

What Is Self-Hatred?

“Why does shame and self-loathing become cruelty to the innocent?”

—Anne Rice, *Merrick*

Self-hatred is not a choice. You are not presented with the options of loving yourself or hating yourself and choose to hate yourself. Self-hatred is there because you were led to believe that it is true. Your early experiences were not your fault. Any bad thing that happened to you was not because you decided that it was what you wanted. Experience after experience led you to believe that you were not worthy. You did not make self-hatred happen, and self-hatred does not have to be what endures. You have the power within you to define and validate your experience and then change something that you believe would never change.

I recently decided to re-read *Jane Eyre* by Charlotte Brontë written in 1847. 1847 was a time decades before we understood the impact of trauma and invalidation on a person’s sense of self. Reading the book through the lens of my current exploration, I was shocked to see how profoundly Brontë understood and articulated this impact. For instance, here is her protagonist, Jane, describing an experience at 10 years old:

Mrs. Reed soon rallied her spirits: she shook me most soundly, she boxed both my ears, and then left me without a word. Bessie supplied the hiatus by a homily of an hour’s length, in which she proved beyond a doubt that I was the most wicked and abandoned child ever reared under a roof. I half believed her; for I felt indeed only bad feelings surging in my breast.”

—*Jane Eyre* by Charlotte Brontë

The experience of many patients is reflected in this passage and you can have deep compassion for the 10-year-old Jane because you see that she did not choose to be treated in such a hurtful way. And then through years of being treated this way, it makes sense that she concludes that it must be because she is such a terrible child.

Self-hatred is a lie that arises from experiences that you had no way of preventing. In many cases you were too little.

The self-hatred that I tackle in this book is not some transient state. For the people with lived experience, it is a persistent, unrelenting and unyielding intense dislike of the self, and one that comes with feelings of inadequacy, guilt, self-blame, and low self-worth. People with self-hatred at times see themselves as a burden that needs to be removed from the world. There is an enduring sense that “I will never be good enough.”

Not Just Messing Up

This core self-hatred is not transient. It is not the same as, for example, someone accidentally spilling a glass of red wine on a white tablecloth, or breaking a plate, or messing up on a term paper, saying: “I’m so stupid, I hate myself.” Many people have said “I hate myself” to express dissatisfaction in an outcome or an action. In this context, it typically means that they messed up; they use the expression to acknowledge to themselves and others that they are aware of messing up. “I hate myself,” uttered in these types of situations is a transient reflection of temporary upset.

50 Shades of Reaction

There are degrees of reaction when an accident happens, such as spilling red wine on a white tablecloth. For those who do not suffer from self-hate, there may be a moment of surprise or embarrassment, followed by an apology to their host, and an offer to clean up or to pay for a new tablecloth. Then, after the wine-spilling (or whatever incident) and apology, they continue enjoying their time without dwelling on the incident. In contrast, for those who suffer from self-hate, the reaction is quite different. Intense feelings of shame

and guilt emerge, their inner dialogue becomes harsh and critical, and they experience deep embarrassment, guilt, or even self-disgust. They struggle to move past the incident, which weighs on their mind for the remainder of the day. While to many, it is just spilled wine; to those with self-hate, it is a reflection of their own perceived inadequacies.

So you will see, self-loathing I discuss in this book is a much deeper, painful, and all-consuming problem. It is a construct that evolves over time and seems to become embedded in the very essence of the person as a core part of the self. It is as if self and self-hatred have merged and cannot be separated, to the point that a person can never remember not hating themselves, or that the idea of challenging it seems preposterous, even a waste of time. *“Self-hatred is to me what H₂ is to O in water. Water is H₂O. That’s me and self-hatred,”* quipped a patient.

For most people, self-hatred and self-loathing are the same thing, and I tend to use the term interchangeably throughout the book; however, one patient felt differently. She felt that self-loathing was even more intense than self-hatred and said:

It’s loud in my head, all the time. So much of it is me berating my own existence. Everything I do is wrong. Nothing I do is good enough. Maybe the little failures of each day seem like nothing to other people, but when my head is already SCREAMING at me that I can’t do anything right, even forgetting to put grape jelly on my daughter’s PB&J instead of strawberry feels like the end of the world. How can I not mess even the little stuff up?! Sure, maybe I’m a nobody that can’t figure out how to make it in this world, but AT LEAST I could put the right fucking jelly on the sandwich.

