



Module Four: Developing Self-Compassion

This module will cover:

- What research says about self-criticism's relationships to mental health and productivity, and how to identify the self-critical voice.
- The evidence on self-compassion, mental health, and productivity.
- How to start being more self-compassionate.

Self-criticism

When we talk about self-criticism, we are referring to:

- Consistently judging yourself harshly.
- Being unnecessarily hard on yourself for your behaviour.
- Not being satisfied when you're successful.
- Being worried about the possibility of making mistakes.
- Beating yourself up after making mistakes.

You may notice some overlap between this definition and the components of perfectionism. This is because self-criticism is a component of perfectionism. In fact, evidence suggests it is the component of perfectionism with the strongest ties to negative mental health.¹ Self-criticism is linked to depression, anxiety, eating disorders, and problems in relationships.⁴

Self-criticism and progress towards valued goals

We have found in our clinical practice that people with perfectionism often say that, although they know that self-criticism makes them feel bad, they feel it's necessary for them to be self-critical to motivate themselves to meet their goals, because they are different to other people. That is, they think that self-criticism is helpful to their performance.

¹ Dunkley, D. M., Zuroff, D. C., & Blankstein, K. R. (2006). Specific perfectionism components versus self-criticism in predicting maladjustment. *Personality and Individual Differences*, 40(4), 665-676.
<https://doi.org/j.paid.2005.08.008>

Research does not support the idea that self-criticism is helpful for achieving goals. Instead, it suggests that the opposite is true! Self-criticism has been linked to:



Making *less* progress towards academic, social, and health-related goals

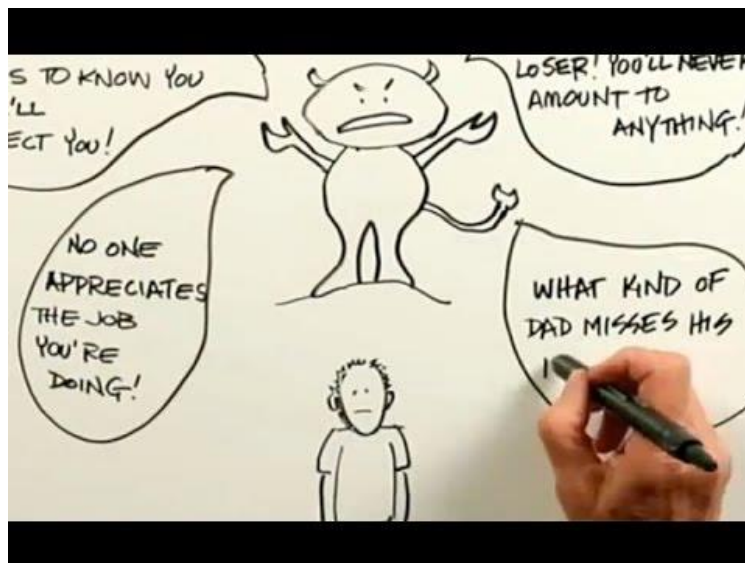


More of the behaviours that *interfere* with making progress towards goals, such as:

- *Rumination* (thinking about mistakes repeatedly).
- *Procrastination* (putting tasks off until they can be done “right”).
- Taking up lots of time doing *busy work* (e.g., list-making or checking) that does not increase productivity.

Identifying the self-critical voice

The following video should help you to start identifying the self-critical voice. Clicking on the thumbnail will open the video in your browser, but if you can’t access it that way, you can also reach it from this link: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uWc4pZhnpOw>



Which coach would you choose?

Imagine you took your child along to coaching sessions to teach them to play basketball. Your child has always wanted to learn to play basketball, so they’re very excited and determined to try hard in the lessons. Imagine that they have two different coaches, who alternate each week: Coach Smith and Coach Jones.

Coach Smith doesn’t say anything when your child bounces or throws the ball, but when they drop it or miss a shot, Coach Smith berates them, telling them they’re doing a terrible job, they’re getting it all wrong, and they need to try harder. When your child looks sad, they tell them to “toughen up” and “stop being such a wimp”.

Coach Jones doesn't tell your child off when they drop the ball or miss a shot. Instead, they encourage your child to keep trying, saying things like, "don't stress – you're still learning!" or "no problem, you'll get it soon – making mistakes is how we learn". They also point out when your child is doing well at catching passes or bouncing the ball.

When it comes times for you to choose which coach's team you want your child to join, which coach would you choose? Which coach do you think would be more helpful in getting your child to learn to play basketball – Coach Smith or Coach Jones?

Moving away from self-criticism

Everyone experiences the self-critical voice at times. This is completely normal. The aim is not to "get rid" of your child's self-critical voice, but rather to introduce some additional, competing responses that are more compassionate, and hopefully more useful to your child.

