

THE RELATIONSHIP WITH YOURSELF



*Understanding self-worth, self-criticism
and the inner voice that shapes everything else*

—
This workbook is an invitation to turn toward yourself
with the same care you have spent a lifetime
offering to everyone else.



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A note from me to you

This workbook is the one in this series that I feel most tender toward. Not because it deals with the most dramatic struggles, but because it explores the relationship that sits underneath all the others.

The relationship you have with yourself influences how you love, how you work, how you care for your body, how you respond to setbacks, what you believe you deserve, and how much space you allow yourself to occupy in the world. It shapes far more than most of us realise.

As you move through these pages, there is nothing you need to achieve. Nothing to prove. Nothing to get right. The invitation is simply to become curious.

To begin paying attention to how you speak to yourself, how you treat yourself, and what you have come to believe about your own worth. And if part of you is already wondering whether you deserve this kind of attention, whether you are worth the effort, whether focusing on yourself is somehow selfish or unnecessary, just notice that.

That voice is not a reason to stop. It may be one of the reasons you are here.

For now, all that is needed is a willingness to look with curiosity rather than judgement, and to consider the possibility that your relationship with yourself can become kinder than it has been.

That is enough to begin.

With warmth,

Shelagh MacFarlane, MSc Counselling Psychology
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How to use this workbook

This is a structured workbook with writing space throughout. You can print it and work through it by hand, or use it as a framework for journaling. Work through the sections in order if you can, each one builds on the last, but follow your own instincts if something draws you elsewhere.

A particular note for this workbook: if you notice something contracting as you read or write, a wish to close the page, a voice saying this is self-indulgent or you're making too much of things, please don't take that as a signal to stop.

Take it as a signal that you're close to something that matters.

Shame thrives on silence. Gentle, honest attention is its antidote.

There are no right answers here. There is no way to do this incorrectly. The only thing required is honesty, and a willingness to be slightly kinder to yourself than you have perhaps been in the habit of being.

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SECTION 1

How self-worth influences our relationship with ourselves

As you read this, I want you to notice what happens in you. Maybe a person comes to mind. Maybe a memory, or a moment, something from your own history, or the way you grew up. If that happens, let it. Whatever comes up for you, sadness, anger, tenderness, even a kind of numbness, all of it is welcome here. There's no right way to feel as you read this.

So much of what we end up believing about ourselves was never actually said to us directly. It was learned quietly. Over time. In ordinary moments that didn't seem especially significant when they happened.

What I'm inviting you into here is something quite personal. How did your relationship with yourself come to feel the way it does?

Because it didn't form on its own, in isolation. It formed in connection, with the people around you, and with what you learned simply from being with them. And when you start to see that a little more clearly, something in you often shifts. Not everything. Not all at once. But maybe enough to begin wondering whether it has to stay exactly as it is.

Because anything that was shaped in relationship can, in time, be reshaped in relationship too. That includes the relationship you're building with yourself, right now, in this book.

We learn our worth in relationship

It's easy to assume that our sense of worth comes mainly from what we were told as children. Words spoken or not spoken, and that can play a part. But if you're willing, I'd like to go a little deeper with you here, because it really does go much deeper than that.

A child's sense of worth is formed through experience, through how they are met when they are upset, whether their feelings are taken seriously, whether there is space for them emotionally, or whether they learn they need to adapt in order to stay connected.

And it isn't only what happens to a child. It's also what they observe. Children are constantly taking in the world around them, how the adults in their life speak to themselves, how they respond when they make mistakes, whether they seem gentle with themselves or critical, whether being "enough" seems to come naturally or like something that has to be earned.

Without anyone needing to explain any of it, something is being absorbed. Not as information. But as an internal sense of what it means to be a person.

The conclusions we make, without knowing we're making them

When a child grows up somewhere that feels emotionally steady enough, something quiet and stable tends to develop inside them. Not entitlement. Not inflated confidence. Just a sense of being okay. I matter. My feelings matter. I don't have to earn my place here.

For a lot of us, the experience was more mixed than that. There may have been love, care, real moments of connection, and, alongside them, other experiences that shaped things differently. Maybe attention or approval came more easily when things were going well. Maybe strong emotions didn't quite feel comfortable for the adults around them. Maybe it felt safer to be easy, capable, or not need too much.

