PATIENT RESOURCE

Self-criticism

Easing a harsh inner voice is a different step from adding kindness.

This page explains what research has found, and some ways to notice the harsh voice.

WHY THIS HAPPENS

Harsh and kind are not opposites

Most of us have a voice that shows up when something goes wrong. For many people it is fast, familiar and harsh.

Research often looks at two sides of how we treat ourselves. One is being kind. The other is being harsh: judging yourself, feeling alone, and getting swept up in painful thoughts.

RESEARCH CONTEXT

Being harsh with yourself was more strongly linked with distress. Being kind was linked with less distress, but less strongly (Buric et al., 2026). These studies show links, not cause and effect.

For some people, kindness itself feels uncomfortable. Researchers have described this particularly in people who are highly self-critical (Gilbert et al., 2011).

A SMALLER FIRST STEP

You do not have to feel warm towards yourself to begin. Noticing the harsh voice, and easing it a little, is a step on its own.

WHAT CAN HELP

Notice the voice before changing it

These prompts are about noticing, not fixing. There are no right answers.

Ask yourself

1. When something goes wrong, what are the first words you say to yourself?
2. Would you speak to a friend in that same tone?
3. What happens in your body when someone is kind to you?

Other things that may help

- **Name it.** Giving the harsh voice a label, such as "the critic", is one way to notice it.
- **Lower the volume.** Aim for less harsh, not instantly kind. Neutral is a valid step.
- **Borrow a friend's words.** Ask what you would say to someone you care about.
- **Go slowly with kindness.** If warmth feels uncomfortable, you can pause and come back to it.
- **Talk it through.** Your GP or a psychologist can help you explore where it comes from.

If you need support now

LIFELINE
13 11 14
24/7 crisis support

BEYOND BLUE
1300 22 4636
Anxiety, depression and low mood

MINDSPOT
1800 61 44 34
Free phone and online programs

This resource is for general information only. It does not constitute clinical advice and is not a substitute for consultation with a registered health professional. If you are experiencing thoughts of suicide or self-harm, contact Lifeline on 13 11 14 or attend your nearest emergency department.

References: Buric et al. (2026) · Gilbert et al. (2011) · Full citations at equalpsychology.com.au · Written October 2026 · Review by October 2027

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Medicare rebates available with a Mental Health Treatment Plan and referral

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