

Cultivating Self-Compassion to Help Your Client Heal from Shame

Bonus #3:

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with Paul Gilbert, PhD; and Kristin Neff, PhD

Dr. Vigil-Otero: Welcome to this bonus on expanded ideas of why we self-attack. Many of us might be familiar with the negativity bias, and how that comes into play when we self-attack. However, we heard some fresh insights from Dr. Paul Gilbert and Dr. Kristin Neff that go a little bit beyond this idea. In a moment, we're going to hear from Dr. Kristin Neff on cultural factors that might come up when we're engaging in self-attack. But first, let's hear from Dr. Paul Gilbert and why self-monitoring can be particularly relevant when it comes to reasons we self-attack.

Dr. Gilbert: Okay, so all living systems have to monitor their functions to a degree, so temperature regulation and so on. Humans have a capacity to monitor consciously just about anything. I mean, you can monitor your heart rate, you can monitor what's going on in your mind, you can monitor your thoughts. You can think about what other people are thinking about you, you can monitor how much you've been eating, you can reduce your eating, too, so you can monitor anything. You can monitor pain in your body, what does that mean? Does it mean I've got a tumor coming?

We monitor things, and then as a result of what we monitor, we start to judge those things. So that's the first thing, we have a huge capacity to monitor just about anything. We can certainly monitor our behavior. We can monitor our behavior against what we wanted that behavior to be, so we can become disappointed in our behavior, that's very clear. That only comes from the ability to monitor what we wanted or could have been, and what actually was. What we call it the “ideal self” versus the “actual self.” And that's a monitoring function.

The Function of the “Internal Referee” and It’s Link to Self-Criticism

But that's okay because we can just be disappointed. The question is, “Why not just be disappointed? Why do you then become critical?” There are a number of reasons for that. One reason this is quite interesting is because criticism is a kind of way of reminding you that you're a subordinate, that you're not good enough. And why would you want to do that? Well, partly because your brain has got a system to do that as a defense. Really, how does that work? Well, it turns out that many animals when they're in conflicts, they're fighting with each other, you know, head butting or whatever it is. One of them will work out that they're going to lose. They have to monitor themselves in relation to others and think, “Hang on a minute, I'm not going to do this, I'm not going to make it. I better stop, I better de-escalate, I

better run away, I better break off the conflict.”

We have a monitoring system in ourselves that is telling us to do more or do less. That you are inferior, that you will fail. If you continue, you will get injured and fail. So this system is called the internal referee, and the internal referee, which was a concept that John Price, the late John Price, he's passed away now, talked a lot about in terms of these mechanisms in the brain that are estimating your chances of success or not. Then you do more if the chances seem good and less if they don't.

So how is that associated with self-criticism? It's really interesting because self-criticism is like an internal referee, and it says, "You're inferior, you're a failure, you're worthless, right?" Now, why would you have something telling you that? Well, because that's what the system's designed to do to the subordinate, okay? It's an algorithm that's designed to say, "Stop fighting, you're not going to win. Let's get up, run away, you're inferior, you're a subordinate, you're inferior to the one who's fighting you, right? They're much more powerful and stronger than you." That's one aspect, which is very interesting, and we've done some research on that. Because why is it that all depressed people have the same kind of voice? Why are they all saying the same thing? "You're inferior, you're worthless, give up, okay? You can't make it. Why would they all be saying that?"

Three hundred million depressants around the world, they're all saying the same thing. They didn't all have the same mothers. There must be an underlying algorithm that is working, implying a sense of, actually, don't keep going, give up. Now, there are many, many versions of this approach, right? The next thing is it is also true that these systems can be sensitized because of the way that you were brought up. In other words, if you've got people around you when you're a child saying, "You're no good, you're useless, you're this, you're that." That is going to sensitize your system so that it doesn't take very much, and you're going to switch into that mechanism of then hearing and experiencing yourself to be no good, useless, and so on. So that's another aspect of it.

Another aspect to it, of self-criticism, is self-criticism is a way of dealing with your rage. Now, this is Freud, of course. In 1917, Freud wrote a very famous essay called "Mourning and Melancholia," and he based a lot of that on Nietzsche. Now, Friedrich Nietzsche had said, "No one blames themselves without a secret wish for vengeance." Freud took that "Mourning and Melancholia" and he argued that the depressed person, the difference between mourning

and melancholia is that in mourning, the world has become empty, and in melancholia depression, the self has become empty because the self has attacked itself.

And his view was that's because we're really angry with other people. If you attack them, they will hurt you even more, and you're dependent, you must not attack them. You must suppress your anger, and the only way you can do that is to turn it in on yourself. A lot of people were unsure about that. In fact, the evidence for that is not too bad. I'll give you an example where it actually operates in a whole culture. And you can see if I use this example, how powerful it is.

One Example of The Connection Between Anger and Self-Attack Seen in Culture

The Aztecs were just one of a number of cultures that believed in sacrifice to the gods in order for the gods to send the rains, to stop the famines, to stop the diseases, to help the harvest, and the fertility. They had a number of these special gods and a lot of the priests were men because being men, they thought, what would the gods like? "Oh, you can't go wrong with a few virgins. We'll sacrifice a few virgins, right?" Children as young as seven, eight, and nine were being identified for sacrificial women when they were in their teens, pretty horrible, really, but that's what happened. And they were also sacrificing loads and loads of prisoners and everything. So here we go then, so we're going to sacrifice to the gods because we need the gods to look after us and protect us, so we sacrifice to them.

