

POSITIVE SELF-TALK: PROMOTING CONSTRUCTIVE AND GOAL-DIRECTED SELF-CRITICISM. PROPOSAL FOR A NEW PROTOCOL OF INTERVENTION

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Abstract

Self-criticism is associated with various mental disorders and can negatively impact relationships, performance, and goal achievement. However, self-criticism can also be adaptive when it promotes realistic and constructive reflection, fostering personal improvement and goal attainment. Many interventions aim to reduce self-criticism by encouraging self-compassion; however, it has been demonstrated that self-criticism and self-compassion are distinct processes that can coexist. Moreover, most interventions overlook the adaptive function of self-criticism and, despite its negative impact on goal achievement, often fail to integrate strategies that enhance goal-directed behavior. Therefore, this study presents the development of a novel intervention designed to reduce dysfunctional self-criticism while fostering a constructive and goal-oriented approach. An extensive literature review and expert consultations were conducted to analyze theoretical models and existing treatments. The prevalence of maladaptive self-criticism was considered to identify the target population. Various delivery formats were evaluated to ensure the intervention was scalable, accessible, and cost-effective while maintaining efficacy. As a result of this structured development process, “Positive Self-Talk” was created as a preventive tool aimed at healthy individuals, recognizing that even in non-clinical populations, internal dialogue is often dominated by self-critical content. The intervention integrates techniques from Positive Psychology, third-wave Cognitive-Behavioral models, and the Nonviolent Communication model. Designed as an online guided self-help program, it ensures broad accessibility, scalability, and cost-effectiveness while overcoming common barriers associated with traditional therapy. Positive Self-Talk comprises six structured modules combining psychoeducation, self-monitoring tools, and practical exercises. These modules help users identify dysfunctional self-criticism, explore its underlying motivations, and transform it into a more constructive and adaptive process. Functional imagery techniques are incorporated to reinforce learning and facilitate goal achievement. Moreover, participants receive support from a trained Tutor, a psychologist who fosters motivation, commitment, and personal goal attainment through activity monitoring and online guidance. Positive Self-Talk is hypothesized to reduce dysfunctional self-criticism, enhance psychological well-being, and support pursuing meaningful goals. Future steps include evaluating its efficacy through empirical studies, with plans to adapt and extend its application to clinical populations.

Keywords: *Self-criticism, guided self-help intervention, prevention, goal-oriented behavior, psychological well-being.*

1. Introduction

Self-criticism is a negative self-evaluation process characterized by chronic self-blame and self-disapproval, feelings of inadequacy, self-disgust or self-hate, and comparisons to personal or external standards (see Zaccari et al., 2024 for a meta-review). Growing evidence indicates that self-criticism contributes to functional impairments by hindering goal progress (Powers et al., 2007), lowering self-esteem, fostering interpersonal difficulties, and promoting maladaptive coping strategies. Furthermore, self-criticism contributes to the onset and maintenance of a wide range of mental disorders, such as mood disorders, anxiety disorders, and eating disorders (see Werner et al., 2019 for a review).

While most existing literature conceptualizes self-criticism as unhealthy and destructive, its potential benefits are often overlooked. Evidence suggests that healthy levels of self-criticism can be adaptive and functional if it promotes realistic and constructive self-reflection and self-feedback, helping individuals identify necessary changes to achieve their goals (Holm-Denoma et al., 2008).

Therefore, reducing negative self-evaluations alone is insufficient; for self-criticism to be constructive, it must provide clear insights into what is wrong and how to improve. When it lacks this clarity, it becomes maladaptive and destructive, offering little guidance for self-improvement (Bergner, 2008).

Cognitive-behavioral therapies (CBT) address self-criticism through different approaches. Traditional CBT focuses on modifying negative self-critical thoughts, while third-generation methods emphasize taking distance from these thoughts or fostering self-compassion, often considered an antidote to self-criticism (Werner et al., 2019). However, despite advances in treatments to reduce self-criticism, some limitations persist. First, research shows that self-criticism and self-compassion can coexist rather than function as opposites (Longe et al., 2010), challenging the assumption that increasing self-compassion automatically reduces self-criticism. Additionally, interventions rarely promote adaptive self-criticism, which can facilitate self-improvement and goal achievement without leading to self-devaluation. Lastly, while self-criticism can hinder personal growth (Powers et al., 2007), most interventions fail to investigate whether reducing it enhances goal achievement.

