

The Self-Criticism Cycle

WHY IT HAPPENS, AND HOW TO BREAK IT

Self-criticism often starts with a perceived mistake or shortcoming. What begins as an attempt to motivate or protect ourselves can quickly become a cycle of negative thoughts, painful emotions and unhelpful behaviours — leaving us feeling worse rather than better.

WHY DOES THIS HAPPEN?

Self-criticism often develops from early experiences, high standards, fear of failure, or a belief that being hard on ourselves will keep us safe or help us improve. Over time, it becomes an automatic habit.

THE HIDDEN COST

While self-criticism might feel motivating short-term, it often leads to increased stress, reduced confidence, poorer performance and a lower sense of self-worth.

COMMON FORMS

- All-or-nothing thinking
- Focusing on mistakes
- Comparing yourself unfairly to others
- Using harsh or judgemental language
- Dismissing successes
- Feeling you should always do more
- Believing you are not good enough

A KINDER ALTERNATIVE

Self-compassion isn't about lowering your standards — it's about treating yourself with the same understanding you'd offer a close friend. This helps you learn, grow and change without the added pain of self-criticism.



You Can Break The Cycle

Greater awareness, self-compassion and more balanced thinking can help interrupt the self-criticism cycle. With practice, it's possible to respond to mistakes and challenges in a kinder, more constructive way, building resilience and a healthier relationship with yourself.

PRACTICAL STEPS

1

NOTICE

- Become aware of your self-critical thoughts
- Notice when the cycle is starting

2

CHALLENGE

- Ask: "Is this thought kind, helpful and true?"
- Consider a more balanced, compassionate perspective

3

RESPOND DIFFERENTLY

- Speak to yourself as you would a close friend
- Use a supportive, realistic inner dialogue

4

PRACTISE

- Be patient — change takes time
- The more you practise self-compassion, the weaker the cycle becomes



A kinder inner voice leads to a calmer mind, greater resilience and a more fulfilling life.

SOURCES

Neff, K.D. (2011). *Self-Compassion: The Proven Power of Being Kind to Yourself*. William Morrow. · Gilbert, P. (2009). *The Compassionate Mind*. Constable.