Overcoming Self-Loathing

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Intended for:

Parents
Children and adolescents
People who struggle with the experience of not liking themselves
Therapists
All of us, to continue to consider this topic

Also, this will not be comprehensive in that I will mainly be looking at the manifestation of self-loathing in the context of conditions like BPD. I recognize that we see this symptom in the LGBTQ community, in people with other mental health conditions and in young men and women under the unrelenting impact of social media.
A Reflection

Of all the symptoms that I see in the patients we treat, perhaps the one that elicits the most sadness in me is when they tell me that they hate themselves.

This is going to be a difficult talk for many to hear. We have to start somewhere. Although we tend to have relative success in addressing many behaviors in the patients we see, the experience of self-loathing seems to be one that does not budge as readily. I find it nearly unimaginable that people so worthy, so talented, so capable and often so compassionate, qualities so readily seen by others, cannot see their own self-worth.

There is to-date no robust or reliable therapeutic way to address this symptom and so these slides represent my reflections. My ideas and perspectives on the topic, my review of the literature, and the way that I imagine a path forward.
A Cautionary Word

Many will find this talk difficult.
It may trigger strong emotions.
People mind feel blamed or blame themselves.
It may feel invalidating.
Therapists may find it discouraging

AND there will be much to hope for, and many ideas to try out!

However, because the topic of self-loathing is rarely brought up we have to begin discuss this symptom just as much as we do any other.
Goals For This Talk:

I want to review the nature and presentation of self-loathing and related constructs, consider its development in people with conditions such as Borderline Personality Disorder (BPD), review the literature on the topic, and suggest some approaches to consider in tackling the experience of self-hatred.

I will review the more painful, yet necessary, aspects of the topic, before suggesting some ideas as to what we can do.
To Paraphrase Nelson Mandela

“No one is born hating themselves because of who they are. A person must learn to hate, and if they can learn to hate, they can be taught to love, for love comes more naturally to the human heart than its opposite.”
Self-Loathing: A Narrative

The following sequence to self-loathing is common:

1) A person experiences being chronically hurt, rejected or invalidated
2) They conclude that this must be because they are a bad person (karma)
3) That then because they are bad, that the things they do are bad
4) That then as punishment for doing bad things, bad things happen to them
5) Then if they are bad, then no one will ever love them
6) Then if no one can love them, they are eternally unlovable
7) If they are unlovable, then they cannot love themselves
I Hate My SELF

What is the self that you are hating?
What if we removed all the parts that you did not hate?
What would be left?
Can you reconsider the statement?
1) I hate my thoughts?
2) I hate my actions, reactions, and behaviors?
3) I hate my emotions?
What Makes Up My SELF

Your bones
Your muscles
Your tissues
Your fluids
Your thoughts
Your emotions

Which of these do you hate?
What Do You Need To Grow?
Without The Cr@p
The Nature And Presentation Of Self-Loathing

Self-loathing is the enduring experience that “I am just not good.” It can be that the person feels that they are “not good enough,” or “not good at ____,” or simply “not good at anything.”

It can be subtle, with habitual comparisons to other people, marked with self-criticism.

People can constantly find fault in themselves, putting themselves down and doing so as if they deserve to be put down.

It can be listening to a critical inner voice which scolds and berates us, telling us how embarrassing, stupid, or insensitive we are and then because we believe this narrative to be true, we refuse to challenge the narrative.
Imagine

Living this way all the time and feeling that you have no control over that experience!
Related Ideas

Self-hatred
Self-criticism
Feeling toxic to others
Self-disgust
Self-Criticism

Self-criticism is a way in which a person evaluates themself.

In our work, self-criticism is typically seen as a negative personality trait in which a person has a disrupted self-identity.

The opposite of self-criticism would be the experience of a coherent, comprehensive, and generally positive self-identity.

Self-criticism is often associated with major depressive disorder and in general people with depression tend to be more self-critical than those without depression.

A high level of self-criticism prevents people from taking risks, asserting opinions, or believing in their own abilities which is unhelpful or detrimental to well-being.

Is this a trait of the person’s personality? Tougher to treat.

