



Building Self-Compassion

Module 2

Barriers to Self-Compassion

Introduction	2
Positive Beliefs about Self-Criticism	2
Challenging Positive Beliefs about Self-Criticism	4
Worksheet: Challenging Your Positive Beliefs	5
Negative Beliefs about Self-Compassion	7
Kindness vs Criticism Experiment	8
Worksheet: Kindness vs Criticism Experiment	10
Module Summary	12
About the Modules	13

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Introduction

If developing a sense of compassion towards yourself were simple, then reading Module 1 would be enough and you would be oozing self-compassion by now without any trouble. But self-compassion is not a simple or easy road. For most people there will be barriers that get in the way of their self-compassion journey. So to give yourself the best chance of being able to build self-compassion, it is helpful to check if these common obstacles apply to you too. If they do, then let's address them from the outset so they don't mess up your journey too much. If these barriers don't apply to you, well then you can be confident that you are commencing these modules from the best starting point to get the most out of them.



In this module, we will address the two key barriers to self-compassion that people are typically unaware of. These barriers relate to the beliefs we hold about what it means to us to be self-critical and what it means to us to be self-compassionate.

Positive Beliefs about Self-Criticism

“I am such an idiot, I can't believe I did that, I am so useless, I need to do better, I should be doing better, other people don't make such stupid mistakes. I am just not careful enough, I have never been careful enough, and now I am failing and getting what I deserve”

Does this sort of critical self-talk sound familiar to you? Now it may be obvious when we see it on paper in black and white that this is an unhelpful way of talking to ourselves. However, what we may not realise is that we can often be in two minds about this. We may not realise that whilst we acknowledge that self-criticism is unhelpful, at the same time deep down we may believe that self-criticism carries some benefits.

Ask yourself the following questions to see if you hold any positive beliefs about the benefits of being self-critical:

- *Why is my mind critical?*
- *Why does it speak to me in this critical way?*
- *What is its motive?*
- *What is its aim?*
- *What is it trying to achieve?*
- *How might my mind be trying to protect or help me by criticising me?*
- *Or, let's come at it from the opposite angle, if I wasn't critical of myself, what do I fear might happen? Hence, what bad things might self-criticism prevent?*

Our minds aren't stupid and they don't do things for no good reason. Self-criticism usually occurs to fulfil at least one of two main aims:

- 1) **Self-improvement.** Self-criticism often occurs as an attempt at self-correction. It can be seen as a means of highlighting weakness and fixing them. It can be perceived as a means of trying to better ourselves, motivate ourselves, push ourselves to do better, be stronger, stop mistakes or address flaws. It can be intended to keep us down to earth, grounded and humble.
- 2) **Self-punishment.** For some, self-criticism is a form of self-punishment. Some people may have the sense that they are bad or they have done something bad, and may feel that the correct course of action to be absolved of this is via some form of punishment. And if there is no one else to dish out the punishment, then they will dish it out to themselves.

So, common positive beliefs that some people hold might sound something like,

Self-criticism...

*Motivates me;
Helps me get things done
Toughens me up
Pushes me to excel
Makes me a better person*

If you hold any positive beliefs about the benefits of being critical towards yourself, see if you can summarise your positive beliefs about self-criticism using the following sentence.

Being self-critical helps me because _____

Now, before we start addressing your positive beliefs about self-criticism, we need to know how much you believe them.

How much do you believe self-criticism is helpful?
(Circle the percentage that best describes the strength of your belief)

0% 10% 20% 30% 40% 50% 60% 70% 80% 90% 100%



Believing that self-criticism is beneficial can create a barrier to giving up self-criticism and embracing self-compassion. After all, why would you give up something that you thought was good. So, rather than just blindly accepting the idea that self-criticism is helpful, we need to check this out a bit further.

One way of doing this is to have a go at challenging or disputing your beliefs. That means dissecting your beliefs about the benefits of self-criticism, by evaluating if they really are accurate and true, and examining what evidence you base your beliefs on. In this way you will be like a detective, trying to get to the facts of whether self-criticism really is helpful to you.

Challenging Positive Beliefs about Self-Criticism

Below is a list of questions you can ask yourself to challenge whether your positive beliefs about self-criticism are really true. These questions are to help you do your detective work. An example is given below of how to use these questions to challenge your beliefs, and on page 5 you will find a worksheet to help you do this for yourself.

