

**Mindset**

Exercise



20 min



Client



No



## Adopting a Growth Mindset to Criticism

Criticism can hurt in any situation, regardless of whether it has merit. While some people can consider and integrate helpful criticism and experience no lasting effect from it, others find it more difficult to accept and digest and experience extreme defensiveness and/or negative affect (anxiety, depression, anger, and shame).

High sensitivity to criticism is related to high levels of neuroticism, depression, fear of negative evaluation, pessimistic explanatory style, and low scores on self-esteem (Atlas, 1994). Oversensitivity to criticism can hinder an adaptive response to criticism, even when that criticism is constructive and intended to be helpful. Further, oversensitivity to criticism can develop into a fear of criticism, and this fear can result in avoidance of opportunities to receive critical feedback (Atlas, 1994).

While it may not be possible to avoid being criticized by people in life, one can learn to react and respond to it in more helpful and less damaging ways. One such way is to adopt a growth mindset, which means approaching the criticism as an opportunity for personal growth and learning (Dweck, 2008). Approaching criticism with a fixed mindset, by comparison, would be to interpret this feedback as challenging and threatening to one's capabilities. In this exercise, clients will examine their tendency to be oversensitive to criticism, and they will explore how to reframe the experience of criticism as an opportunity for growth and learning.

### Author

This tool was created by Hugo Alberts (Ph.D.) and Lucinda Poole (PsyD).



### Goal

The goal of this tool is to help clients adopt a growth mindset in the context of receiving criticism. By doing so, clients learn to view criticism as a means of improvement rather than a means to self-criticism and negative affect.





## Advice

- The 'Extracting Strengths from Problems' tool would be a valuable complementary exercise to help clients identify strengths within the given problem.
- Clients may benefit from additional information about the benefits of adopting a growth mindset in life, such as the fact that people with growth mindsets are more likely to succeed academically because they are more motivated to learn, have a desire to work hard, are less discouraged by difficulty, and use more effective strategies for learning. In contrast, people with fixed mindsets are more likely to be debilitated by failure because they believe they cannot succeed.



## References

- Atlas, G. D. (1994). Sensitivity to criticism: A new measure of responses to everyday criticisms. *Journal of Psychoeducational Assessment*, 12, 241-253.
- Dweck, C. S. (2008). *Mindset: The new psychology of success*. Random House Digital, Inc.





# Adopting a Growth Mindset to Criticism

## Instructions

### Introduction

Being on the receiving end of criticism can be difficult. When we hear what sounds like a criticism, many of us tend to take it personally, as though our boss or colleague or tutor is negatively evaluating us rather than our work or as though a friend is negatively evaluating the friendship rather than a particular behavior or event. Many of us also become immediately defensive, taking aim and batting the criticism away to the boundary. However, criticism can open us to the possibility of growth and self-improvement; adopting a “growth mindset” in the context of criticism enables us to view criticism as valuable feedback.

In this exercise, we will look closely at your tendency to be oversensitive to criticism and explore how to reframe the experience of criticism as an opportunity for growth and learning.

### Step 1: Reflect on situations that trigger oversensitivity

Think of five situations in your recent past where you were oversensitive to criticism. Describe the situation, including who else was involved, how you were criticized, and what the consequences of being oversensitive to this criticism were, in the first three columns in the table on page 5.

### Step 2: Adopt a growth mindset to counteract oversensitivity

Consider the idea that this criticism is valuable, offering you the opportunity to improve yourself. How can you reframe each experience of criticism to become an opportunity for growth and learning? Going forward, how can this criticism help you? Write down your response in the fourth column of the table.

### Step 3: Affirming statements

Come up with three things that you can say to yourself next time you notice you experience oversensitivity to criticism. For example, *This feedback is a blessing in disguise, not a personal attack; Without the feedback, I would remain stagnant.*

1.

2.

3.





#### Step 4: Additional strategies to manage oversensitivity to criticism

Below is a list of 10 additional strategies to help you manage oversensitivity to criticism. As you read through the list, place a check-mark next to those strategies that resonate with you, and keep these in mind the next time you receive criticism.

1. Practice self-compassion. Offer yourself compassion during moments of criticism. Acknowledge to yourself that being criticized can hurt and change your inner talk to match what you would say to a friend or loved one.
2. Don't take it personally. Notice what someone is saying objectively without taking it on board as a personal attack. Listen to feedback with an open mind.
3. Notice the automatic negative, self-critical voice that pops up when someone criticizes you, and mentally dial down the volume.
4. Repeat to yourself affirming statements, such as: "I am seeking improvement, not approval," and "This is an opportunity for growth and learning."
5. Reflect on the criticism you have received, and in instances where you have been wrongly criticized, assert yourself and speak up about it.
6. Try not to become defensive at the moment. If you feel the urge to snap back, step away, and rethink your response.
7. Forgive yourself. Repeat phrases such as, "I did the best I could," "My intentions are positive," "I can't always be perfect," "I let that person down, but I forgive myself," "I'm going to make mistakes sometimes; everyone does," "I'm not a bad person just because I made a mistake," and so on.
8. Manage your emotions. If you feel yourself becoming emotional and/or overly defensive upon being criticized, step away, take some mindful breaths to calm down, and postpone the conversation if need be.
9. If you are upset or angry, resist the urge to offer a 'counter critique' in response.
10. Thank the person for offering you feedback, even if it was not constructive or helpful.





Situation	Criticism received	Consequences of being oversensitive	Opportunities for growth and learning
E.g., Received negative feedback about my public speaking skills from an audience member	Was criticized for being not as good as the previous speaker and seeming junior and not confident	Felt ashamed, disappointed in me, and had trouble sleeping as I couldn't stop thinking about the criticism	I could dedicate time to improving my public speaking skills (e.g., research, practice) so that I come across as less juvenile and more confident next time. I could also see this as an opportunity to practice acceptance and self-compassion.
1.			
2.			
3.			
4.			
5.			