

What Is Self-Hatred?

Chapter Summary

Self-hatred is a persistent and intense dislike of the self. It comes with feelings of inadequacy, shame, guilt, self-blame, and low self-worth. This is not a state of mind that will improve on its own, and it's far more than what a person feels when they mess up or react to an accident they've made. When a person with self-loathing makes a mistake, they perceive it as proof that they are inadequate and undeserving. Their embarrassment and self-criticism will stick with them as they struggle to move past the event.

Self-hatred, and the thought and emotional patterns it generates, become a deep and painful problem that impacts all aspects of life. It evolves to become embedded in an individual's core sense of self directing their inner dialogue. It is related to self-criticism, self-disgust, self-blame, and self-contempt, but self-hatred is distinct and doesn't always overlap with these constructs.

Key Definitions and Concepts

- **Self-hatred:** A persistent core belief of being unworthy, bad, or broken.
- **Self-criticism:** The tendency to engage in negative self-evaluation that results in feelings of worthlessness; historically linked to depression.
- **Self-disgust:** A sense of disgust or revulsion directed toward the self, either physically or behaviorally.
- **Self-blame:** The act of attributing the consequences of an experience to a person's own actions or character; also connected to an inflated sense of control.

- **Self-contempt:** A clinical phenomenon that interferes with emotional processing and leads to a person's active rejection or scorn for some aspect of the self that seems alien or not a part of them.
- **Trauma response:** An emotional response to a harmful or life-threatening event like an accident, crime, natural disaster, abuse, or violence. Trauma can have a lasting negative impact on a person's function and well-being.
- **Core beliefs:** A person's individual perspective that influences how they see the world and themselves.

Despite it feeling so for those with lived experience, self-hatred is not an innate part of human beings. It is an erroneous and yet painfully enduring sense of self that can develop over time, in response to deep feelings of inadequacy and shame, created by enduring messaging that teach the person that they are inadequate and deserving of little, including love. The most important thing to understand about self-hatred is that it is *not* a natural part of any human. It is a toxic false narrative that feels true and certain to the person experiencing it. We know this in part because self-loathing does not typically respond to standard approaches such as cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT), dialectical behavior therapy (DBT), or others, and nor does it respond to medications. It is a learned and ingrained concept and behavior rather than a biological condition, although it may be linked to mental health conditions.

Chapter 1 Warmup Activity: Differentiating Related Concepts

The first step to overcoming your self-hatred is to better understand it. Complete the following table to determine how and how often self-hatred and related concepts affect your life.

Concept	Definition	Personal Example	Frequency (Rarely/Occasionally/Frequently)
Self-hatred	A persistent core belief of being unworthy, bad, or broken		
Self-criticism	Negative self-evaluation about specific actions or traits		
Self-disgust	Revulsion toward one's body or behaviors		
Self-blame	Attributing problems to one's own actions or character		
Self-contempt	Active scorn or rejection of aspects of self		

1. Which of these do you experience most often?

2. Which feels most painful or persistent?

Core Versus Transient Self-Hatred

There are two main ways self-hatred presents. Core self-hatred describes a person's enduring experience, while transient self-hatred is an emotional response. Core self-hatred has five features:

- 1. Deeply ingrained:** Typically develops and ingrains in early childhood in the context of deeply hurtful and invalidating experiences.
- 2. Identity level:** Feels like a fundamental truth about the self.
- 3. Persistent:** Does not easily fade or respond to positive feedback or positive accomplishments.
- 4. Linked to mental health conditions:** These include chronic depression, complex post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), and borderline personality disorder.
- 5. Self-perpetuating:** Behaviors tend to be consistent with the belief, for example, avoiding growth opportunities and repeatedly engaging in toxic relationships—behaviors that reinforce the belief.

Not commonly a presenting symptom: Because the person has always felt this way, it is the only way that they know their life. If a person has always had a headache, that is their enduring experience, and so they do not know that it is a problem. However, when someone has not had a headache in one moment, they then notice a headache when it appears.