Children rarely interpret that as something missing in the environment around them. They usually turn it inward. They make it about themselves. So, without ever choosing it, a child may begin to carry beliefs like, I am too much. I am not enough. I need to earn love. I have to achieve to be valued. Other people's needs matter more than mine. I need to be careful not to take up too much space.

I know what it is to carry "I have to achieve to be valued" in my own body. I started playing violin at three, and for years, the practicing wasn't really about the music. Two parts of me were driving it, a critic and a perfectionist, both convinced that if I wasn't good enough, something bad would happen. I pushed through pain in my shoulders and arms because stopping felt more dangerous than the pain did. For a long time, no one, including me, could see that what looked like discipline was actually fear. It took years, and a real turning point, before I could let go of the pushing and simply trust myself enough to play.

If any of these feel familiar, I want to be really clear with you: these aren't character flaws. They're adaptations, ways a younger version of you found to stay connected, safe, and understood in the particular world you were growing up in. They made sense. They may even have kept something in you protected.

Understanding where these beliefs came from is not the same as excusing what happened, or deciding your feelings about it should be smaller than they are. If what you're uncovering here brings up real anger toward the people who raised you, that anger may be entirely earned. You don't have to talk yourself out of it, and you don't have to arrive at forgiveness to keep doing this work. What we're reaching for isn't blame or its absence, it's understanding, held alongside whatever you actually feel, not instead of it.

Why these patterns can feel so true

Over time, these kinds of beliefs stop feeling like beliefs. They start to feel like reality. Not something you are thinking, but something that simply is true. Part of what makes them so powerful is that they didn't begin as conscious thoughts. They began as early ways of making sense of experience, formed by a younger version of you who was trying to understand something they didn't yet have the language for.

It doesn't have to be a difficult childhood

It's easy to assume that struggles with self-worth only come from clearly difficult or traumatic childhoods. But in reality, it's rarely that straightforward. Quite a few of us who struggle with self-worth describe

growing up in homes where we were loved in many ways. We were cared for. Our needs were met. There were moments of warmth, safety, and real connection. And still, something subtle may have shaped how they came to experience themselves. The way emotions were handled. What was praised or discouraged. What seemed to make someone "easy to love." What didn't quite feel welcome. It's rarely one big moment. It's the repetition of small ones. And those patterns can quietly continue long into adulthood, shaping not just how you see yourself, but how you relate to yourself.

So, if you'd like to, take a moment here before moving on. What belief about yourself feels most familiar to you, right now? And with real gentleness, where might it have first begun to take root?

There's no need to answer fully, or even clearly. Just let the questions rest with you for a moment. That noticing, softly held, is where this work begins.

Exercise 1 What you learned about your worth

Before you write, take a moment to slow this down rather than answer it quickly. There is no right way to do this. You are simply beginning to notice what you may have learned, over time, about what makes you acceptable, lovable, or safe.

What did you feel you needed to be, or do, or not be, in order to feel safe, accepted, or loved? You might notice patterns in behaviour, emotion, achievement, or personality, or simply a sense of how you learned to be in order to be okay with others.

As you write, try not to edit or judge what comes up. Just notice what appears.

Exercise 2 The conclusions you drew

Before you begin writing, take a moment to slow down with this. Over time, you made sense of your experiences in the best way you could. This exercise is about gently noticing what you came to believe about yourself along the way.

What did you conclude about your worth? About what you deserved? About what you needed to be or do in order to be accepted, safe, or loved? These conclusions may not always have been conscious. They may feel more like a background sense of “how things are” rather than clear thoughts.

As you write, you might find it helpful to be as specific as feels manageable, but without pushing.

SECTION 2

Self-esteem, self-worth, understanding the difference

These two ideas often get used as if they mean the same thing. And I think that can be confusing, because they actually refer to quite different experiences inside you.

Self-esteem

Self-esteem is usually about how we evaluate ourselves. How we see our abilities. How we feel about our performance. How we judge what we're doing in life. And because of that, it naturally shifts.

