



Building Self-Compassion

Module I

Understanding Self-Compassion

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Introduction

The old saying goes that, “*You are your own worst critic*”. It is very true that most of us are hard on ourselves, particularly if we get even the slightest hint that we don’t ‘match up’ in some way – in our achievements, career or study, social standing, relationships, appearance, body image, financial status, etc. If we make even the minutest mistake, then we have a tendency to berate ourselves, and if we make a genuine medium or large mistake, then look out!

People seem to find it hard, and for some almost impossible, to treat or speak to themselves in a kind or caring manner. In fact, some recoil from the idea of it, like they were being asked to do something repulsive or painful. In this module we will look at what self-compassion is all about, why it is so vital to our well-being, and why we are great at self-criticism, but struggle when it comes to self-kindness.

Being able to cultivate self-compassion can be a stand-alone approach that might address all your mental health needs, or it may be a helpful starting point to then go on and address more specific issues that are covered in our other Infopax. Either way, if you identify with being your own harshest critic, then join us on the journey from self-criticism to self-kindness...



What is Self-Compassion?

To define *self-compassion*, we really need to start with what is *compassion*. The two are really one and the same. Compassion is an attitude that involves a certain set of feelings, thoughts, motives, desires, urges, and behaviours that can be directed towards any living thing (i.e., ourselves, another person, a group of people, a society, animals, the environment, etc.). Therefore, when we talk about self-compassion, we are specifying that this attitude is being directed internally towards ourselves.

Paul Gilbert and Kristen Neff are two leading figures in the area of building self-compassion to improve mental health and well-being, and these modules draw heavily on their expertise and writing.

Kristen Neff defines compassion as:

“the recognition and clear seeing of suffering...feelings of kindness for people who are suffering, so that the desire to help – to ameliorate suffering – emerges... recognizing our shared human condition, flawed and fragile as it is” (Neff, 2011, p10)

Similarly, Paul Gilbert defines compassion as:

“a basic kindness, with a deep awareness of the suffering of oneself and of other living things, coupled with the wish and effort to relieve it” (Gilbert, 2009, p. xiii)

You will notice that these definitions emphasise four key things:

1. **Awareness.** Being attentive or sensitive to the fact that some sort of ‘suffering’ is occurring. Now suffering could mean some distressing struggle with emotional pain, mental pain, physical pain, or all of the above.
2. **Normalising.** Recognising that experiencing this sort of pain is universal, we all experience pain at some point to varying degrees. The fact that we experience pain isn’t a fault or failing of ours, we are not to blame for our pain, and we are not alone in our pain.
3. **Kindness.** Not shying away from or ignoring the pain, but meeting this pain with feelings of kindness, care, warmth and concern.
4. **Alleviation.** Focusing our energy on ways to alleviate the pain, which may be via providing further comfort and caring actions, providing a helpful perspective regarding whatever the trouble is, or having the strength and courage to take other necessary actions to address the problem being faced.

So self-compassion is about doing all of these four things for ourselves when we are struggling. That is, being aware of our own pain, whatever that may be. Understanding that whilst feeling this pain is hard, this is a normal human experience, not a failing on our part and we are not alone. It then involves directing feelings of kindness and care towards ourselves, just as we might to someone else we care about who is struggling. And finally, focusing our attention and energy on how we might improve our own pain and move through the struggle we are facing.

You may think, well that all sounds very nice, but how exactly do I do that? The modules to come will help you develop the ability to take a deeply caring attitude towards yourself, particularly in times of struggle. Being self-compassionate is a skill that initially takes a lot of effort, so before we get to the 'nuts and bolts' of how to be more self-compassionate, let's first think about why it would be worth the effort.

Why is Self-Compassion Important?

Evolutionary Importance

The need to receive care and nurturing evolved as a strong need within all mammals, including humans. Being cared for from birth is vital to our survival, and without it we don't thrive. The success of the human race as a species has depended on us receiving care and being motivated to give care to others. When this is working well, humans work together, supporting each other and flourishing. Whilst receiving care from other people is of course very important, we now know that it is very narrow to think that we can only fulfil this need for care through other people. Fulfilling our need for care and nurture ourselves, can also be extremely valuable.

