An Evolutionary Approach to Shame-Based Self-Criticism, Self-Forgiveness, and Compassion

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The Self That Seeks Forgiveness Lives Within a Social Context

What marks humans as different from other animals is not so much their motivation and emotional orientations but the recent evolution of cognitive competencies for processes such as knowing awareness, self-awareness, second-order self-appraisal, systemic reasoning, rumination, anticipation, and attribution, negative self-judgements, and possibilities for self-forgiveness (Byrne, 1995; Gilbert, 2009; Suddendorf & Whitten, 2001). Negative self-evaluation on the one hand, and self-acceptance, self-forgiveness, and self-compassion on the other, can only arise because we have capacities for symbolic self-representations that cannot be separated from the social contexts in which they operate (Gilbert, 2009; Siegel, 2016; Sznycer et al., 2016). For example, obesity in some cultures signals wealth and well-being, whereas in others it signals poor self-regulation. Sumo wrestlers are prized in their cultures, but people of that size on the local London bus would not be. Hence, the focus of shame, self-criticism, and even self-hatred is based in our social contexts (Sznycer et al., 2016). Considering self-criticism and self-forgiveness in social and evolutionary contextual terms provides a platform for recognising that self-criticism, self-compassion, and self-forgiveness can be understood in terms of their social as well as personal forms and functions (Gilbert, 1998a, 1998b, 2009). In addition, it offers a basis for understanding the relationship of compassion to self-forgiveness.

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L. Woodyatt et al. (eds.), *Handbook of the Psychology of Self-Forgiveness*,
DOI 10.1007/978-3-319-60573-9_3

Evolution of Competing and Caring Motives

Various motivation and emotional dispositions evolve because they benefit survival and gene replication (Buss & Plomin, 2014). Two of the major challenges for all species are (1) competing for resources (including food and sexual opportunities) and (2) offspring survival. Social competition gives rise to a variety of specific competencies (e.g. social comparison and self-other monitoring) to work out how to navigate increases and decreases of social rank and status, cope with threats to one's social standing, and be successful at resource acquisition. In humans, social status is won or lost less with aggression and more in competing to be attractive to others: being accepted, included, wanted, and chosen as a friend, lover, employee, and leader (Barkow, 1989; Gilbert, 1989, 2007; Sznycer et al., 2016). In contrast to competing for social status is the evolution of strategies for ensuring offspring survive to reproduce. Rather than produce hundreds of eggs, with only a few surviving (called *r* selection), mammalian survival has involved producing few offspring but caring for them, and to avoid harming them (called *k* selection; Buss & Plomin, 2014; Crook, 1980; Geary, 2000; Gilbert, 1989). Thus, the motivation to be caring, helpful, and supportive has been central to human evolution (Mayseless, 2016).

Understanding Shame, Humiliation, and Guilt

Self-criticism can be associated with a range of emotions including shame, humiliation, and guilt. Each of these can be understood according to the way they relate to competitive or caring motivation systems. Table 1 offers a snapshot overview of the differences between various self-conscious emotions. Understanding these different motives and emotions suggests that self-forgiveness will operate very differently depending on the emotions and motivations to which it relates.

Shame and humiliation emerge from defences that evolved in the context of dominant-subordinate relations (Gilbert, 1989, 1992, 1998a, 1998b, 2000; Gilbert & McGuire, 1998; Sznycer et al., 2016). Hence, shame responses have a similar profile to submissive defences of eye gaze avoidance, behavioural inhibition and withdrawal, posturally making the body smaller, and elevated cortisol responses (Gilbert, 1992, 1998a, 1998b, 2000, 2009). Attacks of shame can lead people to feel paralysed and even unable to talk or think clearly—all aspects of defensive, behavioural inhibition. Humiliation activates more the non-submissive, fight back, strategies. In contrast, guilt emerges from the evolution of caring behaviour and the avoidance of harming others (kin and allies; Crook, 1980; Gilbert, 1989).

