



Compassion over criticism

Learn to show yourself compassion instead of criticism

Flinders University Institute for Mental Health & Wellbeing

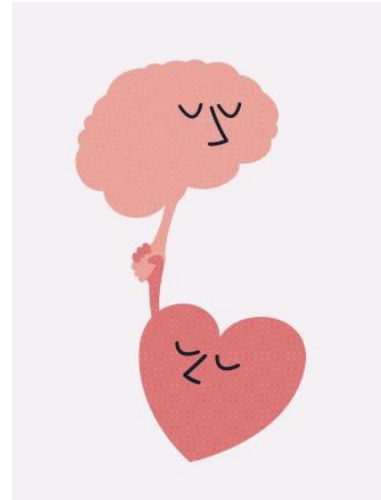
Ways to reach your goals through self-compassion?

In **Part 1 – Learn**, you'll learn about self-critical perfectionism, your inner critic, and how this may be getting in the way of reaching your goals.

In **Part 2 – Do**, you'll learn how to use self-compassion, rather than self-criticism, and start to put this into practice to work towards your goals.

Then, **we will ask for your advice** on how to share this information with other people who have an eating disorder.

All the stories in this chapter are based on the experiences of real people who have struggled with eating disorders.



Help us help others!

People tell us the ideas in this chapter are interesting and helpful. But we need your help to learn how to best support people with eating disorders. By sharing your experiences and advice, we can help others who might be experiencing similar struggles with self-critical perfectionism.



We know that **you are the expert** in your life and have valuable insight into what it's like to be a person with an eating disorder.

Please complete this chapter thoughtfully and share your feedback at the end to help us learn the best way to present this information to others like you.

Tell us what worked well for you and what didn't, so we can improve and make a real difference **together**.

Part 1 – Learn

Do you ever feel unhappy or critical of what you've done,
even when you try your best?

Do you get frustrated if things aren't perfect?

Do you stress over every little detail?

Do you focus more on what you could have done better
and forget to notice what you did well?

These are common experiences for people who have difficulty with **perfectionism**.

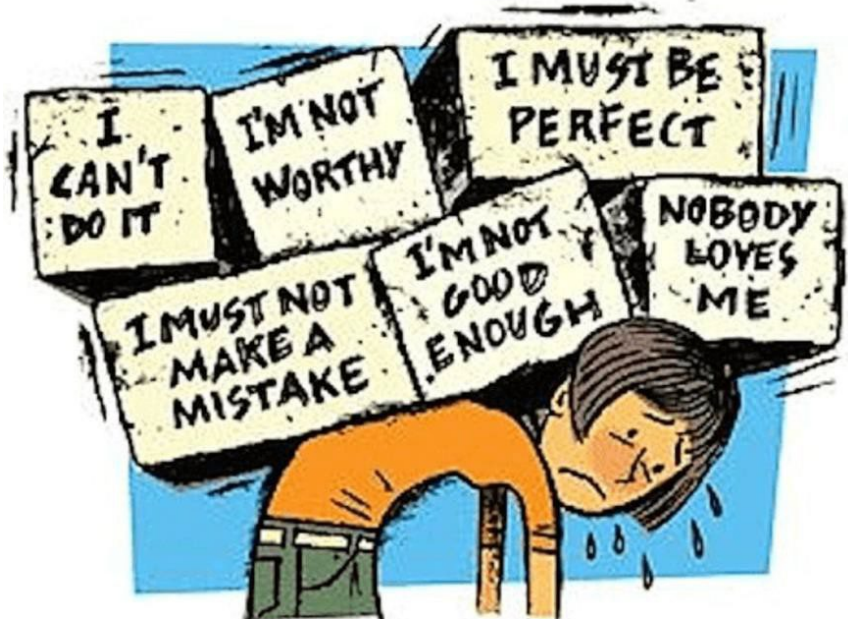


What is perfectionism?

Perfectionism means constantly pushing yourself to meet extremely high standards, even when it causes problems. A key issue is that people often tie their self-worth to how well they meet these standards.

This can lead to **self-doubt**, **self-criticism**, **lower self-esteem**, and **worse performance**.

Taking a closer look at perfectionism



Perfectionism isn't just trying to do well. It's being overly hard on yourself when you don't meet high standards and ignoring your achievements.

It can prevent you taking on a challenge or starting a task because you're afraid to fail, like not starting an assignment because you don't think you will get a good grade. It can make even the simplest tasks feel overwhelming.

It's linked to mental health issues like anxiety, depression, obsessive-compulsive disorder, and eating disorders.