Mental Health and Well Being Benefits

Research has shown that self-compassion is strongly linked to our mental health and well-being. Studies have found that those who are more compassionate towards themselves tend to have less mental health problems, like depression, anxiety and stress. These people also tend to have a better quality of life, a greater sense of well-being, and less problems in relationships. Compassion is linked to the hormone oxytocin, often called the "love" hormone. This is a hormone that promotes bonding and closeness, and therefore is particularly active at childbirth, during physical affection, during sex, when parents play with their children, when people play with their pets, etc. It is suggested that directing compassion inwards can equally trigger the release of oxytocin, and the calming benefits it brings. In essence, self-compassion goes hand in hand with general life contentment, something we could all do with a dose of.

Balancing Our Emotions

The reason why self-compassion might bring us such wonderful benefits, is via its proposed vital role in helping to balance our emotions. Paul Gilbert has written extensively about the idea that our emotions are governed by three systems known as the **threat**, **drive** and **soothe** systems, with each playing an important role in regulating our emotions.

Threat: Generally speaking all living creatures are good at anticipating and avoiding threat in order to survive. This protective mechanism is hard wired within us all. Couple this with the human ability to think a lot, and we find that the human mind seems to have a default setting to look for, pay attention to and repetitively think about bad stuff. This results in our threat system being active and in overdrive a lot.



No longer are we in caveman times where the presence of a sabre tooth tiger is the type of thing that triggers our threat system. In today's society, small mistakes or perceived flaws in our abilities, appearance, social skills, etc, are all seen as threats. These sorts of things are seen as risks to our reputation, social status, relationships, career, finances, health, future or happiness. So our threat system seems to be on high alert for many of us most of the time, always on the lookout for potential dangers in order to protect ourselves.

When active the threat system leads to emotional responses such as anxiety, anger, or depression. These emotions are all about motivating us to protect ourselves, with anger prompting us to confront and defeat danger, anxiety prompting us to shy away from danger, and depression prompting us to shut down from danger. As such, the threat system also generates corresponding behavioural responses such as to 'fight' (i.e., aggression), 'flight' (i.e., avoidance) or 'freeze' (i.e., being submissive or passive).

When we are in threat mode our thinking becomes very narrow and negative. Our mind doesn't seem to budge easily from its narrow negative focus when it is in this state. It is very difficult to think in balanced, reasonable, rationale ways when in threat mode, as this requires quite sophisticated thinking by our brain. Our brain wasn't designed to be sophisticated when it thinks we are in danger. Sophisticated thinking takes up time, something you have little of if you really are in danger. By contrast, narrow negative thinking is very quick. This is really important to know, as people often berate themselves for their seemingly 'irrational' thinking when they are experiencing distressing emotions, not realising that essentially their mind was built to be irrational when it senses danger.

Now the threat system is not a bad thing. Remember, its purpose is to keep us safe from legitimate threats (e.g., getting out of the way of a moving car). However, many of our mental health problems relate to the threat system being active too much of the time when there is no real danger.

Drive: The drive system spurs us on to try new things, achieve things, set and work towards goals, and feel those ecstatic 'high five moments' when we have those 'wins' in life. The drive system is what energises us to get things done and be active in life. Having 'drive' is great, because it keeps us progressing in life. Without our drive system being active some of the time, we would be rather lifeless and directionless, a problem that can occur when we feel depressed.



The problem is that this system, like the threat system, can also kick into overdrive. This particularly happens if we live in a society that is highly competitive, and gives us the message that we always need to do more and be better, and if we don't achieve this then there is something wrong with us. What can happen is that when we don't succeed in our goals, which understandably is not always possible to do, then we can quickly flip from the drive system into the threat system. And so, we can become trapped in an unhealthy pattern of... *drive, drive, drive* (e.g., "I must achieve, achieve, achieve"), and when we hit a barrier then it is *threat, threat, threat* (e.g., "I've failed and so now lots of bad stuff is going to happen to me").