Internal Versus External Shame Shame has been linked to the competitive dynamics of life and can be distinguished between external and internal shame on the basis of the attentional and cognitive focus, and coping behaviours (Goss, Gilbert, & Allan, 1994; Gilbert, 1998a, 2007). There is now good evidence for these distinctions and how they impinge on psychopathology in slightly different ways

Table 1 Rule of thumb distinctions between shame, humiliation, and guilt

Internal shame	Humiliation	Guilt
Rank mentality	Rank mentality	Care mentality
Inwardly directed attention on damage to self and reputation	Externally directed attention is to the threat or damage done to the self by the other	Externally directed attention on hurt caused with empathy for the other, allied with a focus on one's behaviour
Feelings are of anxiety, paralysis, heart sink, confusion, emptiness, self-directed anger	Feelings are of anger, injustice, and vengeance	Feelings are of sorrow, sadness, and remorse
Thoughts focused on negative judgments of the 'whole self', such as being bad, inadequate	Thoughts focused on unfairness of any negative judgments or behaviours by others	Thoughts focused on the 'harm to the other, sympathy and empathy
Behaviours focused on submissive closing down and moving away, avoidant displacement, denial, self harm; self recovery	Behaviours focused on vengeance and silencing the other—having power over the other, belittling and humiliating back	Behaviours focused on trying to repair harm, offer genuine apologies, make amends for the benefit of others

Adapted from, P. Gilbert (2010) *Compassion Focused Therapy*. With kind permission from Routledge

(Kim, Thibodeau, & Jorgensen, 2011). In external shame, attention is focused on the mind of the other and how the other is judging the self and may act towards the self (e.g. rejecting, avoiding, attacking). The self feels looked down upon, unattractive, and 'marked' as undesirable. External shame not only arises from wrongdoing but from making mistakes, being seen as stupid or incompetent, 'letting oneself down in the eyes of others', or having a physical appearance that is unattractive or disfigured. Self-forgiveness for external shame would be forgiving oneself for doing things that has damaged one's reputation, social standing, acceptability, or likeability in the eyes of others. In contrast, for internal shame, attention is turned inwards. The imagined or anticipated audience fades from consciousness into the background; the self becomes the judging audience of the self. The primary emotions associated with shame are ones of anxiety, disgust, and what might be called 'heart sink'.

Humiliation Humiliation can arise from similar events as external shame (feeling looked down or held in contempt by another), but here there is little self-reference (Gilbert, 1998a, 1998b). Rather, the focus is on the threatening behaviour of the other. The essence of humiliation is feeling being 'made to look small'. This can fuel a counter-attack or revenge attack; Scheff and Retzinger (1991) discuss this as 'humiliated fury'. Whereas in shame, individuals try to accommodate to subordinate roles/status, in humiliation they seek to exert dominance in retaliation. Stram (1978) noted that while people may feel they deserve their shame they do not feel they deserve their humiliation (see Gilbert, 1998a, 1998b for a review).

Guilt Guilt is related to the care-focused and harm avoidance motivational system. As Crook (1980) pointed out motivations to care for kin also involve avoiding harming them, with aversive consequences if doing so, and with a motivation to repair any harm done. No parental investment or attachment system could evolve unless there was also a harm avoidance aspect within it. This involves an awareness of not only what an infant needs (e.g. food, protection comfort), but what could be harmful to them. Gilbert (1989) utilised these insights in developing a model of guilt. Gilbert (1989) argues that guilt can arise in contexts of an empathic awareness of unintentionally causing harm. This is then associated with feelings of remorse and sadness and the motivation to repair any harm done.