Let's watch a video to find out more about perfectionism¹:



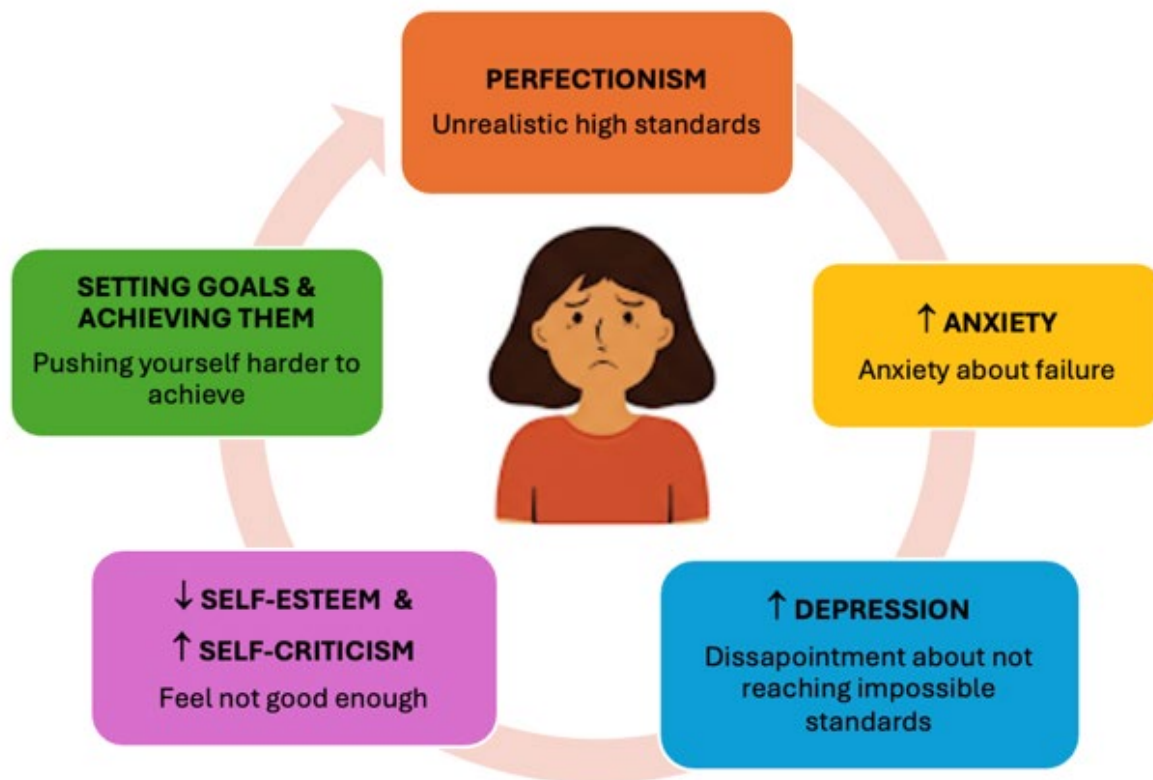
Now, in one sentence, what was the main message of the video that you think is important for people to know about perfectionism?

¹<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WynxfVX0eek>

The vicious cycle of perfectionism

To better understand perfectionism, we asked young people who've experienced depression and anxiety to share their thoughts.

This feedback helped us to create a “**vicious cycle of perfectionism**” shown below:



Learn more about this vicious cycle

According to this cycle, a perfectionist is someone who sets unrealistic high standards for themselves and works relentlessly to achieve these standards despite negative consequences.

Trying to meet these high expectations can cause anxiety, because we worry about failing or making a mistake. Being anxious about making mistakes then leads to more mistakes being made and more anxiety.

When people think that they have failed to reach these impossible standards they often feel not good enough and depressed. This leads to increased self-criticism and lowered self-esteem. This makes them push themselves harder to achieve more, just to feel better about who they are.

To start thinking about the different ways that perfectionism can impact your life, let's look at an example...

Sara's story:



I sat in front of my computer, re-reading the draft of my email for the fifth time in the past hour. I had been working on a project that had not been going well. Even though the difficulties had nothing to do with me, I had been putting off sending an email telling my boss for weeks. I couldn't find any issues with the email, but I still had this nagging feeling in my chest that something wasn't right.

It was already past midnight, but I couldn't bring myself to send it. One more read-through. One more check. I kept thinking, I need to make sure it's flawless. I need to make it clear that the project failing isn't my fault but also make sure I'm not blaming anyone else. My tone needs to be just the right level of disappointed and optimistic. If I can nail all these details, then my boss won't be upset with me when they read it.

I couldn't risk making a mistake or being criticised. If the email wasn't flawless, what would that say about me?

I kept rewording, deleting, and rewriting—a small change here, a tiny fix there. Every time I changed something, it felt a bit better... but somehow, still not good enough.

