

## Introducing CBT for Low Mood and Depression (6): Self-Criticism

Hello, and thanks for tuning into this sixth podcast in my CBT for Low Mood series, in which I'm going to be talking about self-criticism.

First off, let's address an important question: is self-criticism all bad? It's got to be a no, right? Being able to reflect on things we've done and notice where we've gone wrong is really useful in all sorts of ways. Using mistakes to improve our academic skills is an important part of learning. Similarly, if you've hurt someone, being aware of and understanding that, even feeling guilty about it, is the fuel for repairing it. Let's be clear: this kind of self-criticism is *not* what I'm going to be talking about in what follows.

No, what I'm getting it here are the much less constructive, often viciously destructive, forms of self-criticism that characterise periods of low mood. I've talked in earlier podcasts about the "inner critic" – that readiness to berate yourself for perceived shortfalls, which is so often such a feature of depression. The longer I work at the University Counselling Service, the more versions of this critic I see. Asked what their inner critic typically says to them or thinks about them, students I've worked with have given examples like:

"you're stupid"

"you're lazy"

"you're inadequate"

"you're weak"

You can see that the inner critic can have a fierce quality to it: often these self-judgments are very personal. Rather than being about what went wrong in a specific situation, they're about the person themselves, speaking to some supposedly intrinsic, permanent attribute. Sometimes the very fact that you are struggling, the feelings themselves, become the focus of self-criticism. In earlier podcasts I talk about the CBT concept of Core Beliefs – these lurking, negative ideas about ourselves that can get activated during setbacks or mistakes. These are often at the beating heart of self-criticism – anything and everything that seemingly provides evidence for them is seized upon and woven into a story of how rubbish you are.

Sometimes self-criticism becomes a kind of fuel for persistent low mood, withdrawal, loss of self-worth and all those classic signs of depression. Sometimes though, its toll may be less obvious. The psychologist Margaret Robinson Rutherford coined the term "Perfectly Hidden Depression" to describe people who might seem outwardly to be thriving but for whom relentlessly high self-standards and self-criticism become this constant threat, propelling them on and never allowing them to be gentle with themselves or permit themselves to be struggling. I see quite a lot of students at Oxford who fit this description, and the costs to mental health and wellbeing are no less significant than in those with more classic low mood and depression. Constant worry, feelings of detachment, and burnout are just a few of the risks. In the transcript to this podcast, I've included a link to [a website where you can read more about this](#) if you'd like to.

So why do people criticise themselves? Well, there are lots of reasons. Sometimes self-critical thoughts are internalised versions of what has been communicated to us, explicitly or implicitly, in the past. Familial and socio-cultural expectations are important here; the kinds of things we criticise ourselves for (whether helpfully or unhelpfully) are often related to the values and norms that we

have grown up with. And let's acknowledge here the role of discriminatory attitudes: if we have been given pervasive messages about how we *should* be, or been devalued or shamed, that is ripe territory for self-censoring and self-criticism. Similarly, experiences of being excluded, isolated or abused, can of course have a huge impact on a person's sense of self-worth. Sometimes the critic might feel more like your own voice – or part of you, at least, which has become habitually critical over the years. In a weird way, often the inner critic is trying to warn you in some way – about judgment from others, for example, or risk of abandonment or failure. I was in a workshop with Paul Gilbert, one of the founders of Compassion Focused Therapy, and we were asked to imagine we'd undergone some procedure which completely removed the capacity to self-criticise, and to ask ourselves: what would I be afraid of in this scenario? Students I've put this question to have often said things like "I'd become arrogant or selfish" or "I'd lose my edge, my academic spark". This goes some way to explaining why sometimes people can cling on to self-criticism even when it comes at such a cost: it's fending off a fear. The problem of course - at least with the more unhelpful forms of self-criticism – is that it goes way, way too far. Not only is it horrible to be plagued by self-critical thoughts, it's also, often paralysing: if you're always calling yourself a stupid, boring person, the prospect of getting to know someone – who might see this in you – becomes really frightening. If you're constantly tearing apart your work and telling yourself it's not good enough, the whole experience of working becomes incredibly off-putting. There's a biological cost too. Just as when we're criticised by someone else, the body responds to self-attacking thoughts as a kind of threat, so it'll start secreting stress hormones and firing up the body's alarm system. This can manifest in all kinds of stress, anxiety and even physical symptoms. And when you're *feeling* low and depressed, this has a big impact on your thinking – you're much more likely to lean towards the negative, self-blame, and assume the worst. So you get a cycle.

