



## **SELF-CRITICISM AND BEING DEMANDING WITH ONE'S SELF**

It is scientifically proven that self-criticism, perfectionism, and self-demandingness (or imposing extremely high standards on ourselves) play an important role in the occurrence and maintenance of mental disorders such as anxiety, mood, and eating disorders.

The psychological treatment of these factors decreases the number of symptoms in different areas and reduces the onset of others. Many studies have proven the significant reduction of anxiety and depression with the treatment of self-demandingness and perfectionism.

### **Being Demanding with One's Self**

The majority of patients have learned self-demandingness from their parents or during their upbringing. There are healthier ways to accomplish our goals, but self-demandingness begins as a response to the environment by “helping” people achieve their objectives. It appears that it gives people a leg to succeed, grow, and evolve. However, distress or intense negative emotions are the best indicators about the need to change these patterns.

### **When Self-Criticism and Self-Demandingness Cause Distress**

Our thought patterns and coping mechanisms are based on the experiences that yielded positive results for us sometime in the past. Yet, when self-criticism and self-demandingness cause distress or intense negative emotions, it is time for a change.

Imposing extremely high standards on ourselves means continually noticing our failures and needing to be perfect, strong, good enough, efficient enough, and a

wide range of endless, non-flexible, and self-imposed requirements. The constant reminder is an inner voice that judges and blames us as it finds fault in ourselves, even when the mistakes are minimal or non-existent. Self-demandingness usually comes together with self-criticism.

When the desired result is not within our reach, but we still impose its achievement on ourselves, we start to feel intense negative emotions such as guilt, anger, or sadness. We are not considering other circumstances or variables that may be influencing the achievement of that outcome. We can also feel distressed when we think we made unpardonable mistakes, and that there are going to be catastrophic consequences.

Think about it: It is impossible to be 100% focused on your studies or to get perfectly good grades during a pandemic. It is tough to be highly productive in your work when you are looking after your two kids as you are working from home. In these examples, our self-demandingness is ignoring all the circumstances that have changed; it is taking an all-or-nothing stance. How can we run a marathon with a broken leg? How can we be 100% productive at work when we are not feeling well? How can we focus while studying if social contact is essential to us, but we cannot have it?

Self-criticism is the root of low self-esteem. Self-criticism is our inner voice making subjective judgments and interpretations of ourselves without taking into consideration objective and reliable data.

### **Tips for Reducing Self-Demandingness and Self-Criticism**

The first step is to detect our critical voice, paying attention to the specific situations where it appears, e.g., when we make a mistake, in social interactions, etc.

Second, it is important to see if there are unhelpful thinking styles within our thoughts (“shoulds,” labels, name-calling, etc.) and eliminate them from our internal language. Consider the following words you tell yourself: “I shouldn’t have told my colleagues about my problems. I am sure they all must hate me right now. I am very immature.” The example shows the use of biased forms of reasoning:

- *Shoulds and musts*: “I shouldn’t have told my colleagues,” or “I am sure they must hate me.”
- *Mind-reading*: “I believe people will not like what I said,” even when I do not have evidence to assume that.
- *Labeling and name-calling*: “I am very immature,” and
- *Black-or-white approach*: “They all must hate me.”

Substituting these thought patterns with a more objective and reasonable approach would give us something in the lines of: “I would rather not share my problems with others.” “I can’t really tell if they object to what I did because I have no proof of that.” “I am assuming that the majority of them are going to hate me, but it is more likely that only a few are going to react negatively to what I said.” “Based on what I’ve observed around me, people my age don’t usually share their problems with others.” “Being immature can’t only be based on a specific behavior or situation.”

It is not about trying to cheer ourselves up at any cost but, instead, adjusting the message to the facts and reducing the risk of bias.

Finally, understanding the purpose of self-criticism can help us to overcome it. Once we are aware of its role, addressing it becomes easier. We may ask ourselves: “What is this self-criticism doing to me?” Then, you could try to understand where it comes from or what its purpose is.

We can also substitute self-criticism with a more compassionate and realistic point of view, challenging the behaviors the criticism invites us to engage in.

When we challenge self-criticism, we may feel anxious or guilty at first. We need to remember that this type of thinking had helped us to survive for many years. However, if we are determined to fight it because we do not find that voice useful anymore, its effect on us should become less intense, and we could achieve a day-to-day life that we find more fulfilling.



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