

# You wouldn't say it to a friend

A short book about running yourself down in private as a  
way of keeping yourself in line

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First edition

Written by AI with human guidance. It can  
contain mistakes, which later editions correct.

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## Before you start

This is a short book and you can read it in two or three sittings. It's about one habit. When you get something wrong, and often when you haven't, you speak to yourself in a way you'd never speak to another person. You call yourself an idiot. You ask what's wrong with you. You go over your failings in the dark. Nobody hears it, and you've done it for so long that it seems less like a habit than like simply knowing yourself.

I'm going to argue three things. The first is that the habit was learned, usually early and usually from somebody else, and that you keep it up for reasons that seem sound. Chief among them is the belief that it keeps you in line, and that without it you'd become lazy, careless and pleased with yourself. The second is that it doesn't do that. The research on people who are hard on themselves finds that they make less progress towards their goals, judge their own performance less accurately, and find it harder to face their mistakes. I'll set that out and give its limits. The third is practical. When you get something wrong, you talk to yourself the way you'd talk to a friend who'd done the same. Chapters 15 to 17 cover how.

Nothing in this book asks you to lower your standards, make excuses, or tell yourself you're wonderful. I'm not recommending affirmations in the mirror. If you've hurt someone, you should feel it and put it right. The argument is about the difference between correcting yourself and attacking yourself, and I'll argue that the attack gets in the way of the correction.

Four cautions.

If you've felt low, hopeless or worthless for most of the day, every day, for more than two weeks, that may be depression, and harsh self-criticism is one of its symptoms as well as one of its causes. The NHS advice is to see a GP. A book isn't a treatment for depression.

If the things you say to yourself include wanting to hurt yourself, or that others would be better off without you, please seek help now. Call 111, or 999 in an emergency. The Samaritans are on 116 123 at any hour.

This book is about your own thoughts, in your own inner voice. If you hear a voice that seems to come from outside you, or that other people can't hear, that's a different thing, and you should talk to your GP about it.

And if the harsh voice in your head is recognisably that of someone who mistreated you, a parent or a former partner, a short book may not be enough. A therapist can help with that, and chapter 17 says a little more.

The notes at the back give my sources and their limits. Where I'm giving my own reasoning and not a finding, I'll say so.

## Wednesday, twenty-five past eight

It's twenty-five past eight on a Wednesday morning and you've just parked at work. You reach into your bag for your pass and your fingers find a folded sheet of paper. It's the consent form for your son Sam's school trip. It was due back yesterday.

The commentary starts before you've unfolded it. "You idiot. You absolute idiot. One form. Every other parent managed it. What is wrong with you? He'll be the only one who can't go, and he'll know it was you." It's fast, it's fluent, and it's in your own voice. You sit in the car with your heart going. Then you ring the school office. The secretary says it's no problem at all and to send it in with him tomorrow. The call takes ninety seconds. The commentary carries on across the car park regardless. "You got away with it. You always leave things. You're a mess."

At eleven you're presenting the quarter's numbers and you give one figure wrong. A colleague corrects it, pleasantly, and you thank her and move on. Nobody else appears to register it. Inside, it's "Stupid. They all saw that. They're wondering how you got this job." For the rest of the meeting you're half listening, because part of you is going back over the slip.

In the evening you catch sight of yourself in the hall mirror and there's a remark about that too. At ten to midnight you're awake, and the commentary is doing a review. It covers the form, the figure and the mirror. It adds the friend you haven't rung, the gym membership you don't use, and something you said at a party in 2016.

Now a different memory. A month ago your friend Anna rang you, upset. She'd forgotten her daughter's dentist appointment, the second one she'd missed, and the surgery had been sharp with her. You said, "Oh, love. You've had so much on. Ring them tomorrow and rebook, it happens to everybody. You're a good mum." You meant all of it. It wouldn't have crossed your mind to say, "You idiot, what's wrong with you, every other parent manages it." If you had said that, Anna would have been right to put the phone down and wonder whether you were a friend at all.

You have one way of speaking to people you care about when they fail, and another way of speaking to yourself. You've never really noticed that the two are different. If someone pointed it out, you'd have an answer ready. Anna needed kindness, you'd say. You need to be kept up to the mark. If you spoke to yourself the way you spoke to her, you'd let everything slide.

I'll use a few terms throughout. **The commentary** is the running stream of judgement you direct at yourself. **A remark** is a single instance of it. **The double standard** is the gap between how you speak to yourself and how you'd speak to a friend in the same position. **The discipline story** is the belief that the harshness is what keeps you functioning. **Correction** is noticing what went wrong and what to do about it. **Attack** is a judgement on what kind of person you are. **The friend test** is asking what you'd say to a friend who'd done the same thing, and it's what this book builds towards.

The habit has some regular features. This list is my own observation and not a research finding.

It's automatic. The remark arrives before you've decided anything, often before you've fully taken in what happened.

It's about you and not about the act. It says "you idiot" and "you're a mess". It rarely says "that form was late".

It's sweeping. Its favourite words are always, never, everything and everyone.

It's out of proportion. A late form and a serious betrayal would get much the same vocabulary.

It doesn't stop when the problem is solved. The school said it was fine, and the commentary carried on.

And it's private. You'd be embarrassed for anyone to hear it, which may tell you something about it.

Try one thing before reading on. For two days, keep a tally of remarks, and write a few of them down word for word. Then read them back as if they'd been said by one person to another. Most people who try this are surprised by the number, and taken aback by how the words look on paper.

## Where the commentary comes from

If the tally was high and the words were ugly, the commentary probably had something to say about that too. You're so hard on yourself, it may have said, and you can't even stop. I'd like to start by suggesting that the commentary isn't really yours. You learned it.

Nobody is born calling themselves an idiot. A two-year-old who drops a cup looks surprised, or interested, or upset about the cup. The idea that dropping a cup says something shameful about the person who dropped it has to be supplied from outside. Often it's supplied in the exact words that later become the commentary. If you listen to yours carefully, you may recognise the phrasing. "What is wrong with you?" is a question people ask other people, usually children. "You always leave things" sounds like something said across a kitchen.

There's long-term research on this. Koestner, Zuroff and Powers used a study that had followed 156 people from early childhood into their thirties. The children's mothers had described their own parenting when the children were five. Children whose parents had been restrictive and rejecting, particularly the parent of the same sex, were more self-critical at the age of twelve. That held after allowing for the child's early temperament. For the women in the study, self-criticism at twelve strongly predicted self-criticism at thirty-one.