Understanding Self-Criticism

There is considerable research highlighting how self-criticism is associated with a range of mental health problems (for reviews, see Gilbert & Irons, 2005; Kannan & Levitt, 2013; Shahar, 2016). However, it is important to note that there is a distinction between shame-based self-criticism and compassion-based self-correction (Gilbert, 2009). There are different forms and functions of self-criticism (Driscoll, 1988) that vary from mild self-rebuke and disappointment to self-persecution and self-hatred (Castilho, Pinto-Gouveia, & Duarte, 2015; Gilbert et al., 2004). As these are rooted in different psychological processes, they can be associated with differences in symptom or problem presntations, therapy requirements, as well as differences in the barriers to therapy (Gilbert & Irons, 2005). Recent research has also shown that different types of self-criticism are linked to shame and psychopathology in different ways, with self-hatred being more pathogenic than inadequacy (Castilho, Pinto-Gouveia, & Duarte, 2017) (Table 2).

Self-Criticism as a Means of Feeling in Control Criticising one's self may give the feeling of being in control when in reality one is not, with many difficulties in life arising arbitrarily. Bergner (1995) developed these themes and explored their links to psychopathology and their psychotherapy (see also Woodyatt, Wenzel, & de Vel Palumbo (2017)).

Self-Criticism as Redirected Anger One function of self-criticism was identified centuries ago by Freud (1856–1939), who borrowed from the German philosopher Frederic Nietzsche the idea that 'no one blames themselves without a secret wish for vengeance' (Ellenberger, 1970). This basic idea was to appear in Freud's 1917 publication *Mourning and Melancholia*, in which he distinguished *mourning* (where the world had become empty) from *melancholia* (where the self had become empty). For the latter, Freud proposed that some individuals had high hostility towards people they depended on but failed to express it due to fear of a counter-attack or loss of support. This became known as the 'anger turned inward' model.

Self-Criticism as Appeasement of a Powerful Other A different take on the same basic idea was generated by the attachment psychiatrist John Bowlby (1980).

Table 2 Distinguishing between shame-based self-criticism and compassionate self-correction

Shame-based self-attacking	Compassionate self-correction
• Focuses on the desire to condemn and punish • Punishes past errors and is often backward looking • Is given with anger, frustration contempt, disappointment • Concentrates on deficits and fear of exposure • Focuses on self as a global sense of self • Includes a high fear of failure • Increases chances of avoidance and withdrawal	• Focuses on the desire to improve • Emphasises growth and enhancement • Is forward looking • Is given with encouragement, support, kindness • Builds on positives (e.g. seeing what you did well and then considering learning points) • Focuses on attributes and specific qualities of self • Emphasises hope for success • Increases the chances of engage
For a transgression • Shame, avoidance, fear • Heart sink, lowered mood • Humilation-Aggression	*For a transgression* • Guilt, engage • Sorrow, remorse • Reparation
Consider example of critical teacher with child who is struggling	Consider example of encouraging supportive teacher with child who is struggling

Adapted from, P. Gilbert (2009) *The Compassionate Mind*. With kind permission from Constable Robinson

He posited that children, who are dependent on their parents, may not be able to express anger or defend against parental hostility or rejection as to do so could escalate parental hostility. Consequently, when a child is hit they tend to assume they have done something wrong rather than view their mother or father as an impulsive, aggressive person. Bowbly coined the term 'defensive exclusion' to refer to the way in which a child learns to exclude from awareness the bad behaviour of the parents (and later, others), and take blame personally in order to maintain some kind of positive attachment. One can imagine that these children may be particularly likely to self-blame in contexts of conflict, and likely to be poor self-forgivers. They can become overly apologetic, submissive, and take responsibility in contexts where that might be inappropriate (for reviews see Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007).

