

ACT with Compassion: ACT for Chronically Self-Critical and Shame-Prone Clients

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Jenna and The Dalai Luoma 15 years ago



The Dalai Luoma Today

Outline

Part 1: Shame and self-criticism

Part 2: An ACT approach to shame

Part 3: Demonstration/practice



Informed Consent

- ▣ Some of this will be experiential
- ▣ Confidentiality
- ▣ Its your choice to participate, some will do their work privately
- ▣ You are encouraged to try it on

Part 1

Shame and self-criticism



Let's look in the mirror

- ▣ Shame affects us all.
- ▣ What aspects of yourself do you keep hidden? What past events are you afraid to talk about because of what people might think?
- ▣ Let's do a brief exercise

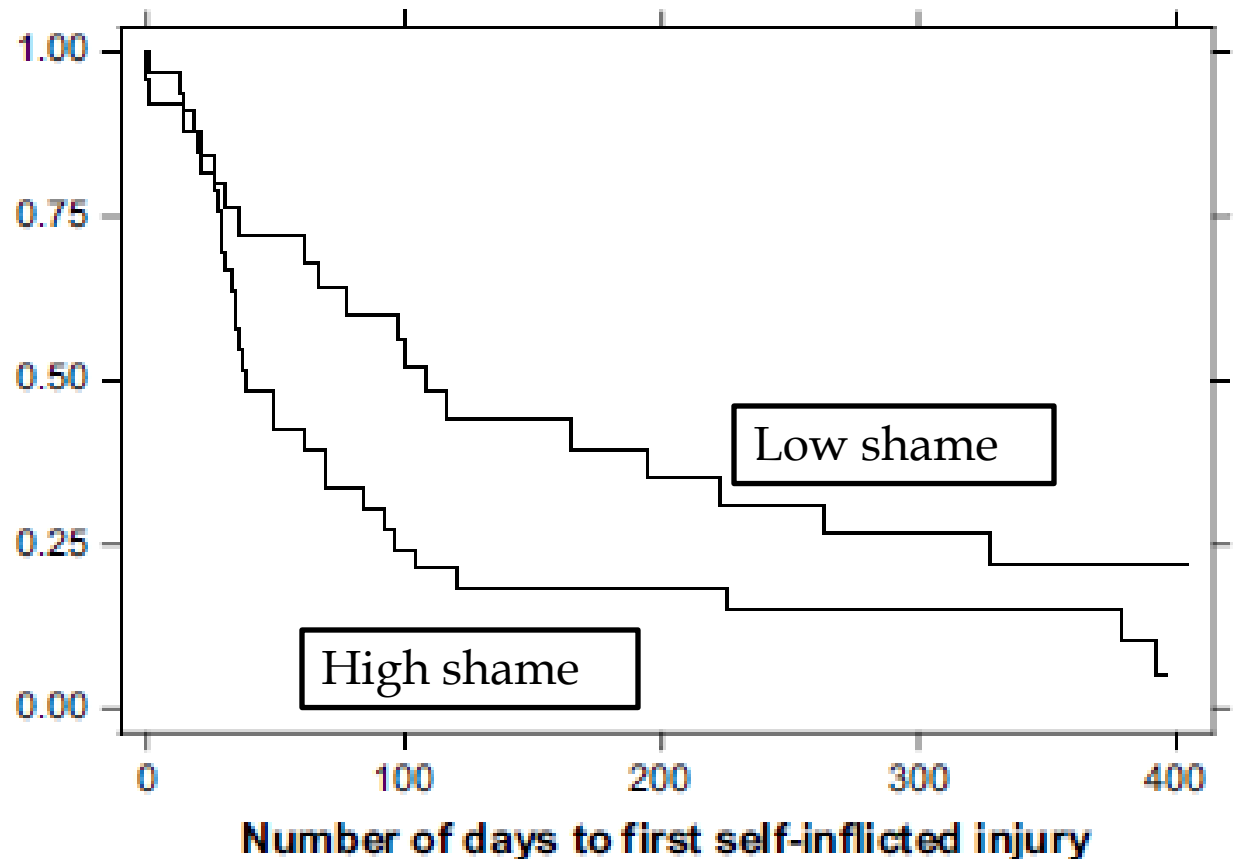
Shame and self-criticism are typically central to the struggles of our most chronic, interpersonally difficult, and stuck clients