It tends to go up when things are going well. And it tends to drop when things feel harder, or when we don't meet our own expectations. So, in a way, self-esteem is quite responsive to what's happening around us, and to how we're doing in comparison to others or to our own standards.

Self-worth

Self-worth feels a little different. It's less about evaluation, and more about something deeper in how we relate to ourselves. A sense of whether we feel fundamentally okay as we are. Not because of what we achieve or how we perform, simply because we exist.

When self-worth feels more stable, something often shifts in how we are with ourselves. Mistakes may not land quite as heavily, failure may not feel like it defines us, and rest may feel a little less like something we have to earn.

They can exist at the same time

It might be helpful to notice that these two things can exist together. You may feel confident in what we do, capable, competent, even successful in many areas, and still carry a quieter sense underneath that something isn't quite enough. Or that we're still trying to prove something, even when things are going well.

This is something I see quite often. On the outside, things can look steady. But the relationship we have with ourselves can still feel quite conditional.

A small place to pause with this

It might be interesting to gently notice when things go well for you, does it shift how you feel about yourself as a person or just how you feel about your performance? And when things go badly, does it feel like a temporary setback or something that says something deeper about you?

Just something to begin noticing. Where self-worth actually shows up

Here's something worth pausing on. Self-worth often becomes most visible not in how you perform, but in how you are with yourself when performance is taken out of the picture entirely.

When you're tired. When you make a mistake. When things don't go to plan. When you're not "doing well" in any obvious way, nothing to point to, nothing to show for it.

That's often where the relationship with yourself becomes clearest. Not in the moments you'd choose to be seen in, but in the quiet, unremarkable ones. And that's often exactly where the deepest patterns live, because there's nothing to earn your way out of it with.

So, here's an invitation. Right now, as you are, not achieving anything, not fixing anything, just reading these words, can you take a moment to appreciate yourself? Not for anything you've done. Just for being here, doing this work, willing to look. That's allowed to be enough on its own.

And it gives you room to be human. You don't have to be steady, or insightful, or "doing this right" for any of this to count. You're allowed to be tired here. You're allowed to get it wrong, lose the thread, or not feel anything at all. This isn't a performance either.

Exercise 3 Esteem, worth, or both?

A simple question to sit with. You might find it helpful to pause with this for a moment, rather than answer it quickly. When you think about your relationship with yourself, what feels most familiar?

Is it mainly self-judgement, a tendency to evaluate your performance, appearance, or capabilities quite harshly? A sense of not measuring up in what you do? Or does it feel something deeper than that, less about what you do, and more about who you are? A quieter sense that, even when things are going okay on the surface, there is still something about you that doesn't feel fully acceptable? Or perhaps it shifts between the two.

At times it may be performance-based, linked to achievement, comparison, or how things are going in your life. At other times it may feel more global, as though your sense of worth as a person itself is affected. This is not something to get correct, but something to begin noticing.

SECTION 3

The inner critic and what it is protecting

You may notice that alongside these deeper feelings about worth, there's often another experience that shows up quite strongly. A kind of inner voice.

I know mine well. For years, mine sounded like a metronome I could never quite satisfy, always faster, always cleaner, always not yet. It lived in my violin practice from the time I was very small, and it had a companion, a perfectionist, who worked right alongside it. Between the two of them, I could play something well and still walk away certain I hadn't done enough.

For some of us, this voice is clear and easy to recognise, the way mine was. For others, it's more subtle, a background commentary running underneath everything else. But either way, it can feel quite harsh at times. Quick to point out what hasn't gone well. Quick to focus on what could have been done better. And often much slower to register what has gone well, or what you're managing under pressure. When things are difficult, this voice can get even louder.

Noticing how it sounds for you

You might begin, gently, by simply noticing what this voice is like for you. If you had to describe its tone, what words might fit? Is it critical? Pressuring? Disappointed? Cold? Relentless? Or something else entirely?

There's no right answer here, just your own experience of it. You don't need to change anything about it at this point. Just noticing is enough.

Looking at it a little differently

There's a way of understanding this voice that some people find genuinely helpful. Not as something separate from you. But as something that developed over time, in response to your experiences, and in many cases, it may have originally formed with a protective kind of intention, even if it doesn't feel that way now.