In terms of cultural history, many early civilisations, such as the Aztecs, had a belief in the power of the gods to control the fates. The way to avoid the misfortunes of (say) droughts, famines, and diseases was to try to get the gods on side. The way to do this was to try to work out what they wanted, be obedient, and sacrifice to them as a demonstration of one's submissiveness, gratitude, and followership (Garcia, 2015). The key point is that if the scarifices do not work, and the famines are as bad as ever next year, people do not direct their anger at the gods (who have failed them) because that would be too dangerous, but to themselves with questions of 'what did we do wrong to upset you' (self-blame) and 'how can we win your favour again' (appeasement), maybe even more sacrifices. In a context of individuals (even imagined ones) who are powerful and vengeful, subordinates cannot afford to express anger but must self-monitor their behaviour, and this process of self-monitoring may easily become a form of self-blaming and fear or doing something

wrong (Fournier, Moskowitz, & Zuroff, 2002). Forrest and Hokanson (1975) showed that in a conflict situation, depressed people felt relieved by being able to be self-critical whereas non-depressed people preferred to be assertive. So self-blaming and self-criticism are clearly related to power dynamics and that will be important for self-forgiveness. (See Gilbert & Irons, 2005).

Further evidence that some forms of self-criticism do indeed develop within a background of threatening environments was revealed in a major study by Sachs-Ericsson, Verona, Joiner, and Preacher (2006). They found self-criticism, but not dependency, was a full mediator of the relationship between childhood parental verbal abuse and internalising difficulties associated with depression and anxiety symptoms. For other forms of abuse, self-criticism was only a partial mediator.

In addition, Irons, Gilbert, Baldwin, Baccus, and Palmer (2006) found that recalling parents as rejecting, overprotecting, and controlling was significantly related to both inadequacy and self-hating forms of self-criticism. In contrast, recall of parental warmth was negatively correlated with them. In addition, recalling parents as warmth and helpful was associated with the ability to be self-reassuring when things were difficult. The impact of recall of negative parenting on depression is mediated by forms of self-criticism, while the effect of parental warmth on depression was mediated by the ability to be self-reassuring. The study also found that a fearful avoidant attachment style (keeping emotional distance from others because one is frightened of them) was significantly linked to self-criticism compared to a dismissing style (which involves not engaging in close attachments because one does not see them as helpful or useful). Such data further indicate the social and relational dynamics of self-criticism.

It is known that socially anxious people tend to see themselves as subordinate and inferior to others (see Gilbert, 2014a; Weeks, 2014, for reviews). Similarly, social anxiety is associated with both self-blaming and self-criticism. For example, Trower, Sherling, Beech, Horrop, and Gilbert (1998) asked anxious and non-anxious students to engage in a free-flowing open conversation with a lecturer. The lecturer, however, was primed to break social conversation rules such as randomly changing the subject and speaking over the student. When asked about the reasons for the lecturer's behaviour, students low on anxiety blamed the rudeness of the lecturer, while socially anxious students blamed themselves (e.g. that they were boring).

Self-Forgiveness

Recognising these underpinning functions of self-criticism indicates that the concept of self-forgiveness is very tricky because self-forgiveness can seem threatening when people's tendencies to self-blame and self-criticise are rooted in their safety strategies. Both taking blame and seeking forgiveness can be seen as safety seeking efforts to calm the anger in the minds of the (powerful) other(s) so that the self is not rejected or hurt. Indeed, sometimes individuals can be so fearful of retribution that they will literally beg for forgiveness and continue to be in a state of loathing and

distress without it (Garcia, 2015; Plante, 2016). In nonhuman primates too, when a subordinate has been threatened or hurt by a dominant they may, after a while, seek the reassurance of the dominant by approaching them with very submissive postures. Generally submissive signals are natural de-escalators of anger and hostile intent. This is called 'reverted escape' where the subordinate returns to the source of the threat (see Gilbert, 2000 for reviews). These kinds of safety behaviours, which may appear as submissive seeking of forgiveness, can be linked to the regulation dyadic relationship of hostile-dominance and subordination.

