

Harshness versus Compassion

How do you tend to talk to yourself—harshly or with compassion?

Harsh Self-Talk	Compassionate Self-Talk
Blaming, “beating yourself up” Prevents change Ignores the self Is easy	Loving, understanding Promotes change Listens to the self Is difficult

An example:

Harsh Self-Talk	Compassionate Self-Talk
“I drank last night. What a loser! I can’t do anything right.”	“I know drinking is dangerous, but I did it anyway. There must be a reason. Maybe it’s because I’m upset about my brother’s death. Next time I feel an urge to drink, I’ll try to prevent it by calling my sponsor to talk about how I feel.”

Ideas to consider:

Harshness may be associated with PTSD and substance abuse.

PTSD. If you feel a lot of emotional pain, you may take it out on yourself. This can take the form of putting yourself down (“You jerk!”) or physical abuse such as self-cutting. If you were harshly criticized in childhood, you may have “internalized” those voices and are now criticizing yourself.

Substance abuse. Self-hatred often arises after using a substance. People feel ashamed and “yell” at themselves to try to prevent it from happening again. Yet the best way to prevent it is to explore compassionately why you used (e.g., feelings of deprivation? loneliness? fear?). Also, next time you have an urge to use, try talking to yourself in a compassionate way to avoid giving in to the urge (i.e., meet your needs in some other way).

Compassion promotes growth, while harshness prevents growth. You may think that harshness is “true” or is a way to “take responsibility”—that yelling at yourself will change your behavior. But self-hatred is a cheap trick, an illusion. It is a psychological defense that *prevents* growth. It is a destructive habit that is all too easy to do. Research shows that punishment does not change behavior in the long term; praise and understanding do. No matter what you have done, you can take responsibility for it without beating yourself up. Compassion means searching with an open, nonjudgmental mind into what happened. This promotes real change. If compassion is not familiar because you did not learn it when you were growing up, it may feel difficult. You may need to practice a lot for it to feel natural.

★ *Think about your own life:*

- What does your harsh self-talk sound like? What does your compassionate self-talk sound like?
- When you are harsh with yourself, does it keep you stuck in old behaviors?
- Is it easier for you to be harsh rather than compassionate with yourself?

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