You might recognise moments where it seems to say things like If I criticize myself first, maybe it won't feel as bad if someone else does. If I push myself harder, maybe I can avoid making mistakes. If I stay on top of everything, maybe I can prevent things going wrong. If I don't assume I'm doing well, I won't be caught off guard.

At some point, this way of relating to yourself may have made a kind of sense, especially if being criticized felt painful, or approval felt uncertain, or mistakes felt like they carried more weight than you could easily hold.

What it learned along the way

You might also notice that this voice often reflects the environment you grew up in, not always directly, but in tone, expectation, or pressure. Sometimes it mirrors how others spoke to you. Sometimes it mirrors how they spoke to themselves. And sometimes it simply reflects what seemed to be needed in order to stay safe, accepted, or valued. Over time, it becomes internalised. And because it's been there for so long, it can start to feel like it is simply "how you think."

Why it can feel so persistent

This voice doesn't always update easily. Even when life changes. Even when you're no longer in the same situations. It can still speak as if the same rules apply. As if you still need to be on guard. As if mistakes are still dangerous. As if worth still has to be earned. Because it's been trying to help in its own way, for so long, it can feel quite difficult to simply switch it off.

What might be happening underneath

It can sometimes help to pause the instinct to argue with this voice, or push it away. Instead, just get a little curious about what it might be trying to protect you from. Not because everything it says is true. But because underneath the tone, there is often something more vulnerable. Maybe a fear of being judged. Maybe a fear of not being enough. Maybe a fear of being rejected or letting yourself down.

When I finally got curious about mine, rather than fighting it, I found a frightened kind of loyalty underneath, it genuinely believed that if it stopped pushing, something in me would fall apart. That's not something I could have seen while I was still arguing with it.

You don't need to fully agree with any of this. Just beginning to see it differently can sometimes soften the relationship with it a little. And that softening, in my experience, is often where things begin to shift.

Now that you've spent a little time with that voice, where it might have come from, what it may be trying to protect, it might help to step back and look at something a little wider. Because this isn't just an inner experience that stays inside your head. It tends to move outward too, into the shape of your actual, everyday life, often in ways you haven't quite connected to it before.

When the critic first appeared

Before you begin, take a moment to settle. This exercise looks back gently, and there is no need to force anything or dig for a memory that will not come. You are simply becoming curious about where this voice may have learned to speak.

The inner critic is rarely something we are born with. More often it was shaped, somewhere along the way, by messages we absorbed about what made us acceptable, safe, or loved. As you think back, you might notice a particular period of your life, a relationship, or a recurring situation where you first began to feel that you were not quite enough as you were.

Sometimes the critic's tone, its choice of words, even its timing, can feel familiar. It may echo the voice of a parent, a teacher, a sibling, or a wider culture that praised certain things and withheld approval for others. This is not about assigning blame. It is about understanding that the voice came from somewhere, and that it was often trying, in its own way, to help you belong or stay safe.

Even at its harshest, the inner critic usually formed with a protective intention. Perhaps being hard on yourself first felt safer than being criticised by someone else. Perhaps striving for perfection seemed like the only reliable way to earn love or avoid rejection. As you reflect, you might gently ask what this part of you was trying to secure, or what it was trying to spare you from.

Whatever arises, try to meet it with the same care you would offer a friend. You are not trying to reach a tidy conclusion or a single origin story. You are simply beginning to understand that this voice, however painful, was not random, and that it once made sense.

Exercise 4 Getting to know your inner critic

Starting with what you notice - You might begin simply by noticing what this voice is like for you. If you had to describe its tone, what words would fit best? Is it harsh or contemptuous? Cold or dismissive? Quietly relentless? Something else entirely?

There is no right answer here, only what you recognise from your own experience.

- Getting curious about it - You might try writing about this voice as if you were getting to know something, rather than trying to get rid of it.
- Noticing its patterns. The situations it tends to appear in. The kinds of things it most often says. There can be something quite different that happens when you relate to it this way, when it becomes something, you are trying to understand, rather than something you are trying to silence. Sometimes, that shift in attention is enough for a slightly different perspective to begin to emerge.

