

# Self-Compassion for the Self-Critical

**Susan David:** There's a meme floating around social media right now. In austere black type over a white stark background, it declares, "if you don't come out of this quarantine with a new skill, your side hustle started, or more knowledge, you never lacked time, you lack discipline." Even if this particular meme hasn't passed through your Facebook feed, you probably recognize the sentiment. In our productivity obsessed culture, there's an impulse to frame even an unprecedented global trauma as an opportunity, "now's your chance to finally read War and Peace, to master Indian cooking, or to learn German." Of course, there's nothing wrong with finding ways to use this time, productively. If you're currently teaching yourself to code or working through the canon of mid-century Scandinavian cinema, more power to you. But there is something inhumane about the expectation that in the shadow of so much illness, death, and uncertainty, we should be pressuring ourselves to achieve. This isn't a time for merciless self-criticism. It's a time for self-compassion. This is Checking In with Susan David.

I recently had a conversation with a loved one, and he described how he was experiencing unrelenting stress, with back-to-back Zoom meetings, and also trying to homeschool two young children. I encouraged him to be kind to himself; this is tough. And he replied saying that he didn't have the luxury of being kind. He couldn't be weak or lazy when everyone needed him.

One of the myths of self-compassion is that it's about deluding yourself, lying, letting yourself off the hook, and is therefore associated with being weak or lazy. I invite you to consider that the opposite might be the case. Industrialized society, especially now that it's amped up with so much technology, encourages us to push ourselves to our limits. Certain professions, law, medicine, investment banking, business, technology, bake that intensity right into the job description, but even people in less competitive careers feel the pressure.

We all, now, run faster, work harder, stay up later, and multitask more aggressively just to keep up, even in a pandemic. In this environment, in which we're expected to approach life like an endless iron man or iron woman competition, showing yourself self-compassion can be seen as a sign that you lack ambition or don't care about success as much as the next person does.

There's a misconception that you need to be tough on yourself to maintain your edge, but people who are more accepting of their own failures may actually be more motivated to improve. Self-compassionate people aim just as high as self-critical people do. The difference is that self-compassionate people don't fall apart when, as sometimes happens, they don't meet their goals. It could be that self-compassion actually sharpens your edge. After all, it's associated with health

behaviors such as eating right, exercising, sleeping well, and managing stress during tough times, which is when you need to care for yourself the most. It may even strengthen your immune system, helping to ward off illness, while encouraging social connection and positive emotion. All of this helps you to be your best and keep on trucking. The knowledge that you will be kind to yourself and be there for yourself, no matter what, actually encourages you to take risks and to try harder. If things don't work out, you will be there for you. This doesn't mean soft peddling, the negatives or denying they exist, rather it means forgiving ourselves for our imperfections so we can move on to better things. Showing yourself kindness becomes even more important during life's rough patches, and the current pandemic certainly qualifies. When things get tough, many of us are quick to scold blame or punish ourselves. The internal chatterbox starts with a shoulda, woulda, coulda, and the I'm-just-not-good-enoughs. Maybe you or a loved one has gotten sick and you're blaming yourself for somehow letting the virus into your home, perhaps your company laid you off and you're beating yourself up for draining your savings on that big Caribbean vacation last year, or you might be trying to balance your job with your new gig as a homeschool teacher to your kids, and you feel like you're just not measuring up to either/or. These thoughts are understandable, but research shows that people who navigate difficult situations the best are those who practice self-acceptance.

In one study of people going through divorce, researchers found that those who express compassion for themselves at the beginning of this painful experience, we're doing better nine months later than those who had beaten themselves up over their perceived faults. Life during a pandemic can be similarly traumatic and requires a similar approach.

Even if, especially if, you find yourself struggling, remember that you are doing the best you can, with the resources that you have at your disposal. When facing my emotions in tough times like this, I try to, and I encourage you to as well, remember the difference between guilt and shame. Guilt is the sense of burden and regret that comes from knowing you failed or did wrong.