Is it self-criticism mood dependent? Easier to target.
Statements

“I’m a failure.”
“I can’t do anything right.”
“People are not going to like me.”
“I’m not good enough.”
“I’ll never get better.”
Compounded

By the thought: If I have so many good things in my life, what right do I have to complain about anything? If I am still dissatisfied it must be that I am a real failure.
Only YOU Can Take Away Your Self-Loathing

Many people on this call, whether clients, parents, clinicians, and others who will either 1) struggle with the symptom, 2) recognize it in their loved ones, or 3) want to treat this very real experience. Marsha Linehan teaches: “You may not have caused all your problems, but they are yours to solve anyway.”

Whatever the reason for why a person does not like themselves, it is their work to do. Certainly, others can do what they can to help, but others cannot remove it.

Focusing on blame is an exercise in staying stuck in perpetual suffering and abdicating autonomy.

Finally, this: You CANNOT stop hating yourself by hating someone else.
Imagine Your Kid Saying

“I can’t do it. I’ll never pass the test,” your son says. “I am so stupid!” he mumbles.

“I don’t have any friends!” your teenage daughter screams. “I’ll never have anyone because everyone hates me.”

“Why was I even born?” your loved one states.
Typical Development

Babies are born into the world entirely at the mercy of others. They have no natural strength or intelligence they cannot fight or complain. Their survival depends almost solely on their ability to charm their parents from their cribs.

That’s their superpower: Their ability to attract care in such a way that they will be fed and clothed, protected and kept alive.
In Exchange

Young children readily admire their caregivers unconditionally. Many parents remember wonderful interactions with their young kids. Babies and young children are in awe of their parents. They are in awe of their caregivers. When they are young, they have no desire nor need to question their authority figures. Because of this, small children are hugely sensitive to ensuring that they have their beloved protectors on their side. If they feel loved, they go about their natural ways.
Before We Go On

There is NO singular cause for self-hatred.
All research points to a significant interaction between environmental factors and a highly sensitive child.
Many parents who have more than one child use very similar styles of parenting with their other kids, and for some of their other kids, “tough parenting” and “tough love” really does work.
However

And this is particularly true in a highly sensitive child, when a parent does not or cannot provide such care, or if there is anger, or despair, or fighting or exhaustion, this impacts the development of the child’s sense of being in a safe world.

When this happens, encoded in human biology, the child then works a lot harder. It redoubles its efforts to charm, to be good, to smile, to be admired. In late childhood and early adolescence, we see kids then wondering what is wrong with them that their caregivers don’t seem to be approving.

Eventually they come to the conclusion that it must be because of their own character.
The Development Of Self-Criticism

Excessively self-critical thoughts often have their roots in negative experiences with caregivers in childhood.

Research on relationships and the attachments formed between a person and their primary caregivers show that the earliest bonds in life often have a significant effect on the child’s future relationships and their sense of self.

We find that when parents give children autonomy, encourage them to attempt things for themselves, and allow them to make mistakes without censure, children are more likely to develop self-confidence and grow up with a sense of security regarding their own choices.
Yes, You Did THAT! AND

It was not with intention.
It was often with compassion?
You did not realize the impact.

Your parenting style worked with your other kids.

There is NO BLAME here. Everything is caused and your sensitive child is who they are. The question is, what now?
In Most Cases

There was no intended malevolence by others.

And yet in many cases we assume that the other had malevolent intention.

“Assuming is a form of giving away your power to another regarding an outcome that concerns you.” Molly Friedenfeld, The Book of Simple Human Truths
Impact

Chronic or excessive self-criticism contributes to mental health disorders such as depression, social anxiety, body image concerns, perfectionism, self-harm or feelings of worthlessness.

A tendency to blame oneself when things go wrong can lead to feelings of failure, lowness, or a depressed mood. People who are highly self-critical may also feel guilty or ashamed when something goes wrong, believing the fault lies with them.
A Group Of 6 Adolescents

I ask them to write down the following:
1) How do you feel about yourself? (6/6)
2) How do you feel about the others in the group? (5/5)
3) What do you think that others feel about you? (5/5)
4) How do you reconcile the experience
Self-Loathing Makes No Logical Sense
As A Conclusion

It makes sense how it develops
It makes sense that a person feels the way they do

HOWEVER

It is built on a series of false premises, often ones that people who experience self-loathing, cannot see as false
What Can Be Done?