I don't want to make this a story about blaming parents. Most parents who criticise do it out of love and worry, in the way it was done to them, because they believe it's how children are made to try. Teachers do it, and so do coaches, older siblings and the general culture. The NHS, writing about low self-esteem, says it often begins in childhood, with messages from teachers, friends, siblings, parents and the media, and that for some reason the message that you're not good enough is the one that stays. A child takes in the critical voice and keeps it running after the critic has left the room. It's a sensible thing for a child to do. If you criticise yourself first, you may avoid the mistake, and you'll be ready for the telling-off if it comes.

So the habit began as protection, and you keep it for reasons that still feel sound.

You believe it makes you better. The harshness is how you keep your standards up and your effort going.

You believe it keeps you humble. People who are easy on themselves, you feel, become smug. In Britain especially, thinking well of yourself is close to a social offence.

You believe it's honest. You're only telling yourself the truth, and other people are too kind to say it.

You believe it's fair. When you've done wrong, you should pay for it.

And you believe it protects you. If you've already said the worst to yourself, nothing anyone else says can take you by surprise.

Underneath these are needs nobody should be ashamed of. You want to do things well. You want to see yourself clearly and to be a decent person, and you don't want to be hurt. The question for the next several chapters is whether the commentary serves those needs. I'll argue that it fails at each of them, and that something else does the job better.

## **"It keeps me in line"**

This is the belief that holds the rest in place. You may dislike the commentary, but you think you need it. It's your quality control. You're a bit lazy and careless underneath, and only the threat of a roasting keeps you performing. If you turned it off, you'd stop trying, the forms would never go in, and the figures would all be wrong.

It's a reasonable theory, and it can be tested. If harsh self-criticism drives achievement, then people who do more of it ought to get more done.

Theodore Powers, Richard Koestner, David Zuroff and their colleagues have tested that repeatedly. In a set of five studies, they measured how self-critical people were and then followed their progress on goals they'd set themselves, across different areas of life, including academic work, weight loss and music. The pattern was the same in all five. The more self-critical people were, the less progress they made towards their goals.

The same studies contain a finding that I think is even more useful. The researchers also measured how high people's standards were and how much they strove for excellence. High standards and harsh self-criticism often go together, which is why people assume they're the same thing. When the researchers separated the two statistically, high standards on their own went with more progress, and self-criticism went with less. It was the standards that were helping, and the self-criticism was holding people back.

These are observational studies, and I should be careful. It might be that people who are failing at their goals become more self-critical, and not the other way round. The researchers measured self-criticism first and progress later, which helps, but it doesn't settle the matter. What the studies do show is that the discipline story's central prediction fails. If self-criticism were driving achievement, the most self-critical people would be the ones getting furthest. In study after study they were the ones falling behind.

Why might attack hold a person back? This is my interpretation, and I think most people will recognise it. When you know that any failure will be followed by a savaging, failure becomes something to avoid at almost any cost. The surest way to avoid it is not to attempt anything you might fail at. So you put off the difficult task, because starting it means risking the commentary. You don't apply for the job or ask the question, and you leave the draft unshared. When something does go wrong, you're tempted to hide it, from others and from yourself, because looking at it squarely means another savaging. People don't learn well under threat. They get by through defending themselves and concealing things.

Think about how this works with anyone else. Imagine a manager who responded to every slip with "You idiot, what's wrong with you?" Some of her staff would work hard, out of fear, for a while. They'd also hide their mistakes, avoid anything risky, stop making suggestions, and leave when they could. Nobody thinks that's good management. You've been managing yourself that way for thirty years, and you've given the method credit for everything you've achieved.

Look at that Wednesday again. The form was late and you found it. What got it sorted out was a ninety-second phone call. The commentary contributed nothing to that call. It delayed it by a minute or two while you sat in the car with your heart going, and it carried on afterwards when there was nothing left to fix. You're conscientious, and that's why the call got made. The commentary played no part in it.

## **"I'm only being honest with myself"**

You may grant that the commentary is unpleasant and still hold that it's accurate. Other people flatter you, or don't know you well enough. You know the truth about yourself, and the truth isn't pretty. Going easier on yourself would mean looking away from it.

So look at it as testimony and ask how reliable the witness is.

Start with its vocabulary. "You always leave things." In fact you returned the last dozen forms on time, which is why this one stands out. "Every other parent managed it." You have no idea whether that's true, and the secretary's relaxed tone suggests she takes such calls every day. "They're all wondering how you got this job." You have no evidence for that, and some against it, since nobody reacted. "You're a mess." Here's a person who holds down a job, is raising a child, and rang the school within two minutes of finding the problem. The commentary deals in always, never, everyone and nothing, and statements containing those words are almost never true. A witness who spoke only in those terms would be torn apart in court.

Next, look at what it leaves out. It has perfect recall for the wrong figure in the meeting and none for the forty figures you gave correctly. It remembers the party in 2016 and none of the hundreds of social occasions on which you were perfectly pleasant company. An honest account would include the rest of the evidence. The commentary argues one side only, like a prosecutor.

There's research showing that this bias has measurable effects. Mark Leary and colleagues at Duke University ran a series of studies on people who differed in how kindly or harshly they treated themselves. In one, participants were filmed doing something awkward, which was making up a children's story aloud in front of a camera. Afterwards they rated their own performance, and independent observers rated the same recordings. People who were habitually hard on themselves rated their performances lower than the observers did. They undervalued what they'd done. The people who were kinder to themselves came closer to the observers' ratings.

That's the opposite of what the honesty argument predicts. If self-criticism were a form of clear sight, the self-critical would be the accurate ones. In this study they were the ones whose picture was off, and it was off in one direction only.

Real honesty about yourself is a different thing, and it's worth having. It sounds like this. "The form was a day late. It was in my bag under the pass. I've been putting school letters in there and forgetting them. I should deal with them the evening they arrive." Every word of that is true. It's specific, it's about the act, and it points to a remedy. It also happens to be more useful than "you absolute idiot". It doesn't mention your character, and the facts of the matter don't require it to.

So being honest with yourself is a good aim, but the commentary doesn't achieve it. What it offers is a harsh voice, and you've been mistaking the harshness for honesty.

## **"But I know what I'm really like"**

The double standard has a defence, and you may have been rehearsing it since chapter 1. Anna is different. When Anna forgot the dentist, it was an honest slip by a good person under pressure. You know that about her. When you forget a form, you know rather more. You remember noticing the form on Sunday and thinking "I'll do it later". There have been other times as well. You know how lazy you can be, how distracted, how much you leave to the last minute. Anna deserved kindness because her mistake was innocent. You have inside information on yours.