By the time the sun came up, I had finally finished—or at least, I told myself I had. I quickly edited the last sentence and hit send, just in time. But when I checked it later, I saw a typo in that final line. I felt like a complete failure.



Now that you've read Sara's story, let's take a closer look at how perfectionism affected her—in good and not-so-good ways.

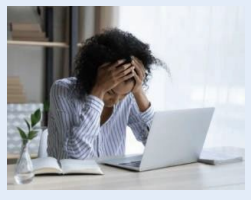
Below is a list of examples from Sara's story. Some show the positives (how perfectionism helped Sara), and others show the negatives (how it made things harder for her).

For each example below, select whether you think it is a:

 good thing about perfectionism (positive)

 not-so-good thing about perfectionism (negative)

Examples from Sara's story	The good things about perfectionism (positives) 	The not-so-good things about perfectionism (negatives) 
She worked really hard – Sara spent a lot of time and effort on her email.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
She felt stressed and worried – Sara was anxious that her email still wasn't good enough.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
She got really tired – She stayed up all night trying to perfect it.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
She paid attention to detail – She kept checking and improving her writing.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
She struggled to finish – She kept editing and found it hard to stop.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
She wanted to do well – Getting a good result really mattered to her.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
She was scared of being judged – She didn't want anyone to find mistakes in her email.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
She was really hard on herself – One small typo made her feel like a total failure.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
She was motivated by her goals – She cares about her job and wanted to impress her boss.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
She didn't feel proud of her work – Even after all that effort, it still didn't feel good enough to her.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>



Based on this on this information, what conclusions can you draw about whether perfectionism is working for Sara?

You likely identified that while Sara’s perfectionism helped her to develop a near flawless email, it came at a cost. Even after Sara had worked all night perfecting it, the inner voice of perfectionism found something to criticize. It still didn’t feel good enough. Nothing she does feels quite good enough, so she can never celebrate her achievements.



Take a moment to think about the ways perfectionism has impacted your own life. Have you found yourself being judgmental or critical of yourself after a perceived failure? What were the consequences of this?

Now, in a few sentences, describe the impact perfectionism has had on your life and reflect on whether you think perfectionism is working for you?

Self-compassion instead of self-criticism?

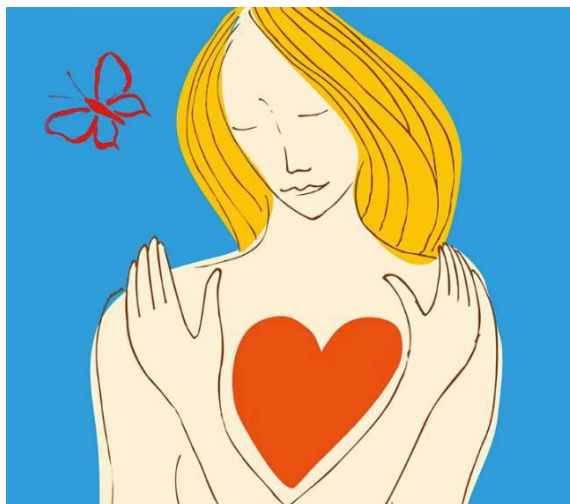
Many people with perfectionism believe they need to be self-critical to stay motivated – **BUT** the evidence from scientific studies shows it holds them back from achieving goals that are important to them.



Self-compassion means treating yourself with the same kindness and compassion you'd show a friend or person you care about. It helps you bounce back from mistakes and keeps you motivated to reach your goals, instead of beating yourself up when things go wrong.



Common myths (and truths) about self-compassion



Let's look at some of the common myths (and truths) about self-compassion...

Myth #1: Self-criticism is better than self-compassion for helping achieve my goals

Myth: If we're kind to ourselves, we'll get lazy or stop trying, and that being hard on ourselves is the only way to stay motivated and improve.

Truth: Actually, the opposite is true! People who practice self-compassion are MORE likely to achieve their goals. They are less scared of failing, and when they do fail, they're more likely to try again, and more quickly.

Myth #2: Self-compassion will make me soft or weak

Myth: Being hard on yourself builds strength and makes people tough. Self-compassion will make people soft or vulnerable.

Truth: When facing challenges, what's going to make you stronger - being your own ally who supports you or an enemy that constantly undermines you? Research tells us that self-compassionate people are better able to deal with stressful situations such as natural disasters, health issues, and personal conflicts.

Myth #3: Self-compassion means letting myself off the hook

Myth: People believe that showing compassion towards yourself means excusing mistakes and not taking responsibility.

Truth: Self-compassion involves being kind and understanding towards yourself when facing challenges. It also means taking time out after a fall to recuperate and consider a new approach so we can get back on with the task rather than avoiding future challenges due to a fear of failure.