There is no singular treatment for self-loathing
The Problem With Standard Approaches

Standard behavioral interventions and therapists’ well-meaning encouragements often work for less self-loathing patients. These are ineffective with severe chronically self-loathing patients and might even cause a worse experience of self-loathing through perceived invalidation.

**Standard change-focused behavioral approaches** addressing low self-esteem might include naming or asking patients to look for positive attributes, qualities, skills or achievements with therapist and trying to connect these with positive self-worth, however these approaches are also frequently perceived as invalidating by the patient. Efforts to encourage change may be perceived by patients as evidence of their unacceptability and thereby serve as a stimulus for further self-loathing.

**Standard acceptance-focused behavioral interventions** can be equally problematic. Patients with BPD with severe chronic self-loathing often find therapists’ well-meaning encouragement of self-care, self-acceptance and self-soothing as superficial, facile, glib, ineffective or even aversive.

Patients can find such self-acceptance and self-care extremely challenging as it can create a self-perception of being undeserving or even triggering a more vigorous experience in patients of self-loathing and self-punishment.
It’s Difficult

Skills training
Focus on skill deficits might cue self-construct of being fundamentally flawed, providing ‘evidence’ of being fundamentally flawed.

Cognitive modification
Focus on ‘irrational’ thinking might cue self-construct of being fundamentally flawed, providing ‘evidence’ of being fundamentally flawed.

Exposure
Patients cannot engage in an exposure treatment to decrease suffering if they believe that suffering is justified.

Patient self-reinforcers
Difficult for patients to engage in behaviors that will promote a life of quality if clients believe that they are not deserving of such a life.

Mindful acceptance of internal experience
Mindfulness may cue an increase in distressing symptoms in patients previously practiced in avoiding emotional experiencing or may trigger thoughts of undeservedness.
What You Can Do NOW: Parents

Let go of hovering: When we do everything for our children, we inadvertently teach them that they are not capable of doing things for themselves.

Let them try themselves first: When we rescue our children too often, they never learn how to face life’s bumps, and they conclude that they are incompetent.

Don’t praise for the tiniest of successes: When we praise our children for every minor achievement, they stop believing in our praise altogether.

Do praise for overcoming challenges for THEM: What is easy for one kid is not necessary for another.

Stop constantly correcting: When we are constantly telling our kids how to do things better, they never get to celebrate what they already do well.

Let them figure it out: When we force our kids to stay in activities that they don’t want to be in, it can send the message that you always know better.
What To Do: Therapists

Target the reinforcers: Understanding the reinforcers for self-loathing will be important in looking for reinforcers of alternative healthier behaviors that might interrupt the self-loathing.

As therapists we do not want to validate the unhealthy self-loathing self-construct and so we need to find alternatives to validate. Without doing so, the treatment of self-loathing can remain stuck. The challenge is to help patients to find something that they can self-validate while not beating themselves up for their self-loathing.

Focus on the immediate antecedents and consequences of self-loathing.

The Zen Approach: “If I could have compassion for hating myself, I would no longer be hating myself, I’d be loving myself, and nothing about me would need to change.”
Targeting Avoidance

Awareness of self-loathing as avoidance of virtually unbearably painful emotions that patients do not know how to deal with can enable them to begin to empathize with and validate their experience. This can be done in a non-blaming way. In this way, self-loathing can be validated as having served as an adaptive way of surviving, while at the same time consider other, healthier ways of doing so in the present moment.
Cultivating Self-Compassion

Developing self-compassionate for unwanted or unpleasant emotions including, paradoxically, shame and self-loathing can interrupt patients’ vicious self-loathing cycle and be a starting point for attempting to access the small part of themselves for whom they have compassion.

Where patients can access a small part of themselves for whom they have compassion then, as therapists, we can encourage and support the growth of this aspect of the client.

Therapists can encourage the patient’s self-compassionate ‘voice’ to speak and be heard, at least initially, in the presence of their therapists.
The Magic Of Myelin

When different parts of the brain communicate and coordinate with each other, they send an electrical signal down the nerves to wherever they are connected. Sending the signal strengthens that nerve pathway and creates behavior: be it movement, thought, and emotion.

Accuracy and precision of behavior is made possible by the white matter in our brain. The white matter is called myelin, a fatty tissue that coats much of the length of the nerve cells. It’s like the insulation around an electrical cable.