Soothe: The soothe system is very different, and has a calming influence on both the threat and drive systems, helping to quieten them down when they are overactive. The soothe system is at work when we are just chilling out, feeling safe, calm and content. You can't be in threat and soothe mode at the same time, and you can't be in drive and soothe mood at the same time.

Experiences of kindness and care tend to stimulate the soothe system. Whilst receiving compassion from others is one way to unlock the soothe system, self-compassion is another key. These modules are really about finding this key and using it whenever we need to calm the threat and drive systems, by bringing the soothe system online to balance our emotions.



Adapted from Gilbert (2010)

The Opposite of Self-Compassion...Self-Criticism

For most people, being compassionate towards themselves and therefore activating the soothe system doesn't come naturally. However the opposite of self-compassion, self-criticism, seems to very easily roll off the tongue. Self-criticism is a thinking style that involves our internal self-talk being highly negative, disparaging and berating. Self-criticism can therefore activate the threat system in and of itself, or once the threat system is active for other reasons, responding by being critical of ourselves can keep the threat system alive.



The content of self-critical thoughts can be very cruel and the tone very cold, harsh, and attacking. It is like we are telling off or reprimanding ourselves in a most unkind or punishing way. This thinking style occurs within us all to varying degrees, and is very common in our society. You will tend to hear most people refer to themselves as "stupid" or "idiot" when they make a small mistake. This may be at the milder end of self-criticism. Others may routinely speak to themselves harshly, while others may frequently hurl a barrage of abuse at themselves. Some harsh self-critics may experience a sense of self-loathing, self-hatred or self-disgust, where they believe they don't deserve to treat themselves any better.

Some common examples of self-critical statements might sound something like:

*I am an idiot...what a moron...you are useless and pathetic...I am so hopeless...
You shouldn't have done that...why did I do that... you should have known better...
I never get it right... you may as well give up now...there is no point, why bother...*

You will notice that some self-critics refer to themselves in the first person (*I am...*), whilst others may refer to themselves using a second person perspective (*you are...*). You will also notice that self-criticism often involves the following unhelpful thinking styles:

- Labelling:** making global and derogatory statements about ourselves on the basis of our behaviour in a specific situation;
- Shoulding:** using "should" statements to put unreasonable demands or pressure on ourselves; and
- Overgeneralising:** taking one negative instance and concluding that this applies to everything.

To gain more awareness of your own self-critical thinking style, consider the following questions:

What do you typically criticise yourself for?

What sorts of things do you typically say to yourself/about yourself?

How do you say these things? What does your internal voice sound like? Does it remind you of anyone?

When you criticise yourself, how does it make you feel?

What do you think the negative consequences are of speaking to yourself like this?

I wonder what you noted for how self-criticism makes you feel and any other negative consequences you recognised. One big negative consequence is that self-criticism doesn't make you feel very good, and usually leads to feelings like anxiety, sadness, depression, guilt, shame or anger. Self-criticism is common across lots of mental health problems (e.g., depression, anxiety disorders, eating disorders, body image issues, low self-esteem, etc), and can contribute to staying stuck in these problems. Therefore, addressing self-criticism by building the ability to instead be self-compassionate, may play a role in improving some of these difficulties.

While you may have acknowledged some negative consequences of being self-critical, many people don't realise that they can often hold positive beliefs about the benefits of being critical towards themselves. Module 2 will look in more detail about why we talk to ourselves in a critical manner, and what our mind might be trying to achieve when it does this, as our mind typically doesn't do things for no good reason.

Why is it Hard to be Self-Compassionate?

So if self-criticism is just leading to more misery, then surely self-compassion is the answer. But, it ain't that simple. Most people struggle to be more compassionate towards themselves. If this applies to you, please know you are not alone and there can be a number of reasons for this.

Early Life Experiences

It is proposed that for some people, experiencing limited care, kindness and nurturing from others growing up, leads to the soothe system being underdeveloped. The soothe system thrives on and is stimulated by having compassionate experiences. Essentially, it is hard to learn something that you were never taught. So, if you didn't receive much compassion from others in earlier life, then it is understandable that it can be more difficult to develop the ability to be compassionate to yourself later in life.