Did any of these views resonate with you? Ask yourself, after learning some of the truths about self-compassion, has your view on self-compassion changed?

From what you've learned so far and what research says, what do you think are the benefits of being kind and compassionate to yourself? Write them down below.

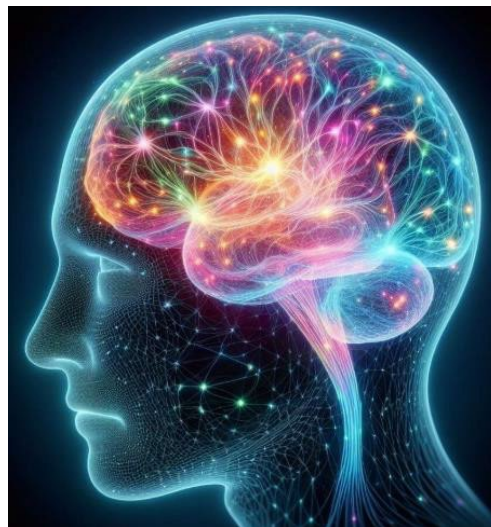
Benefits of self-compassion:

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Can I change my self-criticism?

At this point you might be thinking “But I’ve always been a perfectionist, always self-critical and tough on myself. Is it possible for me to change?”

The answer is, ABSOLUTELY you can!



Research highlight

Research shows that you can be less hard on yourself by trying new ways to reach your goals and learning new skills.

Your brain is flexible and can change by building new connections, a process called **neuroplasticity**.

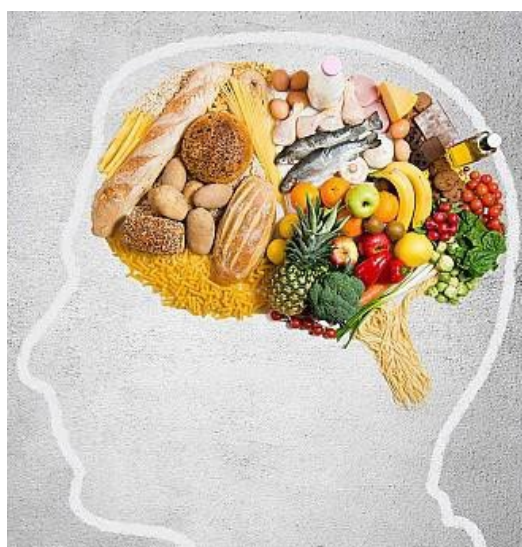
This means that when you try new things, challenge yourself, and keep practicing new habits, you can help your brain grow and improve in positive ways.

But what about brain food?

To work properly and keep adapting, **your brain needs the right fuel**, especially from food.

If you're not eating enough or missing important nutrients, your brain shrinks in size, which makes it harder to think clearly, make decisions, solve problems, and manage your emotions.

It also becomes harder to notice and challenge negative or self-critical thoughts. Your brain needs energy to work well, and **carbohydrates** (like those in whole grains, fruit, and veggies) are one of its most important sources of fuel.



It is recommended that approximately 50% or more of total energy of your diet should come from carbohydrates. **Select at least 4 servings over the day** – examples of servings are below.²

<input type="checkbox"/> ½ cup muesli	<input type="checkbox"/> 1 ½ Corn Flakes	<input type="checkbox"/> ¾ cup cooked cous cous
<input type="checkbox"/> 1 cup Sustain	<input type="checkbox"/> 1 roll	<input type="checkbox"/> 1 cup cooked barley
<input type="checkbox"/> 1 cup All Bran	<input type="checkbox"/> 1 pita bread	<input type="checkbox"/> 1 cup sweet corn
<input type="checkbox"/> 1 cup Sultana Bran	<input type="checkbox"/> 2 slices bread	<input type="checkbox"/> 1 cup cooked quinoa
<input type="checkbox"/> 1 cup Just Right	<input type="checkbox"/> 2 fruit toast	<input type="checkbox"/> 1 cup mashed potato
<input type="checkbox"/> 1 cup cooked porridge	<input type="checkbox"/> 2 tortillas	<input type="checkbox"/> 2 medium baked potatoes
<input type="checkbox"/> 1 ½ cups Special K	<input type="checkbox"/> 1 cup cooked pasta	<input type="checkbox"/> 1 large, sweet potato
<input type="checkbox"/> 1 ½ cups Rice Bubbles	<input type="checkbox"/> 1 cup cooked rice	<input type="checkbox"/> 2 cups cooked noodles

² This information is available from the Real Food Guide - <https://cbt-t.sites.sheffield.ac.uk/resources>

GOOD NEWS!