Evidence For

- What makes you think self-criticism is helpful?
- What's the evidence for your positive beliefs?
- Can you specifically describe how self-criticism helps?
- Is the evidence for your beliefs good/solid/reliable?
- Is there another way the evidence for your beliefs could be viewed?



Evidence Against

- Is there any evidence that goes against your positive beliefs about self-criticism?
- What is the aim of your self-criticism? Does self-criticism really achieve this aim?
- Can you achieve your aims without self-criticism? (i.e., instead encouraging yourself or taking action)
- Is it self-criticism that is helpful or something else? (i.e., taking action)
- What are the negative consequences of being self-critical? How is self-criticism damaging to you? How do these things fit with the idea that it is helpful?
- If being critical is so helpful, would you use it as a way of dealing with a friend or child who was struggling with something? If not, why not?
- Have you ever conducted a proper experiment, comparing the outcome of being critical versus kind to yourself? If you haven't done this then how do you truly know that self-criticism is helping you?

EXAMPLE:

Evidence For	Evidence Against
<p><i>Self-criticism motivates me to fix problems with myself.</i></p> <p><i>Self-criticism helps me be in control and get things done properly.</i></p>	<p><i>But self-criticism often zaps my motivation so I feel unable to do things and I don't feel in control then.</i></p> <p><i>Maybe I could try encouraging myself and I might still be able to tackle my problems and get things done.</i></p> <p><i>It isn't the self-criticism that helps me, but taking action. It is possible to take action without criticising myself.</i></p> <p><i>Self-criticism gets me down, makes me feel anxious, and paralyzes me, which completely contradicts the idea that it is helping me.</i></p> <p><i>I would think that criticism was a cruel and probably ineffective way to help a friend or a child with a problem they were dealing with.</i></p> <p><i>I have never properly compared self-kindness to self-criticism to see which is a more effective way to get things done</i></p>

Challenging Your Positive Beliefs

Belief: <i>Self-criticism is helpful</i>	
Evidence For	Evidence Against

An additional exercise that may be useful in rounding off the challenging of your positive beliefs about self-criticism, is to have a go at the following. What you learn from this exercise you might choose to add into your page 5 worksheet.

Think about an issue that you often criticise yourself about (e.g., your social skills, work ability, study habits, tidiness, appearance, etc.). Using the first column below, write the types of things you usually say to yourself about this issue. Also note the tone of voice with which you say them.

In the second column, pretend it was not you but a close and cared for friend who was struggling with the same issue. Now write out what you would say to them, and again note the tone of voice you would use with them.

In the third column pretend you were dealing with a child who was struggling with the same concerns. Again, write out what you would say to them, and again note the tone of voice you would use with them.

Me	Friend	Child
I would say...	I would say...	I would say...
Voice Tone:	Voice Tone:	Voice Tone:

What do you notice? If the way you talk to yourself is very different from how you would deal with a friend or child, think about why this is the case, and what it says about the helpfulness of self-criticism.

Negative Beliefs about Self-Compassion

So, if we give up being self-critical, and instead are more self-compassionate, we may fear a negative backlash. Some people fear they would become lazy, self-indulgent, self-absorbed, undisciplined and out of control. Some may be concerned that they would achieve nothing, get nothing done, make mistakes, stagnate in life and never progress forward.

There are a lot of misconceptions about what self-compassion truly involves. Many see it as being too 'wishy washy' or 'touchy feely', giving the impression that self-compassion equals being 'weak'. Others see it as equating to self-pity and side-stepping having to take responsibility in life.

See if you can summarise any negative beliefs about self-compassion you may hold using the following sentence.

The downsides of self-compassion are... _____

Just like with your positive beliefs about self-criticism, we need to know how much you believe your negative beliefs about self-compassion.

How much do you believe self-compassion is unhelpful?
(Circle the percentage that best describes the strength of your belief)

0% 10% 20% 30% 40% 50% 60% 70% 80% 90% 100%

To address misconceptions you may have about self-compassion, we need to come back to the definition of what true self-compassion is in the first place. A helpful way to do this is to think of people that you consider to be compassionate human beings.

