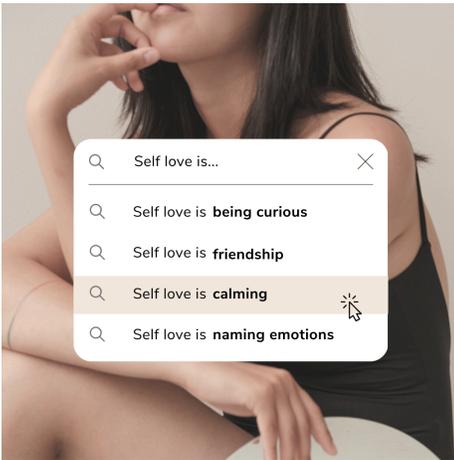


# Conquering Negative Self-Talk

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Your boss gives you a look and you assume she's mad at something you did or that you're an incompetent employee. You say the wrong thing at a party, and lament how socially awkward you always are. Like it or not, we all have that inner voice critiquing our weaknesses and mishaps. Though many of us can ignore it, for others it's a frequent visitor, waiting for the slightest misstep or unfortunate event to beat us over the head with. For some, the thoughts aren't just about themselves, but spill over into negative thinking of the those around them. Either way, these "cognitive distortions" can create a downward spiral of self-doubt, pessimism, resentment, and are key contributing factors to anxiety and depression<sup>1011</sup>.

So how exactly, do we avoid getting sucked into this mire? First off, it will take some patience because correcting thought patterns are not easy – especially if you've been doing it for a while. You are creating new trails in our mind, hacking away at the brush that's overgrown, while allowing hurtful paths to become ignored. You can do this by following the steps below:

### 1. Name Them, to Tame Them

A significant challenge to overcoming this process is recognizing that it is taking place, including happening in ways we don't realize. Take some time at the end of each day to write down any you noticed. As you do this, try to identify your most common thinking errors. Eventually you

want to be able to catch them (and eventually challenge them) while they are happening.

### 2. Identify the Surrounding Triggers

Now, that you're more aware of your inner critic, you need to consider the circumstances that contribute to these thoughts. Are there places where these tend to happen more, such as work or school? Is there a time of the day, week or month when they are more likely? Are there other scenarios that send you into a downward spiral, like being tired or receiving criticism? Research suggests, those that cut down on social media use feel better<sup>12</sup>. Once you know when these thoughts arise, you are in a better place to tackle them as they come up.

### 3. Calm Your Body (and Your Brain)

One of the first things you can do when these cognitive distortions pop up, is to take a few slow, cleansing breathes through the nose. Strong emotions will trigger the thoughts, so we need to send a signal to our brain and body that we are safe. Such relaxed breathing also allows your thinking to move from the irrational, reactive part of your brain, to the more rational part that can challenge the faultiness of our thinking<sup>13</sup>. When we calm our body, our brain will follow that lead.

### 4. Explore Alternative Stories

Next, you're going to want to challenge these negative thoughts, particularly the ones that come up a lot. This can be done by generating a number of alternatives to the story you're telling yourself. If your boss give you a look, rather than assuming the worst, think maybe she's upset over her sports team losing or she's annoyed about a TV show being cancelled. If your boss really is annoyed about something you did, challenge the idea that it only happens to you or that it's the end of the world. It's probably safe to say your boss has been annoyed at other people besides you. Two overreaching questions to ask yourself about these thoughts are: 1) *Is this helpful?* 2) *Is this true?* Is thinking that you're the worst parent if your child makes a mistake helpful? Is it even remotely true?

### 5. Treat Yourself Like a Friend

In an ideal world, if your friend or someone you loved made a mistake, would you same the same harsh things to them or would you be understanding and sympathetic? Also consider what verbal harshness does to a person, does it inspire them to be better person or does it make them that much more anxious about messing up and over time, too scared to try. So, replace those harsh criticisms with more patient and compassionate words like, "It's okay, not every flaw I have needs to be fixed right now" or "I don't have to be perfect to be loveable".

**6. Be curious**

Finally, if some of the other techniques are not doing the trick, another effective approach that pairs well with calming breaths, is to be curious about the thought<sup>14</sup>. # For example, instead of thinking, "I'm terrible person", you can gently think, "I wonder where this thought is coming from?".# In approaching your inner critic this way, you're creating a bit of distance between yourself and your thoughts. Ultimately, you want to accept that these thoughts are not your reality but just thoughts that you don't have to buy into.