Self-compassion is a learnable skill. It can be learned through practice. By learning to give yourself compassion instead of criticism, you can change your life for the better.



Meet Abbey - Always the self-critic

Abbey's story:



I sit, staring at my phone. My friend texted earlier, confirming if we were still on for the movie later. I had been looking forward to it, but I didn't sleep well last night, I haven't eaten since breakfast, and I haven't felt great all day. I know I need to stay home and rest. I don't want to cancel, but I'm exhausted, and I have a big day tomorrow. But the thought of cancelling on my friend makes me anxious. If I cancel, she'll miss the premiere. Am I just making excuses?

I feel torn between what I want and what I think I should do. Finally, I type out the text: "I'm really sorry, but I don't think I'm feeling up to it tonight. Can we go another time?" I hit send, then immediately stare at the screen as a wave of guilt washes over me. Am I just being lazy? Maybe I should've pushed through it. I don't want to disappoint her.

As soon as the message is sent, regret sets in. She's going to be so disappointed. I'm letting her down. She would never bail on me like this. I'm a bad friend. My inner critic grows louder, making me second-guess my decision. I feel sick with guilt and worry. No matter what I do, it never feels like enough. And tonight, that voice is telling me I'm lazy, selfish, and a bad friend.

Based on what you've learned so far, in a few sentences, what is one thing you would suggest Abbey do to start to address her self-criticism? If you're not sure, it's okay to guess.

Thanks for giving Abbey advice! This is what she ended up doing:

I start paying attention to the thoughts running through my mind—I'm lazy, I'm selfish, I'm a bad friend, I should've pushed through it—and I realise they're only making me feel worse. I take a step back and question whether these thoughts are true or if they're just my inner critic showing up again.



But I'm not being lazy or selfish. I wanted to go. I really am so tired and not feeling well. I don't think I could have gone even if I tried—I can barely keep my eyes open. I know I'm a good person and a good friend.

I remind myself that choosing to rest isn't selfish; it's about listening to my body and taking care of myself. I wouldn't judge a friend for doing the same—in fact, I'd encourage it—so why should I judge myself? This realization eases my anxiety and guilt.

I also notice that not eating all day isn't helping, so I make myself a nourishing meal with plenty of carbohydrates to fuel my brain. As I eat, I start to feel more energized, and slowly, I begin to feel better.



In the next section, we'll choose ways you can start taking positive action in your own life.

Part 2 – Do

Now that you've learned about how self-critical perfectionism might be impacting your life, it's time to **TAKE ACTION**.

Understanding self-criticism and identifying your inner critic is just the beginning. Real progress happens when you use what you've learned to create lasting, positive changes in your life.



In this section, you will learn how to use **self-compassion** instead of self-criticism and how to **put this into practice to reach your goals**. This section will also help you to prepare for potential challenges and **roadblocks** along the way, which are a natural part of learning and developing.

First, identify your inner critic and a compassionate response



The first step to changing your self-criticism is identifying your inner critic and finding a way to talk back to it.

One way to do this is to look for thoughts that you would hesitate to say to another person, because they sound harsh or judgmental.

When you are used to being self-critical, it can sometimes be hard to recognise the self-critical thoughts because you accept them as 'the truth'.

Use the following activity to identify your inner critic. Try to understand which events most commonly trigger critical thinking and what your inner critic says.

See if you can identify those thoughts that are critical of you. An example has been provided for you.

Think about a triggering event . What happened?	Self-critical thoughts . What did I say to myself?
<i>Examples:</i> My boss said my work wasn't up to its usual standard My colleague at work didn't smile at me this morning	<i>Examples:</i> I am stupid; I never write anything good I have done something wrong, I've offended them
1.	1.
2.	2.
3.	3.
4.	4.



The goal is to **decrease the power of the self-critical voice**.

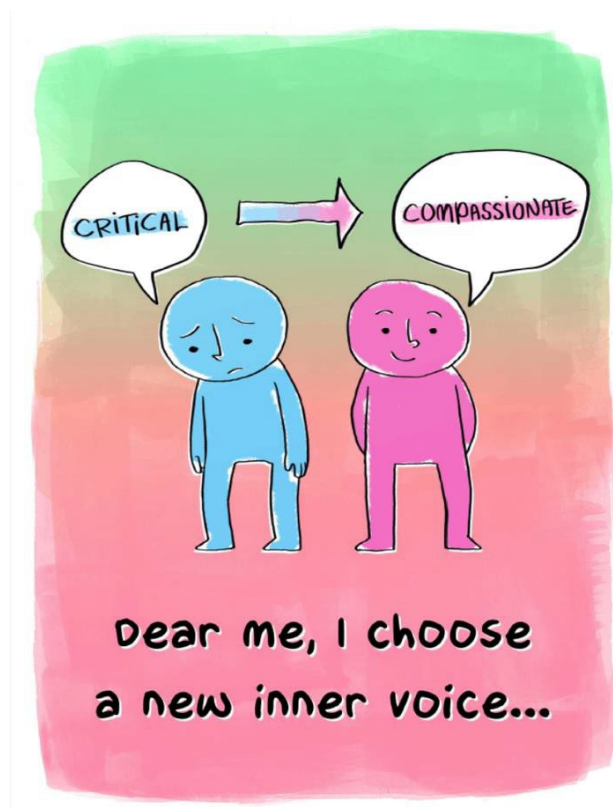
Imagine your self-critical voice had a volume button—the volume can be turned down low but not all the way off. In the same way, the volume of the self-compassionate voice can be turned up.