The present study aims to develop a novel intervention to reduce maladaptive and destructive self-criticism in favor of adaptive, constructive, and goal-oriented self-criticism. This shift would improve goal achievements and promote psychological well-being.

2. Method

The intervention was developed through a structured, evidence-based process aligned with the best practices in psychological intervention design. First, using different databases (e.g., Psycinfo, PsycArticle, PubMed, Google Scholar), an extensive bibliographic review was conducted to explore theoretical perspectives on self-criticism, assess theoretical models and existing interventions, and identify standardized assessment tools. Following this, a team of specialists in the field was consulted to refine the intervention's theoretical approach, structure, and feasibility. Successively, the most suitable population was identified based on prevalence rates of maladaptive self-criticism and the potential benefits of intervention. Additionally, multiple formats—including individual and group sessions and self-help programs—were evaluated to select the most scalable, cost-effective, and accessible delivery method while maintaining efficacy.

3. Results

Following the structured development process, a novel intervention has been developed: Positive Self-Talk. This intervention aims to reduce dysfunctional and maladaptive self-criticism in favor of adaptive, constructive, and goal-oriented self-criticism.

3.1. Delivery method

The intervention was specifically designed as an online guided self-help program to provide an effective yet accessible method that overcomes the obstacles of traditional therapy (e.g., high costs, limited availability, and stigma-related concerns). Moreover, this format ensures scalability and cost-effectiveness while maintaining efficacy. Guided self-help was chosen over pure self-help as it enhances effectiveness, fosters autonomy, and reduces dropout rates (Kazdin, 2018).

3.2. Theoretical background and target population

Positive Self-Talk integrates Positive Psychology (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000), third-wave CBT, and Nonviolent Communication (NVC; Rosenberg & Chopra, 2015) techniques. The NVC method helps people observe without judgment, connect with feelings and needs, and make clear and constructive requests. CBT techniques are used to explore personal values, challenge negative thoughts, and, alongside Positive Psychology, promote competence acquisition.

Although self-criticism is common even in healthy individuals (Morin et al., 2011), Positive Self-Talk was designed as a preventive tool rather than a clinical treatment. Targeting those prone to self-criticism, it serves as an indicated prevention intervention to reduce distress, lower the risk of mental disorders, and enhance psychological well-being.

3.3. Protocol development

The intervention adopts a multicomponential and modular approach to provide a structured yet flexible experience. A multicomponential design integrates various evidence-based techniques, while the modular structure ensures each component functions independently while remaining interconnected. This step-by-step framework balances adaptability with consistency, making the intervention tailored to individual needs (Chorpita et al., 2005). Positive Self-Talk comprises six structured online modules

combining psychoeducation, self-monitoring tools, and practical exercises. The first module introduces the program, encourages self-reflection on personal goals, and examines the pros and cons of modifying self-criticism. The second module provides psychoeducation on self-criticism's forms and functions, helping individuals recognize their patterns and challenge underlying dysfunctional beliefs. The third module helps users identify what they seek to achieve through self-criticism, demonstrating how alternatives can be more effective, less harmful, and less emotionally distressing while assisting them in reaching their goals. Moreover, values are explored to ensure their goals align with intrinsic motivation. The fourth module introduces the Nonviolent Communication techniques to foster adaptive and constructive self-criticism, with exercises for practical application. The fifth module provides structured exercises to practice adaptive self-criticism, incorporating functional imagery techniques to reinforce learning and support goal achievement. Lastly, the sixth module focuses on integrating these skills into daily life through continued self-monitoring for long-term sustainability. Users receive guidance from a Tutor, a psychologist who fosters commitment, gives support, and provides feedback.

4. Discussion

Combining evidence-based strategies, interactive exercises, and personalized support, Positive Self-Talk offers a structured approach to cultivating constructive and adaptive self-criticism. The intervention is hypothesized to reduce dysfunctional self-criticism, enhance psychological well-being, and support goal pursuit. The next steps include a study to assess its feasibility and efficacy, and future adaptations will extend its application to clinical populations, broadening its potential impact.

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