In western samples, shame is strongly associated with poor functioning

- ▣ **PTSD symptom severity** (Leskela et al., 2002):
 - Shame was positively related; guilt was unrelated
- ▣ **Suicide** (Lester, 1998; Hastings, Nortman, & Tangney, 2000):
 - Shame related to greater suicidal ideation, suicidal thoughts, but not attempts; guilt unrelated to suicidality
- ▣ **Substance abuse problems** (Dearing, Stuewig, & Tangney, 2005):
 - Shame related to greater; guilt related to fewer
- ▣ **Self-injury** (Brown et al., 2009):
 - Shame predicts time to first suicide attempt/self-injury among people diagnosed with BPD
- ▣ **Immunological function** (Dickerson et al. 2004):
 - Shame related to poorer immunological correlated (i.e., cytokine activity); guilt unrelated

Shame predicts time to first suicide attempt /self-injury (Brown et al., 2009)

77 women diagnosed with borderline personality disorder, enrolled in a clinical trial



We aren't trained to address shame.

2005

First multiple baseline study (Rizvi & Linehan)

2007

First ACT open trial (Luoma et al.)

2012

First randomized trial (Luoma et al.)

2006

First open trial (Gilbert and Proctor)

2012

First handbook on the treatment of shame



Why aren't we better equipped to
respond to shame?

Shame comes with a
tendency to hide, so
it's hard to recognize
it when it happens.





We don't talk about shame, so we don't understand it.

Recognizing & understanding shame

Distinguishing guilt from shame

- ▣ In general, theorists argue that people experience guilt when they have a negative evaluation of their *behavior or actions*, whereas shame involves a negative evaluation of the *self* (Barrett, 1995; Tangney, Stuewig, & Mashek, 2006).

Focus of attention in shame vs guilt

In shame, the focus of attention is on the “bad” self

In guilt, the focus of attention is on the “bad” behavior or damage to a relationship





Figure 2. Prototypical shame expression (reprinted from Tracy, Robins, & Schriber, 2009).







Nonverbal indicators of shame

- Hunched shoulders
- Facial touching
- Blushing
- Gaze and head movements downward
- Decreased levels of expressive behaviors
- Avoidance of contact with others (e.g., eye contact)

Action Tendencies in Shame

- ▣ Attempt to repair self-image
- ▣ Hide, withdraw, disappear

If repair of self-image does not occur, then we see:

- ▣ Obsessive rumination the bad qualities of the self and self-hatred/contempt
- ▣ Overfocus on bad self and lack of empathy for others
- ▣ Withdrawal and social isolation in order to hide the “bad” self
- ▣ Attempts to reduce the painful emotion itself (e.g., numbing, drug use)

What direction should we take in dealing with shame?



Part 2

An Acceptance and Commitment Therapy approach to shame and self-criticism

“Self compassion is the special sauce, the secret ingredient for mindfulness in all traditions, including science-based mindfulness...I don't know the technical explanation. All I can say is, all this stuff [acceptance, defusion, etc.] is easier to do if you are kind to yourself the way you would be to a friend, a child, a pet, etc. (your choice).”

--Randy Burgess, posting on
the ACT for the Public Listserv

Applying ACT to shame

For self-critical clients, much behavior is organized around avoiding shame/fear

- ▣ Shame is intricately blended with fear
- ▣ Shame is extremely painful (and therefore understandable that people want to avoid/escape it)
- ▣ Often these folks have many early life experiences of being devalued, uncared for, falling short of standards, or being humiliated and dominated – leaving a tendency toward shame

Self-criticism can be a means to reduce shame and create safety, but unfortunately serves to further feed it

Two major functions for self-criticism:

- 1) Self-correction – attempts to protect the person from problematic consequences (including shame)
- 2) Self-punishment – attempts to punish or destroy the “bad self” as we might expel or eliminate a disgusting or worthless object

“What we feed grows”

Pick a client who is highly self-critical and answer the following questions:

- ▣ What kinds of behavior do this person engage in to avoid shame in session?
- ▣ How can you tell they are experiencing shame?
- ▣ What do they feel shame around? (do you know?)
- ▣ What do you think the function of their self-criticism is?
- ▣ How does being organized around shame get in the way of their lives?

