

# Why and how to silence your inner critic

Organisational psychologist **RACHEL SETTI** puts the case for self-compassion as a tool for success.

**A** lawyer I once worked with had just managed a deal that went dreadfully wrong, one in which his client was left unsatisfied and his managing partner was, well, unhappy to say the least.

This lawyer lamented his shortcomings and obviously was finding it difficult to move on. Subsequently his next deal was painfully difficult. Though successful by most objective measures, he found it difficult to see the positives. It is fair to say that he was frozen by his fear of failure. Over time he became emotionally depleted and concerned for his capacity to continue working in the profession he was once so passionate about.

It's a scenario that is not at all uncommon, perhaps because we believe that being self-critical and comparing ourselves to others somehow motivates us to work harder and better.

Many workplaces even encourage this type of thinking by comparing employees using billable hours and similar statistical measures. While the pros and cons of different success measures is an interesting thing to debate, I'd like to address the emotional impact of perceived failure, and how we can stop being so harsh on ourselves.

According to research by social psychologist Alison Ledgerwood, humans are programmed to attribute a stronger weighting to their failures than their successes.

We tend to remember our mistakes better than we remember our triumphs. But what if we consciously turn that on

its head, and view our errors as learning opportunities?

Inventor Thomas Edison had the right idea, he is quoted as saying "I have not failed. I've just found 10,000 ways that won't work". In other words, if we approach each situation with an open mind and look for ways to learn and improve, our mistakes would not feel as painful as they often do.

This is where self-compassion comes into the fray. A phrase coined by Kristin Neff (see her Ted talk at <https://bit.ly/1n5DoNP>), self-compassion is a way to overcome the harsh self-judgement that is all too common among lawyers and other professionals.

It is an approach in which we recognise our shortfalls, accept our imperfections, and refrain from holding ourselves ransom to unrealistic expectations. (Incidentally, once the aforementioned lawyer began practising self-compassion he regained his optimism, confidence and motivation.)

Self-compassion has been shown to reduce emotional turmoil and depression, and increase healthy relationships (Yearell and Neff, 2011). Differentiated from self-pity, it often goes hand-in-hand with what psychologists call a *growth mindset* in which errors are considered improvement opportunities, rather than disasters. Such beliefs are often self-fulfilling prophecies, and therefore increase the chances of success.

But how can we change habitual thoughts and behaviours, ones that we often have engaged in since childhood?

It isn't easy, but given that we don't always get what we want (if only we did), here are some tips on how to practise self-compassion when you feel a sense of inadequacy.

- **Train your mind** to see things in a more positive way. Writing down three things that you are grateful for everyday has been shown to boost wellbeing.
- **Track your self-talk** (the ongoing chatter in your mind) in the face of "failure". If you addressed others in the way you do yourself would you have any friends or colleagues left? If not, then a bit of self-compassion is called for.
- **Accept that failure is painful** but don't submerge yourself in the emotion. Recognise it and take a balanced approach to learning from your errors. Remind yourself that imperfections are part of the human condition. The best mistakes are the ones that lead to new and improved discoveries.
- **Don't isolate yourself in your failure.** Every single person you know has made multiple mistakes. Speak to someone (a trusted friend, boss, mentor or coach) and you'll soon be reminded that mistakes are part of life. Learn from them, don't dwell on them. **LSJ**



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