The Threat System

As already mentioned, our brain is hard wired to shift into threat mode pretty easily to protect ourselves. Seeing the negative is our default attention bias. Turning our attention to more self-compassionate endeavours is therefore overriding this attention bias, which is not something that comes naturally to us.

Lack of Awareness

Many of us may not be aware that we are struggling, or aware of the unhelpful critical ways we may be treating ourselves. We can go through life on autopilot, doing what we have always done. We get tangled and stuck in our struggle, never pausing to consciously recognise we are struggling, and that maybe we could deal with this in the same way we might help others deal with something similar. It has just never even occurred to us that treating ourselves kindly is an option.

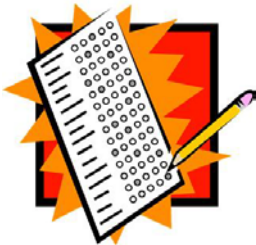
Negative Beliefs about Self-Compassion

Some of us may cringe at the idea of self-compassion. Being self-compassionate is not something we are taught about or talk about a lot, and so it can carry some negative connotations. Some people think being self-compassionate is too ‘touchy feely’, and will lead to laziness, self-indulgence or self-pity. Rest assured, self-compassion is none of these things, and we will address these sorts of beliefs that can be a barrier to being more self-compassionate in Module 2.

Do You Need to Build More Self-Compassion?

Everyone can benefit from a bit more self-compassion. It is not really something you can have too much of. However, this sort of approach was particularly developed for people who are very harsh self-critics, even to the extent of feeling self-loathing or hatred. For these people, developing self-compassion is especially important, and may also take more time and effort.

For some people, being more compassionate towards themselves can be a frightening experience often because of past traumatic experiences. If this is the case for you, and you are struggling to put into practice some of the strategies from the coming modules, then we would recommend being supported by a mental health professional as you work your way through these modules.



To help you make the decision about whether you want to proceed further into these modules, have a go at the following quiz to get a sense of how self-compassionate you are. The more items you tick, the more self-critical you are likely to be, indicating that you could benefit from an ‘injection’ of self-compassion.

	Tick if this applies to you
I find it hard to be kind to myself	
If something goes wrong I automatically blame myself	
I don't deserve to do nice things for myself	
I am very critical of myself when things aren't going well	
I am very critical of myself even when things are going well	
When I am having a hard time, I wouldn't even think to look after myself like I would a friend	
I focus a lot on my faults and flaws and can't let them go	
If I make a mistake I give myself a really hard time	
When I am struggling, I don't treat myself with much care	
I can't accept mistakes I've made or things I haven't done well	
I think over and over about things I don't like about myself	
I am not very gentle with myself when I am suffering emotionally	
If I make a mistake I feel like I should be punished	
I feel like I'm the only one who struggles or fails at things	

About These Modules...

Drawing together some of the concepts discussed in this module, the bottom line is this...

When our brain detects some sort of **trigger** or 'problem' (which could be a particular situation we are in, or just thinking about past or future negative events, or an uncomfortable emotion or physical sensation we may be experiencing), then it quickly and automatically shifts into threat mode.