Thus, we can see that self-criticism and related emotions such as shame are highly related to competitive motives that arise within hierarchical social groups where status and power dynamics are at play. One question we might ask is to what extent does having power or status mitigate against tendencies to self-blame and self-criticise, or facilitate self-compassion and self-forgiveness (Gilbert & Miles, 2002). Certainly, during the Global Financial Crisis many individuals knew perfectly well they had caused harm but neither owned responsibility, nor felt a need for forgiveness from others, let alone self-forgiveness (Sachs, 2012). Indeed, rather than engaging in responsibility and showing regret or remorse there is some evidence that those who are dispositionally higher in power (e.g. high on narcissism) may simply justify their behaviour (Strelan, 2007). Certainly, those in positions of power seem to exhibit less concern for others and their suffering (Keltner, 2016).

Compassion Towards Self and Others

In contrast to power and competitive motives, our capacity for compassion evolved from mammalian motives for caring (Mayseless, 2016). What links caring to compassion is our socially intelligent competencies that allow us to *knowingly* engage in helpful acts (Gilbert, 2017). So many mammals care for their infants by protecting them and feeding them; however, we would not necessarily call this compassionate behaviour.

We can define compassion as an aspect of caring involving a sensitivity to suffering in self and others with a commitment to try to alleviate and prevent it (Gilbert, 2017; Gilbert & Choden, 2013). From this definition, there are two basic sets of psychological competencies required. The first is our ability to turn towards signals of distress and suffering rather than avoid them, dissociate, use denial or justification—even if we are the cause. The second is moving to an action orientation and working out what is a wise thing to do. In the case of compassion, we can identify six competencies for engaging with distress and six for working out what to do. These are given in Fig. 1. By articulating the competencies that underpin compassion—such as attention sensitivity, distress tolerance, empathic insight, courageous behaviour—we will be able to explore how each of these can play a role in self-forgiveness. For example, it is clear that an inability to tolerate distress or understand one's actions could mitigate against self-forgiveness. One has to be empathic to the distress one causes, even unintentionally, in order for self-forgiveness to rise

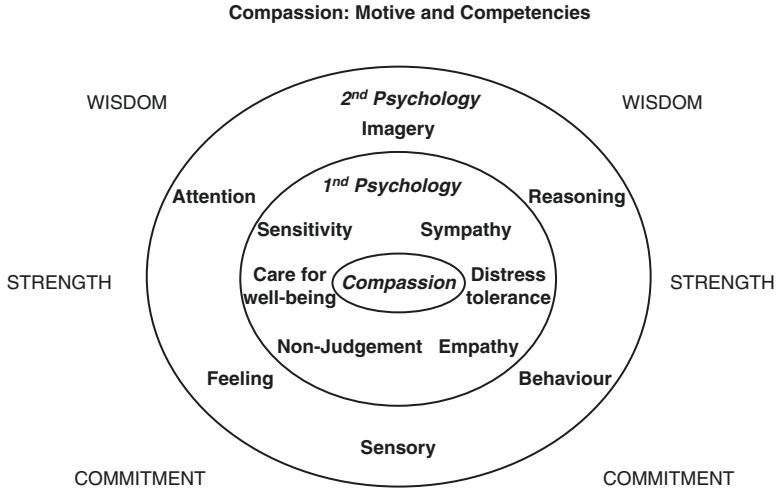

Fig. 1 The competencies of compassion. Adapted from, P. Gilbert (2009) *The Compassionate Mind*. With kind permission from Constable Robinson

at all. So self-forgiveness may require one or more particular facets of compassion to be developed.

A crucial point here is that self-forgiveness may work very differently according to the underpinning motivational system. The functions and healing of rank, power, and (global-self) shame based underpinings for self-criticism and self-forgiveneness will be different from care concern (behaviour-focused) underpinings for self-criticism and self-forgiveneness.

Competencies of Compassion and Their Role in Self-Forgiveness

One way of developing facets of compassion is through approaches such as Compassion Focused Therapy (Gilbert, 2010). Below we outline facets of compassion that may be particularly relevant for those struggling with self-forgiveness that are addressed within Compassion Focused Therapy (CFT). As with most psychotherapies, change begins first with a willingness to move towards or into the difficulty, the capacity to recognise a need for self-forgiveness, and then the desire to address this and relieve it.

