

# Stop Punishing Yourself

## Objective

To reduce self-punishing behaviors and identify healthier ways to cope.

## What to Know

Self-punishment is the attempt to harm yourself for perceived wrongdoings and may include either physical or psychological actions against yourself. You may respond to your mistakes or failures by forcing yourself through unpleasant, corrective actions. These can be obvious and extreme, like harm to your body, or subtle, like blaming yourself for something that is not your fault.

Self-punishment can become a habit. You may believe it is the only way to compensate for your failures. Sometimes self-punishment is easier than communicating to others what you are going through. Examples of physical self-punishment include any type of action you take to intentionally cause yourself physical pain. Some examples:

- excessive drinking or drug use
- forcing yourself to work out extra time at the gym after overeating
- sleep deprivation
- cutting, burning, or bruising yourself
- pulling your hair
- punching the wall or destroying objects
- refraining from eating

Emotional or psychological self-punishment is less obvious. Some examples:

- any type of negative self-talk
- excessively criticizing or insulting yourself after making mistakes
- forcing yourself to overwork
- denial of pleasure
- overspending
- constantly accepting blame
- always viewing yourself as wrong
- not allowing others to help you

Self-punishment can serve many different purposes, but often involve emotion regulation. If you do not have the tools to regulate intense emotions, you may feel overwhelmed or incapable of handling them – leading to self-punishing behaviors. A recent study indicated emotional dysregulation is associated with self-harming behavior and self-punishment, as well as non-suicidal self-injury. So, what can you do to reduce and eventually stop punishing yourself?

**1. Develop self-awareness.** Practice catching yourself before you take self-punishing actions.

**2. Practice emotion regulation techniques.** There are many tools you can try to help regulate your emotions. Techniques vary from mindfulness practices to simply stopping yourself and asking how you can respond differently. If you use a tool the moment before punishing yourself, it may be enough to prevent you from choosing the harmful behavior or thought. Here is an example: Take 3-4 deep breaths and bring your awareness to the soles of your feet, flat on the ground beneath you. Observe your thoughts without judgment, and if you are overwhelmed, simply notice your breath without trying to control it. Bring your hand to your heart to provide yourself comfort during this practice. Continue this exercise until you feel calm and the urge to punish yourself passes.

**3. Practice self-forgiveness.** You do not have to “pay extra” for your mistakes. If you make a mistake, call it a mistake, and move on. Make forgiveness part of your life. When you forgive yourself and move on, you maintain forward momentum.

**4. Get curious.** To end cycles of self-punishment, become curious instead of getting angry with yourself. Ask questions and honestly answer yourself. For example: “Why am I overeating after work every night? Maybe I’m overworked. Maybe I don’t like my job. Maybe I just have too much on my plate right now and I’m trying to comfort myself.” When you break a cycle of self-punishment that has become a habit, you may find acceptance and you can redefine your goals.

**5. Talk to trusted loved ones.** Is there a friend or family member willing to listen when you feel like punishing yourself? Communicating with someone may offer comfort or relief from your challenging emotions.

**6. Seek help from a mental health professional.** This may be especially helpful if you hold onto deeply ingrained, negative beliefs about yourself. If self-punishment is the only way you know how to respond to overwhelming emotions, see a mental health professional, who can offer perspective about how these beliefs developed.

Self-punishment is one way of coping with emotional challenges. It can make you temporarily feel better or more in control, but if self-punishment is your default reaction, there are other, healthier ways of responding.

## What to Do

Write about a recent experience where you made a mistake that led to negative feelings about yourself.

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Were your emotions following this experience difficult to manage? Explain.

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Did you punish yourself? Describe what happened.

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How do you typically punish yourself? With thoughts, words, or actions? Do you say mean things to yourself? Do you put yourself down? Do you give yourself consequences for not fulfilling unrealistic expectations? Be specific.

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For the next month, use the following chart to record when you are tempted to engage in self-punishing behaviors. Note the date, describe what happened, and write down what you did. Did you engage in a healthy coping behavior, or did you punish yourself? Write down how you responded. Note any additional information (outcome, who helped you cope, and so on).

Date	What happened?	How did you respond?	Notes

Date	What happened?	How did you respond?	Notes

## Reflections on This Exercise

Did this exercise help you reduce self-punishing behaviors? Why or why not?

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What was difficult about this activity? Easy? Be specific.

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Did you identify healthier ways to cope? If yes, describe.

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How helpful was this exercise? \_\_\_\_\_

(1 = not very helpful, 5 = moderately helpful, 10 = extremely helpful)

What can you do differently to make progress in this area?

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*Please note – If you have a mental health emergency, you can:*

- call the [988 Suicide and Crisis Lifeline](#) at 988 (English and Spanish)
- chat with professionals at [Lifeline Chat](#)
- text “HOME” to the [Crisis Text Line](#) at 741741
- check out [Befrienders Worldwide](#) or [Suicide Stop](#) if you are outside the United States and need to find your country’s crisis hotline
- if you call an emergency number (911), ask the operator to send someone trained in mental health, like Crisis Intervention Training (CIT) officers