A close-up photograph of a white cat's face, focusing on its green eye. A blue geometric diagram, consisting of a hexagon with a circle at its top vertex, is overlaid on the left side of the image.

Present Moment

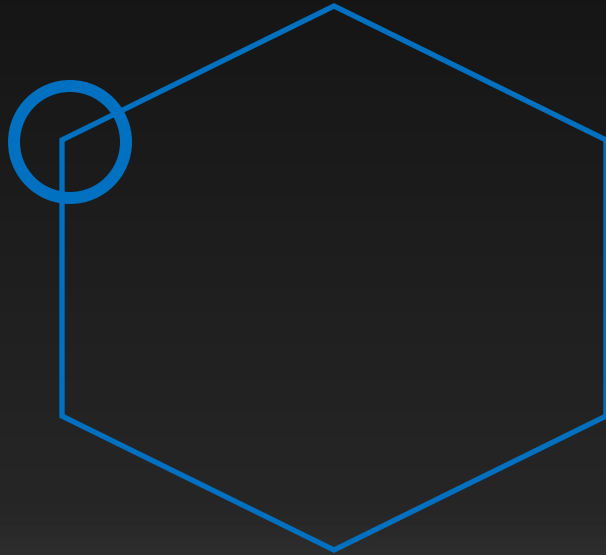
Build awareness of self-criticism/self-attack and its effects

Clients often do not even notice their self-evaluations, nor do they track the effects of this way of relating to themselves

Acceptance

**Acknowledge & embrace
aspect of self that feels
damaged, broken, unlovable,
not-good-enough, and/or
rejected**

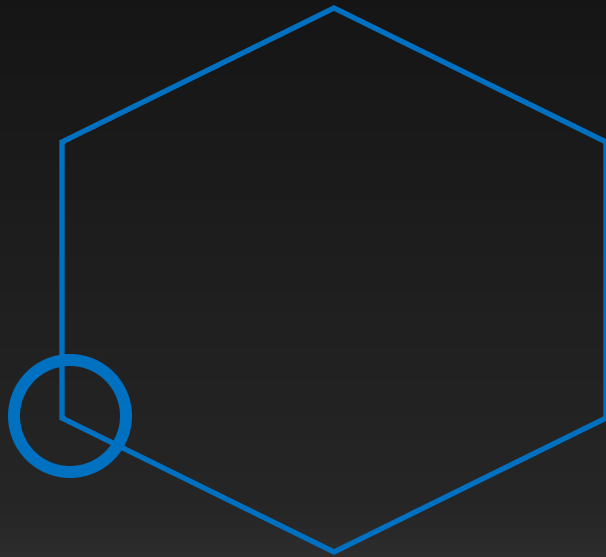
Some aspects of self-as-
content that are rejected,
denied, hated, and judged.
Vulnerable emotions are
shameful and avoided.



Defusion

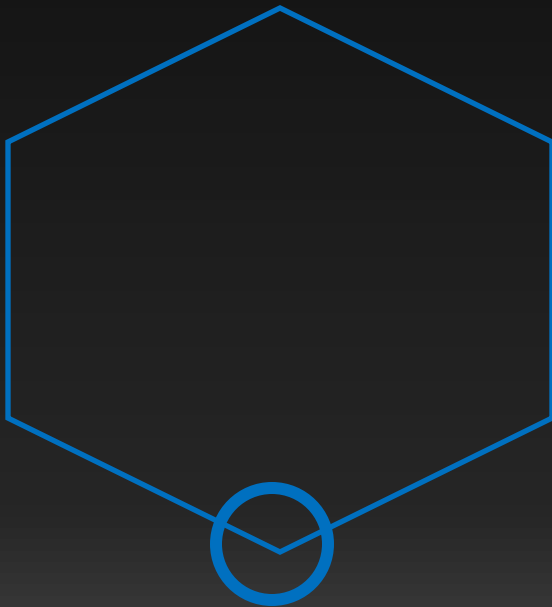
**Develop distance,
distinction from self-
attacking thoughts**

Clients typically see critical
view of self as normal, earned,
or needed for motivation.