This is the most persuasive argument for the double standard, because it's built on something true. You do know more about yourself than about anyone else. You have access to every lazy impulse, every uncharitable thought, every corner you cut. With Anna you see only her behaviour, which is mostly fine, and you hear the account she chooses to give.

But follow that through. Anna has the same inside information about herself. When she rang you, she probably knew that she'd seen the appointment card on the fridge and thought "I must put that in my phone", and hadn't. She has her own store of lazy impulses and cut corners, and her own commentary may well have been calling her an idiot before she picked up the phone. If she'd told you all of it, you'd have given her the same answer, and you know you would. You'd have said, "Everyone does that. I do that." You didn't think her innocent. You gave her kindness because you

take it for granted that ordinary people are disorganised sometimes, think "I'll do it later", and are still good people doing their best.

You apply that assumption to every adult you know except one. The inside information makes you feel like a special case, but everybody has it about themselves. If you could see the inside of anyone else's head, you'd find the same procrastination, the same private pettiness and the same forgotten forms. What you can see is their outside, which looks competent. You compare it with your own inside, which looks like a mess to you, as everyone's does to them. You'd come off badly in that comparison however well you were doing.

Researchers who study kindness towards oneself treat this as one of its main ingredients. Kristin Neff, whose questionnaire is used in many of the studies in this book, describes it as seeing your own failings as part of what everyone goes through, and not as something that sets you apart. People who score low on that tend to feel, when they fail, that they're the only one. That feeling of isolation is part of what makes the failure hurt so much.

So the inside information is real, but it doesn't justify the double standard. If the people you're kind to were judged on their insides, they wouldn't look much different from you. You're kind to them anyway, and you're right to be.

## **"If I went easy on myself, I'd never improve"**

This is the fear at the bottom of it. Suppose you stopped. Suppose that when you got something wrong you spoke to yourself as you spoke to Anna. You think you'd shrug the mistake off, and with no pain there'd be nothing to make you do better. You'd become one of those people who are very comfortable with their own failings.

This is the most tested question in the area, and the results run against the fear.

In the last of Leary's studies, the researchers asked people to recall a real failure, rejection or loss that had made them feel bad about themselves. Some were then led through a short exercise in responding to it with kindness. They wrote about how other people go through similar things, and wrote to themselves as they would to a friend in the same position. Others did different exercises or none. Those who'd taken the kinder view were afterwards more willing to acknowledge their own part in what had happened. They also felt less overwhelmed by it. Kindness didn't lead them to let themselves off. It made it possible for them to look.

Jia Wei Zhang and Serena Chen, at Berkeley, asked the question about improvement directly. They studied regrets, which are mistakes people know they made. In their first study they analysed regrets that people had posted anonymously on a website. The people who described their regret with more kindness towards themselves were also judged by independent readers to have learned and grown more from it. In another study, people who were generally kinder to themselves reported more personal

improvement from their regrets, and observers who read their accounts agreed. In a third, the researchers asked one group to write about a regret from a compassionate, understanding point of view. That group reported more acceptance of what had happened and more personal improvement than the comparison groups. The route, as far as the researchers could trace it, ran through acceptance. People who could admit the regret fully, without flinching, were the ones who changed.

I think that's the mechanism, and it's worth spelling out. To learn from a mistake you have to look at it closely. You have to ask what you did, why, and what you'd do differently. If looking at the mistake sets off an attack on your whole worth as a person, then looking is painful and dangerous. So you don't look, or you look for half a second and flinch away, or you defend yourself by blaming someone else. The harsher the commentary, the more it costs to admit an error and the fewer you'll admit. When a mistake costs you only the mistake, you can afford to examine it.

The picture of the person who's comfortable with their failings deserves a moment, because it's the bogeyman that keeps the discipline story going. Such people exist. But their ease doesn't come from kindness to themselves. It comes from not caring much about other people or about doing things well. You care a great deal, and you wouldn't be reading this if you didn't. Caring is what drives you to improve, and it won't disappear when the abuse stops. It'll carry on without the beating.

Think of the best teacher or coach you ever had. They almost certainly held you to a high standard and told you plainly when your work fell short. They did it in a way that left you wanting to

try again. They'd have said, "That's not right yet. Look at this part. You can do this." They didn't call you an idiot, and you improved faster for them than for anyone who did.

## **"Fear of failing is what gets me going"**

There's a version of the discipline story that survives the last few chapters. You might accept that attacking yourself after a failure doesn't help. You'd still say that the dread of that attack, beforehand, is what gets you out of bed. You work hard because you're afraid of what you'll say to yourself if you don't. If you took away the fear, you think, there'd be nothing to make you work.

I'll concede what's true in this. Fear does mobilise people in the short run. A looming deadline, with the prospect of humiliation behind it, produces a burst of effort, as every student knows. If you've run on that fuel for years, you'll have plenty of memories of it working.

The question is what kind of effort it produces, and what it costs. Kristin Neff, Ya-Ping Hsieh and Kullaya Dejitterat looked at this among university students. They measured how kindly or harshly students treated themselves, and what kinds of goals they held in their studies. Psychologists distinguish between aiming to master the material, because you want to understand it, and aiming to perform, which means to look good or avoid looking bad. Students who were kinder to themselves were more likely to be aiming at mastery. Those who were harder on themselves were more likely to be aiming at performance. The difference was explained partly by fear of failure, which was lower in the self-compassionate students, and partly by the fact that they felt more competent.

The second study in the same paper looked at students who'd just received a midterm grade that they themselves regarded as a failure. The ones who were kinder to themselves were less likely to cope by avoidance, which means things like giving up, not thinking about it, and staying away from the subject. The students who were hard on themselves were more likely to turn away.

These were surveys of American undergraduates, so they show associations and nothing more. But they fit the argument of chapter 3 closely. Fear of failure does produce effort, and it shapes the kind of effort. The effort goes into not failing, which isn't the same as succeeding. It favours the safe task over the stretching one, because the stretching one might go wrong. It discourages asking for help, which would expose what you don't know. And when failure comes anyway, fear leads people to avoid the subject, which is the opposite of what learning needs.

There's another source of effort, and you have plenty of it. You mind about the work. You like doing things well, you care about the people who depend on you, and you find some things interesting. That's what drives the students who aim at mastery, and it lasts longer, because it doesn't depend on being frightened. You've never had the chance to find out how far it would take you, because the fear has always been there as well. My expectation is that when the fear quiets, you'll go on working about as hard as you do now. You'll probably choose harder things to work at.

## Correction and attack

So far I've talked as if self-criticism were one thing. The distinction this book depends on is between two things that travel under the same name, and there's research behind it.