How do you start turning the inner voice from frenemy into friend? Doing this requires **self-compassion**.

Find your compassionate voice

To change your self-critical voice and decrease self-criticism, you need to first find your compassionate voice.

When you have been listening to the self-critical voice for a long time, it can initially be very hard to identify your compassionate voice, but with patience and practice this will get easier.



The following activity will help you identify your compassionate voice.

You will need to refer to the self-critical thoughts you identified on the previous page. For each self-critical thought, try to come up with an alternative thought, from the perspective of a compassionate voice. **HINT:** Keep in mind the compassionate things you might say to a close friend or loved one who was being self-critical.

Then think about how you would feel if this compassionate thought was true. Look at the examples provided and then have a go at the activity.

It's okay if you have difficulty coming up with compassionate statements or don't believe them strongly to begin with, try to complete the activity anyway.

Self-critical thought <i>[your self-critical thoughts from the previous activity]</i>	Alternative compassionate thought	How would you feel if this compassionate thought was true?
<i>Example:</i> <i>I am useless at this</i>	<i>I'm still learning, it can take years of practice to master a new skill.</i>	<i>Reassured that if I keep at it and practice, I will improve.</i>
<i>Example:</i> <i>I am a bad friend</i>	<i>My friends have told me that they value my friendship.</i>	<i>I am comforted that I am a good friend.</i>
1.		
2.		
3.		
4.		

Practice! Practice! Practice!



At first, your belief in the alternative compassionate thoughts may be very low, especially compared to your self-critical thoughts, but that's okay. Just like strengthening a muscle, the more you use the compassionate voice, the stronger it will become.

Being compassionate to yourself, rather than critical, takes time, patience, and, most importantly, **practice!** With practice, the compassionate voice will get easier to switch on and more believable, and the unfairness of the self-critical voice will become clearer. Over time, you'll be more likely to question the truth of self-critical thoughts and believe them less.



Remember, the process of **neuroplasticity** in the brain? By regularly practicing new skills, you can form new neural connections and promote positive changes in your brain. Also remember that your brain performs at its best when it has **adequate nutrition**, particularly carbohydrates.

Remember, practice is key when it comes to building new adaptive habits for the future.

Self-compassion in action



You can also start to improve your self-compassion right now, by using one of the many strategies listed below.

Pick one strategy to try out this week to practice self-compassion.

Think about how you would treat a friend: Next time you are self-critical, think about what you would say to a friend or family member? Showing kindness to others can help you be kinder to yourself.

Compassionate hand: Place your hand over your heart or wherever feels comforting. Imagine it's a loving person's hand offering you comfort. What are they saying?

Write a letter or journal: Write a self-compassionate letter to yourself letter or journal entry. Acknowledge that you are struggling now and respond to yourself with kindness and encouragement.

Self-compassion meditation³: Listen to short meditations to help you practice kindness for yourself and others.

Do something nice for yourself: Do something nice and kind for yourself (e.g., taking time out for yourself and having a warm bath or doing something you really enjoy)

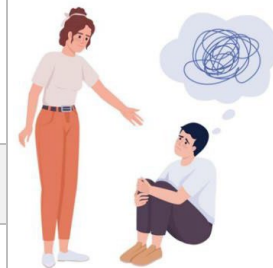
Self-compassionate mantras/statements: Remind and encourage yourself to be self-compassionate with phrases like "Being kind and gentle with myself helps me get closer to my valued goals".

Visualize compassion: Picture yourself giving or receiving kindness and compassion.

Self-compassionate thinking: Challenge self-critical thoughts and generate alternative compassionate thoughts.

Accept a compliment: Say "thank you" the next time someone gives you a compliment.

Volunteering, help others: Volunteering or doing something kind for others can help you feel kinder to yourself too (e.g., help a friend, volunteer for an organisation).