Exercise 5 *When did the inner critic first appear?*

- *Does that voice echo the voice of a parent, a teacher, a sibling, or a wider culture that praised certain things and withheld approval for others?*
- *What was it trying to protect, secure, or spare you from?*

There are no right or wrong answers here. The goal is to see if you can recall when it started and perhaps understand why it started.

SECTION 4

How low self-worth shapes your life

The patterns you may not have connected

If an inner critic chisels away your self worth over time, it can ultimately result in low self-worth. Low self-worth rarely announces itself directly. It doesn't usually show up as a clear thought like I don't value myself. More often, it's something quieter than that. Something indirect, woven into patterns of behaviour, the way you relate to others, the choices you make, and the ones that feel difficult or impossible to make at all. It can also show up as a background sense that something is slightly off, even when things on the surface look fine.

What follows isn't a complete list. Think of it more as an invitation, to see whether any of these patterns feel familiar in your own life.

In relationships

You might notice certain familiar patterns in how you relate to others. Perhaps there's a difficulty trusting that you're valued simply for who you are, rather than for what you do, give, or manage for other people. You might find yourself giving more than you receive or staying attuned to others' needs in a way that leaves less space for your own.

There can also be a kind of background anxiety in relationships, a sense that love might be conditional or could be withdrawn if you don't stay "enough" in some way. As a result, asking for what you need may feel difficult. Not because you don't have needs, but because having needs can feel like too much, or like an imposition. And yet low self-worth doesn't always show up this way.

Sometimes it takes a different form, a sense of distance, emotional self-protection, not needing others too much. Even a kind of independence or superiority that keep other people at arm's length. On the surface, this can look like confidence. But underneath, it may still be organised around the same fear: that if someone gets close enough to really see you, they might find you lacking in some way. It can look like being the friend everyone leans on, while quietly making sure no one leans on you.

Do either of these feel like something you recognize?

At work

Low self-worth is often less visible at work, partly because it's often masked by high performance. From the outside, things may look successful, capable, even accomplished. But internally, you might recognise something different.

Other signals may help you recognize it. Perhaps praise is difficult to take in, quickly dismissed or minimised. Perhaps there's a strong fear of failure that quietly drives perfectionism. Perhaps success doesn't quite land as something that belongs to you, while failure feels more personal, more confirming.

There may also be a sense of needing to over-deliver in order to feel temporarily "okay." Or, at the other end of the spectrum, a stepping back from recognition altogether, a kind of self-sufficiency that looks strong on the outside, but may also be protecting against the risk of not being good enough. It might look like re-reading an email six times before sending it, certain that somewhere in it is proof you don't belong there.

In how you treat your body and wellbeing

One of the clearest places self-worth shows up is in how you relate to your own basic needs. Rest. Nourishment. Medical care. Pleasure. Time that is just yours. These needs aren't ignored out of carelessness, but because of a deeper, quieter assumption that they aren't fully deserved. That the needs of others come first. That rest has to be earned. That looking after yourself is somehow indulgent.

In whether you ask for help

There's something quite painful, and also very human, here. Often, those of us who most need support are the ones who find it hardest to reach for it. You might notice a tendency to minimize your own difficulties, to assume they aren't serious enough, or that others have it worse, or that you should be able to cope. This isn't really perspective. It's often what low self-worth looks like when it turns inward and becomes small. Not dramatic. Not obvious. Just quietly self-diminishing.

As you begin to notice these patterns, it can sometimes bring a sense of recognition, and for some of us, a sense of heaviness as well. It may become clearer how much of this isn't about isolated habits or personality traits, but about a deeper way of relating to yourself that has been shaped over time.

This is where the next part of the workbook becomes important. Because if low self-worth is reflected in the way you relate to yourself across different areas of life, then change also begins in that same place, in the relationship you have with yourself, moment by moment.

This is where self-compassion becomes relevant. Not as a technique to add on top of everything else, but as a different way of meeting yourself within the patterns you've just begun to recognise.

Exercise 6

You don't need to answer all of these. You might only stay with one or simply notice what comes up as you read.

There is nothing to get right here, only patterns to gently recognise.