Paul Gilbert, a clinical psychologist at the University of Derby, and his colleagues asked 246 students about how and why they criticised themselves. When they analysed the answers, self-criticism came apart into separate strands. There were two forms. One was feeling inadequate and dwelling on mistakes. The other was harsher, a matter of self-disgust and wanting to hurt oneself. There were also two functions, or reasons. One was a wish to improve and to correct one's errors. The other was a wish to punish oneself, to take revenge on the self for failing. The researchers called them self-correction and self-persecution. It was the persecuting kind, along with self-hatred, that was most strongly tied to depression. People's capacity to reassure themselves worked against it.

That gives us the two things I've been calling correction and attack. They feel similar from the inside, because both arrive as a critical thought after something goes wrong. They differ in four ways, and once you know the four, you can tell which one you're hearing.

Correction is about the act, and attack is about you. "The figure on slide six was last quarter's" is about the act. "Stupid" is about you.

Correction is specific where attack is sweeping. "I didn't check the slides against the final spreadsheet" names one thing. "You always mess up" names everything and therefore nothing.

Correction looks forward and attack looks back. Correction ends in something to do, such as "check them against the final version next time". Attack ends in a verdict, and you can't act on a verdict.

And correction stops when the matter is dealt with, while attack carries on. Once you've rung the school, correction has nothing more to say. The commentary followed you across the car park.

Run the Wednesday through that. "Ring the school now" was correction, and it took ninety seconds. "Deal with school letters the evening they arrive" is correction too. Everything else was attack. "You idiot" contributed nothing to the fix, and neither did "what is wrong with you", "every other parent managed it" or the midnight review.

The discipline story depends on a confusion between the two. You've noticed, correctly, that a self-critical thought sometimes leads to your fixing something, and you've concluded that self-criticism works. But it was the correcting part that did the fixing. The attack came along with it and took the credit. They've arrived together for so long that you've never seen one without the other.

You can have one without the other, though. Plenty of people notice their mistakes promptly, feel a proper pang about them, fix them, learn something, and move on, without being called an idiot by anybody. You do this for Anna. When she told you about the

dentist, you helped her think about rebooking, and you didn't assess her as a mother. You gave her correction without attack, so you already know how it's done.

## **"I deserve it"**

Sometimes the commentary presents itself as justice. You did wrong, and wrongdoers should suffer. To let yourself off would be to cheat. The feeling is strongest when someone else was affected by what you did. You snapped at your son, or let a colleague down, or forgot your mother's birthday. It can feel as though hating yourself for a while is the least you owe.

There's something right in this, and I don't want to argue it away. When you've hurt someone, you should feel bad. That pang is conscience, and a person without it is dangerous. The distinction from the last chapter applies here. Guilt, in the useful sense, is about the act. It says, "I did a bad thing, and I need to put it right." It belongs to correction. What the commentary supplies is mostly the other kind, which says, "I am a bad person." That's attack again, under another name.

Ask who receives the payment. If you snapped at Sam this morning, the person you owe something to is Sam. What he's owed is an apology, an explanation that it wasn't his fault, and a parent who's in a better state this evening. An hour of calling yourself a terrible mother gives him none of those. He doesn't know it's happening, and nothing reaches him. If anything, he gets less, because a parent who's busy hating herself is withdrawn and brittle, and more likely to snap again.

Self-punishment can even stand in for repair. Having suffered, you feel the account is settled. You feel you've paid, though the person you wronged has received nothing, and the urgency to make

amends fades. I'm offering that as an observation and not a finding. It's worth checking against your own experience. After a long bout of self-reproach, you may be no more likely to pick up the phone and apologise, and sometimes you're less likely.

Compare the sentences with the offences too. You can do this with the list you made in chapter 1. A late form earned "you absolute idiot, what is wrong with you". A slip over a figure earned "they're wondering how you got this job". If a judge handed out sentences on that scale for offences of that size, there'd be a public inquiry. No system of justice would recognise them. The commentary says the same things whatever the offence, and says them just as hard.

If you've done something that matters, you owe three things, in this order. You should acknowledge it plainly, to yourself and to the person affected. You should repair what can be repaired. And you should work out what you'll do differently. That's a demanding list, and it's much harder than calling yourself names, which asks nothing of you. Once those three are done, the debt is paid. Further punishment does nothing for the person you wronged.

## **"Better I say it before someone else does"**

Part of the commentary's appeal is that it feels like armour. If you've already told yourself that the presentation was poor, nobody else's verdict can ambush you. If you expect to be found out, you won't be humiliated when it happens. Getting your criticism in first seems like a sensible precaution.

I think this goes back to where the habit began. A child who's often criticised learns to scan herself for faults before anyone else can find them. It's a kind of early warning system, and in a critical household it may well have worked.

Look at how it performs now, though. Start with how often the blow you're bracing for arrives. In the meeting, you gave a wrong figure and braced for judgement. None came. Your colleague corrected it pleasantly and everyone moved on. Nobody else was holding the opinion the commentary delivered to you as general knowledge. If you think back over the last month, you'll probably find the same pattern. You've delivered dozens of harsh verdicts on yourself in advance of criticism from others that never came.

Other people are mostly occupied with their own performance and their own commentary. You've been defending yourself against an attack that almost never comes, and the defence itself does you harm.

Then consider the rare occasions when criticism does come. If the armour theory were right, you'd take it better for having got in first. My guess is that you take it worse. A person who's spent the morning telling herself she's useless hears her manager's mild

comment about the report as confirmation of everything. Someone whose view of herself is steadier can hear the same comment as information about the report. The commentary has already worn you down by the time the criticism arrives, so it lands harder.

There's also a cost in how you come across. People who expect to be judged often behave in ways that invite it. They apologise before they've said anything and run their own work down as they hand it over. They deflect praise with a list of what was wrong. Colleagues tend to take people at their own valuation, at least at first. If you introduce your report as "probably rubbish", some of your readers will start reading it that way.

You can't prevent other people from criticising you sometimes. It's part of doing anything. The best preparation for it is a fair and steady view of your own work, one that can take a criticism on board without collapsing.

## **"Being kind to yourself is soft"**

When people are advised to be kinder to themselves, many feel a kind of recoil. It sounds indulgent. It brings to mind scented candles and bubble baths. For someone who prides herself on high standards and not making a fuss, it's faintly embarrassing, and it can seem dangerous too, as if any kindness to yourself would let the standards drop.