Write a list of people that you would label as compassionate. These may be famous people, people from history or current figures in society. These may be people you know and have encountered over your life time, or people you don't know, maybe a stranger who's life story you heard about on a news report. Take a moment to write down the names of people that you think embody compassion. If none come to mind easily, then be on the lookout for acts of compassion in everyday life, either directly noticing or experiencing someone being compassionate, or noticing things on TV or in newspapers detailing compassionate acts by others.

Compassionate People: _____

Now, write out the particular qualities these people have demonstrated that have led you to conclude that these are compassionate people.

Compassionate Qualities: _____

Now, have a look at the list of compassionate qualities you wrote down. How do these qualities fit with the negative qualities mentioned earlier like laziness, self-indulgence, self-absorption, undisciplined, lack of control, weakness, self-pitying, and under-achievement?

Hopefully the sorts of qualities you noted were quite the opposite of this, and reflected what true compassion is all about. Qualities like being kind, supportive, warm, caring, non-judgemental, accepting, generous, strong, stable, courageous, knowledgeable, understanding, insightful, resilient, persistent, tenacious, etc.

Kindness vs Criticism Experiment

So far, we have looked at both your positive beliefs about self-criticism and negative beliefs about self-compassion in detail. However, the best way to truly assess for ourselves whether self-criticism really helps and self-compassion really hinders, is to do an experiment to find out.

If you believe that self-criticism is helpful and/or self-compassion is unhelpful to you, then you need to compare what happens when you criticise yourself with what happens when you are kind towards yourself. This will allow you to judge which approach is more helpful, and see if there are any downsides of either approach.

In this experiment we want you to alternate between each day of the week, **being kind towards yourself** on one day, then **self-critical** the next day. It should look something like this:

Kind Day: On the first day, put all that usual self-criticism to the side as best you can, saving it up for the following day, and speak to yourself like you would someone you cared about. Now, this is not about being unrealistically positive (e.g., “everything will be great”) or heaping yourself with praise (e.g., “I am awesome”), but instead being encouraging and kind in your words and tone of voice. Now this will be hard and foreign to you at first, but just do what you can. As you work further into these modules you will get better at being kind towards yourself.



Be clear about what sorts of things you will say to yourself and your tone of voice on your Kind Day (e.g., *I will say things like “I know this is really hard, everyone struggles with this, just do the best you can and hang in there”, and I will have a soft warm tone to my voice*).

Critical Day: Now, on the second day, purposely be as critical towards yourself as you can. Berate and be harsh with yourself over every little thing, every mistake, everything you don't like about yourself and your efforts never being up to scratch.



Be clear about what sorts of things you will say to yourself and your tone of voice on your Critical Day (e.g., *I will call myself an “idiot” a lot, say that “nothing I do is good enough, and I should do better” and be very cold and hard in my tone of voice to myself*).

On Day 3, go back to it being a KIND DAY and on day 4, make it a CRITICAL DAY again, and so on. Keep alternating each day between kindness and criticism.

Before you start the experiment, complete the worksheet on page 10 in as much detail as you can and then continue filling it out as you go along.

Instructions for completing the worksheet:

First, write down what you think will happen on the days you criticise yourself, and what you think will happen on the days you are kind to yourself. If you think self-criticism has many positive benefits, then you should predict better outcomes on the days you criticise yourself (e.g., you will be more motivated, you will do a better job, get more things done, feel more in control, feel stronger, etc). If you think being kind to yourself has many downsides, then you should predict a poorer outcome on the days you are kind to yourself (e.g., not getting things done, being lazy, not dealing with daily duties, feel weak, etc). If you are a person who doesn't believe that self-criticism has any benefits and you do believe that self-kindness will have many benefits and no real downsides, then you can either skip this experiment, or do the experiment anyway to make yourself even more confident of this.

Now it is time to just give the experiment a go and see what happens.

For each of the next 7 days, at the end of your day, assess any positive outcomes you noticed, negative outcomes you noticed, how much you got done, and note how you generally felt.

Then, compare what you predicted would happen with what actually happened on those 7 days. What tended to happen on Kind Days and what tended to happen on Critical Days?

