

The effect of self-criticism on one's psychological state: A literature review

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Abstract

Self-criticism is an insult or punishment that comes from oneself, when a person judges that they have not met the standards that have been set internally so that they have a mindset in response to perceived failures that can create a negation scheme that becomes the basis for depressive thinking. The purpose of this study is to determine the effect of self-criticism on a person's psychological condition. This study used the literature review method. The data for this study were sourced from national scientific journal articles obtained through Science Direct, Google Scholar, and Pubmed. This study found that self-criticism has been associated with self-harm, depression, psychopathology, and has also been directly linked to suicide. This study showed that self-criticism was associated with suicidality, depression, NSSI, relationship need satisfaction, anxiety, disordered eating, and pain response.

Keywords: Self-criticism; Psychology; Depression; Suicide

1. Introduction

Self-criticism is an experience in which a person's self-evaluation and sense of self (internal world) become critical, hostile, and persecuting even in a number of studies, self-criticism has been associated with self-harm, depression, psychopathology and is also directly associated with suicide (1). Self-criticism is the insult or punishment that comes from oneself, when a person judges that they have not met the standards that have been set internally so that they have a pattern of thinking in response to perceived failures that can create negated schemas that form the basis of depressive thinking (2). Self-criticism exerts high negative affect and low positive affect where in some cases clinical symptoms, for example individuals who have high self-criticism interpret ordinary events such as receiving an A- on a lab report as evidence of intellectual incompetence and lack of commitment to studies, thus turning uncomplicated events into upsetting complications (3). As a second example, highly self-critical women have been found to engage in hostility in conflictual interactions with their boyfriends, which in turn elicits more hostility from their partners (3). Individuals who have high self-criticism tend to experience shame, guilt, and hopelessness which makes the individual more vulnerable to depressive symptoms (4). Self-criticism poses a threat to the enactment of social motives such as self-critical people being less satisfied in relationships, achieving lower employment status, and enjoying parenthood less (4). With this in mind, it is important to discuss the effect of self-criticism on one's psychological state.

2. Material and methods

This study used the literature review method. The data for this study were sourced from national scientific journal articles obtained through Science Direct, Google Scholar, and Pubmed using the keywords "Self-criticism," "Psychology," "Depression," "Suicide." The inclusion criteria for this study were titles that fit the research theme, namely the effect of self-criticism on a person's psychological state and scientific articles published from 2018 to 2023 (the last five years). Relevant research articles were identified using the literature review method, by comparing similar articles in their research, especially those related to the influence of self-criticism on psychological conditions.

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3. Results and discussion

Based on the collected and analyzed articles, the findings are presented as follows:

Table 1 List of Articles

No.	Author	Research Title	Method	Result
1.	Catherine O'Neil et al.	The relationship between self-criticism and suicide probability	A correlation, regression and mediation analysis was undertaken.	Results demonstrated that self-attacking has a direct relationship with suicide probability, alongside established predictors; entrapment and hopelessness. Depressive symptomology was not found to be a significant predictor of suicide probability in this population. Addressing particularly hostile forms of self-criticism may be a promising area in terms of future research and clinical practice (1).
2.	Catherine B. Gittins and Aroline Hunt.	Self-criticism and self-esteem in early adolescence: Do they predict depression?	cross-lagged modelling was used.	Results indicated that self-criticism and depressive symptoms increased over the time period, while self-esteem decreased, and these changes were all related. Self-esteem predicted depressive symptoms from Time 2 to Time 3, while depressive symptoms predicted self-esteem from Time 1 to Time 2. Self-criticism did not predict depressive symptoms, nor did depressive symptoms predict self-criticism. These links appeared largely independent of gender. Self-esteem and depressive symptoms during the early adolescent period thus appear to have a somewhat reciprocal relation, while self-criticism does not appear to predict the development of depression (2).
3.	Laura M. Nagy et al.	An experimental investigation of the effects of self-criticism and self-compassion on implicit associations with non-suicidal self-injury.	An experimental investigation.	Results showed that participants in the self-criticism induction experienced an increase in their implicit associations with NSSI while implicit associations in the self-compassion condition did not significantly change. These results highlight the importance of self-criticism in NSSI (5).
4.	Mary K. Lear et al.	The influence of self-criticism and relationship closeness on peer-reported relationship need satisfaction.	The study design was cross-sectional.	Results suggest that close relationship partners of highly self-critical individuals may not experience optimal psychological need satisfaction, particularly for relatedness needs, which may contextualize prior findings of reduced social support among highly self-critical individuals (6).
5.	Niyati Thakur and Nicola Baumann.	Breaking the anxious cycle of self-criticism: Action orientation buffers the detrimental effects	The study used cross-sectional data.	The relationship between self-critical style and psychological symptoms was mediated by anxious motive enactment. Action orientation moderated the link between self-critical style and anxious motive enactment and buffered the effects of a self-critical style on both anxious motive enactment and psychological symptoms (4).