Self as context/ flexible perspective taking

**Develop connection a
transcendent sense of self
and flexibly take perspective
on our stories**



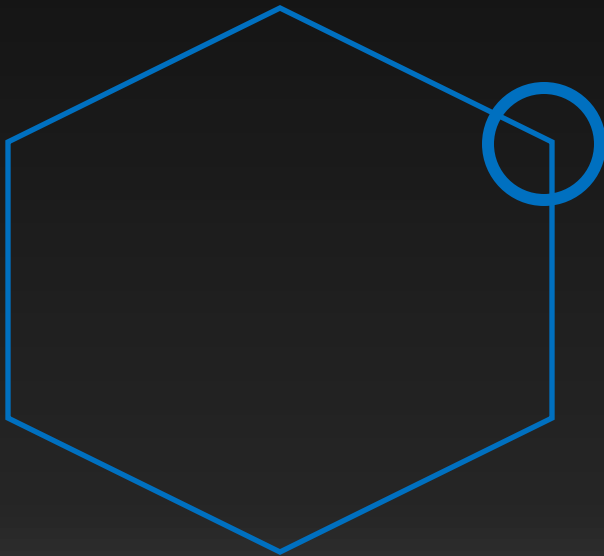
Shame/self-criticism is
fundamentally about fusion
with stories we tell about self
and other

Values

Help person articulate and take a stand for their values, particularly self-oriented values

Most people value empathy and connection, but fusion with self-concept impedes applying that to themselves

Simply discussing the possibility of self-kindness & self-compassion can be eye-opening for many clients

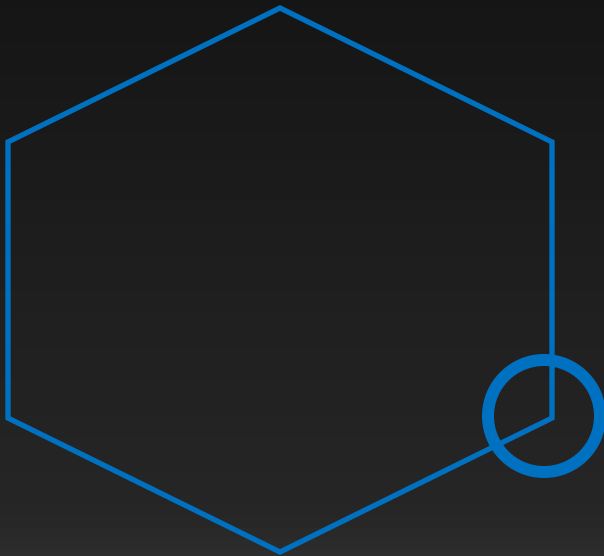


Committed action

Help client take steps to act on values while practicing kindness and compassion

Self-attacks often function to coerce the self to act in line with self-standards and values (e.g., “push through it”).

Self-criticism makes it harder to take risks & learn, which inevitably involves failure and mistakes



These six processes can be organized into 3 core strategies:

1. Stop feeding shame through defusing from self-critical thinking that serves to maintain avoidance and sustain shame
2. Reduce dominance of shame in organizing behavior through exposure to shame in learning context
3. Increase repertoires of self-related values (e.g., kindness and compassion)

1. Stop feeding shame through defusing from self-critical thinking

Build awareness of self-criticism/self-attack (contact with the present moment and perspective taking)

Develop distance, distinction from self-attacking thoughts, observing self-critical thoughts as thoughts (defusion and perspective taking)