Interestingly, the more myelin a nerve has, the stronger and faster the signal. A lot of myelin is like moving your internet to broadband. More myelin means that you are able to perform behavior with greater accuracy and precision than ever before.
This Is Great For Learning!

Sports
Musical instruments
Academics
Languages
How Do You Get More Myelin In Your Brain?

REPETITION!

Getting more myelin around the nerve cells is a process called myelination. The more we practice the same skill, the more myelination occurs, and the smoother, more natural and efficient the skill becomes.

But there’s a very important point about myelination – your brain doesn’t decide which pathways it will myelinate. It simply myelinates the ones that are activated the most.

This is why if you practice poor techniques in a sport or playing a musical instrument, you get good at doing the technique poorly. Myelination of those pathways leads to poor habits and these poor habits can be hard to correct.

The same is true for any concept: political, religious or other. YES, if you practice self-loathing and self-criticism, you get better at doing it.
What Is Key

Myelin is dynamic tissue. It builds with more practice. There is no process to unmyelinate a nerve cell or unlearn something, at least not completely. However, myelin will decay slowly without practice. It is thought that myelin begins to diminish after about 12 weeks.

If you want to stay good at something, you have 90-120 days that you can afford to not fire a specific circuit before it starts to be compromised. This is why you may feel rusty after a few days of no practice but take months or years off and it feels like starting from ground zero.

Removing self-loathing will not take place overnight.

So, when you practice a new way of seeing yourself, your brain creates a new circuit. It is important that when learning this new way of thinking that you do so, you do so in as an error-free way as you can. You want to myelinate the new pathway so that you get the outcome you need.
Brain Plasticity and Learning

https://youtu.be/VvZ-9ofM7Go
Learning Anew

Focus on the task at hand (self-compassion) and remove potential distractions from your practice space.

Start out slowly, making sure that what you are doing the action accurately (just a few minutes of fully practice each day). Then gradually increase the number of repetitions.

Frequent repetitions, with regular practice breaks, are common habits of elite performers.

Visualize in as vivid detail as possible, the you that you can imagine is loved.
Opposite Action To Self-Hatred?

If you hate yourself, the opposite practice is to love yourself
Loving Compassion/Self-Compassion

You can find more:
Research by Dr. Kristin Neff
The book: Lovingkindness Sharon Salzberg
What It Is Self-Compassion NOT

A form of narcissism
A form of selfishness
Weakness
Complacency
Self-pity
Research In BPD

Small study (2017) of 32 patients with BPD randomized patients into a loving-kindness and compassion meditation (LKM/CM) or mindfulness continuation training (control group). Patients in the LKM/CM group showed greater changes in acceptance and reduction in self-criticism compared with the control group.

A small study (2018) study of 19 patients showed a strong positive correlation between self-compassion and recovery and a strong negative correlation between self-criticism and recovery.
A Sense Of Agency

Remember that you may not have caused all your problems but that they are yours to solve anyway.
You may not have caused self-loathing, you may not have decided to hate yourself, but you do have the choice to do something about it.
Many of the people in your life did not have malevolent intent, but they did not know the impact of their actions on you. Can you forgive them?
Some people may have been intentionally hurtful. Can you forgive them?
Other Ideas:
You Cannot Defeat this all at Once

Do little things and notice the effect:
Support a friend
Small little acts of kindness
Do one nice thing for yourself
Notice having done a small thing well and recognize your experience as true
Be Precise. What Can You Change?

“'I hate myself.'” Is less of a precise statement HOWEVER you can work on:
“I should not have stayed up so late last night.”
“I should have waited until the morning to respond to the text.”
“I watched too many episodes of my binge show and didn’t study for my exam. I must stop that behavior.”
“I yelled at my partner this afternoon. I need to be more regulated when I explain what my concerns are.”
“If I keep spending money on stuff that I want, I won’t have the money I need to be able to move out of home. I need to start saving more.”

These statements focus on a particular aspect of behavior that a person wants to change.
In Summary

Self-loathing and related concepts are extremely painful experiences, particularly in conditions like BPD.

Its cause is complicated and involves biology and environment.

Blaming any person or anyone factor is not an approach that helps.

The conclusion of self-loathing, although is understandable, is not valid.

It is a learned construct, and although difficult, can be defanged, and replaced with healthier self constructs, including self-compassion and even self-love.
References


Loving Compassion Research