		of a self-critical personality style.		
6.	Tieying Gong et al.	The associations among self-criticism, hopelessness, rumination, and NSSI in adolescents: A moderated mediation model.	A cross-sectional design.	Self-criticism was significantly associated with NSSI, and this association was mediated by hopelessness. Rumination strengthened the association between self-criticism and hopelessness, as well as the association between hopelessness and NSSI (7).
7.	Yossi Levi-Belz and Carmel Blank.	The longitudinal contribution of prolonged grief to depression and suicide risk in the aftermath of suicide loss: The moderating role of self-criticism.	A longitudinal design study.	A moderated mediation model shows that high self-criticism intensified the relations between PG and shame and between shame and depression and suicide risk, above and beyond the contribution of the longitudinal PG trajectory. Importantly, the indirect effects of PG on both depression and suicide risk via shame levels were found only among SLSs with high levels of self-criticism (8).
8.	Rachel L. Zelkowitz and David A. Cole	Self-criticism As a Transdiagnostic Process in Nonsuicidal Self-injury and Disordered Eating: Systematic Review and Meta-Analysis	Systematic Review and Meta-Analysis.	Results showed equivalent, moderate-to-large effects for the relation of self-criticism to NSSI ($r = .38$; CI: $.29 - .46$) and DE ($r = .40$; CI: $.34-.45$). The relation of NSSI to self-criticism generalized across multiple potential moderators. DE behavior type moderated the relation of self-criticism to DE, with a stronger relation emerging for purging than restriction (9).
9.	Andrew C. Porter et al.	The Unique Associations of Self-Criticism and Shame-Proneness to Symptoms of Disordered Eating and Depression.	All analyses were conducted via Mplus using maximum likelihood estimation. Hypotheses were tested via path analysis.	Findings suggest self-criticism may have incremental utility above-and-beyond shame-proneness as part of a transdiagnostic underlying cognitive substrate for depression and disordered eating (10).
10.	Kathryn R. Fox	Self-Criticism Impacts Emotional Responses to Pain	Approx. 2 weeks before the in-lab visit, participants completed a brief online survey to assess NSSI history using the modified SITBI.	In participants with and without NSSI histories, self-criticism was positively correlated with mood improvements during pain. Thus, regardless of NSSI history, self-criticism impacted emotional responses to pain. Together, results suggest that self-criticism may not only decrease an important NSSI barrier but also enhance NSSI benefits, specifically leading to more mood improvement during pain.

3.1. Self-Criticism and Suicide Probability

Suicide is a major societal problem that impacts individuals and members of the wider community with an increasing incidence each year (1). Suicidal behavior refers to potentially self-harming actions where there is implicit or explicit evidence that the person intends to end their life (1). Self-criticism is associated with a range of mental and mental health disorders, such as eating disorders, social anxiety disorders, and problematic interpersonal relationships to the point of increasing suicide risk as well as serving as a moderator that intensifies shame to higher levels of suicidal ideation and behavior (8). Research suggests that one potential route to increasing the likelihood of suicide through self-injury comes from research on childhood adversity and its impact on self-criticism and shame (1). In this study, it was seen that depression and suicide risk were significantly and positively associated with self-criticism (8).

