

Changing your critical self-talk

This exercise should be done over several weeks and will eventually form the blueprint for changing how you relate to yourself long-term. You can speak aloud to yourself, think silently or write in a journal – whichever works best for you.

1. The first step towards changing the way to treat yourself is to **notice when you are being self-critical**. It may be that – like many of us – your self-critical voice is so common for you that you don't even notice when it is present. Whenever you're feeling bad about something, think about what you've just said to yourself. Try to be as accurate as possible, noting your inner speech verbatim. What words do you actually use when you're self-critical? Are there key phrases that come up over and over again? What is the tone of your voice – harsh, cold, angry? Does the voice remind you of any one in your past who was critical of you? You want to be able to get to know the inner self-critic very well, and to become aware of when your inner judge is active. For instance, if you've just eaten half a box of chocolates, does your inner voice say something like "you're so disgusting," "you make me sick," and so on? Really try to get a clear sense of how you talk to yourself.
2. **Make an active effort to soften the self-critical voice**, but do so with compassion rather than self-judgment (i.e., don't say "you're such a bitch" to your inner critic!). Say something like "I know you're worried about me and feel unsafe, but you are causing me unnecessary pain. Could you let my inner compassionate self say a few words now?"
3. Reframe the observations made by your inner critic in a friendly, positive way. If you're having trouble thinking of what words to use, you might want to **imagine what a very compassionate friend would say to you in this situation**. It might help to use a term of endearment that strengthens expressed feelings of warmth and care (but only if it feels natural rather than cheesy.) For instance, you can say something like "Darling, I know you ate that chocolate because you're feeling really sad right now and you thought it would cheer you up. But you feel even worse and are not feeling good in your body. I want you to be happy, so why don't you take a long walk so you feel better?" While engaging in this supportive self-talk, you might want to try gently stroking your arm, or placing your hand on your chest. Physical gestures of warmth can tap into the caregiving system even if you're having trouble calling up emotions of kindness at first, releasing oxytocin that will help change your bio-chemistry. The important thing is that you start acting kindly, and feelings of true warmth and caring will eventually follow.

Identifying what we really want

Do you use self-criticism as a motivator? Is there any personal trait that you criticize yourself for having (too overweight, too lazy, too impulsive, etc.) because you think being hard on yourself will help you change? If so, first try to get in touch with the emotional pain that your self-criticism causes, giving yourself compassion for the experience of feeling so judged.

Next, see if you can think of a kinder, more caring way to motivate yourself to make a change if needed. What language would a wise and nurturing friend, parent, teacher, or mentor use to gently point out how your behaviour is unproductive, while simultaneously encouraging you to do something different. **What is the most supportive message you can think of that's in line with your underlying wish to be healthy and happy?**

Every time you catch yourself being judgmental about your unwanted trait in the future, first notice the pain of your self-judgment and give yourself compassion. Then try to reframe your inner dialogue so that it is more encouraging and supportive. Remember that if you really want to motivate yourself, love is more powerful than fear