Psychologists have studied this recoil. Paul Gilbert and colleagues developed a questionnaire about what they called fears of compassion, which included fears about being kind to oneself. The items were statements such as the fear that if you became kinder to yourself, your standards would drop, or you'd become weak, or you'd become someone you didn't want to be. They gave it to 222 students and 53 therapists. Fear of being compassionate towards oneself was strongly linked to self-criticism. The people who were hardest on themselves were the people most afraid of stopping. Both went with depression, anxiety and stress.

So if you recoil, that's typical of the habit, and the recoil doesn't show that kindness is unsafe for you in particular.

It helps to be clear about what I'm recommending, because the word kindness covers a lot.

I'm not recommending that you think highly of yourself. You don't need to believe you're talented, attractive or special. The friend test doesn't ask what a flatterer would say. When Anna rang about the

dentist, you didn't tell her she was the most organised mother in the county. You told her it happens to everybody and helped her fix it.

Nor am I recommending that you make excuses. A good friend doesn't say "it wasn't your fault" when it was. She says, "Yes, you forgot. It's fixable. Here's what I'd do."

Self-pity is no part of it either. Self-pity says "poor me, nothing ever goes right". A friend says "this is hard, and plenty of people find it hard".

And it doesn't mean letting yourself off the things you've decided to do. There's evidence on that. Fuschia Sirois and colleagues pooled fifteen samples, with more than three thousand people in all, looking at whether people who are kinder to themselves take better or worse care of their health. If kindness to yourself meant letting yourself off, you'd expect the self-compassionate to exercise less, eat worse and skip the dentist. It went the other way. In every one of the fifteen samples, people who were kinder to themselves reported more healthy behaviour. The link was modest in size, and these are self-reports at a single point in time, so they can't show what causes what. But the evidence points away from the fear. The kind of kindness in question seems to go with looking after yourself, which includes doing things you'd prefer not to do.

That makes sense if you think about what kindness to a friend involves. If you care about Anna, you want things to go well for her. Sometimes that means telling her something she doesn't want to

hear, or encouraging her to do the hard thing. Wanting good things for someone means having standards for them, and it means going on caring about them when they fall short.

## "It's only in my head"

You might accept most of this and still feel it doesn't matter much. It's only thoughts. Nobody's hurt. You say a few harsh things to yourself and get on with the day. Compared with real problems, it hardly seems worth a book.

Consider how often it happens. If you kept the tally from chapter 1, you have a number. Suppose it was thirty remarks a day. Over a year, that's more than ten thousand, all from the same voice and all pointing the same way. If a colleague made thirty disparaging remarks to you every day, you wouldn't describe it as only words. You'd describe it as bullying, and you'd expect it to affect your health. It doesn't stop mattering because the colleague is inside your own head, where you can't get away from it by going home.

Consider too what repetition does. Anything rehearsed ten thousand times a year becomes automatic, quick and convincing. After enough repetition you no longer experience the commentary as an opinion. It seems like plain perception. "I'm useless at this" stops feeling like a thought you're having and starts feeling like a fact you're observing. It's how a habit of speech becomes a belief about who you are.

And consider what your body makes of it. This part is interpretation, based on a view that Gilbert and others have argued for, and I can't point you to a single study that settles it. The systems in your body that respond to threat don't distinguish sharply between an attack from outside and one from inside. If someone stood over you and said "you idiot, what is wrong with

you", your heart would speed up and your stomach would tighten. In the car park on Wednesday, with nobody there but you, your heart was going. You were reacting to the form being late, and also to being shouted at. A person who's attacked thirty times a day, from inside, spends a good part of the day in a mild state of alarm. That's tiring, and it may be one reason why self-critical people so often describe themselves as worn out.

So the commentary isn't weightless. You hear more of it than of any other voice in your life, and it's always hostile.

You do have more control over it than over most things. You can't choose your colleagues or decide what strangers think of you. How you speak to yourself is one of the few parts of your daily environment that's entirely in your hands, though after thirty years of habit it doesn't feel that way. The next chapters deal with changing it.

## What the commentary costs you

The last several chapters took the beliefs one at a time. This one adds up the bill.

You're paying in mood and in mental health. Angus MacBeth and Andrew Gumley pooled twenty samples from fourteen studies that had measured both how kindly people treated themselves and their levels of depression, anxiety and stress. The association was large. The harder people were on themselves, the more symptoms they had. In Gilbert's study of fears of compassion, when everything measured was put into one analysis, self-criticism was the only significant predictor of depression. These are associations, measured at one point in time. Depression makes people self-critical, as well as the reverse, so the arrow runs both ways. But a habit that so reliably keeps company with depression isn't one to regard as harmless.

You're paying in progress. On the evidence of chapter 3, self-critical people get less far with their goals, across every area studied.

You're paying in what you don't attempt. This cost is the hardest to see, because it's made up of things that didn't happen. You didn't go for the promotion, and you never joined the choir. There was a course you didn't sign up for, because you'd be the worst in the class and you knew what you'd say to yourself about that. Someone who's savaged for every failure learns to stay where failure is unlikely, which means staying inside what she can already do. A life lived that way gets smaller over the years. From the outside it looks like modesty or caution.

You're paying in accuracy, as chapter 4 showed. Your picture of your own abilities is lower than the facts support. You're making decisions about what to apply for, what to charge and what to say in meetings on the basis of a biased report.

You're paying in the ability to enjoy what you do well. The commentary has plenty to say about failures and nothing about successes. When a piece of work goes well, it's silent, or it notes that anyone could have done it, or it points out the flaw. So your achievements don't register and the failures do, and after enough years your memory holds mostly failures.

You're paying in energy, for the reason in the last chapter.

And you're paying in sleep. The midnight review, with its agenda going back to 2016, is the commentary's longest performance of the day, and it comes at the hour when you're least able to answer back.

I should put the other side. You may feel that the commentary has driven you to achieve things, and you may have achieved a good deal. I'd say you achieved them because you care, you work hard and you have high standards, and that you did it in spite of carrying a heckler the whole way. The research in chapter 3 suggests you'd have got at least as far without one. I can't prove that about your particular life. But it's worth asking whether you'd wish this method on anyone you loved. If your son grew up to talk to himself the way you talk to yourself, I doubt you'd be pleased that he'd learned discipline.

## What it costs the people around you

A private habit of mind seems to affect nobody else. But the commentary gets out in several ways.

The first is that you say some of it aloud. "I'm so stupid." "God, I'm useless." "Ignore me, I'm an idiot." These slip out when you drop something or forget something, and you think nothing of them. If you have children, they're listening. Children learn how a person is supposed to respond to a mistake mainly by watching what the adults around them do when they make one. You'd never call Sam an idiot for forgetting his PE kit. But if he hears you call yourself an idiot for forgetting a form, he's learning what to say to himself when he forgets his kit. Chapter 2 argued that the commentary is handed down, and this is how it happens. Nobody meant any harm by it.

