Understanding low self-esteem

How a harsh view of yourself is formed, and how it keeps itself going.

Self-esteem is the overall opinion you have of yourself. Low self-esteem means that opinion is harsh and negative: "I am not good enough", "I am unlikeable", "I am a failure". It feels like a fact. It is actually a conclusion, drawn a long time ago, from experiences that were often not your doing.

Early experiences	Criticism, neglect, bullying, being compared, being the odd one out, too little praise or warmth
↓	
The bottom line	The verdict on myself. "I am not good enough."
↓	
Rules for living	Ways to get by in spite of it. "I must never fail." "I must keep everyone happy."
↓	
Trigger	A situation where a rule is broken or might be
↓	
Anxious predictions and self-criticism	"I will mess this up." "Typical. I am useless."
↓	
The bottom line seems confirmed	Low mood, avoidance, and more evidence for the verdict

How it keeps going

- **Biased attention.** You notice everything that fits the verdict and overlook what does not.
- **Biased interpretation.** You put successes down to luck and treat failures as proof.
- **Avoidance and safety behaviours.** If you never take the risk, you never find out you could have managed.
- **Self-criticism.** Constant criticism lowers your mood and confidence, as it would for anyone.

How it changes

1. Catching and questioning anxious predictions, then testing them.
2. Answering self-criticism with something fairer.
3. Noticing and recording good qualities and things that go right.
4. Loosening the rules.
5. Building a new bottom line, based on all the evidence.

> **Note**
> The bottom line is an opinion. It was formed by a child or young person with limited information, and it can be revised.

Based on the cognitive model of low self-esteem developed by Melanie Fennell.

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My self-esteem map

Where my view of myself came from, and what keeps it in place.

Name _____ Date _____

Experiences that shaped how I see myself

What happened, and what was missing?

↓

My bottom line

"I am..."

↓

My rules for living

"I must...", "If I..., then..."

↓

Situations that set it off

When is the bottom line triggered?

↓

What I do and say to myself then

Predictions, self-criticism, avoiding

What does living by this bottom line cost me?

If I saw a child being treated the way I treat myself, what would I think?

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Getting to know my inner critic

A close look at your self-critical voice: what it says, when and how.

Name _____ Date _____

Most of us have a critical voice. For some it is constant and vicious. The first step is to notice it as a voice, and to stop treating what it says as fact.

What does it say? Write its typical lines, word for word.

How does it say it?

- ☐ Cold
- ☐ Angry
- ☐ Contemptuous
- ☐ Disappointed
- ☐ Mocking
- ☐ Loud

When does it turn up?

Situations, moods, times of day

Whose voice does it remind me of?

How do I feel when it speaks?

In my body and mood

What do I think it is trying to do for me?

- ☐ Keep me safe from failure
- ☐ Protect me from rejection
- ☐ Make me try harder
- ☐ Keep me in line

Does it work? What does it cost?

If I spoke to a friend the way it speaks to me, what would happen to that friendship?

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Critic or coach?

Compare what your inner critic says with what a good coach would say.

Name _____ Date _____

Many people fear that without self-criticism they would become lazy or selfish. Think about who gets the best out of a child learning something hard: the teacher who shouts and shames, or the one who believes in them and shows them how?

The critic

- Attacks who I am
- Looks backwards at the mistake
- Harsh, contemptuous tone
- Says "you always" and "you never"
- Leaves me anxious, ashamed and stuck

The coach

- Looks at what I did
- Looks forwards to what would help
- Warm, firm tone
- Says "this time" and "next time"
- Leaves me able to try again

What my critic says	What a good coach would say
"You idiot. You have ruined it, as usual."	*"That did not go the way you wanted. It is one mistake. What would help put it right?"*

What does my coach sound like? Whose voice could I borrow?

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My strengths and good qualities

A list of your strengths, skills and good qualities.

Name _____ Date _____

This can feel awkward, even boastful. You are correcting a view of yourself that has been one-sided for a long time. Aim to be accurate. If you get stuck, ask someone who knows you well.

What do I like about myself, however small?

What have I achieved, or got through? (Include things that were hard for me, even if they look ordinary.)

What skills and talents do I have?

What do other people value in me, or thank me for?

What qualities do I appreciate in others that I also have, even a little?

What bad qualities do I not have? (Am I cruel? Dishonest?)