In the rest of this podcast I'm going to introduce three practical tools to help you get a handle on relentless self-criticism. This podcast is by no means exhaustive and if you are someone who is really struggling with these issues, don't let it be a replacement for seeking professional help. But I hope it might give you a head-start, or complement some of the work you're doing with a counsellor.

### **Tool 1: Unhooking from Self-Critical Thoughts**

I say it in almost every episode of this podcast but remember that CBT principle: thoughts are thoughts, they may or may not be true, they may or may not be helpful. The thing with self-criticism is that it's often really habitual, so much so that people sometimes aren't aware how much they're doing it. Like anything we do repeatedly, the more we do it, the more automatic it gets. If you've entertained certain stories about yourself for years and years, the mind will quickly default to them in sculpting your reactions to day-to-day stresses and setbacks.

This is a technique I've borrowed and adapted from Russ Harris. He calls it defusion, and it's basically a way of taking the sting out of horrible thoughts – reminding you that they are just thoughts, just words, just a very familiar story. I'm going to talk you through a few examples of how to do this – you're welcome to give it a go as I speak, if you'd like to, or just listen in for now and see what you think. Often people like some versions of defusion more than others, and as you'll see there's a lot of scope for creativity with this technique. So. Bring to mind some negative thought about yourself. For this exercise, I'd avoid anything that might have traumatic associations but it should be something that brings you down, some familiar put-down: I'm stupid, I'm a fraud. Now first of all, just bring that thought to mind and notice what it does to you, how it makes you feel. Now think the same thought, but insert this phrase before it: "I'm having the thought that..." and just notice what happens. Now hear the same thought but imagine it's being said to you in the voice of a familiar cartoon character or famous actor. Now hear that phrase sung by your college choir at Evensong or, if you prefer,

bellowed out by a rock band at a music festival. Now imagine you're in a lecture and picture the words popping up on a PowerPoint slide, but in this imaginary lecture YOU can control the slides – so you can play around with the font and formatting, you can decorate the slide with colours and pictures. OK, you get the idea! What did you notice? Hopefully you found that in doing that exercise the thoughts felt a little different. It's not going to make them disappear – it's not supposed to – the whole point of that exercise really is to help you relate differently to thoughts that might otherwise slip in very sneakily and take root, demanding your attention, pressing themselves on you as fact. With this exercise, you're reminding yourself that these are just very familiar thoughts; it helps you take a mental step back and avoid getting quickly hooked into them. And once you've done that, often it's then easier to focus your attention on something else, something that moves you towards your values. I said it in an earlier podcast but making a deliberate choice not to engage with thoughts you know are only going to drag you down and redirecting your attention is more than just distraction – it's about affirming to yourself what's important to you, and not letting self-criticism get in the way.

### **Tool 2: Getting to know your inner critic**

When you did that last exercise, the thought you were working with – was it a familiar one? Is it one that tends to pop up quite a bit for you? Often there are themes to self-criticism, things that we are particularly hard on ourselves for – these may be quite clear to you, but sometimes self-criticism can be sneaky. Sometimes it doesn't sound all that harsh even – it's not always shouting and labelling – it can present itself as quite reasonable and rational. It's quite useful then to spend a bit of time just noticing your self-critical thoughts, perhaps jotting them down as they crop up over a week or so. Often when people do this, they're surprised at how much the inner critic has to say, how demanding or downright mean it can be. See if you can notice any particular patterns or themes in what you criticise yourself for. You might like to externalise your inner critic by giving it a name: Dr Perfect or some-such. What would your inner critic look like if it had a physical form? What is its tone of voice? If you've listened to the podcast on Rules for Living you might notice links here: we're typically most critical of ourselves when we see ourselves as having broken our own rules. As in that exercise, it can be helpful to think about where your inner critic might have come from – what messages you've received from important figures in the past, explicitly or implicitly, what social scripts you've absorbed. Just going back to what I mentioned at the start, remember that not all self-criticism is a bad thing: see if you can practice differentiating helpful self-correction, which motivates you to move towards your values and goals, and more destructive forms of self-attack.

