

# "I'M AN IDIOT" AND "I'M SO STUPID": HELPING YOUNG PEOPLE TO USE SELF COMPASSION TO MANAGE SELF CRITICISM

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Many years ago I was mid session with a bright and engaging 5 year old when he looked me in the eyes and tearfully said the following:

*"I'M SO UGLY. THAT'S WHY NO-ONE WANTS TO PLAY WITH ME".*

As an early career psychologist working with children at that stage, it was a confronting moment. Like many adults, I'd believed (or perhaps just hoped) that children of this age did not have excessively critical thoughts about themselves the way many adults do.

Sadly, as my working life progressed, I've come to realise this is not true.

Many children and teens are absolutely capable of - and frequently do - view themselves in harsh and negative ways. Although it some young people do this less than others, and some not until they are older - eventually almost all young people berate, criticise or feel negatively about themselves at least on some occasions during their childhood and adolescence.

As a parent/caregiver, you've quite possibly seen evidence of this in your own children. Here are some of the common refrains you might have heard:

- I'm ugly/fat/have a big nose/fat thighs/puny
- I'm slow/bad at sport/school work/making friends/dumb/stupid
- I shouldn't have done this/I'm bad for doing this
- I can never get things right. I always mess things up.

There are many different ways we can respond as parents/carers to young people when they express self criticism. These include listening carefully, expressing care and concern, helping them notice other more positive parts of themselves and helping them redirect their attention to more positive activities instead of being stuck in a negative loop of self criticism.

However in the longer term, we want to help young people build a skill of generating *self compassion* when they feel critical towards themselves.

Self compassion as a concept is key in many major religions, including Buddhism and Christianity, and many different psychological treatments (including *compassion focussed therapy*, an approach developed Paul Glibert in 2009, which is associated with promising improvements for a range of psychological disorders). A self compassionate response to self-criticism means talking to and treat ourselves in kind, loving and understanding ways when these critical thoughts occur.

There are a number of varying strategies psychologists use for developing self compassion, but there are four particular ones I use with children and young people. I'll discuss these below – first in the context of how we might use them as adults, and then how we can support young people to use these themselves.

## 1. MINDFULLY NOTICE SELF CRITICISM AND ITS EFFECTS

Mindfully noticing self criticism and its effects means stopping to notice the thoughts we are having and acknowledging the pain and sadness which it brings. In other words, it is labelling specifically **WHAT** is happening in our minds rather than just being lost in the experience itself.



For example when we are thinking "I'm so stupid" we might say to ourselves: "*I'm feeling dislike for myself right now and that hurts a lot*". When we are thinking "I'm ugly and fat" we might say to ourselves "*I'm have lots of critical thoughts about my ability in this and that feels lousy*". Labelling and noticing self criticism in this way provides some distance from the experience and is more likely to help us feel kindness towards ourselves.

We can help our young people to do this too. When they tell us self critical thoughts, rather tell them they are being silly, ignoring them, telling them to stop thinking those thoughts or immediately denying their perception (that's not true!) we might say sentences like:

- *I'm sorry your mind is telling you that and making you feel so sad about it.*
- *That sounds like a really painful thought for you to think.*
- *It must be tough when that feeling comes up.*
- *I'm sorry that's the thought you are having.*

If it feels more natural, we can add a statement that we feel differently about them to this kind of labelling, for example:

- *I don't think that's true, but I'm sorry your brain tells you that*
- *I think entirely differently about you, but I know self criticism like that hurts a lot and I'm sorry that's in your head at the moment.*

Sometimes it can be helpful to gently classify or name self criticism – for example some kids relate to the idea of "bad me" thoughts, ie "*Oh those "bad me" thoughts - they can hurt a lot*"

## 2. REMINDING OURSELVES THAT MANY OF THE BEHAVIOURS AND CHARACTERISTICS WE DISLIKE ABOUT OURSELVES ARE NORMAL AND NATURALLY ARISE FROM THE WAY BRAINS/BODIES ARE DESIGNED OR FROM EXPERIENCES WE HAVE HAD

We often believe that our so called flaws, failings or aspects of ourselves we don't like are more abnormal or unusual than they actually are. We also often believe that they occur because of something within ourselves rather than noticing the outside (past or present) factors which have contributed to them occurring.

It can be useful instead to remind ourselves that many of our so-called shortcomings and failures are *very common*, might simply result from *having a human brain with biological drives or instincts or from having certain experiences*. In other words, reminding ourselves there are many factors which make it tough to live life exactly as we would like.