“Except I can’t.”

“That’s self-loathing right there. Hatred is a walk in the park next to self-loathing. Self-loathing is the peak of the mountain of self-hatred.”

“That’s kinda funny and clever!” I said, “Can’t you have some admiration for a mind that came up with that?”

“No, because only a mind that hates itself would come up with that. I wish that I had never had to think that” she replied solemnly.

“Well,” I reflected, “you are so much more than hydrogen and oxygen and so maybe if you can also see all the other things that make you up, your focus on this one idea might change.”

She shrugged skeptically.

I asked a patient to express the idea in a way that others might get it, and she said: *“I would describe my self-loathing to others as a pervasive feeling of being a bad person with no sense of worth or identity. And I mean ALL the time. I often feel that I am a disgusting person who is at fault for all of the problems in my life and who does not deserve care, compassion, or good things generally. And I mean ALL the time. In addition, I feel a sense of separation from self and like it does not matter if I like myself because I don’t have a sense of self-concept and often don’t feel grounded in reality.”*

Many people who live this way, feel that they are so flawed that they must, by virtue of these flaws, be punished for their very existence. And another point is that it endures. “People who have headaches don’t know what unrelenting migraines are,” explained a patient who suffers from migraines and borderline personality disorder (BPD).

At times, self-destructive and self-degrading behavior follows as an attempt to self-punish. Self-destructive and self-degrading behavior used as self-punishment never works, even if there is some temporary relief. It doesn’t work for various reasons; firstly, punishment is typically used when a person has done something wrong or committed a crime. What is it that you need to be punished for? There never was a crime for which you deserved punishment to begin with. If you were abused as a child, a crime was committed, but not by you. Secondly, the very “punishment” behaviors you inflict on yourself often leave you feeling even worse about yourself than when you started. And, finally, even if you had committed some crime, once you’ve been punished for the crime, you’ve served your time, and no further punishment is required. Why keep punishing yourself? Think of a person going to jail for robbing a bank; after the person is released, they don’t keep going to jail for the same crime.

When a person is feeling strong self-hatred, they not only feel that they don't deserve the love of others, but they also feel that they don't deserve anything good happening to them, and instead conclude that anything bad that happens is, to them, a manifestation of their awfulness, and a deserved punishment for being such a terrible person.

I was once working with a patient who arrived a few minutes late. She said: "Now do you see what a terrible human being I am? I mean I wasted your time. That's what I do and that's what I am, a terrible waste of time and a terrible waste of humanity."

"Wow, that's harsh. I was looking forward to our session," I said. "You are always on time and so I was a little bit worried, but you're only 10 minutes late. I assume that you hit traffic, or that you woke up late, or that you were talking to your girlfriend, or that something came up at work. I never even considered that my time was being wasted. And to be honest, I quickly finished an email that I had forgotten to send. Not only am I not at all upset. It wouldn't even come into my mind. In fact, I am grateful I was able to send the email. I appreciate the extra few minutes!"

"Why are you being nice?" she asked. "I deserve to be punished for being a terrible, horrible patient. You should not be thanking me. There are no excuses for being late. I want to punish myself, but you should punish me instead. If you came over and slapped me, then it would make sense."

I think that I started to tear up, because she said, "What's wrong?"

"It just saddens me that you hate yourself so much, that you imagine that I hate you so much that you deserve to be punished for something that happens millions of times a day, to millions of people because of the circumstances of their lives, and then that you would be surprised that in fact I have no such feelings of malice or contempt for you. I know that you are doing the best that you can." I stopped to reflect. "For many people who hate themselves, they cannot imagine that others don't see them in the way that they see themselves. You hate yourself, and you imagine, or maybe believe, that I and others who care about you, can't possibly care about you. You worry that they are lying to you, or that they are deluded or that they cannot see how terrible you are. A psychodynamic therapist would say that you project your self-hatred onto

others and then believe that projection that they hate you. In a way, by being so certain about what they believe and how they should treat you, you rob them of an opportunity to have their own experience of you. In my case, I admire the very hard work in your efforts to overcome the mental health obstacles to you getting into college. And that admiration is true whether you believe it to be so or not. You telling me that I am wrong, is like saying that I am not allowed to have an opinion other than yours on this."