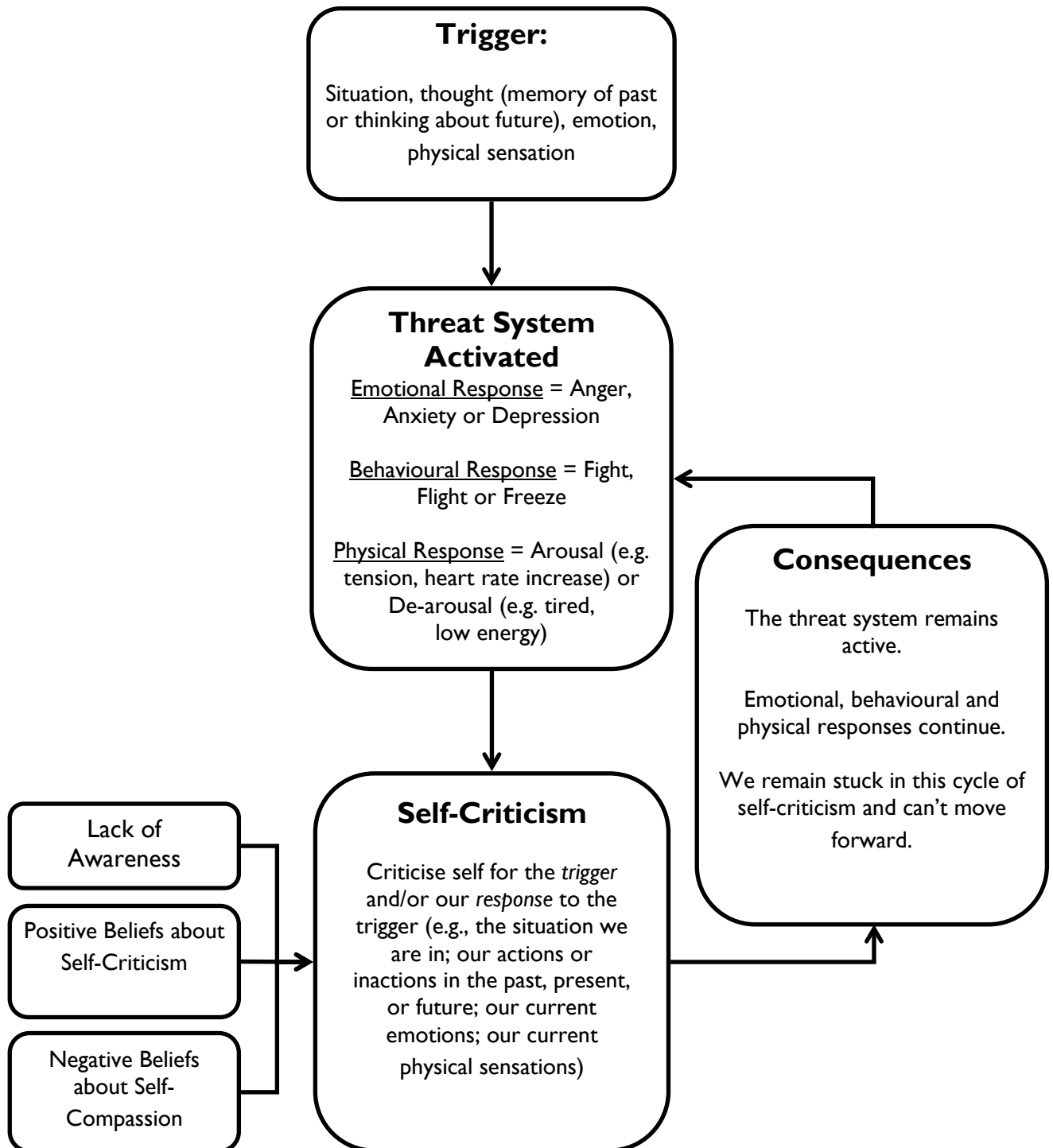
With the **threat system activated**, all sorts of **emotional, behavioural and physical responses** that can be quite unpleasant then follow. Many of us then deal with this via self-criticism, either criticising ourselves for the original trigger or our subsequent response to the trigger. Therefore, we may be criticising ourselves for the situation we find ourselves in; our actions or inactions in the past, present or future; or our own emotional and physical reactions in that moment.

Self-criticism tends to be our way of trying to deal with problems for a variety of reasons, including a **lack of awareness** of our own struggle and our self-critical way of dealing with things, holding **positive beliefs about self-criticism** as being a helpful thing to do, as well as holding **negative beliefs about self-compassion** that can make us reluctant to take a compassionate tone with ourselves.

However, the **consequences** of all of this, is that self-criticism only serves to keep the threat system active, and so our uncomfortable emotional, behavioural and physical responses continue. In essence, self-criticism prolongs our pain and suffering, keeping us stuck and unable to move forward from the struggle we are facing. The Self-Critical Cycle on page 9 summarises this trap we can find ourselves stuck in.