Anxiety is to fear as
self-criticism is to shame

2. Reduce dominance of shame in organizing behavior thru compassionate exposure

Use flexible perspective taking exercises to help clients compassionately enter shame-inducing situations while adding elements that allow learning (i.e., psychological flexibility) to occur

3. Increase repertoires involving prosocial values (e.g., kindness and compassion)

Develop and activate caretaking response on part of client

- ▣ Discuss and explore chosen values toward self
- ▣ Practice compassion-focused and loving-kindness meditations
- ▣ Writing compassionate letters to self
- ▣ Developing plans for how to respond to self-criticism and shame when taking committed action

Measures to consider

I always give:

- ▣ Forms of Self-Criticism and Reassuring Scale (FSCRS) – last week version
- ▣ Internalized Shame Scale (ISS) – last week version
- ▣ Self-Compassion Scale (SCS-short form)

Other useful measures:

- ▣ Functions of Self-Criticism/Attacking Scale
- ▣ Early Memories of Warmth Scale
- ▣ Rizvi's (2010) Shame Inventory
- ▣ Compass of Shame Scale

Other measures here:

<http://www.compassionatemind.co.uk/resources/scales.htm>

Modifying compassion-focused interventions for high self-critics

Compassion and warmth-focused imagery and exercises will typically evoke fear, not affiliative emotions

Deeper connection with the therapist is not soothing, but fearful and often avoided

Part 3

Demonstration/practice

Building awareness and eliciting shame through chair work

Chair work

1. Identify the conflict you are starting with (criticizing part vs experiencing/feeling part)
2. Enact harsh self-attack in the session so you can work with shame directly
3. Draw out and explore felt reaction to attack
4. Should be a dialogue between chairs, not a conversation with the therapist
5. Follow and reflect the client's experience closely, not your ideas of what should happen

Critic chair

Starts here

Frustration
Coach-critic



Move to here

Harsh, specific
contempt/disgust

Experiencer chair

Agreement
Helplessness
hopelessness



Shame/fear

Chair work guidelines

Once you have elicited the shame, that's where most of the work focuses...all the ACT processes could apply in relation to that perspective.

Processes to use during exposure to shame cues

Build awareness of the attack: Observing and detaching from self-attack (defusion, self as context)

Build ability to stay in contact with and elaborate the silenced/shamed/small/hurting self (acceptance, present moment, values)

Take perspective – add in a third perspective of an observer, or help the critic to build empathy/understanding (self as context)

Role Play

A thing worth doing....

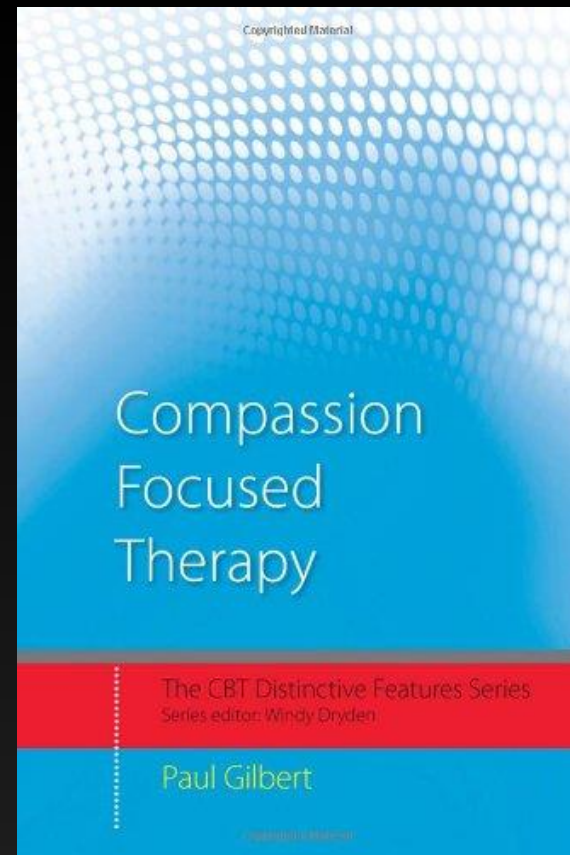
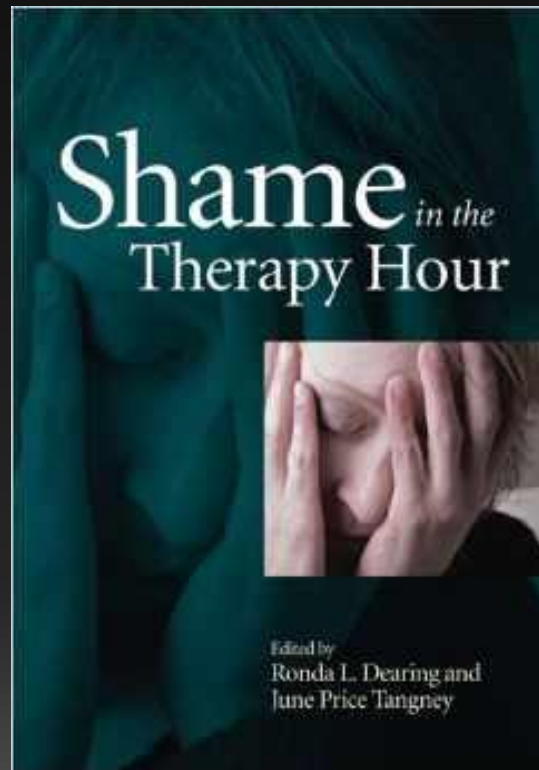
is worth doing poorly at first.