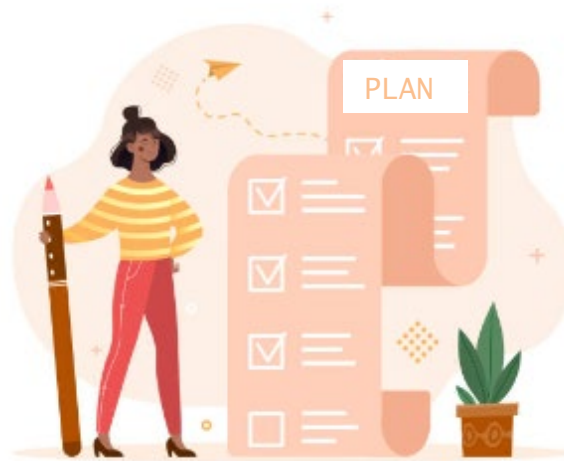
The strategy I've selected to try this week is:

HINT: As you practice one of these strategies for a week, monitor your sense of productivity and progress with goals that are important to you. Compare this to the rating you would have given yourself the week before when you were more likely to be self-critical. What does this tell you?

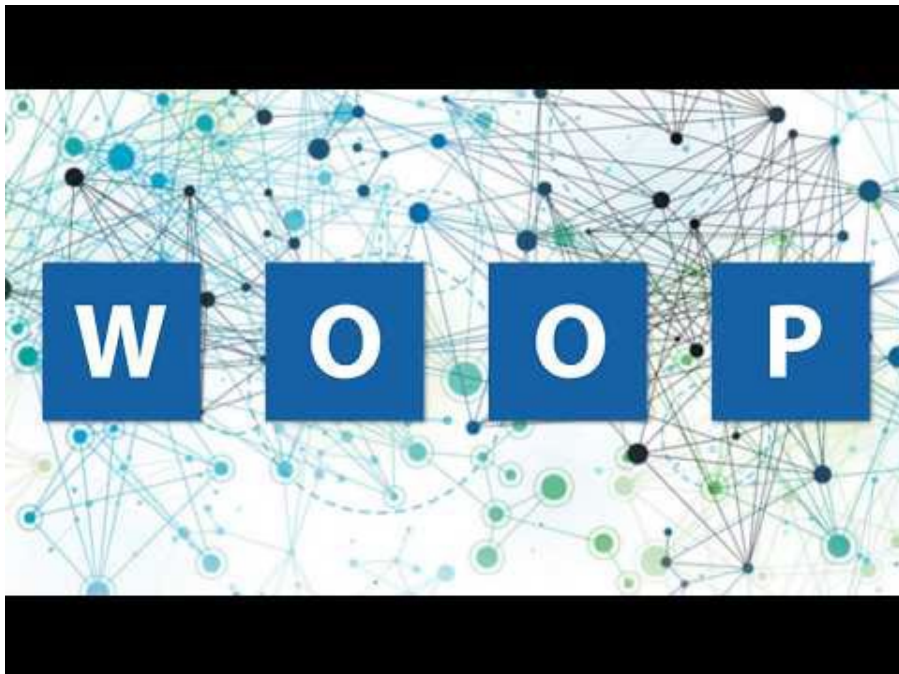
³ <https://insighttimer.com/anahitaholdenphd/guided-meditations/mindful-self-compassion-self-compassion-break>

Make a plan

Now let's create a plan for how you might practice self-compassion this week using the strategy you selected above.



One way to do this is by developing a **Wish Outcome Obstacle Plan (WOOP)** – watch the video⁴ below:



⁴ <https://www.youtube.com/embed/yBaVSI6zq4c?feature=oembed>

Create your WOOP for one of the strategies you selected above.


The strategy I chose is: _____

My WOOP:

<p>What is your <u>wish</u> for the next 4 weeks that seems challenging but achievable? <i>As you name your wish in 3-6 words, imagine writing it in glowing letters on a sign at the end of your path. Keep it in the front of your mind as you move forward in this exercise.</i></p>	<p>Wish:</p>
<p>What is the best <u>outcome</u> that you can imagine, the best outcome about fulfilling your wish? <i>Picture the scene in vivid detail—where are you, what are you doing, and how do you feel?</i></p>	<p>Outcome:</p>
<p>What is the one main <u>obstacle</u> in you that stands in the way of realising this wish. <i>Picture a wall or barrier that appears on the path towards your wish, a habit, a fear, or a thought that makes it harder to move forward.</i></p>	<p>Obstacle:</p>
<p>What is your <u>plan</u> to overcome your obstacle? <i>Imagine you have a tool in your hand that represents your power to overcome the wall. It could be a key, a ladder, or a burst of energy to break through. What action or thought is your tool? Picture yourself using it and watching the wall disappear. Write your action or thought in one sentence.</i></p>	<p>Plan (action/thought):</p>
<p>If/then plan: If [write obstacle here]: _____ Then [write action/thought here]: _____ _____</p> <p style="text-align: center;">Great work. Now slowly repeat this plan.</p>	

Congratulations! You have completed a WOOP that will help you to practice self-compassion.