I Hate Myself was primarily focused on core self-hatred. This affects a person's life by making them believe they are a significant burden to those around them. These thoughts are often tied to early trauma and invalidation during childhood. The higher the level of core self-hatred, the higher the risk of suicide and suicidal thoughts. Core self-hatred is deeply ingrained and feels like a fundamental truth

about someone. It doesn't easily fade, and it is something a person always remembers feeling. It is always self-perpetuating, meaning that a person's behaviors align with their belief that they are a burden. This makes them likely to avoid growth opportunities and engage in toxic relationships. These behaviors, in turn, reinforce the belief that a person is unworthy of love and support. Core self-hatred is linked to mental health conditions such as chronic depression, complex PTSD, and borderline personality disorder.

While core self-hatred presents as a structural part of a person's identity, transient self-hatred tends to present as a reactive cognitive and emotional response.

Transient self-hatred appears intermittently and is often triggered by specific events that are typically outside of a person's control; these feelings come and go based on mood, stress levels, and external conditions. It may be rooted in recent struggles and failures rather than deep, painful childhood experiences. The six features of transient self-hatred are:

- 1. Situational:** Tends to be triggered by specific, and typically external events.
- 2. Fluctuating:** Comes and goes based on mood, stress, and external conditions.
- 3. Not identity level:** Although self-hatred appears to be on a continuum, people with transient self-hatred don't feel self-hatred at their core.
- 4. Tends to respond to logic and CBT interventions:** Self-compassion, problem-solving, and mindfulness are more readily accepted.
- 5. More common in mental health dips:** Tends not to be as present when the person is doing well and is more present during depression or stress episodes.
- 6. More likely to be a presenting complaint:** In contrast to core self-hatred, there is more of a recognition that it is a problem that needs to be addressed.

Transient self-hatred commonly appears during mental health dips, fading when the person is doing well. This makes people with transient self-hatred more likely to recognize that it is a problem they should address. While they may have the desire to die during moments of intense self-hatred, suicidal desires or thoughts aren't as persistent or intense as those tied to core self-hatred. Despite this, they are distressing. Transient self-hatred is more likely to

Table 1.1 Core Versus Transient Self-Hatred

	Core	Transient
Duration and consistency	It's always there no matter what.	It comes in waves: sometimes there sometimes not.
Trigger/prompt dependency	It's always there even on "good days."	It spikes after specific events.
Belief flexibility	You don't believe people who tell you that you are loveable.	You recognize that you might have been treating yourself too harshly.
Impact on behavior	You avoid opportunities and enter into predictably toxic relationships.	You might withdraw temporarily but tend to bounce back.
Childhood trauma/history	It's often tied to early trauma and invalidation.	It may be rooted in recent struggles and failures.

respond to logic and CBT interventions. People with transient self-hatred are more likely to accept self-compassion, problem-solving, and mindfulness as ways to manage thoughts of self-loathing.

Table 1.1 summarizes the differences between core and transient self-hatred.

The Development of a Sense of Self

The question of how self-hatred develops and evolves is an important theme in considering its development, and a quick overview of child development is helpful.

The development of a child's individual sense of self is a complex and continuous process that begins at birth and is heavily influenced by their interactions with the world and the people around them. It involves recognizing themselves as distinct from others, recognizing their own thoughts and feelings, on their way to developing a unique identity.

From infancy to early childhood, and depending on a child's temperament and level of attunement¹ and awareness, their self-concept starts with how adults

¹Attunement is the ability to sense and respond accurately to another person's emotional state, creating a feeling of being understood, validated, and safe.

respond to them. Fundamental connection through warm, caring interactions, good eye contact, and listening with curiosity leads to the creation of a healthy emotional bond, which is crucial for a healthy self-concept. When caregivers consistently and predictably meet an infant's needs, the child develops a sense of trust and security, which is foundational to feeling safe enough to explore their own identity. Around 18 months, toddlers begin to recognize themselves in mirrors and photographs. This "mirror self-recognition" is a significant milestone, indicating the emergence of a reflective self and laying the groundwork for self-conscious emotions like embarrassment and pride.

As language develops, toddlers start using "me" and "my," asserting their individuality and growing sense of autonomy. They begin to identify with their name as a unique label. As the child gets older, adults sharing memories and stories about the child's past helps them construct an internal picture of themselves over time, forming their "autobiography." As the child develops and becomes increasingly self-aware, they learn to identify and name their own emotions and understand how their feelings influence their behavior. This is crucial for emotional regulation and empathy.