"You see, I 'rob' you of your experience, I am not terrible?" she countered.

"You are a terrible knower of what I think," I said smiling, and the tensions diffused.

Related Concepts

Colleagues have suggested that when I focus on self-hatred as a separate entity, that what I am discussing is a set of ideas that is common in many psychiatric conditions, and that many people with other mental health conditions are discontent with themselves and with how their brains work. However, my experience tells me that self-hate can manifest in two distinct ways: firstly, as a symptom of underlying mental health conditions AND secondly, as a standalone experience, one that lingers even when the fury of other mental health conditions has done its worst. It has me thinking: Could enduring self-hatred, in the absence of other clinical symptoms, be its own diagnosis?

When I ask my patients with self-loathing if self-hatred is simply part of a mental health condition, they acknowledge that they identify with all of the ideas that we are shortly about to review, but that they are not the same. They say that self-loathing includes many or all of the following experiences but that having any one of these related concepts would be far easier to deal with and would be far less impactful, less all-encompassing, and less painful than self-loathing. "If all it was, was self-criticism, I would not want to die so badly," was the reflection of one of my patients.

Many people with enduring self-loathing express the following phrases: "I'm a failure," "I can't do anything right," "no one is ever going to like me," "I will never be good enough," "I'll never get better," "I deserve to

suffer because I am such a terrible person,” “I should just die,” “I deserve to be punished,” “I should never be in a relationship because I am toxic to others,” “I am to blame for all my problems and those of other people,” “everyone hates me.” Certainly, these don’t help reduce the impact of self-hatred.

Let’s have a deeper look at concepts related to self-hatred and see how they are similar and how they are different. For some readers of this book, the concepts may in fact mean the same thing as self-hatred, and yet for others, they are ideas that don’t resonate. Some of these concepts have a research base and are clinically defined, whereas other concepts are the words that those with lived experience have used.

Concepts and Experiences Related to, but Different from, Self-Loathing

Self-Criticism

“If you’re capable of despising your own behavior, you might just love yourself.”

—Criss Jami

Self-criticism is the tendency to engage in, and with, negative self-evaluation leading to feelings of worthlessness, feeling that you are a failure, and feeling guilty when you don’t meet expectations. Self-criticism was originally seen as particularly relevant to the development of a specific type of depression, known as introjective depression. In clinical practice, we no longer use that term; however, it is useful to think about because historical descriptions of patients with this type of depression seem to be consistent with many of the themes in this book. Therapists would notice that some patients with introjective depression would feel deserving of being punished and so interpret therapists’ comments as punishing.

When seen as a personality trait, research finds that self-criticism has been linked to several negative consequences. In a study examining behavior differences between people who were self-critical and those who weren’t

(Mongrain 1998), the research found that self-critics experienced greater negative mood states, perceived that others were not trying to help, and made fewer requests for help. Interestingly, in their study, they found that those with and without self-criticism did not actually differ in the amount of support they received, but rather, in how they perceived the support they got, in how they accepted it, and how frequently they asked for help.

In another study (Santor et al. 2000), in people who were self-critical, when compared with those who were not self-critical, the self-criticism predicted a decrease in agreeable or kind comments toward their partners and also predicted being more blaming of their partners than those who were not self-critical. As you can see, this is not exactly the same as self-hatred although there may be some elements that are similar.

I asked a patient about his experience of self-criticism, and this was his reflection: *“I’ve always been extremely self-critical.... So, does that mean that it is part of my personality? It’s different from my self-hatred. Do you think that it could be stemming from my other mental health struggles [like could it be part of my OCD or pathological perfectionism] or is it a separate issue? Either way, that makes self-loathing harder to treat because self-criticism is so deeply ingrained in my way of thinking and acting.”*

Another patient said: *“No. These are two different ideas. You can be criticizing of certain aspects of yourself/things you’ve done without despising every aspect of yourself.”*

The bottom line is that while many people who hate themselves experience self-criticism, most people who criticize themselves, do not also hate themselves.