Exercise in pairs:

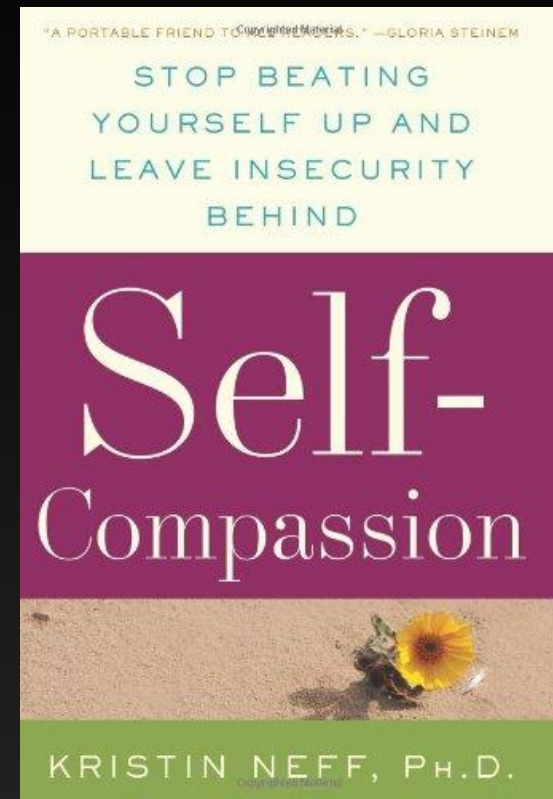
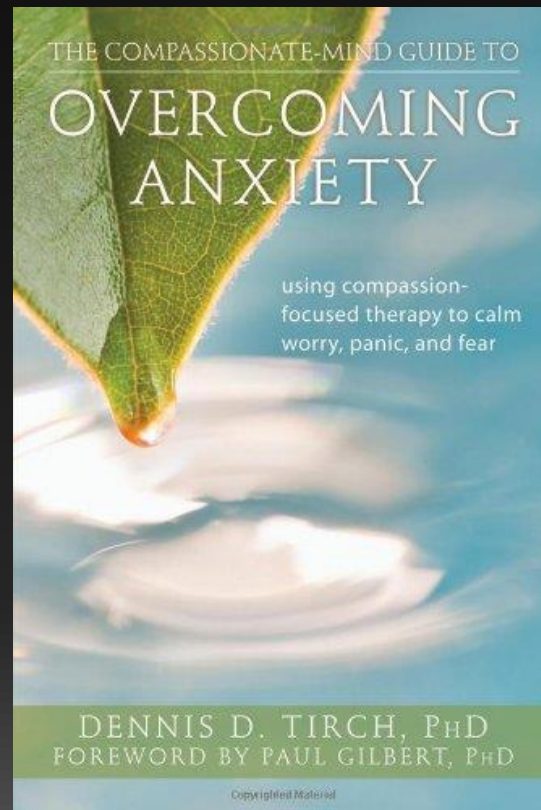
1. what will you take away from this workshop?
2. Committed action related to this workshop: make one commitment