The second is what it asks of the people close to you. A partner or friend who hears you run yourself down has to decide what to do. Usually they reassure you. "No, you're not useless, it was one form." That's kind of them, and it's also work. It has to be done again the next day, because reassurance from outside doesn't last against a commentary that runs all the time. Some partners get tired. Some come to feel that their good opinion of you counts for nothing, since you overrule it daily.

The third is praise. When someone compliments your work, the commentary disagrees, and you say so. "Oh, it was nothing, I made a mess of the ending." You mean it as modesty. But the person who

praised you hears that their judgement was wrong, and if you keep telling them so, they'll stop offering it.

The fourth is that standards leak. Someone who treats every mistake of her own as a disgrace finds it hard, over time, to be relaxed about other people's. You may be gentle with Anna. But people who live with a harsh self-critic often report feeling judged too, even when nothing is said. A sigh, a tightening, or the way you redo something they did can be enough. If you can't tolerate your own mistakes, the house you live in becomes a tense place for other people to make theirs.

And the last is simply that you're less available. Someone who's absorbed in an argument with herself, going back over the slip in the meeting, isn't fully present at dinner. The commentary takes your attention, and it's the people you live with who go without.

## The friend test

The method this book recommends is contained in its title. When you've got something wrong and the commentary starts, you ask one question. What would I say to a friend who'd done exactly this?

It isn't my invention. The NHS gives the same advice on its page about raising low self-esteem. Be kind to yourself, it says, which means being gentle with yourself at times when you feel like being self-critical, and it suggests thinking what you'd say to a friend in a similar situation.

The test works for a particular reason. It doesn't ask you to learn a new skill. You already know how to respond well to someone's mistake. You did it for Anna without any effort. You were warm, you were honest, you put the thing in proportion, and you turned straight to what could be done. You've had years of practice at this, with friends, colleagues and children. It's a highly developed ability that you happen never to use on yourself, and the friend test asks you to use it there.

It's also a way of separating correction from attack, because a good friend supplies the first and leaves out the second. Think about what you'd say to a friend who'd found a late form in her bag. You wouldn't pretend the form wasn't late. You'd say something like, "Oh, that's annoying. Ring the office, they deal with this all the time. It's one form. You've had a lot on." Then, if she wanted, you might help her think about how to stop it happening again. That response has everything in it that's useful. It acknowledges what

happened, keeps it in proportion, gives her a next step, and adds a reminder that she's a normal person having a normal week. It leaves out only the insult.

Here's the test in steps, which you can adapt.

First, notice the remark. This is the hardest part at the beginning, because the commentary is so familiar that you hardly hear it. The tally in chapter 1 is practice for this. You're listening for the tone as much as the words. It sounds contemptuous and exasperated, as if an impatient adult were addressing a child.

Second, name it. Say silently, "That's the commentary." It's a small thing, but it makes a difference. It turns "I'm an idiot" from a fact you're observing into a remark that's been made, and a remark can be questioned.

Third, ask the question. If a friend had done this, what would I say to her? Be specific. Picture a particular friend, in the particular situation, and hear what you'd say. If it helps, imagine what Anna would say to you.

Fourth, say that to yourself. Use those words. It will feel false the first few dozen times, as though you were reading someone else's lines. It's unfamiliar, but it isn't false. The words are the ones you'd use to a friend and mean sincerely.

There's a refinement that has good evidence behind it. Ethan Kross and colleagues at the University of Michigan ran seven studies, with 585 participants in all, on the language people use when they talk to themselves under stress. Some participants were asked to reflect on their feelings in the first person, using "I" and "my".

Others were asked to use their own name and "you", as in "Why is Sarah nervous about this? You've done it before." Then they were put through something stressful, such as making a first impression on a stranger or giving a speech with little preparation. Those who'd used their own name performed better according to independent judges, felt less distress, and brooded less about it afterwards. They also saw the coming stress more as a challenge and less as a threat. It worked for socially anxious people as well as for others.

The researchers' explanation is that using your own name creates a little distance. It lets you stand where a friend would stand. For most of us, advising other people is much easier than advising ourselves, because other people's problems come without the panic. Addressing yourself by name borrows that position. So when you run the friend test, try it in the second person and with your own name. If your name were Sarah, it would be "Sarah, it's one form. Ring the office." Oddly enough, the commentary has been using "you" all along, as in "you idiot" and "what's wrong with you". The second person is already in use, and you only need to change what it says.

Here's how it goes with the other two remarks from that Wednesday. In the meeting, the commentary said, "Stupid. They all saw that. They're wondering how you got this job." If a friend told you she'd given one wrong figure in a presentation and a colleague had corrected it, you'd say, "That happens in every presentation anyone's ever given. She corrected it, you said thanks, it took five

seconds. If you want, check the slides against the final numbers next time." The correction is in the last sentence, and the rest puts the slip in proportion.

At the mirror, the friend test gives a different kind of answer, because nothing had gone wrong and there's nothing to correct. If a friend said about her own face what you said about yours, you wouldn't offer advice. You'd say, "Don't talk about my friend like that." Some remarks are attack with no correction in them at all, and the only reply they need is that you won't speak to a person that way.

On paper the method is stronger still. If something is really bothering you, write down what happened and then write a few lines to yourself as you'd write to a friend. It's the exercise Leary and Zhang and Chen used in their experiments, and it took their participants only a few minutes.

# The decision

Here's the rule I'm suggesting.

**When I've got something wrong, I talk to myself the way I'd talk to a friend who'd done the same. I say what happened and what to do about it, and I leave my character out of it.**

It has seven parts.

**Catch the remark.** Notice the commentary when it starts, and name it as the commentary. In the first weeks you'll catch perhaps one remark in five, usually late. That's fine. The proportion rises with practice.

**Run the friend test.** Ask what you'd say to a friend who'd done this, and say it to yourself, by name if that helps.

**Keep the correction.** State plainly what went wrong, in specific terms and without always or never. Decide the next step. If the mistake is the kind that recurs, decide what you'll change. This is the part that serves your standards, and the rule keeps all of it.

**Repair what needs repairing.** If someone else was affected, acknowledge it to them, apologise if an apology is due, and put right what you can. It's harder than calling yourself names, and it's the part that does some good.

**Then stop.** Once you've corrected and repaired, the matter is closed. If the commentary opens it again at midnight, the answer is "That's been dealt with." One mistake gets one hearing.