Self-Disgust

According to research (Overton et al. 2008), self-disgust is a negative self-conscious emotional pattern of thinking that organizes and interprets incoming information. Self-disgust originates from the basic emotion of disgust and is directed toward physical self, meaning physical self-disgust, and accompanied by statements like: “I find myself repulsive” or to some aspects

of your behavior, behavioral self-disgust, with statements like: “I often do things I find revolting.”

Research (Ypsilanti et al. 2020) shows that self-disgust has been associated with many psychological difficulties, including social anxiety, impaired body image, disordered eating behavior, and PTSD symptoms in women with a history of sexual assault. When these researchers looked at self-disgust in military veterans, they found that veterans with PTSD reported almost three times higher scores in self-disgust, and significantly higher scores in loneliness, anxiety, and depression, when compared to the general population, and that it was the self-disgust that connected the experiences of loneliness and anxiety. In this group, loneliness was defined as the subjective experience of lack of meaningful social relationships, which is common among war veterans.

I find it interesting that when I ask most of the patients who endure self-loathing about self-disgust, that self-disgust does not resonate as strongly as self-hatred. Many feel that it is a different thing. One patient who experienced both self-loathing and self-disgust told me: *“I always hate myself, but I don’t always feel self-disgust. When I do have self-disgust, it makes my self-loathing worse. God forbid that I walk by a mirror, and I see my reflection. Then I am disgusted by the person looking back at me. I was shopping at the mall with a friend, and he was checking himself out every time we walked by a shop window. I looked the other way. But now that you asked the question, there is another way that self-disgust shows up. You know like when you step in dogshit you are disgusted and want to wash it off as quickly as you can? Well, sometimes if I am at a party and I use the rest room and wash my hands and see myself, my self-disgust shows up. When I go back into the party, I feel that I am like that dogshit, and I think: ‘My being in this room makes me think that they are probably thinking that there is something horrible and disgusting in the room, and that thing is me. My leaving would be the best thing I could do for them.’”*

Another patient also recognized that there was stronger overlap with self-disgust than with other ideas: *“This is the closest (in my opinion) to self-loathing, if not, the same. I can’t think of anything to differentiate the two.”*

“And I saw my reflection in a lake, and I waited for it to freeze a little bit so I could break it with my boot.”

—Sam Pink

Another patient had a different, and somewhat comical, take on self-disgust: *“Self-disgust, for me, is PART of self-loathing. I love the dictionary definition. Revulsion. No doubt, I am repulsed by every aspect of my being. I do think it’s possible to be disgusted with yourself yet not hate or loathe yourself, though. Humans are really disgusting creatures, but their disgustingness isn’t necessarily bad. Am I disgusted by the amount of farting that comes out of my husband? Absolutely. I certainly don’t hate or loathe him for it. I guess it turns into hatred or loathing when it becomes a choice.”*

To underscore this point, I have an acquaintance who is significantly overweight. At social outings he eats a lot of high-calorie foods. He is an open, friendly, and well-liked person, and he is a self-described “bon-vivant.” He lives a life of consumption and tells me he’s the very definition of a hedonist. I once asked him if he had any regrets about his excesses. *“Only when I walk by a mirror or go clothes shopping,” he answered, “when I see myself I kinda gross myself out. I’m really kinda disgusted by myself, but I don’t spend too much time thinking about it. I mean that would take the pleasure out of EVERYTHING!”*

It makes sense that the concepts of self-disgust and self-hatred are related and connected; however, research and clinical experience defines them as different constructs.

EXERCISE

Do you experience self-disgust? Y/N

If so, how would you describe the experience to others?

Self-Blame

Self-blame is the act of attributing the consequences of an experience to be the direct result of your actions or your character. It is related to the concept of the perception of control, and people who blame themselves a lot are more likely to believe they have greater control over their lives than those who don't. In researching the concept of self-blame, I found it curious that many of the research articles had to do with medical conditions and the blaming of the self as a reason why the person developed the medical conditions. The articles had titles like:

“Self-blame attributions in women with newly diagnosed breast cancer: A prospective study of psychological adjustment.”