If a child continues in a healthy, empathic and validating environment, even a highly sensitive child should continue to develop in emotionally healthy ways, but it is during these early years that the seeds of self-hatred can be planted. A child's individual sense of self is not something they are born with. And certainly, any sense of sense of self that might exist is not at all fully formed. Their sense of self is continuously constructed and refined through a dynamic interplay of their innate biology, their experiences, and their relationships with the world around them.

Children are *not* born hating themselves. It is something they learn. It is critical to understand this idea in order to overcome self-hatred. Once a person realizes that they were not born hating themselves, but that they learned to do so, then they realize that they can learn to love themselves.

The Role of Core Beliefs

If self-hatred isn't a natural part of some unlucky human beings and isn't depression, then where does it come from? There is evidence that self-loathing has its roots in a person's culture, childhood experiences, and familial interactions. It can also arise from trauma. Any significant experience—such as early childhood

experiences, family interactions, social and cultural influences, and trauma—can form or shape a person’s core beliefs.

Many of our core beliefs are established in childhood, when we are learning about the world and considering our role in it. Over time, these beliefs shape our sense of self and how we interpret our relationships.

The following activities are designed for anyone to complete with their therapist. If you are working independently, you should be able to use all of these activities on your own; however, a therapist would be able to recommend specific techniques and strategies to help you more effectively address your feelings. CBT and DBT work best when you practice them with the guidance of a trained therapist.

Activity 1.1: Self-Hatred Questionnaire

Self-hatred has varying degrees. To better understand how you experience it, answer the following questions. For each question, score your response using a 1–5 scale, where:

1 = Strongly disagree

2 = Disagree

3 = Neutral

4 = Agree

5 = Strongly agree

Questions

1. I feel intense dislike for myself. *Score:* _____
2. I am disgusted with myself. *Score:* _____
3. I feel like I am a bad person. *Score:* _____
4. I do not deserve kindness or compassion. *Score:* _____
5. I get angry at myself for things I do or think. *Score:* _____
6. I wish I could change who I am. *Score:* _____
7. I feel like I am a failure. *Score:* _____

To find your total score, add your responses for all seven items.

Total score: _____

The lowest possible score is 7. The highest possible score is 35. Higher scores indicate greater self-hatred. People with transient self-hatred might be able to guess that their score would be different if they completed the questionnaire on a different day because their mood and circumstances heavily influence their level of self-loathing. People with core self-hatred will feel confident that their scores will be the same, regardless of when they answer the questions.

Activity 1.2: Your Core Beliefs

Complete the table to better understand the core beliefs that determine how you perceive the world. Then, answer the questions to reflect on how your core beliefs impact your life and your sense of self-hatred.

My Perspective	What I Think Others See
Describe the kind of person you are. <i>I am ...</i>	Describe how you think other people would describe you. <i>Other people think I am ...</i>
Think about what you like most about yourself. <i>I love myself when ...</i>	Consider what you believe other people like most about you. <i>People love me when I ...</i>

Consider what you bring into the world and what your purpose is.

Consider your thoughts about other people believe about your purpose in the world.

My role in the world is...

People see my purpose is...

Reflect on how you see the world and other people. Include your reasoning.

The world...

Reflect: The purpose of our core belief system is to provide us the underlying structure for interpreting reality, regulating our emotions, and guiding actions, and this profoundly impacts our overall mental health, relationships, and life satisfaction. If core beliefs are limiting instead of supportive, it is time to change them.

1. Based on your answers, what are your core beliefs about yourself?

2. What are your core beliefs about the world?

3. How do you think those core beliefs contribute to your self-hatred?

4. How do those core beliefs impact your relationships?

5. Which core beliefs have a negative impact on your life?

6. What would it take for you to change those core beliefs?

Activity 1.3: Echoes of the Past

We all carry our past experiences with us and they shape who we are and how we think about ourselves and the world. Now that you better understand your current core beliefs, take a moment to determine where they came from. With your therapist, answer the following questions to connect your core beliefs to your past experiences. This will help you understand how experience can feed your self-hatred.

Reflection: These questions help you identify and acknowledge early messages you believed about yourself.

1. What messages did you receive about yourself from caregivers, teachers, or peers when you were young?

2. Write down your experiences of feeling criticized or belittled.

3. Who were the people who criticized or belittled you?

4. How do you think those messages have shaped your core beliefs about yourself?

5. Have you experienced past trauma that has impacted your core beliefs? If so, what happened, and what did you learn about yourself and the world? How has that trauma influenced your core beliefs?

