
Taming Your Inner Critic



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Eight concrete ways to lead a more contented life.

Two men decided to visit a sage. The first man said: "I'm thinking of moving to this town. Can you tell me what's it like living here?"

The sage asked: "What can you tell me about the town you now live in?"

The first man responded: "It's a miserable town and the people are horrible. When I first arrived there, I did some stupid things. Some people made unpleasant remarks and now I can't get them out of my head. I've always hated living there."

The sage said: "The people in this town are very much the same. I don't think you should move here."

After listening to the sage's comments, the first man left, and the second one entered, asking the exact same question as the first.

The sage asked: "What can you tell about the town you currently live in?"

The second man responded: "My town is wonderful, and the people are very nice. Even though I did some stupid things when I first moved there, most

people reacted kindly. I'm hesitant to leave but would like a change of scenery."

The sage said: "The people in this town are very much the same. I'm sure you would like it here."

Clearly, the first man focused on his negative experiences, which coloured his attitude towards the people in his town. The second man also struggled at first but was able to forgive himself for whatever he had done. He then built a contented life.

This story illustrates that how we deal with setbacks very much determine our perceptions. Compared to the first man, the second one knew how to show compassion to himself.

Compassion as a two-way process

Self-compassion is simply offering the same kindness to yourself as you would to others. This requires empathy. Empathy is *the ability to sense* other people's emotions and to imagine what they might be thinking or feeling, while compassion is when you *relate* to that person's situation and are *prepared to help*.

Think of compassion as a two-way process. Showing empathy, love and concern for people who are in difficulty is one way. Self-compassion, or the ability to turn understanding, acceptance and love inwards, is the other. By not holding yourself to impossible standards, you can be kind to yourself, particularly in the face of setbacks.

As such, self-compassion triggers a much richer inner dialogue about your capabilities and limitations. This can guide you towards activities that are more aligned with your personality, beliefs and values. This congruence will help you better understand yourself. Self-compassion is therefore a great vehicle for personal development.

Unfortunately, many people are fearful of their **dark side** and what they might discover. Instead, they prefer to put it in a box and close the lid. What they don't realise is that integrating all parts of themselves can contribute to positive changes in their life. After all, self-compassion and psychological well-being are close cousins.

Self-compassion helps at home and at work

Both personal and work situations require self-compassion. For example, if you experience conflict with a colleague or haven't received a promotion you were expecting, self-compassion will help you. It is also needed in situations that involve dishonesty, betrayal or hurting someone you care about.

So how to show compassion to yourself? How can you manage the emotional turmoil that you may be experiencing?

A common response to a painful situation is to blame someone (outward projection). Another response is to direct your anger inwards, i.e. blaming yourself. If so, the question becomes: How to cope with this inner critic?

What's certain is that people who are prone to rumination tend to experience more distress. In fact, excessive rumination on past events and mistakes can poison the mind. Instead, try to accept that everyone makes mistakes and learn from your experience.

Self-compassion can preserve your mental health and boost your sense of self-worth because it means that you genuinely care about your own well-being. The most effective people are those who feel genuine compassion for themselves and their circumstances and apply that same compassion towards others.

The source of your inner critic

The inner critic often stems from early childhood experiences, namely the moral standards and ideals that your parents or other early caretakers instilled in you (based on those they internalised themselves). These serve as a blueprint for your perception of the world.

If your parents had unrealistic expectations, you may think that you're unworthy. If you feel you can't live up to their standards and ideals, you develop an inner critic, a voice in your head that's destructive and deprecating.

When something bad happens, don't suppress your pain. Face it, but be kind rather than judgmental about your failures and mistakes. Avoid the trap of negative self-talk.

Eight concrete steps to lead a more contented life

- Give yourself the permission to treat yourself just like you would treat your friends or family members when they screw up. Allow yourself to be imperfect.
- See the difference between making a bad decision and being a bad person. Making a bad decision does not automatically make you a bad person.
- Accept that you are human and will necessarily make mistakes. This sense of vulnerability will also make you feel more connected to other people, as you realise that we all struggle.
- Recognise your flaws and setbacks as learning experiences and opportunities to grow. Embrace these challenges, persist in finding meaning in them and, most importantly, don't give up on yourself.
- Practise gratitude. By noticing, affirming and appreciating the good things in your life, you will reduce the focus on what you don't have. Gratitude can create a buffer against feelings of inadequacy and the tendency to ruminate.
- Stay in the present. Being mindful of where you are and what you're doing can help you tamp down negative thoughts. However, it doesn't mean that you should ignore the past. As the Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard said, "Life can only be understood backwards; but it must be lived forwards."
- Focus on helping others. Generosity has great restorative function. However, you must consciously choose the recipients of your generosity, in light of your resources (from mental, physical, emotional to financial).
- Find a supportive psychotherapist or coach. Psychotherapy or coaching can provide you with a safe environment to become more aware of your thoughts and feelings. This can give you a more realistic perspective of yourself and others, while helping you to internalise new ways of seeing the world.

As the Dalai Lama said, "If you don't love yourself, you cannot love others. You will not be able to love others. If you have no compassion for yourself then you are not capable of developing compassion for others."

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