- *Where in your life do you find yourself giving more than you receive? What is it like to notice that?*
- *How easy is it for you to believe that you are valued simply for who you are, not what you do?*
- *When you are struggling, do you tend to reach out for support, or manage things alone? What feels most familiar about that?*
- *How do you respond internally when things go well for you, do you take it in, or move past it quickly?*
- *When you think about your own needs (rest, care, support), do they feel equally important as other people's needs?*

Reflecting on low self-worth

What you may start to see here is that low self-worth isn't just something you have. It's something that quietly shapes how you are with yourself. And next, we begin to look at what it might be like to meet that internal experience in a different way. Not by pushing it away. But by beginning to relate to it differently.

By this point, you may have started to notice something important, that the way you relate to yourself isn't random. It has a shape to it. A kind of pattern. A familiar tone. A way of responding that can feel almost automatic at times.

You may also have noticed that the inner critic, the voice you explored a little earlier, is often part of that pattern. Not separate from it. But woven into how you tend to meet yourself, especially when things are difficult.

When the cost becomes visible

Here's something worth noticing. Even though this voice has been trying to help, over time its way of helping can start to cost you something.

You might notice more mistakes creeping in, not fewer, the pressure it applies can crowd out the very focus it's trying to protect. You might find yourself more irritated than usual, quicker to snap, with less patience for the people around you or for yourself. Sleep can start to change, harder to fall into, or harder to stay in. You might notice you're getting sick more easily, as if something in you simply doesn't have the reserves it used to.

These aren't signs that you're failing at managing the critic. They can be read differently, as a kind of wake-up call. A signal that this way of relating to yourself, however well-intentioned it once was, has become too costly to keep running on autopilot. Not a reason for more criticism about the criticism. Just information. An invitation to consider doing this differently, which is exactly where self-compassion comes in.

Reflecting

What you may start to see here is that low self-worth isn't just something you have. It's something that quietly shapes how you are with yourself. So I would like us to begin to look at what it might be like to meet that internal experience in a different way. Not by pushing it away. But by beginning to relate to it differently.

SECTION 5

How self-compassion can be a way forward

By this point, you may have started to notice something important. That the way you relate to yourself isn't random. It has a shape to it. A kind of pattern. A familiar tone. A way of responding that can feel almost automatic at times. You may also have noticed that the inner critic (the voice you explored a little earlier) is often part of that pattern. Not separate from it. But woven into how you tend to meet yourself, especially when things are difficult.

I would like to offer you an alternative way of being with yourself, involving self-compassion. Self-compassion is often misunderstood. We sometimes assume it means being lenient with ourselves, lowering our standards, or letting things go. But that isn't really what it refers to. At its core, self-compassion is a different way of being in relationship with yourself. It's the capacity to stay with your own experience, in a steadier, less critical way, especially in moments when things don't feel easy.

So it might look quite simple. When something goes well, it can mean allowing yourself to notice that. To let it land a little, without immediately moving on or dismissing it. When something is difficult, it can mean not adding an extra layer of criticism on top of what's already hard. And when the inner critic shows up, it can mean beginning to see it as something you can relate to differently, rather than something you automatically have to believe.

When it feels unfamiliar

This way of relating to ourselves doesn't come naturally at first, especially if self-criticism has been a long-standing way of coping, staying motivated, or trying to avoid mistakes. So, it can feel unfamiliar. Sometimes even uncomfortable. There may be a sense that if you soften the inner critic, something important might be lost, like drive, focus, or standards.

That concern usually makes sense in context. If self-criticism has been part of how you've managed life, it has likely also been trying to help in its own way, even if it's been harsh. So, this isn't about forcing a different stance toward yourself. It's more about beginning to notice what it's like to meet your experience in a slightly different way. Even briefly. Even imperfectly.

Self-compassion and self-worth

Over time, something often becomes clearer. The way you are with yourself shapes how you experience your own sense of worth. Not in a forced or positive-thinking way. In a lived, ongoing way.

When the relationship with yourself is mostly critical or conditional, it can be difficult for a steadier sense of worth to take root. When there's a little more space, a little more understanding, especially in difficult moments, something can begin to soften. Not because everything changes. But because you're no longer

relating to yourself only through judgement. And that shift, even if it feels small, can begin to change how life is experienced from the inside.