- If you found poorer outcomes on the days you criticised yourself compared to the days you were kind, then hopefully this enhances your motivation to put all your efforts into building self-compassion in the modules to come.
- If you found no difference in outcomes between the two days, then it seems you won't be losing anything by trying a new kinder way of treating yourself. So, it might be worth giving self-compassion a try in the modules to come, and see if over time you start to experience the well-researched benefits of self-compassion. Also, if there was no difference, this could be because you struggled to be kind to yourself. After working through the coming modules and developing more skills in self-compassion, you could always revisit this experiment to see whether a difference in outcomes then emerges.
- If you found better outcomes on the days you were critical compared to the days you were kind to yourself, again we would question whether you really were being kind to yourself, and whether you need more practice to reap the benefits of self-kindness.

So, what did you find?

Kindness vs Criticism Experiment

Prediction 1: What do you think will happen on the days you are critical of yourself?

Prediction 2: What do you think will happen on the days you are kind to yourself?

Day:	___ day	___ day	___ day	___ day	___ day	___ day	___ Day
	Kind Day	Critical Day	Kind Day	Critical Day	Kind Day	Critical Day	Kind Day
What positive outcomes occurred?							
What negative outcomes occurred?							
Did you get things done?							
How did you feel?							

Compare your two predictions with what actually happened. What did you learn about self-kindness and self-criticism?

Your Verdict...

Now that you have challenged and experimented with your positive beliefs about self-criticism and negative beliefs about self-compassion:

Rate again how much you believe self-criticism is helpful?
(Circle the percentage that best describes the strength of your belief)

0% 10% 20% 30% 40% 50% 60% 70% 80% 90% 100%

AND

Rate again how much you believe self-compassion is unhelpful?
(Circle the percentage that best describes the strength of your belief)

0% 10% 20% 30% 40% 50% 60% 70% 80% 90% 100%

Ideally we would like these beliefs to be at zero, but that may not happen overnight. If there is some weakening (however small) of your beliefs compared to your earlier ratings, then congratulate yourself. If there's no change yet, that's OK. Changing your beliefs may take time and persistence. You may need longer than one week doing your Kindness vs Criticism Experiment to further weaken these beliefs and prove to yourself that self-criticism brings no real benefits and self-compassion has no significant downsides. The aim of this module is to ready you for the modules to come, renewing your enthusiasm to give up self-criticism and really throwing yourself into trying the various strategies that will be suggested for building your self-compassionate side.

As we move forward from here, keep in mind that to benefit from the modules to come it will be important to approach them with an open mind, with an attitude of curiosity, and a willingness to experiment with new ways of doing things. At times the strategies may seem unusual or foreign to you, but we would encourage you to have a go. Recognise that what you have been doing so far hasn't been working well for your mental health and well-being, so why not try something new. Be aware that the strategies recommended will need a lot of practice to be effective. Just like any skill, we need practice, practice, practice, to get better and fully discover if it works for us. Self-compassion is no exception. Self-compassion is a skill, and the modules to come will be your training program to develop and fine tune this skill.

Module Summary

- Without being aware of it, we can often hold positive beliefs about the benefits of self-criticism and negative beliefs about the downsides of self-compassion, which will create barriers to building self-compassion.
- Some people think that self-criticism can help them to improve themselves, motivating, toughening and pushing them to do better. But you have to truly ask yourself what is the evidence that self-criticism really brings these benefits? And if self-criticism really was beneficial, why is it that most people wouldn't use it as a way of dealing with a loved friend or child who was upset?
- Some people think that self-compassion leads to weakness, laziness, and self-pity. But if you think of people you admire for their compassionate nature, would you consider them to be weak, lazy or full of self-pity?
- The reality is that self-compassion reflects qualities most people desire such as being kind, supportive, warm, caring, non-judgemental, accepting, generous, strong, stable, courageous, knowledgeable, understanding, insightful, resilient, persistent, tenacious, etc.
- To prove the benefits of self-compassion and unhelpfulness of self-criticism to yourself, have a go at the Kindness vs Criticism Experiment, to really find out for yourself.



Coming up next ...

In Module 3, we will prepare you with some essential skills that lay the foundation for 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.

REFERENCES

These are some of the professional references that informed the development of modules in this information package.

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