When trying to move away from responding with self-criticism, the key factors will be to reduce how much your child buys into their self-critical thoughts, and how much those thoughts are allowed to affect their emotions and behaviours. Essentially, we are trying to reduce the negative effects of "tunnel vision", in which the self-critical thoughts are given more attention than they deserve, and useful additional information (i.e., the information that lends itself to a more compassionate response) is missed.

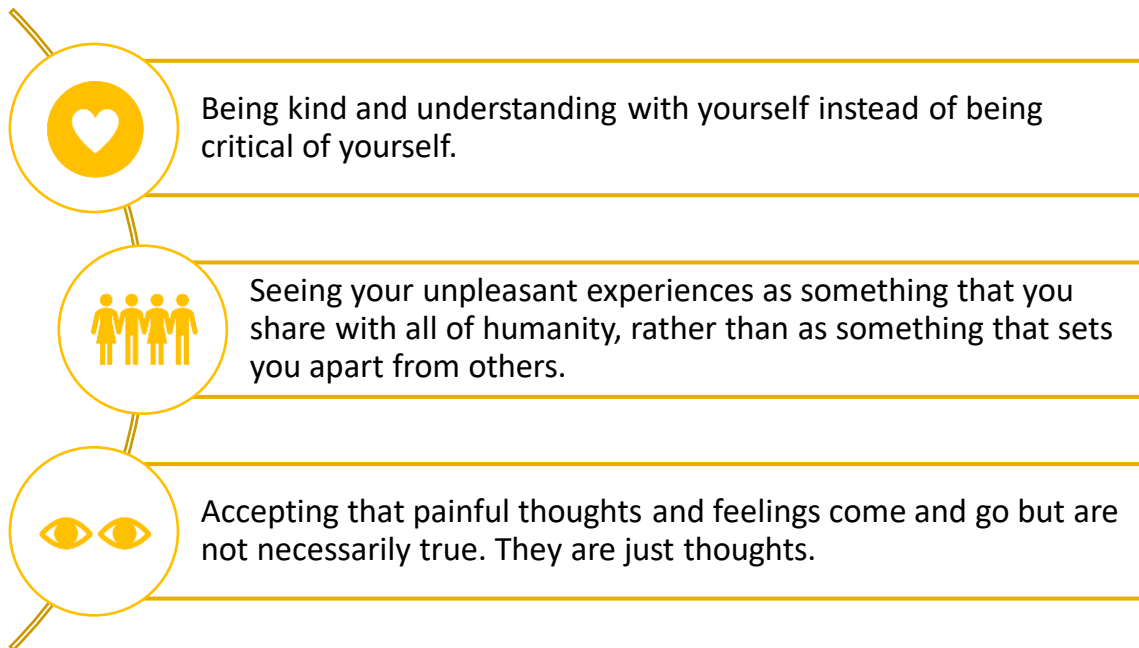
Self-compassion

Please watch the following video, in which researcher Kristin Neff explains the three components of self-compassion. Clicking on the thumbnail will open the video in your browser, but if you can't access it that way, you can also reach it from this link

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=11U0h0DPu7k>



In summary, Kristin Neff sees self-compassion as involving:



Research indicates that self-compassion is linked to...



Key point: Self-compassion seems to be helpful in the same areas where we see self-criticism as unhelpful: mental health and making progress towards your goals.

Starting to practise self-compassion

There are certain barriers or fears that people might experience when thinking of using self-compassion. Some examples of these include:

- Trying to be compassionate with myself will just make me feel sad or empty.
- To get things done, you need to be tough, not compassionate.
- If I use self-compassion, then my standards will drop, and so will my performance.
- I'm not capable of being self-compassionate.
- It's too hard to be self-compassionate.

We have discussed evidence that contradicts some of these fears. However, the most effective way to address these barriers to using self-compassion may be to set up a behaviour experiment with your child to test them, using the method we outlined in the previous module. We will suggest this as part of the homework for this module.

People often find it easier to show compassion to others than to show compassion to ourselves. We can use this compassion for others as a platform to help us become more compassionate with ourselves. So, let's start with compassion for others...



In the situation listed below, what compassionate things could you say to your child? Remember the three components of compassion we discussed above, and see if you can incorporate any of them into your response:

1. Being kind and understanding, rather than critical.
2. Seeing unpleasant experiences as part of the common human experience.
3. Seeing unpleasant thoughts and feelings as temporary experiences that are not necessarily true and will not last forever.

