

Harshness versus Compassion

How do you tend to talk to yourself—harshly or with compassion?

Harsh Self-Talk	Compassionate Self-Talk
Blaming, “beating yourself up” Prevents change Ignores the self Is easy	Loving, understanding Promotes change Listens to the self Is difficult

An example:

Harsh Self-Talk	Compassionate Self-Talk
“I drank last night. What a loser! I can’t do anything right.”	“I know drinking is dangerous, but I did it anyway. There must be a reason. Maybe it’s because I’m upset about my brother’s death. Next time I feel an urge to drink, I’ll try to prevent it by calling my sponsor to talk about how I feel.”

Ideas to consider:

Harshness may be associated with PTSD and substance abuse.

PTSD. If you feel a lot of emotional pain, you may take it out on yourself. This can take the form of putting yourself down (“You jerk!”) or physical abuse such as self-cutting. If you were harshly criticized in childhood, you may have “internalized” those voices and are now criticizing yourself.

Substance abuse. Self-hatred often arises after using a substance. People feel ashamed and “yell” at themselves to try to prevent it from happening again. Yet the best way to prevent it is to explore compassionately why you used (e.g., feelings of deprivation? loneliness? fear?). Also, next time you have an urge to use, try talking to yourself in a compassionate way to avoid giving in to the urge (i.e., meet your needs in some other way).

Compassion promotes growth, while harshness prevents growth. You may think that harshness is “true” or is a way to “take responsibility”—that yelling at yourself will change your behavior. But self-hatred is a cheap trick, an illusion. It is a psychological defense that *prevents* growth. It is a destructive habit that is all too easy to do. Research shows that punishment does not change behavior in the long term; praise and understanding do. No matter what you have done, you can take responsibility for it without beating yourself up. Compassion means searching with an open, nonjudgmental mind into what happened. This promotes real change. If compassion is not familiar because you did not learn it when you were growing up, it may feel difficult. You may need to practice a lot for it to feel natural.

★ *Think about your own life:*

- What does your harsh self-talk sound like? What does your compassionate self-talk sound like?
- When you are harsh with yourself, does it keep you stuck in old behaviors?
- Is it easier for you to be harsh rather than compassionate with yourself?

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Ways to Increase Compassion

When you notice harsh self-talk . . .

☞ Ask yourself, "***If I loved myself, what would I say to myself right now?***"

☞ Ask yourself, "***If I were really listening to my deepest needs, what would I say to myself?***"

☞ **Try to explore the reasons underlying your actions.** For example, if you drank, maybe it was because you were in a lot of pain. If you blew a job interview, maybe it's because you need more help and practice.

☞ **Use kinder language;** find a softer way to talk to yourself. For example, "I am a failure" is harsh, while "I have suffered a lot, so my progress may be slower" is kinder.

☞ **Imagine that you are talking to a small child who has made a mistake.** How would you talk to that child with compassion? For example, you might say, "It's okay. At least you're safe right now. You're a good person and you can keep figuring it out."

☞ **Experiment with compassion,** even for just a few minutes. If it feels very difficult, you may want to try "thought stopping" as a first step: Say "Stop thinking that!" loudly to yourself to break the cycle of harsh self-talk. Then try compassion.

☞ **Try practicing!** In the following situations, how could you talk to yourself compassionately to *prevent* unsafe behavior?

- You feel like using a substance because you are lonely.
 - You just got laid off from your job, and you feel like punching a wall.
 - Your partner broke up with you, and you want to kill yourself.
 - You got a poor grade on an exam, so you want to binge on food.
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Ideas for a Commitment

*Commit to one action that will move your life forward!
It can be anything you feel will help you, or you can try one of the ideas below.
Keeping your commitment is a way of respecting, honoring, and caring for yourself.*

- ✦ Option 1: Take the statement "I am a bad person." How could you make this more compassionate?
- ✦ Option 2: Write a paragraph about what compassion means to you. How would your life be different if you were more compassionate toward yourself?
- ✦ Option 3: Change the "old tapes" in your head by literally creating a new tape! Record a cassette tape with compassionate, soothing statements. If you want, ask significant people in your life to record statements on it too (e.g., family members, your therapist, your AA sponsor). Play the tape whenever your harsh self-talk comes up.
- ✦ Option 4: Fill out the Safe Coping Sheet. (See below for an example applied to this topic.)

	Old Way	New Way
Situation	My daughter saw me using drugs and looked really hurt.	My daughter saw me using drugs and looked really hurt.
★ Your Coping ★	I said to myself, "You're no good. You're not fit to be a parent. You always screw up."	I said to myself, "I must be feeling really upset and deprived if I used in front of her. How do I need to take care of myself better so that this won't happen again?"
Consequence	I felt awful, lower than low.	I tried to focus on solutions, and called my sponsor to get ideas.

How safe is your old way of coping? _____ How safe is your new way of coping? _____

Rate from 0 (not at all safe) to 10 (totally safe)

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