

Promoting Self-Compassion: A Guide for Therapists

By using this guide, therapists can support clients in recognizing self-critical patterns, practicing perspective-taking, and engaging in self-care, helping them transition gradually toward greater self-compassion. It reinforces the importance of consistent self-compassion practice for overall well-being and psychological flexibility.

Self-Compassion

- **Recognizing self-criticism:** guide your client to acknowledge their self-critical thoughts and patterns. Understand that those may be deeply ingrained and thus require time and effort to alter. For example, if a client frequently belittles their own accomplishments, help them to identify these instances and associated negative self-talk, such as, “I should have done better”, “That wasn’t good enough”, or, “I always let myself down”.
- **Practicing perspective-taking:** encourage your client to think about how they’d speak to a friend experiencing the same struggles. Teach them to give themselves the same advice, wisdom, and compassion. For instance, if a client is beating themselves up for making a mistake at work, encourage them to consider what advice they would give to a friend who found themselves in a similar situation. Perhaps they might say, “Everyone makes mistakes. It’s part of learning and growing.”

- **Promoting self-care:** self-compassion isn't just a feeling but a relationship with oneself. Engage clients in identifying specific ways to show kindness to themselves, for instance, by caring for their bodies, eating healthily, or enjoying a hobby. A practical example could be a client who loves painting but has neglected this pastime. Encourage them to set aside time regularly and consistently for this creative outlet as a form of self-care.
- **Setting assignments:** daily homework can reinforce self-compassion. For example, a client can spend time on an action of self-compassion after a difficult activity, like reading a book or doing something else enjoyable to them. Let's suppose that a client feels drained after social gatherings. Assign them the homework of spending time afterward doing something they love, like watching their favorite movie or taking a relaxing bath.

Building a New House

- **Building a new house metaphor:** explain the self-critical house metaphor to your client. Help them understand that they're not tearing down their self-critical house but building a new house of self-compassion next door. Use examples to illustrate this. For example, instead of thinking to themselves "I'm useless", they can constructively say, "I didn't succeed this time, but that doesn't mean I'm useless. I can learn and improve."
- **Gradual transition:** understand that the transition to the new house will be gradual. The client might still return to the old house (self-critical habits) occasionally, but they can always choose to return to the new house (self-compassion habits). An example could be a client who momentarily reverts to self-blame after a setback at work. Remind them that it's okay to fall back into old habits sometimes, as long as they remember their new, self-compassionate approach and return to it.
- **Adding, not removing:** emphasize the importance of adding self-compassion rather than trying to remove self-criticism completely. Encourage clients to practice self-compassion and be kinder to themselves, especially after challenging social situations.

Remember that repeated practice of these thoughts and behaviors will enable your clients to develop the habit of self-compassion, promoting their overall well-being and psychological flexibility.

Key Points

- Help clients to recognize self-critical patterns and develop perspective-taking skills to offer themselves the same compassion they would extend to a friend facing similar struggles. Encourage the cultivation of self-care as an essential component of self-compassion.
- Introduce the concept of building a new house of self-compassion alongside the self-critical house. Understand that the transition will be gradual, and clients may occasionally revert to self-critical habits, but they can always choose to return to the new house of self-compassion.
- Stress the importance of integrating self-compassion rather than trying to eliminate self-criticism entirely. Encourage clients to practice self-compassion consistently, especially after challenging situations, to foster a habit of self-compassion and enhance overall well-being and psychological flexibility.