

The Keys To Self Acceptance by Ocean Robbins

Self-criticism is pretty common. After all, we are usually the world's number one experts on our own shortcomings. If finding fault with ourselves was a virtue, most of us would be saints.

Still, sending ourselves self-hating messages leads to misery more often than to motivation. It leads to lower self-esteem and self-confidence. Meanwhile, it turns out that if you treat yourself with respect or even gratitude, you're likely to increase your effectiveness in work and even in your personal life.

Research has indicated that people who score high on tests of self-compassion have less depression and anxiety, and tend to be happier and more optimistic. They may even have an easier time losing weight.

Self-criticism is so common that many of us just take it for granted. Learning to recognize it is one of the keys to making a change. When you see a piece of deliciously decadent looking chocolate cake and are planning to abstain from it in the interests of your health, self-criticism is the voice that says, "Why am I always being so careful and depriving myself?! Don't I know how to have fun?" And then, if you decide to eat that same piece of cake, self-criticism is also the voice that says, "I don't have any will power. I'm treating my body like crap!"

Self-criticism is the voice that tells you to stay up late working, and then when you feel sleepy in the morning, it's the voice that berates you for not getting more sleep.

When you notice self-criticism, one thing to remember is that hating yourself for it won't do a darn bit of good to anyone.

I like to think that the messages I give myself are like tuning into a radio. At any given time, there are many stations playing. Some have nice, loving messages. Others have mean, critical ones. I get to decide what I want to listen to.

So the next time you notice yourself being mean to yours truly, you might want to consider appreciating the observation, and seeing what would happen if you changed the dial. Maybe from K-HATE to K-KIND?

Dr. Kristin Neff, an associate professor of human development at the University of Texas at Austin, found in her research that: "The biggest reason people aren't more self-compassionate is that they are afraid they'll become self-indulgent. They believe self-criticism is what keeps them in line. Most people have gotten it wrong because our culture says being hard on yourself is the way to be."

An effective way to change patterns of self-criticism is to make friends with whatever good intent might underlie the mean message, and then find a more healthy expression for it.

The same message can have completely different impact, depending on the frame with which it is expressed. Just notice the impact of these common self-hating messages, and then consider how differently they land when they are adjusted.

"I'm going to fail the exam" can become "How can I prepare for the exam?"

"Why do I always miss my deadlines?" can become "Getting this done in time is going to take a lot of focus, and I'm going to give it my best shot."

"Why the heck don't I know how to do this?!" can become "I wonder what I might learn here?"

"I'm lazy and don't have the energy to exercise" can become "I can start slowly by going for a short walk."

My wife and I have twins, and they have autism. Sometimes they do things I don't like, such as screaming uncontrollably for long periods of time. It's easy to feel angry at myself, as if their struggles are somehow my fault, for not being a better dad. I am learning that instead of asking myself, "What am I doing wrong," it's more helpful to ask myself, "What's the best I can do?"

I'm learning that there's a world of difference between self-blame and self-respect. Self-blame just gets in the way of constructive action. Self-respect, on the other hand, gives me more confidence from which to make a difference in my kids' lives.

No matter what challenges you face, there is always a best you can do. Getting mad at yourself for being someone you're not won't lift your spirits or motivate you to take positive action. It will, however, make your journey more miserable.

If you want to move from self-hate to self-respect, here are some simple practices to help you make the transition:

Notice when you're sending yourself mean messages, and see if you can turn your radio dial to a higher frequency.

Make a list of the top three things you criticize about yourself, and then decide on some positive, useful messages that would better help you accomplish your goals.

Take time every day to think of at least one thing that you like about yourself.

Self-respect, it turns out, is not narcissism. Instead, self-respect helps to build the confidence and capacity to create the life you want. And since you're the only person who's been with you from the day you were born, and is guaranteed to hang in there with you to the day you die, it might be helpful to practice the art of being a good friend to number one.