Situation: Your child enters a competition. They work hard on their entry, but they don't win. They are tearful and saying things like "it doesn't matter how hard I work; I never win anything". *What compassionate thing could you say to them?*



Now that you've practised being compassionate to your child, can you practise being compassionate with yourself? To help with ideas, you could ask yourself...:

- What is something compassionate you recently said to a friend, family member, or colleague who was having a hard time?
- What compassionate things have others said to you before when you were having a hard time?
- Picture someone you believe to be compassionate (this can be someone you know or a famous person you imagine to be compassionate) – what helpful things might they say to you at this time?

Read the situations in the column on the left, then enter your ideas for self-compassionate things you could say to yourself in the column on the right.

Situation	What self-compassionate thing could you say?
You apply for a promotion at work but don't get it.	
You have a hard day and are feeling very tired when you get home. Your child is watching TV when you walk in. This irritates you, and you tell them off for watching TV instead of doing their homework. They tell you that they've already finished their homework for the day. You feel bad now for assuming the worst and being short with them.	

Consider: how did this self-compassion exercise compare to practising being compassionate to your child in the previous scenarios? Was this just the same, easier, or harder than being compassionate with your child? You don't need to write a response to these questions, but whatever your answer is, you might like to reflect on *why* that was your answer.



What are some situations that could come up when you're around your child where you could model using self-compassion in front of them (i.e., by saying self-compassionate things out loud)? Like we've said before, seeing you using these skills is likely to make it easier for your child to learn them and to see them as an acceptable way of relating to themselves. An example situation could be when you come home feeling tired and frustrated after work. Please enter your ideas in the table below.

Opportunities to model self-compassion in front of my child

This is the end of Module 4! Below is an outline of the main messages:

Key points from Module 4

- Self-criticism is linked to poorer mental health and seems to get in the way of making progress towards valued goals.
- Self-compassion involves being kind and understanding with yourself, seeing your unpleasant experiences as part of the shared human experience, and making space for painful thoughts and feelings without letting them get the better of you.
- Self-compassion is associated with better mental health and evidence suggests it is helpful for making progress towards your goals.
- We can use our compassion for others to help us develop more compassion for ourselves by imagining how we would treat others in similar situations.



How do these key points relate to your child? Write any reflections you have here. The reflection could include things you learned or things you already knew but have a greater understanding or appreciation of.



Module Four Homework Exercises

Teach your child about self-criticism and self-compassion, using the following handouts:

1. The information sheet titled '*How I Talk to Myself*', which your child can read with you to learn about the difference between self-criticism and self-compassion, and why the latter is more likely to be helpful for them.
2. The questionnaire titled '*Self-Compassion Quiz*', which you can use to:
 - Ask your child about any fears or barriers they might have to using self-compassion.
 - Identify whether it might be worthwhile setting up a behaviour experiment to address a fear or barrier to self-compassion (if you decide that an experiment could be helpful, you can use the worksheet from the previous module to set it up).
3. The worksheet titled '*Being Your Own Friend*', which your child can complete with you to practise using compassion for a fictional character, and then for themselves (you might like to complete this worksheet too, so you and your child can talk about your answers together!).
 - Kindly be aware that two variations of the '*Being Your Own Friend*' worksheet are available. The first version includes examples and language designed for children who lean toward the younger end of the 7–12-year-old age range. We encourage you to exercise your judgment in selecting the version that best suits your child's needs.

Important Note: It is not necessary to complete the module and homework exercises in one sitting. Dependent on your child's needs, you may want to work through the module and exercises in blocks throughout the week.



Keep an eye out for opportunities to:

- Model your own use of self-compassion in front of your child.

- Prompt your child to use a self-compassionate response when they make a mistake or have a setback.

How I Talk to Myself

Everyone talks to themselves, but not normally out loud! We usually talk to ourselves in our own heads. That's what thinking is!

Sometimes, the way we talk to ourselves can be mean. But we can learn to talk to ourselves more nicely!

Being mean to ourselves

We might be mean to ourselves when we make mistakes and think...

"I'm so stupid"

"I never do anything right"



"Other people are better than me"

"I'm such a loser"

Brain scientists say that when we are **mean** to ourselves...



We might feel sad.



We might feel worried.



We are **less** likely to achieve our goals.

Sometimes, people think being mean to themselves helps them to achieve their goals. But scientists tell us this isn't true.

So, if being mean to ourselves doesn't help...

What does help?

Being nice to ourselves

Instead of being mean to ourselves when we make mistakes, we can practice being nice. It's like being your own friend!

When we are being nice to ourselves, we might think things like...

"Everyone makes mistakes"



"Making mistakes helps me learn"

"It's okay to be wrong sometimes"

"Just keep trying, you can do it!"