Great! On a scale from 1 (not at all confident) to 10 (the most confident I can feel), how confident do you feel that you can take actions to change self-criticism and develop self-compassion?

Not at all confident  The most confident I can feel

1 **2** **3** **4** **5** **6** **7** **8** **9** **10**

Now we need your help...

Now that you've heard the science and heard from other people, we'd like you to share your own story and advice. We would like to use your story and advice to help other people like you to deal with some of the challenges they may be experiencing.



Based on everything you've learnt, what advice would you give to a peer with perfectionism who was self-critical and hard on themselves? Share the strategies you learned and the ideas you found most helpful.

By sharing your learning and experiences with someone else in the same situation, you could help them to start taking positive action in their own life.

But changing self-criticism isn't always easy – look out for roadblock thoughts!

It's important to know that changing self-criticism and developing self-compassion isn't always going to be easy, especially if you've been critical towards yourself for a long time.



Sometimes you will come up against **roadblock thoughts**. Roadblock thoughts are negative, unhelpful, and sometimes exaggerated things people say to themselves that can slow down your progress and get in the way of you achieving your goals. Everyone has them now and then.

When you have these thoughts, the self-critical voice might get louder again, and it can be harder to listen to your compassionate voice.

Three **roadblock thoughts** are especially common in young people, these are:

1. Being self-compassionate is too hard, its easier to be self-critical.
2. I am flawed and need to be self-critical.
3. If I don't meet my standards, it means I've failed, and I can't handle that disappointment.

Since we all have roadblock thoughts every now and then, it is a good idea for having a plan to deal with them. So, let's make a plan to deal with roadblocks you might come up with in the future as you move from self-criticism to self-compassion.



Let's take a closer look at each roadblock thought.

1. Being self-compassionate is too hard, it's easier to be self-critical.

Change is tough, especially at first. Moving from being hard on yourself to being kinder can feel difficult, and it's normal to slip back into old habits. If that happens, ask for support from friends, family, or someone you trust. A friend can check in with you or remind you why you want to make this change.

2. I am flawed and need to be self-critical.

This thought is common, particularly if you've been hard on yourself for a long time. You might find it easier to focus on your mistakes and overlook your achievements. To help with this, try keeping a diary of the things you have done well, even the small ones. It'll remind you that your flaws don't define you.

3. If I don't meet my standards, it means I've failed, and I can't handle that disappointment.

It's normal to feel disappointed if you don't meet a standard you've set for yourself, but that doesn't mean you can't handle it. Acknowledge your feelings, but don't let them stop you from trying again. Remember that setbacks help you grow and learn. Instead of harshly criticising yourself, be kind and compassionate to yourself, just like you would be to a friend in the same situation.

In the future, which roadblock do you think might get in your way most?

- Being self-compassionate is too hard, it's easier being self-critical.
- I am flawed and need to be self-critical.
- If I don't meet my standards, it means I've failed, and I can't handle that disappointment.
- None of these roadblock thoughts seem relevant to me, I'd like to describe my own: _____

Let's make a plan for dealing with this roadblock if it comes up for you.

Roadblock thought	My action plan
<p>1. Being self-compassionate is too hard, it's easier being self-critical</p>	<p><input type="checkbox"/> I can ask this person for help or support</p> <p>Person:</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> I can be a good friend to myself saying ...</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> One small thing I can do to take positive action is ...</p>
<p>2. I am flawed and need to be self-critical</p>	<p><input type="checkbox"/> I can ask this person for help or support</p> <p>Person:</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> I can be a good friend to myself saying ...</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> One small thing I can do to take positive action is ...</p>
<p>3. If I don't meet my standards, it means I've failed, and I can't handle that disappointment</p> <p>OR</p> <p>4. My own roadblock:</p> <p>_____</p> <p>_____</p> <p>_____</p>	<p><input type="checkbox"/> I can ask this person for help or support</p> <p>Person:</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> I can be a good friend to myself saying ...</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> One small thing I can do to take positive action is ...</p>



Thank you for helping us today!

And well done – you've completed the Compassion over Criticism chapter!

*Keep Up the
Good Work!*

Remember...

BE NICE TO YOURSELF.
IT'S HARD
TO BE HAPPY
WHEN SOMEONE
IS MEAN
TO YOU ALL THE TIME.
-CHRISTINE ARYLO