It's no fun, but like all emotions, it has a purpose. In fact, society depends on guilty feelings to keep us from repeating our errors and misdeeds. A lack of guilt is actually one of the defining features of a sociopath. Some who were cavalier about social distancing in the early days of the pandemic have since come down with the virus and now feel guilty about having put others at risk. If not taken to extremes, this is an appropriate feeling to have and experiencing it may make people more careful as they progress. While guilt is focused on a specific misdeed, shame is a very different animal. It encompasses the totality of the person's character. Shame urges you to look at yourself, not as a human being who did a bad thing, but as a human being who fundamentally is bad. Here are some examples of the distinction between guilt versus shame. Guilt is, "I yelled at my kids." Shame is, "I'm a bad parent." Guilt: I hoarded toilet paper and sanitizer, and there wasn't enough to go around my community. Shame: I am selfish. Guilt: I was snarky to my mom on the call when she was feeling down. Shame: I'm unlovable. People experiencing shame will often feel diminished and worthless, and as it turns out, they rarely try to make amends. Shameful people are more likely to try and escape, blame, and deny responsibility. This can make shame destructive, both for the person experiencing it and for society as a whole. Someone feeling shame about having flouted

their state shelter-in-place orders isn't likely to learn and grow from the experience, rather they're likely to view themselves as fundamentally reckless or irresponsible, and then try defensively to smother that unpleasant feeling by insisting that social distancing was never necessary in the first place. The key difference between shame and guilt is self-compassion. Perhaps you did something wrong and you feel bad about it because, hey, you should, even so, this transgression doesn't make you an irredeemably awful human being. Another critical way you can show yourself compassion right now is to resist the temptation to compare yourself to others. Unfortunately, the postmodern consumption-driven environment in which we live is much more interested in selling us smartphones and big gulps than it is in advancing our physical or emotional health.

One of advertising's basic jobs is to make us feel discontented, so we crave stuff, whether we need it or not, and whether or not it's good for us. Self-acceptance and self-compassion do not move the merchandise, so what we are confronted with instead are relentless invitations to compare ourselves with others and inevitably to come up lacking.

It will come as no surprise to anyone that according to research, being exposed to people who are hotter, richer, or more powerful than us can send our own self image into the toilet. It's called the contrast effect, and we are all being exposed to it right now.

I chatted with some of my colleagues on the show and asked them what they were seeing on their social media feeds. One person said that she had a sense of anxiety and guilt when she saw people's seemingly perfectly curated and beautifully crafted Etsy schedules, that they seem to be homeschooling their children to. For another, she reflected on how at the end of the day, she's frazzled and felt less than when she compared herself to those on social media who seemed to be tapping into their sense of activism and being able to volunteer, and a third person spoke about how he has a sense of anxiety and gloom at the future and is worried, and then goes on social media and sees people who are sipping wine in their baths with lit candles and barely a care in the world. Social media presents itself as a tool for human connection. With most of our other avenues for human contact currently unavailable, the urge to refresh your browser is stronger than ever. But for many of us, it's also an engine of self-doubt. The lives that flash across our phone and computer screen frequently look so much more enticing than the one we are living. Rationally, we know that these images are curated. We know that our friend posting photos of their quarantine yoga routine to Facebook is choosing such moments with an eye toward how others will perceive her.

Nevertheless, it's hard not to feel inadequate when you see her pulling off a perfect firefly pose while you're dusting Doritos powder off the same sweatpants that you've been wearing for over a week. The research is clear, too much of the self comparison, which frequently happens on social media is bad for your mental health. Frequent users experience a myriad of problems, including increased feelings of sadness, isolation, envy, and a decrease in overall wellbeing.

Does that mean we must delete all of our accounts until doctors find a vaccine? Not necessarily, though limiting your daily exposure to social media probably wouldn't hurt. As with so much in

life, the key is to know what you value and to make your choices with intention. Before you log on today, consider precisely what it is that you enjoy on social media.

Perhaps it's exchanging messages with a friend who lives far away, seeing pictures of a fast-growing niece or nephew, or watching silly videos posted by a favorite comedian because it just makes you laugh and you need more of that right now. I often advise my clients that a good way to become more accepting and compassionate towards yourself is to look back on the child you once were. After all, you didn't get to choose your parents, your economic circumstances, your personality type, or your body. Recognizing that you had to play the hand you were dealt is often the first step towards showing yourself more warmth, kindness, and forgiveness. You did the best you could under the circumstances, and you survived, and you are doing the best you can under these circumstances right now. I invite you to think of yourself for a moment as that hurt child you once were, running up to you, now, as the adult you. Would you mock the child, demand an explanation, tell her that it was her fault, and say I told you so? No, no, you wouldn't. You would take that young, upset child in your arms and comfort her. Why should you treat the adult you any less compassionately? That's all for today. Be well, stay safe, and let's check in next week.