Brain scientists say that when we are **nice** to ourselves...



We feel happier.



We are more excited for the future.



We are **more** likely to achieve our goals.

Sounds pretty good, right?

Practising being your own friend

Maybe you're not sure how to be nice to yourself!

That's okay – we can help you to learn.

Sometimes, it's easier for us to be nice to other people than to ourselves. We can practise being nice to ourselves by pretending we're talking to someone we love!



You could pretend you're talking to your friend or someone in your family.



You could also think about a time when someone said something nice to you. Can you say that nice thing to yourself?

Here are some ideas for nice things to say to be your own friend:

- You can do it!
- It's okay, you tried your best. There's always next time!
- No one does everything right all the time.
- I'm good at lots of other things. People will still like me if I'm not great at this one thing!
- I don't have to get everything right.
- This is a chance to learn something new. I'll know more next time!

It's okay if you still sometimes think mean things about yourself. Everyone does this at times. But now you know how to practise being nice to yourself too!



Self-Compassion Quiz

The following are some questions you can ask your child to find out whether there are fears or barriers that might get in the way of them using self-compassion. You can use the 'When to tick' column as a guide to help you tick off in the final column to make a list of the kinds of thoughts that might get in the way of your child using self-compassion.

Question to ask your child	When to tick	Tick boxes
How do you think you would feel if you speak nicely to yourself after making a mistake?	<i>If they think they will experience unpleasant emotions if they speak nicely to themselves</i>	
Do you think it's easier to get things done if you're mean to yourself or nice to yourself?	<i>If they think that being mean to themselves is more helpful for getting things done</i>	
Do you think being nice to yourself will change your goals?	<i>If they think that being nice to themselves will make them aim for lower goals or drop their standards</i>	
Do you think you can start to practise being nice to yourself?	<i>If they suggest that they can't be nice to themselves or it's too hard to be nice to themselves</i>	
How do you think other people will act if you practise being nice to yourself?	<i>If they think other people will react negatively to them being nice to themselves</i>	

Once you've completed the quiz, we invite you to consider setting up a behaviour experiment to test a fear or barrier to using self-compassion, if you have ticked any of the boxes above. You can use the steps outlined in Module 3 and the handout titled '*Let's Experiment!*' to do this.



If they don't report any fears or barriers, keep an eye out in case these pop up later.



Being Your Own Friend

Can you help Lucy to practise being nice to herself?




Lucy goes to the park with her friends to have a big soccer game. Lucy was super excited because she's good at soccer and wanted to help her team win.

As the game started, Lucy kicked the ball well, passing it to her friends and even scoring a goal! But then, during an important part of the game, she accidentally kicked the ball too hard, and it went way over the fence and into some bushes.

Lucy's face turned red, and she felt so embarrassed. She thought to herself, "I must be the worst soccer player ever! My friends are probably laughing at me right now."

With those thoughts in her head, Lucy felt sad and worried about what her friends might think.



You have learned about being your own friend and speaking nicely to yourself. Let's use what you learned now!

 How can Lucy practise being her own friend? What things can she say to be nice to herself?

Sometimes it's hard to think of new thoughts! You can use the handout called '*How I Talk to Myself*' or ask your parent or caregiver to get ideas if you need some help.

Please write your answer in this box






When did you make a mistake recently? Please write what happened in the box below!

If it's hard to think of a mistake you made, then try to think of a mistake you might make one day.

Please write your answer in this box



Now it's time for you to practise being your own friend!

 When you made that mistake, how could you practise being your own friend? What things could you say to be nice to yourself?

You can use the handout called '*How I Talk to Myself*' or ask your parent or caregiver to get ideas if you need some help.

Please write your answer in this box



Well done for practising being your own friend! Please talk about your answers with your parent or caregiver. They might be able to learn from you. They might also have some ideas you didn't think of.



Well done for finishing this activity!



Being Your Own Friend

Can you help Lucy to practise being nice to herself?




Lucy goes to her school Sports Day. She is a fast runner. She is competing in the 100-metre sprint race for her team.

While Lucy is running in the sprint race, she falls over. She isn't hurt. But after she fell, it took a little while for her to get up. The other runners ran past her. So, Lucy came last in the race.

Lucy is very cross with herself for falling over. She thinks "I am the clumsiest person in the world! I bet everyone is laughing at me."

After thinking this, Lucy feels sad and embarrassed.



You have learned about being your own friend and speaking nicely to yourself. Let's use what you learned now!

 How can Lucy practise being her own friend? What things can she say to be nice to herself?

Sometimes it's hard to think of new thoughts! You can use the handout called '*How I Talk to Myself*' or ask your parent or caregiver to get ideas if you need some help.

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