How might someone who cares about me describe me?

A quality	A recent example of it

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Positive qualities log

Each day, three things you did and what they show about you.

Name _____ Date _____

Each day, write down three things you did, however small, and what each says about you. "Rang my mother" shows caring. "Went to work when I did not feel like it" shows perseverance. The aim is to notice what you would normally brush aside.

Day	What I did	What it shows about me
Mon		
Tue		
Wed		
Thu		
Fri		
Sat		
Sun		

What was it like to do this?

How much do I believe my old bottom line at the end of the week?

0 — 10 — 20 — 30 — 40 — 50 — 60 — 70 — 80 — 90 — 100

Not at all — Completely

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Rules for living

The "if... then" rules and the "shoulds" you live by.

Name _____ Date _____

Rules for living usually began as a sensible way to cope. Trouble starts when they are rigid, extreme or impossible to keep. Some common ones:

"If I do everything perfectly, nobody can criticise me."

"I must never let anyone down."

"If I show how I feel, people will think I am weak."

"If I keep everyone happy, they will not leave."

One rule I live by (If I... then... / I must... / I should always...)

How this rule has helped me

What this rule costs me

Where did I learn it? Does it still fit my life now?

A fairer, more flexible version. For example: "I like to do things well, and mistakes are part of being human."

One small way I could try out the new rule this week

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Evidence log for a new belief

A daily record of evidence that supports a new, fairer belief.

Name _____ Date _____

The old belief	The new, fairer belief I am building

Each day, write down anything that fits the new belief, however small. The old belief will tell you it does not count. Write it down anyway.

Date	What happened	What this says about the new belief
Mon 3rd	*A colleague asked my opinion on her report.*	*People do value what I think.*

How much do I believe the new belief at the end of the week?

0 — 10 — 20 — 30 — 40 — 50 — 60 — 70 — 80 — 90 — 100

Not at all — Completely

The positive data log was described by Christine Padesky (1994).

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What is self-compassion?

Treating yourself the way you would treat someone you care about.

Compassion is noticing suffering and wanting to help. Self-compassion is turning that same attitude towards yourself when you are struggling, have failed, or do not like something about yourself.

Three parts

Kindness, not judgement
Being warm and understanding with yourself when things go wrong, instead of attacking.

Common humanity, not isolation
Remembering that struggling, failing and feeling inadequate are part of being human. You are not the only one.

Mindful awareness, not over-identifying
Seeing your pain clearly, without ignoring it and without being swept away by it.

What it is not

The worry	What the evidence suggests
"It is self-pity."	Self-pity says "poor me, nobody suffers like I do". Self-compassion says "this is hard, and everyone has hard times".
"It is letting myself off the hook."	People who are kinder to themselves are more able to admit mistakes and put them right, because they can bear to look.
"I will lose my drive."	Self-compassionate people are just as motivated. They are less afraid of failing, so they try more and bounce back faster.
"It is selfish."	It leaves you with more to give to other people.
"It is weak."	Facing your own pain with kindness takes courage.

Starting small

- Notice when you are having a hard time, and say so: "This is difficult."
- Ask: "What would I say to a friend in this exact position?"
- Put a hand on your chest and slow your breathing.
- Ask: "What do I need right now?"

If it feels strange or upsetting
That is common, especially if kindness was scarce when you were growing up. Go gently. It gets easier with practice.

The three elements of self-compassion were described by Kristin Neff.

My notes and questions

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A compassionate letter to myself

Writing to yourself as a wise and caring friend would.

Think of something you are struggling with or criticising yourself for. Now imagine someone who cares about you deeply and sees you clearly: your strengths, your flaws and everything you have been through. Write to yourself from their point of view.

What to include

1. **Acknowledge the difficulty.** "I can see how hard this has been."
2. **Make sense of it.** How do your history and circumstances explain why you feel and react this way?
3. **Remember you are not alone.** Others struggle with this too.
4. **Be warm.** Use the tone you would use with someone you love.
5. **Offer encouragement, not orders.** What would help? What do you need?

Write without stopping to edit. If the critic interrupts, notice it and carry on.

Dear me,

Afterwards

- Read it back slowly, out loud if you can, in a kind tone.
- Notice how it feels to receive it.
- Keep it, and read it again on a hard day.

Compassionate letter writing is used in Compassion Focused Therapy, developed by Paul Gilbert.

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