(Glinder and Compas 1999)

“The role of self-blame and responsibility in adjustment to inflammatory bowel disease.”

(Voth and Sirois 2009)

“Smoking and drinking behavior in patients with head and neck cancer: Effects of behavioral self-blame and perceived control.”

(Christensen et al. 1999)

There are of course many psychological conditions and experiences where people blame themselves and that can happen when people have experienced trauma. This is especially true even when the traumatic event was never of your making at all: You didn't ask for it, you weren't okay with it happening, you didn't go out looking for it and yet you were traumatized. There are cultures where society blames the victim for the trauma. “Oh, if she had only not dressed that way,” or “He should not have been at that party,” or “She should not have been drinking,” and so on. The vast majority of people dress in certain ways, go to certain parties, and have a drink and they are okay. Nothing bad happens to them. They don't go into situations looking to be traumatized. And yet, if a traumatic experience happens,

many end up blaming themselves. There are many reasons why you might blame yourself, whether it's a single event or prolonged childhood trauma.

Here are some ideas to consider:

If you were traumatized as a child, your perspective as an adult is different than what it was when you were a child. What was that child's point of view? Remember children don't have the developmental capacity and perspective to see the flaws and wounds and deficits of the people who were supposed to be taking care of them. Because children don't have this capacity, they conclude that they must have been to blame for what happened to them.

For some children and even adults, self-blame can serve as a type of protection because the idea of blaming the very person or people who were supposed to be on their side can destroy the perception that they are always going to be there, to provide and care for them. "If I blame them, then they are the ones who abused me, so I can't trust them and so I shouldn't be with them. But then I will be all alone in the world, and that is even more unbearable." This can feel even more true if you were the focus of the trauma and your siblings or friends were spared from abuse.

An interesting twist on the perception of self-control is that for people who believe that they have a lot of control, when things go well, there is a sense of well-being. In 1979, researchers (Janoff-Bulman) proposed two types of self-blame: The first was one that was adaptive, where the person's sense of control-oriented response was focused on the person's behavior. For example, say a person has set a goal of trying to walk two miles every day and one day they don't make it. They tell themselves that they have to try harder, maybe wake up earlier and not have so many items on their schedule. In this sense, their behavior is under their control, and they are then to blame if they succeed or not. This type of self-control and self-responsibility may be considered healthier, but it is not always the case if the person feels that every single outcome in their lives is based on trying harder. In these cases, it tends to bump into the

second and more maladaptive type of self-blame where the focus is on esteem-oriented response, on the person's character. In this example, the person might then say, "I am to blame for not having completed the two miles because I am a lazy and unmotivated person."

Now, although many people with self-hatred often blame themselves when things go wrong, not everyone who blames themselves hates themselves. They may feel responsible for negative outcomes, but this is not typically because they hate themselves. They can point to some other negative self-attribution such as that something negative happened because: I am lazy, I am inattentive, I am unmotivated, I am uncaring, and so on. It is not typical that someone who blames themselves for a negative outcome feels that self-hatred is the reason for the negative outcome.

I asked a patient if self-hatred and self-blame were the same. She said: *"No. You can blame yourself for something specifically, without despising every aspect of yourself."*

EXERCISE

- a. Do you blame yourself when something you try doesn't work out or has a negative outcome? Y/N

What is an example of this?

- b. Do you blame yourself because of the behavior or actions you took? Y/N

If so, what behavior do you feel that you need to change in order to have better outcomes?

- c. Do you blame yourself because of some perceived character flaw? Y/N
If so, what are the character flaws that you believe cause negative outcomes in whatever you try?

- d. If you experience self-hatred, do you also experience self-blame? Y/N
How are the two tied together for you?

Self-Contempt

“My ideal date would involve painful silence. My ideal date wouldn’t involve me.”