Options for Further learning

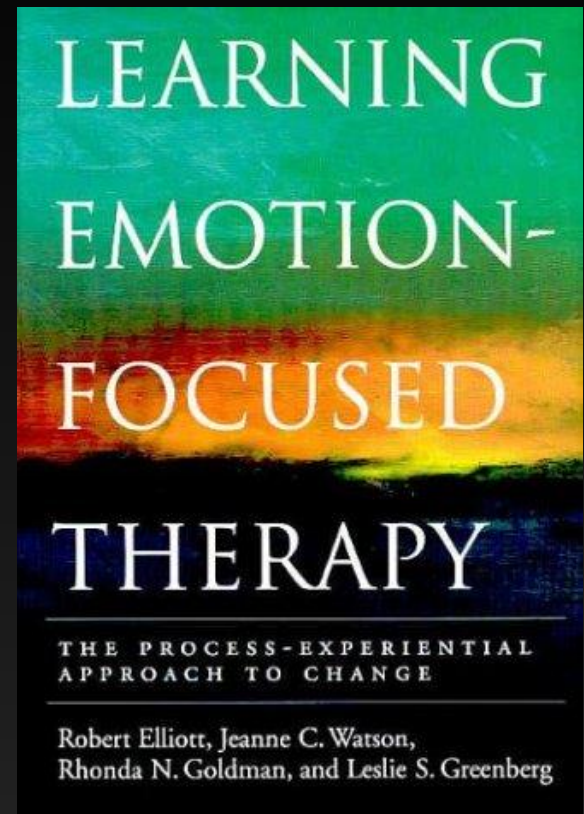
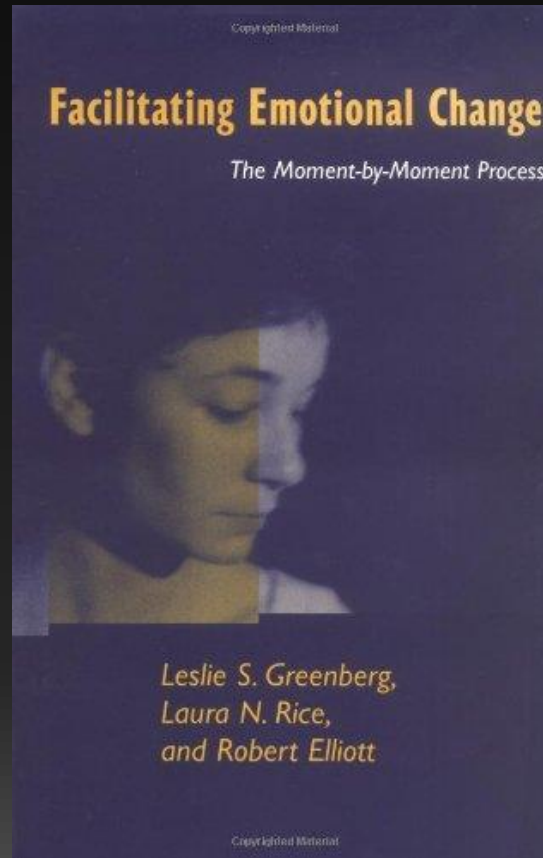
More on therapy to help shame and self-criticism



Self-help focused on self-compassion



More about how to do chair work



Meditation on Love by Steve Hayes

I will hold myself gently.
I will hold myself in love.
Not love as something I earn.
Not love as a judgment, nor a conclusion.
Not a plan, a decision, or a hope.
Not love as a manipulation.
Nor wish.
Rather love as a choice.
As an assumption, a gift.
Love as an action, a foundation, an essence.
As an experienced reality.
I am here now.
And lovingly,
I care.