The Self-Critical Cycle



The solution to this unhelpful cycle is to step out of self-criticism and calm the threat system, by stimulating the soothe system. Self-compassion is a key way of activating the soothe system and its calming influence. There are many ways of building self-compassion, and the modules ahead will cover some of the main methods. It will be important to try the various methods with an open and curious mind, to discover which work well for you, as everyone is different. The aim of all of these modules is to find ways to stimulate the soothe system, to elicit an attitude of kindness, warmth, concern, understanding and strength within us, and then use this attitude to respond to our own struggles, rather than reverting to our usual self-critical habits.

With this in mind, the modules ahead are divided into 3 main aims. The first aim is **developing** self-compassion, by preparing you to find the method that works best for you in turning your soothe system on. The second aim is **applying** self-compassion, so that once the soothe system is switched on, it then positively guides how you think and behave. And the final aim is **maintaining** self-compassion in your day to day living, so that you know what to do to keep being self-compassionate over the long term. The following is a preview of what is to come in the modules ahead...

Developing Self-Compassion:

Module 2	Barriers to Self-Compassion
Module 3	Preparing for Self-Compassion
Module 4	Compassionate Imagery

Applying Self-Compassion:

Module 5	Self-Compassionate Thinking
Module 6	Self-Compassionate Behaviour

Maintaining Self-Compassion:

Module 7	Self-Compassionate Living
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As already mentioned, building greater self-compassion can be useful in and of itself, or it can be a helpful addition to addressing other more specific issues we may be facing such as depression, anxiety, anger, eating disorders, body image issues, perfectionism, procrastination, low self-esteem, self-harm, etc. For some of these sorts of problems, we have more specific Infopax available that target these specific issues. Therefore, this *Build Self-Compassion* Infopax can complement the activities suggested in other Infopax, helping you to take a self-compassionate attitude when practicing the other strategies suggested, which may make these other strategies even more effective.

You could choose to work through this *Building Self-Compassion* Infopax first, and then move on to other Infopax that are relevant to you, so that you may get more out of them. Or vice versa. You could start with other more specific Infopax, and then use this *Building Self-Compassion* Infopax to enhance and make more powerful the skills you have already learnt in the other modules. There is no right or wrong way to go about this, but we would recommend completing one Infopax at a time.

If you do decide to work through these modules, we would recommend completing them in the order they are set out and completing all modules for maximum benefit. The time taken to complete each module will vary from person to person. When making the decision about whether it is time to move on to the next module, ensure that you are giving yourself enough time to become familiar with and practice the practical exercises suggested in a module before moving on to the next module.

Module Summary

- Self-compassion is compassion directed towards ourselves.
- Self-compassion involves being aware of our own pain and suffering, and understanding that this is a hard, but normal human experience. Directing feelings of kindness and care towards ourselves, and focusing our attention and energy on how we might alleviate our pain, are also crucial components of self-compassion.
- Self-compassion can bring great benefits for our mental health and well-being. Particularly, self-compassion can activate our soothe system, which calms the threat and drive systems. Our threat and drive systems tend to be overactive for many of us much of the time, and responsible for the difficult emotions we may be struggling with (e.g., anxiety, anger, depression).
- The opposite of self-compassion is self-criticism. This very negative thinking style often links to difficult emotions and mental health problems. Those who are highly self-critical particularly need to develop the ability to relate to themselves in a compassionate way.
- We can get stuck in a self-critical cycle, where any problem we face activates our threat system, and anxious, angry or depressive responses then follow. If we then use self-criticism as our way of dealing with whatever we are going through, that just keeps the threat system active, and keeps us stuck in the problem and our emotional suffering.
- An alternative to self-criticism is self-compassion, but being self-compassionate is hard for most of us for various reasons. However, these modules will help us to overcome these difficulties, allowing us to develop self-compassion, apply it in our daily lives to guide our thinking and actions, and maintain this new way of living over the long term.



Coming up next ...

In Module 2, we will address any barriers that may get in the way of building self-compassion...

About The Modules

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BACKGROUND

The concepts and strategies in these modules have been developed from evidence based psychological practice, primarily Compassion Focused Therapy, which is an extension of and adjunct to Cognitive-Behaviour Therapy. These modules particularly draw on the work of Paul Gilbert and Kristen Neff.

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“BUILDING SELF-COMPASSION”

This module forms part of:

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

ISBN: 9780987547903

Created: March 2017