### **Tool 3: Leaning towards compassion**

This third tool is similar to the thought challenging technique that I talk about in podcast number 2 of this series, but with a more specific focus. Try and bring to mind a recent time you beat yourself up for something you thought went badly – again, nothing too traumatic, but something you maybe dwelt on or which the inner critic really leapt on. Now firstly, ask yourself what your inner critic has to say about it: what, from this perspective, does it say about you? Just spend a moment or two contemplating that, write it down if you like, and just notice how it makes you feel. Now, I want you to take a few minutes to imagine the perspective of a person or being who is truly compassionate. Someone who knows you for the complex, good person that you are, who doesn't judge you or berate you but understands that you're human and just like all of us, you make mistakes. This person

or being has a deep appreciation for what it is to be human – to be pushed and pulled by powerful feelings, to be conflicted and irrational and all the rest of it – they know what it is to suffer. And they care about you. They want you to know that whatever that inner critic is going on about, you are a person of worth and value. Just spend a few minutes inhabiting this headspace and notice where it takes you. What would this compassionate perspective say about what happened? How would they relate to you? Can you imagine their tone of voice, their facial expression? Can you imagine how you'd feel in their presence?

People typically have varied responses to an exercise like this: sometimes it brings comfort. Often people find it tricky. I know from my own practice: this stuff is really hard! If you're very used to criticising and attacking yourself, it can take a lot of practice to shift away from this. Because of what I talked about earlier – because there are reasons we're tough on ourselves – it can feel scary leaning the other way. It can also put us in touch with more vulnerable, tender feelings, or feelings of anger towards individuals, groups or institutions that have unjustly criticised or hurt you. It may be important to find space for these feelings -I'm biased of course, but counselling can be a really great space for this. And if you do notice blocks to self-compassion, remember that's normal and those blocks have developed for a reason; try to come at them with compassion too. Why might Dr Perfect be wary about this approach? Why is that self-attacking part of you so unwilling to step back? Well, often it's because behind all that harshness and judgment and aggression, they are basically afraid.

What can be helpful to remember here is that even if the feelings of warmth and self-compassion are hard to conjure up, it turns out from research that even the act of entertaining this perspective can be beneficial. As I talk about in the first podcast, sometimes the actions come before the feelings. Every time you catch that inner critic, every time you let that compassionate perspective in, however briefly, is a small but important change. In some ways the how is more important than the what. Don't get too caught up in formulating a perfect compassionate reframe – don't let this exercise be fuel for the inner critic! The most important thing is to try to come at this from a place of kindness towards yourself, not a critical one. So anything that helps to nudge you in this direction is great. Maybe there are people you know – actual people in your life, or famous people you know of – who embody something of this compassionate mindset and who you can bring to mind and channel. How would they act towards you; what wise words would they have for you? There are a load of great resources out there on self-compassion; if you'd like to explore this theme further, check out the podcasts on this theme on our website, and I've also popped a couple of useful links in the transcript. I'm also a big believer in the value of the arts here: are there songs or pieces of music that help you feel safe, soothed and compassionate? Or pictures or artwork? With this in mind, I'm going to leave you here with a poem. Please don't worry about analysing or trying to understand it, just try and absorb the feeling of it, and if you can, let it stay with you as you go on to whatever you're doing next. As ever, thanks for listening.

blessing the boats

BY LUCILLE CLIFTON

may the tide

that is entering even now

the lip of our understanding  
carry you out  
beyond the face of fear  
may you kiss  
the wind then turn from it  
certain that it will  
love your back may you  
open your eyes to water  
water waving forever  
and may you in your innocence  
sail through this to that

**Useful Links:**

[The Compassionate Mind Foundation](#)

Saulsman, L., Campbell, B., & Sng, A. (2017). [Building Self-Compassion: From Self-Criticism to Self-Kindness](#). Perth, Western Australia: Centre for Clinical Interventions

The website of [Dr Kirsten Neff](#), has loads of guided exercises and resources on self-compassion.