Exploration: These questions challenge you to think about different types of messages you may have overlooked.

6. How old were you when you first had the experience of self-hatred?

7. Do you recall a time when you felt loved and important?

8. Did you think of yourself as different from other children? If so, how?

Your core beliefs are echoes of the past that feed your self-loathing, but they are not a part of *you*. You are not the same person you were when these things happened to you, and you are more than the sum of what you have experienced. Once you accept that you have the innate power to change your core beliefs, you will be one step closer to changing them.

Activity 1.4: Challenging the Narrative

Cognitive restructuring is a core component of CBT, and therapists use it to address various mental health conditions. It is a therapeutic technique used to identify and change negative or irrational thought patterns to improve mental well-being. It works by challenging and modifying these thoughts, often by

replacing them with more balanced or positive ones. Answer the following questions to regain a more realistic and balanced perspective.

1. Assume that self-hatred is a lie that was taught to you. What evidence do you have that supports your self-hatred belief? What evidence do you have that invalidates it?

2. Recognizing that we all have flaws, what is a more balanced way to see yourself? Write down a few neutral or even positive parts of who you are.

3. What would you say to a friend who had your experiences and beliefs about self-hatred?

4. Describe a situation that elicited strong self-hatred. Imagine that you discuss this situation with a caring friend or compassionate therapist and take on their point of view. What do they say to you to help you stop judging yourself so harshly?

To practice these techniques, work with your therapist to have a dialogue using role-play:

1. Review a situation that elicited strong self-hatred. For instance, say you are late for therapy, and you are judging yourself.

2. Your therapist expresses compassion and alternative perspectives.

3. Now, you role-play a friend who is late, and the therapist pretends to be you.

This can help you become more accustomed to hearing and considering these new perspectives, making you more flexible in your own thinking.

Activity 1.5: Guided Journaling

Journaling can have many therapeutic benefits. Writing about your experiences can help you regulate and process emotions and trauma by helping you work through complex feelings. Writing down your feelings can also reduce their intensity and bring clarity to your experiences by creating psychological distance. This can make them seem more manageable by interrupting negative thought patterns and rumination. Rumination is when a person gets stuck in a mental loop that

leads them to over-analyze situations and obsess over perceived mistakes or failures. These repetitive thoughts can amplify negative emotions because they focus on problems instead of solutions. This can make it harder to find solutions or move past painful events.

Take your time to write responses to the following prompts. Taking a different perspective will help you focus on things that encourage self-compassion.

1. List three traits or characteristics that are totally separate from your self-hatred (e.g., “I am curious,” “I am resilient,” “I am a good friend.”).

2. Recall a time when you showed strength or kindness, even if it felt small.

Activity 1.6: Overly Self-Critical Thinking

Overly self-critical thinking perpetuates self-hatred by creating a vicious cycle where negative thoughts reinforce painful emotions, which then fuel even harsher self-judgment. This is because every self-attack, for example, “I’m so stupid,” triggers shame, which perpetuates the person’s feeling of being inherently flawed. Then, harsh and negative self-talk frames mistakes as moral failures “because I am stupid,” instead of as fixable problems, which would sound like, “I was exhausted and didn’t fully understand, and I can always ask others for help.” Finally, because the person is harshly judging themselves, they tend to believe that others judge them, too, and any failure is seen as deserving punishment from the self and others.

Describe a recent mistake and answer the following questions:

1. How did you talk to yourself about it?

2. What did I say to myself?

3. Was I fair or overly harsh?

4. What emotions showed up?

5. What would I say to a friend in the same situation?

Key Points

- Self-hatred is a learned set of behaviors or feelings that can be unlearned. Change is possible.
- Self-hatred is not an innate part of a person. It comes from many outside factors.
- Our core beliefs influence our perspective on the world and on ourselves. These beliefs are not fixed and permanent. When they no longer serve us, we should revise them to help us have a more positive outlook on ourselves, the future, and the people around us.
- Childhood experiences and family relationships send and reinforce messages that can lead to limiting core beliefs.
- Trauma has lingering effects on our thinking by undermining our self-worth and strengthening core beliefs that limit us. This is our mind's attempt to protect us from more harm, but it often results in self-criticism and negative thinking patterns that reduce trust and damage relationships.
- By changing our core beliefs, we can shift our perspective on the world to see ourselves as valuable and worthy participants. We can all learn self-compassion.