—Sam Pink

Many people use the concept of self-contempt as synonymous with self-loathing, and yet is it the same thing? A group of researchers (Beuchat et al. 2023) noted that self-contempt “is a frequent but overlooked clinical phenomenon, associated with a number of psychological problems such as increased sadness and shame.” They noted that self-contempt interferes with emotional processing and the quality of the alliance with therapists. However, they noted that there was no clear definition of what self-contempt is.

In their research, they studied a group of 61 participants who were divided into three groups: 20 controls, 21 patients with a diagnosis of BPD and 20 patients with a diagnosis of major depressive disorder. They started with considering self-contempt as a form of anger and scorn toward the self, one that fiercely rejects the self and that is marked by emotional coldness and aloofness.

Already we start to see a difference between self-contempt and self-loathing. Self-contempt has an active, rejecting, and scornful quality to it.

It is as if the person has contempt for a self that almost seems alien. For people with self-loathing, this is not a familiar experience, and that is because it feels as if the loathing is part of them.

ANALOGY: Think of it this way. Say a person does not like the shape of their nose. A person with self-loathing would accept that their nose is a part of them, believe that they deserve it and feel that is just a manifestation of who they are. The person with self-contempt would have contempt for their nose, reject it, and be angry that they have it.

Other researchers (Rüsch et al. 2019) linked self-contempt to what they term “self-stigma.” In their study of 77 people, they noted that people with mental illness often internalize public prejudice and negative emotional reactions to their group, and that this leads to self-contempt. The researchers assessed self-contempt, depressive symptoms, hopelessness, and suicidality at the start of the study, and then again three months later. They found that high self-contempt at the initial assessment predicted increased suicidality at three months, and they concluded that self-contempt could be a risk factor for suicidality and recommended that part of mental health interventions should include the targeting of self-stigma and its emotional consequences.

This resonates with the reflection of a patient: *“It’s somewhat ironic that having a mental illness only validates the feelings of (for simplicity’s sake) self-hatred. Maybe it stems from trauma, or invalidation, or a crazy parent.... WHATEVER. But the deeper we get into our mental illness, the more we’re told that we’re crazy, that we aren’t good enough, that we’re a burden, that we aren’t trying hard enough, that we’re choosing to be this way, that we haven’t seen enough doctors or therapists, that we haven’t sampled enough drugs or utilized enough skills, that we’ve caused bankruptcy, that our in-laws hate us, that we’re just making things worse for ourselves. And when you live in a world that is swirling with examples of how you’ve effectively fucked everything up, that there’s no going back, there’s no fixing it, the damage is done – you tend to hate yourself even more. You feel that stigma and then you stigmatize yourself.”*

The bottom line is that although self-contempt is conceptually different from self-loathing, it does seem to share the attribute that it puts the person who experiences it at higher risk for suicide. As the researchers in the few

articles on self-loathing and related topics conclude, we have to do more research on including the reduction of these symptoms as a key component to overall recovery.

EXERCISE

Do you experience self-contempt? Y/N

If so, how would you describe the experience to others, and how does it differ from self-blame and self-disgust?

It is true that many people with self-loathing feel worthless and feel hopeless, but most do not meet clinical criteria for major depression, and even in the cases when they do and the depression is treated, the self-loathing does not respond to the treatment of depression. Medication does not treat self-hatred.

Perhaps as you read the comments of others, their words will resonate, and if you are stuck in the persistence of self-loathing, these courageous people who shared their words did so to acknowledge their experience and as a first step in facing this toxic false narrative. They are all in various stages of seeing that they and self-hatred are not one, and this for some has brought increasing moments of relief and joy. Some have also noted sadness when something they believed could never change, has started to change, and this is paired with the thought, “why have I suffered so long with this false certainty.”

All the Related Concepts

When I asked a patient about these related comments, she reflected on the question and said this the following day: *“I would conceptualize*

self-criticism, self-blame, and self-disgust more as symptoms of the self-loathing rather than as the loathing itself. I think that another important aspect of self-loathing is self-targeted rage. My self-loathing is a combination of all of these things, with the addition of a background feeling of a lack of sense of identity and only finding identity in the idea in the self-criticism, self-blame, self-disgust, and self-targeted rage.”