A place to begin

Self-compassion doesn't usually arrive as a fully formed state. It tends to begin in smaller moments. A pause before reacting to yourself. A slightly different tone internally. A moment of not immediately turning on yourself when something goes wrong.

Not doing it perfectly. Just noticing what happens when you don't add extra pressure or criticism on top of difficulty. That's often enough to begin with.

A gentle closing note

Nothing here is asking you to become a different kind of person. It's more an invitation to begin noticing what it might be like to be in a different kind of relationship with yourself. One that's a little less automatic. A little less harsh. And sometimes, just a little more on your side.

Exercise 7 The friend you would be

The exercise

Now imagine a close friend came to you describing exactly the same thing about themselves.

What would you say to them? Write it out, the words, the tone, the perspective you would offer.

Then read it back

And then notice: why is this available for them, but not for you?

Exercise 8 Small acts of self-regard

Starting small

It can begin with something very small. What might that look like for you?

Writing a specific commitment

Write down a specific commitment to yourself, based on what has been shared above. The smaller and more specific, the better (e.g. take 5 minutes once a day to sincerely and compassionately check in with yourself)

Coming back to it

Come back to this page in a week or whenever feels right. Did you follow through? What got in the way, if anything? What did you notice in yourself, whether you did it or not? There's no version of this that means you did it wrong.

Exercise 9 One thing to take with you

Before moving on

Take a moment to look back over everything you've explored so far, the beliefs you uncovered, the inner critic you got to know, the patterns you started to recognise. Is there one thing that feels most alive right now?

Write it down

It doesn't have to be the biggest insight. Sometimes the smallest one is the one that stays.

Coming back to it

If it helps, come back to this page from time to time, not to check on yourself, but simply to remember.

SECTION 6

Finding the right level of support

Understanding your options

There's something I want to be quite direct with you about in this final section. The relationship you have with yourself is one of the most important areas of your life. And it's also something that's very difficult to change in isolation. Not because reflection doesn't matter, it does. But because self-worth is formed in relationship. And it often begins to shift most meaningfully in relationship too.

What self-directed work can offer

This workbook is a starting point. A way of beginning to notice patterns that may have been running quietly in the background for a long time. You may have started to notice the inner critic more clearly. Or the tone it uses. Or the way it can feel almost automatic at times. And you may have begun to experiment, even slightly, with not immediately believing everything it says.

These aren't small things. Even noticing is a shift. And over time, small shifts like this can begin to change the internal landscape you're living in. Not all at once. But gradually.

When support from another person matters

At the same time, it can help to remember that the patterns you're working with were formed in relationship. Through how you were responded to. How you were seen. How you learned to make sense of yourself in connection with others.

Because of that, they often begin to shift most deeply in relationship as well. Therapy, in particular, can offer something that reflection alone cannot, a steady, consistent relationship where the parts of you that you might usually judge or hide can actually be brought into the open. The self-criticism. The shame. The sense of not being enough.

And instead of being met with judgement or withdrawal, they're met with presence. Over time, that experience can be quite powerful. It's often unfamiliar, not because nothing like it has ever existed, but because it may not have been consistently available in earlier relationships.

Different approaches that may help

Different therapeutic approaches can support this work in different ways. For example:

Internal Family Systems (IFS) is an approach that can help us begin to relate differently to the inner critic, not as something to fight, but as a protective part that developed for a reason, even if its methods are now outdated.

Compassionate Inquiry, developed by Dr Gabor Maté, tends to focus on understanding how early experiences shape present-day patterns, not just cognitively, but in how you relate to yourself emotionally

and physically in the present. There are many other approaches as well. What matters most isn't the model itself, but whether you feel safely met in the process.

When it may be especially important to reach out

If self-worth difficulties are contributing to significant anxiety, low mood, or a sense that daily functioning is becoming difficult to manage, it may be worth speaking with a GP or a mental health professional.

This isn't about labelling your experience. It's about making sure you're not carrying more than you need to carry alone.

