critical thoughts without a written prompt.

How can I expect to think differently when I'm feeling really upset?

If something happens that upsets you deeply, it will probably be very difficult to find alternatives to your self-critical thoughts. Instead of grasping that this is a common, natural difficulty, you may fall into the trap of seeing it as yet another reason to criticise yourself. The most helpful thing is to simply make a note of what happened to upset you, and your feelings and thoughts, but then leave the search for alternatives until you are feeling calmer. You will be in a better position to see things clearly after you have weathered the storm.

How good does the record have to be?

Many people with low self esteem are perfectionists. However, it's important to bear in mind the reason for the thought record: increasing self-awareness and increasing flexibility in your thinking. Taking a perfectionist approach won't help you to achieve this – it will only create pressure to perform, and stifle creativity. You do not have to find the one right answer, or the answer you think you should put. The 'right' answer is the answer that makes sense to you and changes your feelings for the better. No answer, however sensible it may seem, will work for everyone. You need to find the one that works best for *you*.

What if my alternatives don't work?

Sometimes people find that answers they come up with make little difference to how they feel and act. If this is the case for you, perhaps you are disqualifying the answer in some way – maybe telling

yourself that it applies to other people, but not to you? If you have 'yes, buts' like this write them down in the self-critical thoughts column and question them. Do not expect your belief in your old thoughts and painful feelings to shrink to zero right away, especially if they reflect beliefs about yourself which have been in place for many years. Self-critical thinking can be like a pair of old shoes – not very pleasant, but familiar and moulded to your shape. New perspectives, in contrast, are like new shoes – unfamiliar and stiff. You will need time to practice 'walking in them' until they start to feel comfortable.

What if I'm no good at this?

Don't allow yourself to get caught in this trap of self-criticism while you are recoding your self-critical thoughts. Changing how you think about yourself is no easy task. So beware being hard on yourself when you find the going tough. If you had a friend who was trying to tackle something difficult, would it be more helpful to you to praise or criticise them? You may catch yourself thinking 'I must be really stupid to think this way' or 'I'm not doing enough of this' or 'I will never get the hang of this.' If you do spot thoughts like these - write them down and answer them.

Spotting Self-Critical Thoughts: An Example

To continue Jim's example, below is his completed Combating Self-Critical Thoughts Chart.

Combating Self-Critical Thoughts Chart: Jim

Date/Time: 8 March

Situation What were you doing when you began to feel bad about yourself?

Had a row with Kelly Again. She wanted to go out on a friend's motorbike.

Emotions and body sensations (e.g. sad, angry, guilty) Rate each 0-100 for intensity

Guilty 80

Angry with Myself 100

Hopeless 90

Self-Critical thoughts What exactly was going through your mind when you began to feel bad about yourself? (e.g. thoughts in words, images, meanings)? Rate each 0-100% for degree of belief.

Here I go again losing my temper over nothing. I am a wreck.

Alternative perspectives Rate each 0-100% for degree of belief. Use the key questions to find other perspectives.

It's true that I was angrier than the situation warranted. But it's because I get frightened for her. Bikes are quite dangerous and I'm afraid of losing her. So it wasn't really about nothing. 100%

I do need to do something about this, it's true. I have changed a lot. But then, I went through something really bad, so maybe it's not surprising. I'm not my usual self. 90%

Rows are not good for any of us. But in fact we usually get over it. She's a good girl, even if a bit of a cranky teenager at the moment. We have some good times together. 95%

I don't know how to answer that. It's been going on a while. I don't like doing it, but maybe it's time to get some help. 50%

Outcome 1. Now that you have found alternatives to your self-critical thoughts, how do you feel (0-100)? 2. How far do you now believe the self-critical thoughts (0-100%)? 3. What can you do (action plan, experiments to change self-defeating behaviour)?

1. Guilty 40 Angry with self 30 Hopeless 40

2. 30% 20% 50%

3. i) Tell Kelly I'm sorry about shouting at her and explain why.

4. ii) Talk to Viv (my wife) and tell her how I feel instead of shutting her out

iii) Get some help?

Combating Self-Critical Thoughts Chart

Date/Time:

Situation What were you doing when you began to feel bad about yourself?

Emotions and body sensations (e.g. sad, angry, guilty) Rate each 0-100 for intensity

Self-Critical thoughts What exactly was going through your mind when you began to feel bad about yourself? (e.g. thoughts in words, images, meanings)? Rate each 0-100% for degree of belief.

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