**Stop the out-loud version first.** "I'm so stupid" and "I'm useless", said aloud, are the easiest remarks to catch, because you can hear them. Replace them with something accurate, such as "I forgot that" or "That was a mistake." If there are children in the house, this matters for their sake as well as yours.

**Don't attack yourself for attacking yourself.** You'll forget the rule, and catch yourself halfway through a savage review of something trivial. The commentary will be pleased to add this to the charge sheet. "You can't even be kind to yourself properly." Apply the rule to that too. A friend would say, "You've been doing this for thirty years, of course it's still happening. You noticed. That's the skill."

Plans of the "when this happens, then I'll do that" kind make a decision much more likely to survive the speed at which the commentary works. Peter Gollwitzer and Paschal Sheeran pooled 94 tests of such plans and found that they made people a good deal more likely to follow through. Here are three, which you can adapt.

When I hear myself say "you idiot", aloud or silently, then I'll say "that's the commentary" and ask what I'd say to a friend.

When I make a mistake at work, then I'll say what it was in one specific sentence and decide the next step before anything else.

When the review starts at night, then I'll tell myself "that's been dealt with", and if it hasn't, I'll write down one step for the morning.

Here's what to expect, in my estimate. For the first fortnight, mostly you'll notice. You'll be dismayed by how often it happens and how vicious it is. That's uncomfortable, but it's progress,

because you couldn't hear it before. The friendly replies will feel wooden and unconvincing. Over the next month or two they'll come more easily, and you'll find that the attack loses some force once it's been named. The commentary won't vanish. A habit that's been rehearsed for thirty years gets quieter and you believe it less, and it still speaks up when you're tired or under strain. What changes is that it becomes one voice among others, and you stop taking its word. I can't promise you that your mood will lift, though the research suggests it may. If it doesn't, or if things get worse, go back to the cautions in the preface.

## Big mistakes, old voices and other hard cases

**If you've really done something bad.** Sometimes the mistake is more than a late form. Perhaps you betrayed a confidence, or neglected someone who needed you, or made an error at work that harmed people. The rule still applies, and it asks more of you here, because a serious wrong calls for serious correction and repair. You need a full acknowledgement, a real apology, whatever amends are possible, and a hard look at how it happened. A friend who loved you wouldn't tell you it didn't matter. She'd say, "That was wrong, and you know it. Now what are you going to do?" Hating yourself isn't part of what you owe, and it gets in the way of the rest. If the thing can't be repaired, because the person has died or won't speak to you, then the task is to carry the regret honestly and to be different from now on. A counsellor can help with regrets of that weight.

**If the voice is someone else's.** Some readers will have recognised the commentary at once as a parent's voice, or a teacher's, or a former partner's. If that person was harsh but ordinary, it often helps to say so when you name the remark. "That's Dad." It reminds you that the judgement was never yours and that you're free to disagree with it. If that person was abusive, the commentary may be tied up with painful memories, and changing it may stir them. That's work to do with a therapist and not alone. Your GP can refer you, and in England you can refer yourself to NHS talking therapies.

**If you really are bad at something.** The commentary sometimes has a point on the facts. You may be poor at spreadsheets, or at keeping in touch with people, or at parking. The friend test doesn't require you to deny it. A friend would say, "Yes, spreadsheets aren't your strength. Do you want to get better at them, or arrange things so it matters less?" A weakness in a skill is a practical matter, and you can address it practically. It says nothing about your worth. The commentary's trick is to slide from "I did this badly" to "I am bad", and you can decline that step while accepting the facts.

**If you work in a harsh field.** Some professions and some sports run on fierce criticism, and you may feel that being hard on yourself is part of the job. High standards certainly are. But the evidence in chapter 3 came partly from demanding pursuits, and it found that self-criticism went with less progress. The best performers tend to be exacting about the work and steady about themselves. They'll say "That passage was out of tune, do it again slowly." They don't add "you're a fraud".

**If someone else criticises you.** When criticism comes from outside, the commentary will want to join in on the critic's side. Apply the friend test to the criticism itself. If a friend had received this comment, what would you tell her? You'd probably help her sort out which parts were fair and useful and which said more about the critic. Then take the fair part as correction and act on it.

**If the remarks are about your body or your face.** The mirror is a favourite location for the commentary. You wouldn't say to a friend what you say to your reflection, and she'd be hurt if she heard you

say it to yourself. The rule applies as it stands. If your feelings about your appearance or your eating are taking over your life, that's something to take to a GP.

**If compliments are hard to take.** As a first step, when someone praises you, say "thank you" and nothing else. You don't have to agree inwardly. Just don't contradict them aloud. It's easier on the other person, and over time it lets some of the praise in.

**If you're worried you'll overshoot.** Some people fear that they'll swing from self-attack to smugness. I know of no evidence that it happens. Someone who's been hard on herself for decades, and learns to stop, doesn't become arrogant. She ends up about as fair to herself as she's always been to other people.

**If it comes with perfectionism.** The two often travel together, and there's a separate book in this series on perfectionism. The short version is in chapter 3. High standards help, and the self-punishment that comes with them doesn't.

**If your mood is low and the commentary is relentless.** Go back to the preface. Relentless self-criticism together with persistent low mood, poor sleep, and loss of interest in things is a reason to see your GP. Therapies that work directly on self-criticism exist and are available on the NHS.

## Wednesday again

It's a Wednesday some months on, at twenty-five past eight, and you're in the car park at work. You reach into your bag for your pass and find an envelope. It's the cheque for Sam's music lessons, which should have gone in on Monday.

"You idiot" arrives on schedule, as it still does. You hear it, and you almost smile, because it sounds so exactly like your father. You think, "That's the commentary." Then you ask what you'd say to Anna, and you say it, using your own name. "It's a cheque. It's two days late. Ring the office."

You ring. It's fine, and it takes a minute. On the walk across the car park you think about it for a moment longer, as a practical matter. It's the second time something's got lost in that bag. When you get to your desk you put a reminder in your phone to go through Sam's school bag with him on Sunday evenings, and that's the end of it. Nothing follows you across the car park.

At eleven you're presenting, and you lose your thread for a moment and have to check your notes. There's a flicker of "they all saw that". You let it pass. Nobody's face has changed. You find your place and carry on, and you're able to listen to the questions at the end, because you're not busy going back over the slip.

Last month there was a real mistake. You sent a client a contract with the wrong terms, and it cost the firm some money and you an uncomfortable meeting. The old commentary had a great deal to say, and for a day it said it. Then you wrote down what had

happened, in plain sentences. You told your manager before she found out, which you wouldn't have done a year ago. You apologised to the client, fixed what could be fixed, and changed how you check contracts. It was a bad week, but it didn't turn into a bad month. Your manager said she appreciated being told straight away.