But what happens next year when the drought is worse? What happens when diseases are worse? Malaria or Cholera hits your culture, what do you do? Well, what we know they *didn't do* is to go up onto the altar and say, "Hey, you cheating buggers, where's the bloody rains? We gave you our best virgins. You're not allowed to cheat on the deal." We know they *didn't do that*. What we do know they did is to say, "What have we done to upset you? How have we hurt you? Were they not good enough? Did we not give you enough virgins? Do you want more? Shall I..."

We know what happens when children and people are faced with very powerful others that can hurt them. They learn to blame themselves when things go wrong. "It must be my fault, it must be, it's our fault, it's our fault, it's all our fault." When the tsunami hit the United States

in 2005, there were many religious people saying, "This is God's punishment for decadence. You are being punished." This idea is a very important idea that children learn, particularly when they have aggressive parents, to blame themselves, okay? And then they will become apologetic. "I'm so sorry, Mommy, I didn't mean to upset you, I'm so sorry, Mommy, I didn't mean to upset you." They learn self-blaming as a safety strategy. It's the only way they're going to stop the parent from hitting them by blaming themselves and so on. And that's a problem. So that form of self-criticism can be a little bit more tricky because people are very frightened to give that up. Then they have to deal with their anger.

Another form of self-criticism is because individuals become very orientated towards, it's a kind of a purity thing, really, and this is where individuals have become self-critical, it's more of a self-hating problem, particularly for kids who have been abused. They have aspects to themselves that they just want to get rid of. I mean, they see them as alien parts to themselves, they really hate parts of themselves. They don't want to change, it's not a criticism to improve and get better. It's wanting to get rid of and destroy.

Now, those people who have self-hating, again, that's a different mechanism to normal self-criticism, and the way you work with that is slightly different because self-hating is also based on rage. The point that you make is a really good one. Self-criticism is a major issue in many, many mental health difficulties, but it's complicated. There are many forms of it, and there are many origins to it, and the way you work with it and how compassion can help you depends on the origin. There are some ways we should do things quite simply, but with other things, with some of the self-haters, you have to have compassion for the rage that sits underneath it. We had to do a lot of anger work, really. As you do anger work, the self-criticism settles down.

Dr. Vigil-Otero: Expanding on these ideas, here's Dr. Kristin Neff on how self-attack is a safety function.

How To View Self-Attack as a Type of Safety Function

Dr. Neff: We're taught to believe that, you know, self-criticism is good. We confuse constructive criticism with harsh self-judgment. You know, we think we're helping ourselves, very mistakenly, but we think we're helping ourselves stay safe when we criticize ourselves.

That sense of isolation, the sense of separating ourselves from the group, again, ironically, makes us feel safe. Shame is, actually, believe it or not, a safety function. We feel like if we isolate ourselves, that we won't be, you know, harmed by other group members. And over-identification, as well, is also a safety mechanism. It's like, if I just think about the problem and think about the problem and think about the problem, *maybe I'll solve the problem*, right?

These are all that's triggered by this sympathetic nervous response, our fight, flight, or freeze response. Fight, turned inward, the fight response, fighting the problem, we turn it inward, we fight ourselves with self-criticism. The flight response, we turn that inward, we flee from others, we feel isolated. And the freeze response turned inward is rumination, or getting stuck, or over-identifying with what's happening. So again, these are two basic safety systems, the sympathetic, which is fight, flight, or freeze response, and the parasympathetic, which is kind of the warmth, the affiliation, the kindness. What we're doing, and both of these systems are always in balance and are always talking to each other, and they're always interacting. What we're doing with self-compassion is we're switching our sense of safety from the sympathetic nervous system reaction.

If you think about it, it's not conscious, but we think we're keeping ourselves safe when we beat ourselves up. If I beat myself up, I won't make the mistake again. I won't be rejected by others. I'll get it right. You know, if I feel this shame, somehow, that's going to impel me to action. Or if I get stuck in the problem, I'm going to figure out a solution to the problem. These are all really ways of keeping ourselves safe. What we're doing is we're deactivating the sympathetic nervous system response, and we're activating the parasympathetic, this affiliation, "I'm safe because I'm a human being worthy of love and care. I'm part of the human condition." And I'm just with what is instead of being locked in the thoughts about it. As you know, from my point of view, that's really why it works.

As we know, the sympathetic nervous system kicks in more quickly than parasympathetic. It's actually our reptilian brain, it's our oldest, most easily and quickly triggered response to threat. Now, for instance, if you're threatened, the reason it's easier to have compassion for you is if you're threatened, it doesn't really threaten me. I mean, I may feel moved, I may feel compassionate, I may want to let you know you're cared for, but I'm not personally threatened, so it's easier for me to use my parasympathetic response. But when I'm threatened, or maybe my partner or my children, people who are really close to me, when I

feel really threatened, then I get reactive, and then I'm more likely to use the fight, flight, or freeze response. I think that's partly why we tend to do it more often, because of threat, and it's a slower response, the compassion response is the slower response than the freak-out response, you might want to call it.

Dr. Vigil-Otero: As you can see, there are many reasons that we might self-attack. Often, it's about keeping ourselves safe, but just in a misguided way. And it's important that our clients understand why we do what we do so that we can help them lean into compassionate correction rather than shame-based self-attack. Hope you've enjoyed this bonus. Thanks for joining us.