

Reducing Self-Criticism by Practicing the “Should” Exercise

Objective

To reduce self-criticism by reducing the use of the words “should” and “shouldn’t.”

What to Know

Do you find yourself frequently saying “should” or “shouldn’t?” Can you think of recent examples of times you used these words with yourself or others? If you can’t, here are a few “should” statements you might relate to:

“I should work harder.”

“I should be doing better/making more money.”

“I shouldn’t eat that.”

“I should exercise more!”

“I should be more fun/exciting/have a different life.”

“I shouldn’t be upset. I should be able to cope”

So, what is the problem with the word “should?” The definition might give you a clue – “used to indicate obligation, duty, or correctness, typically when criticizing someone’s actions.”

If you frequently use this word, you’re implicitly criticizing yourself (or someone else). How does this affect you? It can:

- get in the way of goal achievement.
- prevent you from accepting who you are.
- create anxiety and stress.
- shut down your problem-solving abilities.
- cause you to fall into old automatic patterns and habits.
- cause a response that prompts you to run, freeze, or fight.
- lead to self-sabotage.

No wonder you sometimes have trouble doing the things you know you *should* do!

When setting goals, if you begin from “should,” you undermine yourself. Instead of starting from a place of strength and empowerment, you begin from a place of less-than or not good enough. In addition, insecurity won’t motivate you in a sustainable way. It may drive you in the short term, but it can quickly lead to burn out or self-sabotage – resulting in feeling like a failure.

Here’s what you can do:

- Start to notice when you use the word should. Ask a partner, friend, or family member to help point it out.

- Begin to question why you think you (or someone else) should do the thing.
- Ask if the statement fits with your beliefs and values.
- Reflect on whether should-ing yourself has helped you achieve goals in the past.
- Repeat the statement as “I could,” or “I want to.” Notice how that changes the sentence and what it means for you.

Perhaps you will be pleasantly surprised by how removing “should” from your vocabulary makes a positive difference in your life.

What to Do

Write down recent examples of when you used should or shouldn't with yourself.

With others?

Who can help point out when you use “should?” _____

You might not notice how often you use “should” or “shouldn't” when talking to yourself. Fill in the following chart. In the first column, write down all the things you think you should be doing. The list can be as long or as short as you like. In the second column next to each “I should,” write down why. In the third column, write down who you think says you should (it could be yourself!). The “Says who?” column will challenge your assumptions and begin to reveal how you have been programmed to believe certain things. In the final column, rewrite the “should” statements as “I could” or “I want to” statements.

If you need more space, make a copy of the chart.

I should...	Why?	Says who?	I could... I want to...

Reflections on This Exercise

How difficult was it to reduce or eliminate “should” from your vocabulary? Explain.

Was it hard to catch yourself when you said should or shouldn't? Did you ask someone to help you with this exercise? Why or why not?

Did you have a hard time rephrasing your “I should” statements into “I could” or “I want to” statements? Describe.

How helpful was this exercise? _____
(1 = not very helpful to 10 = extremely helpful)

What did you learn from this exercise?
