

I am hopeless. I will never make anything of myself. I am stupid. I am ugly. What is wrong with me! I am pathetic.

Each of these beliefs and many others will result in a mind that is self-destructive via criticism if repeated often enough. For many people this ingrained pattern of destructive self-criticism sucks the joy right out of life. Rather than helping us towards our goals, it becomes a stuckness that sometimes can feel immovable and becomes a way of life.

Constructive self-criticism has a place in our lives. It can push us to do better, it can extend us to become something a little more than we currently are. Extending ourselves or pushing ourselves to be a little better or just relaxing into life does not require self-loathing or repeatedly belittling ourselves. On the contrary, life will go a lot better without them. The last statement is not an opinion but is based on solid scientific evidence stemming from the positive psychology field.

One of the major problems with destructive self-criticism is that it becomes an identity which we carry around for much of life. It is an experience based on unworthiness and like a malignant cancer it squeezes the very life out of a human being. It is a false identity a mask which is difficult to be rid of. This false self or mask gets in the way of fully experiencing life. It is a form of closing off to experiencing joy and peacefulness in life.

The tendency to self-destruct via internal criticism is one of the most common themes that pops up in therapy, but is also easily observable in many individuals. It extends to the way people interact in relationships, work and society at large.

We tend to think of self-criticism in simplistic ways without understanding the complexity which is often involved. A typical assumption is that it should be an easy thing to overcome, but that assumption is usually the exception and not the way for most people. Let us examine why it generally is a difficult thing (but nowhere near impossible) to overcome.

Learned helplessness applies to human beings as well. If there is an experience of abuse or loss of control or repeated loss of control where one of the keys is not having a way to escape, then we can become just like the dogs. We expect that the world will always be hostile or terrifying and we cannot do anything about it. Much to our deep frustration, we seem to become stagnant and unable to break the rigidity of the destructive pattern. People may even tell themselves to fight back and attempt various strategies but sometimes even that is not enough.

One of the primary facets of learned helplessness is that those experiences of helplessness in some way become internalized. For instance, some studies on depression, indicate that people will blame themselves and feel stupid. A destructive inner voice is typically an internalization of something which does not belong to the person. It becomes an identification which weaves itself through the fabric of identity. Once there it often becomes stuck. But there is hope and there are ways out of the predicament. But first let's attempt to get a good handle on the underlying mechanisms which make a self-destructive criticism cycle so hard to combat.

A way to think about the self-destructive cycle is that the brain has been hijacked. While I

might be using this concept as a metaphor, the reality is that it is close to the facts of the matter. To really understand this, we should explore the neuroplasticity of the brain and its role in behaviour.

As scientists delve further into understanding our brain and how it works, they have discovered that the brain has an amazing amount of plasticity to it. One of the inherent properties of the brain is that it has an ability to reorganise itself by continually forming neural connections. These neural connections are formed throughout the life span. The term neuroplasticity refers to this concept. Neuroplasticity can work in our favour but also can work against us as we shall soon see. Consider the following examples;

One of the fundamental rules of how the brain works is that neurons which fire together wire together. What this means in plain English is that when brain cells communicate with each other regularly, the connection between them strengthens. It can also occur in cases of high intensity when the brain is flooded with neurochemicals.

Consider a traumatic experience. When we are traumatized a connection in our brain is made. The connection revolves around an event or series of events and involves pain. The initial experience is a high intensity experience which triggers our flight/fight/freeze response. If the initial trauma is not processed well then, the person is at risk to be repeatedly triggered. E.g., assuming there is some violence involved, then being in violent situations or watching violence may trigger the person. The trigger does not necessarily have to be conscious. Often its closer to an unconscious trigger which may only be discernible via very subtle bodily reactions.

The more the person is triggered then the stronger the neural pathways become. Our thoughts start to become a negative feedback loop. Which only serves to strengthen those neural pathways and make it incredibly difficult to stop. Further compounding the problem is how these neural pathways encroach on other brain areas including emotional and physiological functions within the brain. My therapy clients like how I explain this process by using the metaphor of a cluster.

When the first traumatic event occurs, a neural pathway is formed. As mentioned previously if it becomes reinforced it then strengthens. But it also grows. Initially, there might be a very small cluster formed in the brain, but it can quickly spread and become a large cluster which then encompasses emotional centres. This cluster effectively has hijacked the brain and associations are made between emotional, psychological and physiological functions in the brain. Another way to think about it is as a spreading virus which has effectively seized control of the brain. No wonder it is so difficult to overcome.