For instance, a self compassion responses might be saying to ourselves:

- *"Of course I get angry sometimes, it's what human brains do".*
- *"It's not easy to stick to exercise, my brain is designed to try to keep me feeling comfortable"*
- *"Most people have things they've done they are ashamed of",*
- *"It's no wonder I struggle with doing this as I never really had any training in it"*
- *"Most people have parts of their appearance they don't like".*
- *"My own childhood never really prepared me for this, it's not surprising I'm finding it hard"*
- *"I've had a long and tiring day, it's understandable I didn't understand that idea"*

We can help young people do this too by providing them with information about what is normal, how brains work and how experiences affect us as humans. For example we might say sentences like:

- *Everyone has done that (example of their mistake), including me.*
- *I know lots of people struggle with that issue, for example.....*
- *Everyone lies or loses their temper, it's normal to get angry.*



- *Have you noticed that XX (example) also does/has/did...(helping them notice others with the same perceived "flaws")*
- *Your brain is designed to fight for what it wants, so of course you are going to feel like wanting to...*
- *You've had this experience, which makes it hard to do....*
- *Our brains are designed to keep us safe and stay away from things it thinks are scary - it's no wonder you feel nervous.*

### 3. TREATING SELF KINDLY

Another aspect of a self compassion response is to give ourselves good things and experiences when we are finding life difficult. It also means putting ourselves in situations in which we are more likely to experience kindness, pleasure and gentle experiences.

For example, as adults this might mean we let ourselves have a sleep, ease up on trying to get everything done, take a break from situations we find hard or reducing our standards for some things for a certain time period.

For children and young people, we can encourage them to find ways to be kind to themselves by saying things like:

- *When I feel sad, sometimes I find it helpful to read a book/do something fun..would you like to...*
- *May I give you a hug?*
- *Your job right now is to be kind to yourself.*
- *It doesn't help to hurt yourself and you don't deserve to be hurt.*

### 4. BRINGING OUR ATTENTION TO OUR STRENGTHS AND POTENTIAL FOR CHANGE AND GROWTH

When we are self critical or negative about ourselves, all of our attention is on our perceived flaws and challenges. A final component of self compassion is to instead deliberately remind ourselves of and shift our attention on to our strengths, areas of improvement or growth, and the potential for future change and growth.

This is tough to do (remember our brains are designed to focus on problems and areas of weakness) It takes gentle years of practice to redirect our attention onto these things when self criticism occurs. However, we can get better at doing this if we practice. For example, we might say to ourselves:

- *I'm struggling with X, but I am good at Y*
- *I have come a long way compared to where I was previously in this area*
- *I will be able to keep improving in this way*
- *I should remember A and B about myself*

Sometimes it can help us to have written lists of our strengths, put ourselves in situations where we notice or be with friends/family who can remind us of these things.

We can do help our kids learn to focus on their strengths too. For example, we can say things like:

- *I see you doing so well in....*
- *You have a special skill in...*
- *I love watching you do...*

Many parents/caregivers find it quite easy to comment on our children's strengths in this way. However what can be even more powerful than just listing their strengths ourselves is to instead help young people to start to notice their own strengths and improvements. This will help them believe and remember them more powerfully than if they just hear us describe them. To help them do this, we can ask questions to help them reflect on their own skills and growth – for example:

- *What are your strengths?*



- What is something you like about yourself?
- What are you proud of about yourself?
- What area have you improved in recently?

## WILL DEVELOPING TOO MUCH SELF COMPASSION MEAN CHILDREN AND TEENS LOWER THEIR STANDARDS? (AKA IS A LITTLE GUILT A GOOD THING?)

Here's a common concern parents have – *"If I tell my child that everyone loses their temper, or tell my teen to be kind to themselves when they've acted badly - will they think it's okay to act in unhelpful ways?"* In other words, parents/caregivers are asking me – isn't self criticism useful in helping young people make (needed) changes?

There are two points I'd like to make in response to this:

**First**, helping our young people to be self compassionate towards themselves does not mean we don't work very hard on helping young people reduce their unhelpful behaviour, especially that which hurts them or others. For example, it's possible to encourage young people to be kind to themselves during and after we've enforced a family rule or consequence for a challenging behaviour.

**Secondly**, there is no evidence to suggest that encouraging self compassion in ourselves or our children leads to a lowering of moral or behavioural standards. In fact, there is evidence that the opposite is true. For example, studies have shown that people with a higher degree of self compassion are more likely to act compassionately towards others, those with lower levels of shame and guilt are more able to change and that self criticism is associated with worse behaviour – not better.

### Practice and Modelling

Teaching children and teens to be self compassionate of course starts with being self compassionate ourselves as parents. Here's an exercise you could do now if you like – say the following sentences out loud to yourself:

*Sometimes I criticise myself as a parent for.....(labelling self criticism). However this parenting business is hard, long work, it's normal for us to do it well sometimes - and not well at other times (normalising "flaws" ). I'm going to let myself take a break for a moment by.....(treating self kindly). I have many areas of strength as a parent such as.....(noticing strengths).*

How does this feel? Do you think developing self compassion for yourself as a parent will also help you support your child to be self compassionate when they are critical of themselves?

All the best in developing self compassion for yourself as a parent and helping your young person to develop self compassion for themselves.

In Calm Kid Central we have an activity sheet for primary aged children to draw and write about their critical thoughts and feelings and to develop self compassionate responses in these times. Click below for information about Calm Kid Central.