Clearly, for many people these related concepts resonate but they are not the same thing. They seem to be some of the ingredients of a larger concept; that is, self-hatred, but they are not self-hatred itself.

An Eastern Point of View

Is self-loathing a Western construct?

Some of the ideas in this section may sound strange or even stressful to consider; however, I cannot profess to have considered a broad set of ideas on the topic of self-loathing without looking at it from all angles, including the perspective of Eastern religion and psychology. If you want to skip this section, you can. I include it because almost all the research in this book has been done in the West, and I recognize that this book is Western-centric.

In reading *Ethics for the New Millennium* (1999) by the Dalai Lama, I was fascinated by his surprise in encountering the idea of self-hatred and self-loathing in conversations with his Western followers. He found the notion “incoherent.” He explains his view, reflecting that the very idea of self-loathing is problematic because he believes that all people want to be happy and want to avoid suffering, and so the idea of regarding oneself as worthless seems to contradict the fundamental principles which serve self-interest. Essentially, if you want to be happy and you don’t want to suffer, why would you want to hate yourself? The Dalai Lama’s thinking on this changed after consultation with Western psychologists, and he then recognized that self-contempt was possible, but concluded that it develops as a basic error of self-evaluation. He suggested that people who hated themselves had lost “all sense of perspective” and developed a “narrowing of vision,” which then led to despair.

Clearly the Dalai Lama is not a psychologist with an understanding of the impact of early childhood adversity and maltreatment on the development of self-loathing. Again, in the service of being comprehensive, I include a review of certain forms of Eastern religious philosophy.

In Buddhist teaching, there is an instruction that in addition to giving up thinking too well of oneself one must abandon thinking too badly of oneself. In this philosophy, self-contempt is defined as what is described as the conceited idea, “I am inferior.” This conceit involves a powerful sense that the person is inferior to everyone. The teachings describe an excessive form of inferiority known as “self-abasement,” where the person asserts that they are even more inferior than the most inferior person, which comes across as arrogant.

So how is it that Buddhist philosophy considers self-loathing to be a type of pride or conceit, rather than, as Western psychologies regard it, the opposite? It is because Buddhist teachings state that the conceit of inferiority, that is the thinking that you are the worst of the worst, is like any form of pride that elevates you above others and is a form of self-affirmation. In this context, the theory is that by highlighting that a person is worse than everyone else, that this attestation is a form of drawing attention to oneself, “Look at me. I am the worst person ever.”

Although this is not the experience of my patients, it is nevertheless an interesting point of view, particularly if a person clings to the idea that they have to be worse than everyone else and that because of this they deserve more scorn and hatred than others.

However you got to the belief of self-hatred, remind yourself that from the minute that you, and any one of us was able to explore the world, we did so because we are human and born with an innate sense of curiosity. When this curiosity, shaped by our temperament and biology, interacts with countless situations we encounter, it cultivates the potential to bring our uniqueness and wonder to the world.

But all of this potential can be derailed when the seeds of self-hatred are sown into a young, naïve, and all-accepting mind. These seeds are created by the interaction between a self that is highly sensitive and an environment that is rejecting, invalidating, and hurtful. These seeds then

grow into a destructive force that can permeate all your future thoughts, emotions, and behaviors.

And so, when a child repeatedly receives the message that they are not good enough, it becomes their truth. Then, during their childhood and adolescence, as their sense of who they are is evolving, every critical, belittling, abusive, or devaluing interaction leads them to conclude that “if others see me this way, it must be true.”

When the external criticisms become internalized, it leads to a fusion of the external and the internal. Self-hatred becomes “who I am,” rather than “what I experienced or what I was taught.” Self-hatred takes root and becomes further reinforced by an unrelenting inner monologue that has either filtered out or discounted all positive experiences. Instead, the self-hate narrative is accepted or only the negative thoughts are allowed in. Given this continuous negative dialogue, it is completely understandable that you came to the conclusion of self-hatred. There was little that your younger brain could have done.

While your younger self had limited agency in this process, you now have the power to erode, and eventually dismantle, the toxic building blocks that led to such a hurtful core self-belief. In the next chapter, I’ll review why it is so critical that you tackle self-hatred.

