

4 Ways to Be Kinder to Yourself and Build Self-Empathy

May 24, 2018 [Andrea Brandt, PhD, MFT](#)

“You are a failure.”

“You look ugly today.”

“Everyone’s life is better than yours.”

Have you ever said these things to a close friend? How about a family member? I’m guessing the answer is no.

Then why do you say these things to yourself?

We are often harder on—and crueller to—ourselves than we are with other people. We hold ourselves to higher standards and berate ourselves more. What’s the effect? [Depression](#), [low self-worth](#), and deep feelings of [shame](#).

Here are four antidotes:

1. TALK TO YOURSELF LIKE YOU TALK TO YOUR FRIENDS.

If you wouldn’t say it to your best friend, don’t say it to yourself.

Next time you find yourself engaging in negative self-talk, try this quick exercise. First, get a piece of paper and a pen or pencil and draw a box with two rows and five columns. Label the columns *Thought*, *Emotion*, *Evidence*, *New Thought*, and *New Emotion*.

If you’re beating yourself up about your career, under *Thought* you could write, “I’ll never have a successful career.” After you’ve written it down, sit with the thought for a few minutes and focus on the emotions that bubble up. Do you feel [anger](#)? Shame? [Sadness](#)? In the box under *Emotion*, write down all the feelings the thought triggers.

Under *Evidence*, write anything that challenges the negative thought. For example, “I went to a good college” or “I’m a hard worker.” Under *New Thought*, write a replacement for the original thought that takes into account the evidence. For example, “I haven’t found the right career yet, but I believe I will soon.”

Finally, under *New Emotion*, write down how this new thought makes you feel. [Optimistic](#)? Energized? Repeat this exercise daily until thought-stopping and replacement happens naturally.

2. PRACTICE MINDFULNESS TO ELIMINATE SELF-JUDGMENT.

Along with negative self-talk, self-judgment hurts you even if you're not conscious you're doing it. [Mindfulness](#) is essential when learning to defeat [self-judgment](#) and build [self-compassion](#).

You need to consider your thoughts and feelings without ruling on whether they're "good" or "bad." Observe them with mindful awareness. Recognize the thought or emotion without judging it. Don't try to push it away, but don't ruminate on it either.

Remember, thoughts come and go, and feelings change. Don't over-identify with any one. You are not this one thought or one feeling. This too shall pass.

3. FORGIVE YOURSELF.

Self-forgiveness doesn't mean excusing yourself or pretending what you did wasn't wrong; it means showing compassion for yourself and recognizing your humanity.

Throughout your life, you did the best you could with the tools you had. The lessons you took from your caregivers, your experiences, your environment, and your physical and mental health all affect the way you treat others and yourself. If your parents didn't model healthy anger, it's likely you don't express it healthily either. If you work in a highly competitive and cutthroat workplace, it's likely you've cut a few metaphorical throats yourself.

Self-forgiveness doesn't mean excusing yourself or pretending what you did wasn't wrong; it means showing compassion for yourself and recognizing your humanity. People make mistakes, sometimes huge ones. What's important is making amends, if you can, and learning new tools so you don't make the same mistakes.

4. DON'T COMPARE YOURSELF TO OTHERS.

No matter how much you think you know someone, you can't know the whole story. If you're single and desperate to start a family, looking at Facebook photos of an old classmate's wedding or pictures on Instagram of a coworker's new baby is a quick way to feel terrible about yourself.

People often use social media to show an idealized version of their life. Your old classmate doesn't post about the fights she has with her husband. Your coworker doesn't share photos of the baby wailing through the night. Try to resist the urge to go down the social media rabbit hole, and if you can't resist, remind yourself that you see only one side of the story.

Consider unfollowing people whose lives trigger the strongest emotions. Check the site or app settings; most let you stay friends with someone without seeing their updates.