3.2. Self-Criticism and Depression

Self-criticism is a form of punishment given to oneself when one judges that they have not met internal standards with this mindset occurring in response to perceived failures and forming the basis of depressive thinking (2). Self-criticism is associated with a range of mental and mental health disorders, such as eating disorders, social anxiety disorder, and problematic interpersonal relationships to depression (8). In this study self-criticism and shame proneness associated with eating disorders and depression but when tested individually only self-criticism was associated with both (10). Depressive symptoms and self-criticism increased significantly from 12 to 14 years of age which initially predicted decreased self-esteem, but later, lower levels of self-esteem predicted increased depressive symptoms, which was demonstrated through cross-lagged analysis (2). These findings ultimately support the possibility of a reciprocal causality model although the pathway from self-esteem to depressive symptoms and vice versa for both where depressed mood seems to influence how adolescents evaluate their own worth, and negative beliefs about oneself overall seem to increase the likelihood of developing depressed mood (2).

3.3. Self-Criticism and NSSI

Non-suicidal self-injury (NSSI) or deliberate acts of bodily harm without a suicidal motive is a serious and prevalent health issue with some studies finding that up to 35% of undergraduate students have self-harmed at least once in their lives (5). This study found that hopelessness mediated the relationship between self-criticism and NSSI, and rumination moderated the first and second stages of mediation, so that this association was stronger for adolescents with higher rumination (7). This study showed that there was an association of self-criticism with NSSI but did not differ as a function of age (adolescents versus adults), clinical status, choice of self-criticism measure, assessment of lifetime NSSI versus last year's NSSI, and use of dichotomous versus continuous NSSI measures (9). Self-criticism has been shown to have a strong association with self-harm where in this study participants who underwent self-criticism induction experienced a significant increase in implicit identification with NSSI, while participants who underwent self-compassion induction or neutral controls showed no change (5).

3.4. Self-Criticism and Relationship Need Satisfaction

In this study no evidence was found that self-criticism is directly related to need-satisfying peer relationships. However, higher self-criticism decreased overall relationship need satisfaction among peers in closer relationships (6). The significant interaction between self-criticism and relationship closeness predicting overall need satisfaction may explain why this study did not observe the expected direct effect of self-criticism, as higher self-criticism may only significantly dampen need satisfaction in closer relationships (6).

3.5. Self-Criticism and Anxious

Self-criticism is associated with higher implementation of anxiety motives and action orientation with lower implementation of anxiety motives. The present study showed that the relationship between self-critical style and enactment of anxiety motives was moderated by action orientation. In addition, enactment of anxious motives as a mediator and action orientation as a moderator of this cycle. Action orientation is expected to buffer the detrimental effects of self-criticism. Consistent with assumptions, our findings suggest that anxious motives partially mediate the relationship between self-critical style and psychological symptoms. Furthermore, the relationship from self-critical style through the enactment of anxious motives to psychological symptoms is moderated by action orientation (4).

3.6. Self-Criticism and Disordered Eating

Self-criticism may be related to disordered eating (DE) and depression and that self-critical cognitions are related to shame (e.g., thoughts of worthlessness and inadequacy) may explain SP's association with disordered eating and depressive symptoms. The findings are consistent with a model of disordered eating and depression that suggests patterns of maladaptive cognitions underlie (10). Researchers found evidence for the association of self-criticism across different forms of disordered eating behaviour in both adolescents and adults. The relationship between self-criticism and DE varied significantly from one form of DE to another (9). SC was uniquely associated with eating disorders and depressive symptoms, controlling for shame-proneness (SP). However, SP was not associated with disordered eating and depressive symptoms when controlling for self-criticism. In addition, self-criticism accounted for the majority of the association between disordered eating and depressive symptoms. SP and SC were significantly associated with eating disorders and depressive symptoms when examined separately. When examined together, only self-criticism remained significantly associated with both outcomes (10).

3.7. Self-Criticism and Disordered Eating

This study shows that self-criticism impacts the benefits and barriers to NSSI in that pain may be less for people who have high levels of self-criticism, thus lowering the pain barrier to NSSI engagement. Self-criticism can alter mood benefits of NSSI such that mood improves during the experience of the pain itself among people who are highly self-critical individuals who engage in this behaviour (11).

4. Conclusion

Self-criticism is a self-inflicted humiliation or punishment, when a person judges that they have not met internally set standards. In a number of studies, self-criticism has been associated with self-harm, depression, psychopathology, and has also been directly linked to suicide. This study showed that self-criticism was associated with suicidality, depression, NSSI, relationship need satisfaction, anxiety, disordered eating, and pain response.

Compliance with ethical standards

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No conflict of interest to be disclosed.

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