You've stopped saying "I'm so stupid" out loud. It took a few weeks. Last Tuesday Sam knocked a full glass of juice over his homework, and you heard him say, "Oops. Okay. Kitchen roll." You don't know whether that's anything to do with you, but you noticed it.

Anna rang on Saturday. You talked for an hour, and at one point you told her about the contract, and she said, "Oh, love. You told them straight away, that's the hard part." You let her say it and didn't argue.

Some things haven't changed. You still have high standards, and your work is as careful as ever. It may be better, since you now look at your mistakes and don't flinch from them. The commentary still turns up, mostly when you're tired. You signed up for the evening class in the autumn. You're the worst in the group at the moment, and you find you can stand it.

The midnight review is mostly gone. When it starts, you say, "That's been dealt with," and usually it has been.

Here's one action. Think of the last thing you called yourself an idiot for. Write down, in two or three sentences, what you'd have said to a friend who'd done the same. Then read it back to yourself, using your own name.

## Notes

This book gives general information. It isn't psychological or medical advice, and it's no substitute for a professional who knows your situation. NHS guidance is quoted as I found it in September 2026 and applies to England.

I've kept sources out of the chapters where I could so they read easily. Here they are by chapter, with the limits I'm aware of. Unless I say otherwise, I read the published summary of each paper and not the full text. I checked each paper for a retraction or correction notice in September 2026 and found none on the papers cited. Where a chapter isn't listed, it rests on my own reasoning. That includes chapters 1, 9, 10, 12, 14 and 18, and most of 17. You, Sam, Anna and every other example are invented for illustration.

Most of the research here measures what psychologists call self-compassion, usually with a questionnaire developed by Kristin Neff. I've mostly written "being kind to yourself" in the chapters. Some researchers have questioned whether that questionnaire measures one thing or two, a kind stance and the absence of a harsh one. For this book the distinction matters less than it might, since the harsh stance is the subject.

**Before you start.** The advice on depression is from the NHS page "Depression in adults, symptoms". The Samaritans' number is 116 123.

**Chapter 2.** Koestner, Zuroff and Powers, "Family origins of adolescent self-criticism and its continuity into adulthood", Journal of Abnormal Psychology 100, 1991, pages 191 to 197. The parenting reports came from mothers only. For the men in the study, self-criticism at twelve didn't predict self-criticism at thirty-one, which the chapter doesn't mention. The NHS wording is from the page "Raising low self-esteem". That a toddler doesn't treat a dropped cup as shameful, and that the commentary often uses a remembered adult's phrasing, are my observations.

**Chapter 3.** Powers, Koestner, Zuroff, Milyavskaya and Gorin, "The effects of self-criticism and self-oriented perfectionism on goal pursuit", Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin 37, 2011, pages 964 to 975. That the areas studied included academic work, weight loss and music is from my memory of the paper. The summary says only that the five studies covered a variety of domains. The explanation in terms of avoidance, and the comparison with a bullying manager, are mine.

**Chapter 4.** Leary, Tate, Adams, Allen and Hancock, "Self-compassion and reactions to unpleasant self-relevant events: the implications of treating oneself kindly", Journal of Personality and Social Psychology 92, 2007, pages 887 to 904. The finding on videotaped performances is from the fourth of five studies. That the task was making up a children's story is from my memory of the paper.

**Chapter 5.** Neff's account of seeing one's failings as part of common human experience is set out in Neff, "Self-compassion: an alternative conceptualization of a healthy attitude toward oneself",

Self and Identity 2, 2003, pages 85 to 101, which I've described from general knowledge. The argument about inside information is mine.

**Chapter 6.** Leary and colleagues as above, the fifth study. My description of the exercise is from memory of the paper. Zhang and Chen, "Self-compassion promotes personal improvement from regret experiences via acceptance", Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin 42, 2016, pages 244 to 258. The improvement in the third study was reported by the participants themselves. Related experiments by Breines and Chen in 2012 are described in other books in this series and aren't repeated here.

**Chapter 7.** Neff, Hsieh and Dejitterat, "Self-compassion, achievement goals, and coping with academic failure", Self and Identity 4, 2005, pages 263 to 287. There were 222 students in the first study and 110 in the second. Kinder students in the second study were also more likely to use what the authors call emotion-focused coping. That self-kind people would work as hard without the fear is my expectation.

**Chapter 8.** Gilbert, Clarke, Hempel, Miles and Irons, "Criticizing and reassuring oneself: an exploration of forms, styles and reasons in female students", British Journal of Clinical Psychology 43, 2004, pages 31 to 50. All the participants were women students. The four marks that tell correction from attack are mine.

**Chapter 11.** Gilbert, McEwan, Matos and Ravis, "Fears of compassion: development of three self-report measures", Psychology and Psychotherapy 84, 2011, pages 239 to 255. The examples of what the questionnaire asks are from my memory of

it. Sirois, Kitner and Hirsch, "Self-compassion, affect, and health-promoting behaviors", *Health Psychology* 34, 2015, pages 661 to 669. The average correlation was 0.25, and the samples were the authors' own.

**Chapter 13.** MacBeth and Gumley, "Exploring compassion: a meta-analysis of the association between self-compassion and psychopathology", *Clinical Psychology Review* 32, 2012, pages 545 to 552. The pooled correlation was minus 0.54. Gilbert and colleagues 2011 as above.

**Chapter 15.** The NHS advice is from "Raising low self-esteem". Kross, Bruehlman-Senecal, Park, Burson, Dougherty, Shablack, Bremner, Moser and Ayduk, "Self-talk as a regulatory mechanism: how you do it matters", *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 106, 2014, pages 304 to 324. The example sentence about Sarah is mine. The studies were about stress before and after social tasks, and applying the technique to self-criticism after a mistake is my step.

**Chapter 16.** Gollwitzer and Sheeran, "Implementation intentions and goal achievement: a meta-analysis of effects and processes", *Advances in Experimental Social Psychology* 38, 2006, pages 69 to 119. The rule and its parts haven't been tested together, and what I say to expect is my expectation and not a finding. Trials of programmes that teach self-compassion have been pooled by Ferrari and colleagues in the journal *Mindfulness* in 2019. I couldn't obtain a summary and so haven't relied on it.

**Chapter 17.** The therapy I have in mind in the last section is compassion-focused therapy, developed by Paul Gilbert, along with cognitive behavioural therapy. Availability varies by area. The book on perfectionism is "Good enough went out on time".