What's Wrong with Me?

By Ellen Schlesinger

Ellen Schlesinger, JD, MA, RP, RCC, CCC, is a therapist and former lawyer. She works with law students in her role as Student Success and Wellness Counselor at Osgoode Hall Law School in Toronto, Ontario, Canada, and with lawyers across North America in her private counseling practice. Ellen is an experienced speaker and professional development workshop facilitator. This article was submitted on behalf of NALP's Canadian Section.

When I look back on my first job after graduating from law school, I immediately remember a negative experience. In a meeting with a partner, when I failed to recognize an acronym he used and asked him for clarification, he replied with two questions of his own: "You don't know what the PPSA is? Why did we hire you?" In that moment, I couldn't remember my decent law school grades, my love of legal research, and my strong interpersonal skills. I froze in front of his intense stare. Feeling defeated, I said "I don't know."

Years later, when I was completing my internship in pursuit of my graduate degree in counseling psychology, I met weekly with the director of the psychology clinic for supervision. I can't remember any of the positive feedback he gave me, only the negative. In one instance, while playing him an audio clip of a counseling session with a client, he interjected, asked me to pause the tape, rewind, listen again, stop the tape. Several times we listened to a sigh I had expelled, captured on my little digital audio recording device. My supervisor looked at me quizzically and asked whether my sigh was an empathic sigh or a judgmental sigh. Again, caught off guard with this question, I entered the barren land of self-doubt, "I don't know." Sigh…

Wired to capture the negative

Science can explain my remarkable ability to remember the negative as well as my shy response to these experiences. It's called the negativity bias. This applies to you and the law students you support. Humans are evolutionarily wired to pick up on cues of danger. Identifying them supports our survival. Our danger cues have evolved from the startled response to a lion's approach, to being startled in the face of negative feedback or rejection. When we've done something wrong, or failed, even on a small scale, we worry whether we will survive. If our career doesn't survive, how will we support ourselves, pay our housing and food costs, raise our children, and attend to other life responsibilities fully and responsibly? Our worries snowball.

Self-doubt spiral

Enter rumination. Our brain goes over and over and over the situation in which we feel like we've failed. The more we ruminate, the more we have an aversive emotional response to our rumination. Self-critical thoughts expand as we berate ourselves. We enter a self-interrogation, analyzing what we could have done to prevent the situation or how we could have more appropriately responded. With the war going on in our minds, our physical bodies follow. We may experience tightness in our chest or throat, a rapidly beating heart, and a general sense of overwhelm. We doubt ourselves and our abilities. Soon our worry and panic cause our mood to tumble: a sibling of anxiety is depression. What now?

Training our mind towards the positive

Now we have an invitation to train our brains. It's an invitation that never expires but requires us to respond, ideally, as soon as possible. Fortunately, there are several replies at our disposal.

First, we can train our minds to notice the positive, even the tiniest, most miniscule thing (read: any sort of thing that does not completely suck). Each morning, when you leave your house for work, set a gentle challenge to yourself to notice good things—both the good you do and the good you receive. Here are examples of my go-to morning good things: random smiling with strangers on transit (we are all in this mess of rush hour together); noticing when people I'm walking behind turn around and hold the door open for me (and responding with a profound thank you); and savoring my first cup of coffee of the day (enjoying the taste and experiencing gratitude that the caffeine will allow me greater wakefulness to engage in office small talk). That's just one morning—imagine a whole day of this! It's good.

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Every moment is an opportunity

Mindfulness is a buzz term. Often, its qualifier "practice" is dropped. Let's reunite them. Mindfulness practice is about cultivating awareness of the state of our mind and training it to return to the present moment when it's caught up in too much thinking. Mindfulness is called a practice because (spoiler alert) we never fully arrive at bliss. Instead, every moment is an opportunity to rejoin the present. Being mindful that our thoughts are scattering is an invitation to shepherd them back to the present. Our shepherd is our breath (notice how you breathe, direct it towards slow and deep movements), and our five senses (what can you touch, smell, hear, taste, and see in this present moment?)

We think we need to set time aside during the day to practice mindfulness. Not so. Here's an example from my experience last Monday. I started off the day proud, waking up two minutes shy of my alarm. I'm off to a good start, I thought. Out the door promptly, check. Catch the first bus on my journey to the office, check. But minutes after transferring to the subway, we stop between stations. An announcement: a train ahead of us has stalled, emergency technicians have been dispatched, our train will remain halted in the meantime.

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F&%^!

My first reaction was closely followed by, "Ellen, you are so terrible in the mornings, you really should get up a half-hour earlier and if you had already started a more proactive morning routine, you could have avoided this delay. Now you'll be late for work. You really wanted time before your first meeting to finish answering emails. If you were better at managing your time yesterday, you wouldn't even have outstanding emails to get to!" Evidence the assembly of self-criticism.

To get the attention of negative thoughts, we have to tap a few times on the mic. I focus on my breath and notice how I am breathing. Likely it's shallow. I invite my breath to fill my lungs and feel for the expansion of my rib cage. With these deeper breaths, the survival response of fight, flight, freeze, slows and I can access my rational mind again. I have just succeeded in self-soothing. Hoorah! From there a colleague of mindfulness practice can join us: self-compassion practice.

Self-compassion sticks, Self-esteem flips

What is self-compassion practice? It's the development of a gentle, empathic, internal dialogue. It's not a way of letting yourself off the hook nor is it feeling sorry for yourself. It's providing a non-jackass response that acknowledges the difficulty of your experience. Like something you'd say to a friend. It also can involve placing a hand over your heart while saying to yourself, "There, there sweetheart. I see you struggling; it's a difficult experience you're going through. Let's take this moment by moment."

Is this an easy thing to do? Nope. Can it be learned? Yup! Again, science backs up the health benefits of self-compassion. You can easily access academic research, guided meditations, reflective activities, and even an online course through the University of Austin's Kristin Neff at self-compassion.org. American Psychologist and Buddhist mindfulness practitioner Tara Brach's lectures are an excellent resource as well. You can subscribe to her podcast and watch her lectures through her website or YouTube.

My final pitch: self-compassion sticks, self-esteem flips. Of these two metaphorical friendships, self-compassion is the more reliable and dependable one. Since our self-esteem is most often tied to external accomplishments and comparisons to others, when we feel like we've failed, self-esteem ditches us to hang out with the winner. Self-compassion stays by our side, bears witness to our experience, and whispers:

"It's tough now, I feel it. Let's make you a cup of tea. The bad feelings will pass and things will get better. You tried as best you could within your current life circumstances. I promise: there's nothing wrong with you." ■