A simple way to think about it

You might find it helpful to think about this in quite a simple way.

Self-directed work can be helpful when:

- you have enough stability to engage with what comes up
- the inner critic is present, but not completely overwhelming
- reflection feels possible, even if uncomfortable

Therapy or additional support can be helpful when:

- the inner critic feels relentless or hard to step back from
- self-compassion feels out of reach
- patterns repeat in relationships or work despite understanding them
- earlier experiences feel emotionally unresolved or hard to access alone

There's no hierarchy here. Just different kinds of support for different levels of need.

A final thing I want to say directly

If any part of you is reading this and thinking my difficulties don't justify support... (others have it worse, I should be able to manage this on my own), I want you to gently notice that thought. Not as truth. But as something familiar. Because often, that isn't perspective. That's the self-worth wound speaking. And it tends to underestimate what you're carrying, while overestimating what you should be able to hold alone.

You deserve support that's proportionate to what you're going through and beginning to take that seriously, even in a small way, is often part of what shifts the relationship you have with yourself.

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About Me

That's really the last thing I wanted to say to you directly. I hope this has all been helpful. What follows is a little about me, in case it's useful to know who's been sitting with you through these pages.

I'm a Canadian-British counselling psychologist with more than 20 years in private practice. I've lived in Southeast Asia for 26 years and work with clients across the world via Zoom. Before retraining as a psychologist, I had a career as a professional orchestral violinist, an experience that shaped my understanding of performance, perfectionism, and the psychological cost of maintaining a composed exterior when the interior is anything but.

My approach

My approach is integrative, drawing on Internal Family Systems (IFS), Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT), Compassionate Inquiry (developed by Dr Gabor Maté), inner-child work, Gestalt techniques, and mindfulness-based approaches. I don't apply a single model to every person. The work is shaped by who you are, where you are, and what you need. I work with individuals, couples, and families. My particular areas of focus include anxiety, burnout, life transitions, relationship difficulties, identity questions, expat mental health, and the long-term psychological effects of growing up or living between cultures.

My background

- MSc Counselling Psychology, United Kingdom
- Counselling Diploma, Canada
- Registered member, British Columbia Psychological Association (BCPA)
- Member, International Practitioners of Holistic Medicine (IPHM)
- Certified Executive Coach
- Trained in Compassionate Inquiry (Dr Gabor Maté)
- Former crisis line counsellor, Befrienders Malaysia
- Volunteer counselling: Malaysian Cancer Society, All Women's Action Society, UNHCR (supporting Afghan and Myanmar refugees)
- Communications and life-skills training across Asia, Africa and the United States

Get in touch

If, at some point, you feel like you would like to talk to me directly, I offer a free 15-minute initial consultation by WhatsApp or video call, with no obligation and no pressure. This is a chance to ask questions, get a sense of whether the fit feels right, and understand what working together might look like. Sessions are conducted by video call at times that work across time zones. You can reach me by email at shelagh.psychologist@gmail.com, or by WhatsApp on +60 17-358 2563.

THE SERIES

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This workbook is part of a growing series of gentle, practical guides for the difficult parts of being human, each written to be worked through at your own pace, and to meet you where you are.

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When worry has become the background hum of your life.

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For the losses that come without a funeral, and are grieved alone.

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The way you talk to yourself matters more than anything else. This workbook will help you change it.



When we stop treating ourselves as the harshest judge in the room and start offering ourselves the same curiosity and care we give to others, something fundamental shifts. This workbook offers a compassionate, evidence-based approach to understanding where your self-worth comes from, how your inner critic developed, and how to begin a genuinely different relationship with yourself.

INSIDE YOU'LL FIND:

-  Where self-worth comes from — and why it feels so fixed
-  The difference between self-esteem, self-worth and self-compassion
-  How the inner critic operates — and what it is actually protecting
-  How low self-worth shapes your relationships, work and health
-  Practical, evidence-based tools for beginning to shift
-  Gentle space to explore, reflect, and grow at your own pace

*The goal isn't to become someone else.
It's to become, perhaps for the first time,
genuinely kind to the person you already are.*



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20+ years in private practice



Supporting thoughtful, lasting change
through insight, compassion, and
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