It's so pervasive that it can lead to severe depression, suicide attempts, anxiety etc.

Luckily our brains by their very nature have a plasticity to them which lasts until death. We can use that to turn that vicious self-critical cycle around and have something more constructive replace it.

One of the most important things to understand is that it is a long-term project which may encompass a few years. There is some literature around which suggests that a habit takes around 30 days to form. In some cases, this is accurate, but in many other cases it is not. This is one of those areas where it is not applicable.

However, it is not uncommon to see small gains in as little as a few weeks to a few months. It's these small gains that we are keeping our eyes peeled for. To illustrate I am currently reading a book entitled the Brains Way of Healing.

In this book, there is a description of someone who overcame chronic pain by training his brain to respond differently. Initially, he did not see any results for a few weeks. Then he noticed a moment's respite. A few weeks later there were more moments of respite. In a few months, he was experiencing periods in his life in which he was pain free. A few years later, he was essentially pain free. This was despite him trying everything previously to get rid of the pain. It's the same effect we are after.

The first aim is to starve the current neural pathways of attention. We want to deny them as best as we can since they are in a perpetual state of learned helplessness. A good way to go about this is learn to recognize what sets the self-critical patterns into motion. Journaling for at least a period of a couple of weeks is helpful in this endeavour. Specifics and as much detail as possible is what is being looked for. It's a type of getting to know our own inner critics, what words are being used, what emotions are coming to the fore, what situations or lines of thinking seem to initiate the pattern.

Next, we want to try and stop all the secondary anxiety and secondary thoughts around the inner critic. The tendency is to become anxious over the fact that we are anxious. Or we further put ourselves down because we are putting ourselves down. These are examples of secondary psychological mechanisms which do not serve us well. Try and remember, that

initially this is going to be difficult. It usually is not something which can occur on one try, but rather comes about through dedicated persistence.

Fall down seven times, get up eight. ~ Japanese Proverb.

If we can learn to observe ourselves as the self-destructive pattern is going on that is usually a good step in the right direction. Through observing the pattern, we become less caught up in it. A little bit of distance is created between you and the pattern. In this respect, something like developing a mindfulness habit can be handy. There is the acceptance of the self-criticism where the acceptance can work as a counterpoint to the destructiveness of the cycle. Just take note that it is not a giving in or giving up, rather it is more like a gentle welcoming. The gentleness is in stark contrast to the harshness and can have a positive effect on the mind.

One of the real keys is to learn to replace the negative cluster of learned helplessness with a routine based on loving self-care. Self-care in this case is not necessarily about going for a run (which can also help) nor about going on a shopping spree. It is about changing the way the mind works.

When that self-destructive pattern is noticed, then counter it with loving thoughts about yourself. The Buddhists have this concept called loving kindness which essentially means tenderness and consideration towards others. Same concept, except direct it towards self. Most especially direct it towards self when the pattern is noticed.

Another complimentary strategy might be to complete this statement;

I feel cared about and loved when I

Notice those times and commit them to memory. When the negative pattern appears in your life, recall those memories. Try and experience them as fully as possible. Rinse and repeat.

As corny as this sounds, cheer yourself on, praise yourself, give yourself a pat on the back at even the slightest bit of forward movement. For example, praise yourself for the effort, even though the results may not initially be very rewarding. Every little bit helps, but most

especially, persist, persist, persist. Remember that we are attempting to create new neural connections and then reinforce them repeatedly.

Consider EMDR or some Hypnosis as other ways into changing the way the brain works. Both have very solid research backgrounds and we are only now beginning to understand how they might be applied to different life problems.

As you may have guessed by now, the whole idea is to literally rebuild the mind to work in a different way than it is used to. It is difficult and likely is not going to happen overnight but it is doable.

Here is a thought to leave you with. The same method has been used with patients who have experienced a stroke and lost the use of a limb. By tying up the good limb and having the patient continually try and use the non-functioning limb, neural networks are rebuilt. Eventually, some people can regain the use of their limbs when medical experts have thought that to be an impossibility. It flies completely in the face of convention, yet there are documented cases of this very phenomena occurring. The story hopefully serves as a reminder to keep your hopes up as much can be accomplished.

On a personal note, I do have some chronic pain conditions myself and am going to experiment with some of the techniques outlined here. I will let keep you informed of any progress I make.

The following book is a good read on the healing potential of neuroplasticity.



Ten Irrational Beliefs



The Effects of Trauma on Brain Development



Stopping Rumination