Attention Sensitivity Compassion requires us to pay attention to the nature and extent of suffering and the source of our or others' distress. Noticing and attending to an aversive state (guilt and shame, or self-criticism or self-dislike) rather than

dissociating from it is important. This state of mindfulness, of recognising and attending to one's thoughts and emotions, is part of compassion.

Sympathy When we pay attention to distress in oneself and others, we can be emotionally moved by that distress. This reaction is typically labelled as sympathy (Eisenberg, VanSchyndel, & Hofer, 2015). In a way this is feeling distressed for our distress as opposed to indifference. So partly what motivates one to consider and develop self-forgiveness is being emotionally moved in some way with the pain that certain actions and a lack of self-forgiveness cause us.

Distress Tolerance Developing emotion and distress tolerance is essential to most psychotherapies. In order to forgive others, we need to be engaged with, and to tolerate the pain, hurt, and anger others have caused us. Self-forgiveness is likely facilitated by learning to tolerate genuine guilt-based remorse and sadness. We may gain insight into our need for self-forgiveness when we are able to tolerate the way in which our self-criticism and lack of self-forgiveness underpins (say) feelings of being unlovable, disconnected, or lonely. Again if we block out from those feelings, if we cannot tolerate to look deeply into them or bear them, then we may not fully recognise the harm of shame-based self-criticism and self-hatred and the need for both self-acceptance and self-forgiveness (Gilbert & Irons, 2005).

Empathy Empathy is the ability to resonate emotionally with the experiencing of self and others and also understand it. Generally, there is a focus on two dimensions of empathy: (1) emotional contagion and attunement and (2) perspective taking (Decety, Bartalm, Uzefovsky, & Knafo-Noam, 2016; Decety & Cowell, 2014). Empathy also enables us to recognise and anticipate the 'consequences' of our behaviour and the impact we have on others. Without it we may lack insight into the harmful and hurtful nature of our acts, which will inhibit processes of self-forgiveness. Beyond this, empathy enables us to connect with our common humanity. However, part of that common humanity is the realisation that people are not entirely an individualised, autonomous 'in control' selves. Rather our needs and desires have been complexly developed through the interaction of genes, physiology, and social contexts (Gilbert & Choden, 2013). CFT has the view that 'I'm not responsible for *having* an anger or sex system or it's vigour or even it's typical elicitors –as these were built by genes and physiological systems choreographed – by background.' A car is very useful but also potentially dangerous and therefore we have to learn how to drive it carefully and responsibly. It's the same with our minds: they are potentially wonderfully creative and caring but also potentially dangerous to us and others. So we need to take responsibility for learning how to 'drive them' safely. Empathic insight into the evolving nature of mind helps us see this. Empathy requires acquiring wisdom and understanding that the human brain is full of conflicting motives. With a lack of self-empathy we tend to have unrealistic expectations of what is possible for us. Compassionate self-correction is a way of being motivated to see our mistakes honestly and openly in order to improve (Gilbert, 2010).

Nonjudgement The sixth engagement quality of compassion is nonjudgement. This relates to an ability to be accepting and open to one's experience, without condemn-

ing and closing down on it. It again addresses the self-focused, self-critical elements but can enable experiences of guilt, associated with sadness and remorse. Inaddtion to the six engagement competencies are those for taking compassionate action, such as using insight, wisdom and courage (see Gilbert 2009, 2017 for a fuller discussison).

CFT is a motivational approach to compassion and identifies a number of competencies. These competencies are the basis for compassionate mind training (e.g. how to improve distress tolerance, empathy, courageous behaviour, and evidence-based thinking). Central practices use breathing, posture, and behavioural techniques to construct a sense the self consistent with who we would be if we were at our most compassionate. Therapists can then help clients develop competencies such as empathy and distress tolerance, along with the competencies for courage and wisdom and to change. Using the example of self-forgiveness, one might invite the client to step into the compassionate state and then consider: 'as your compassionate self how would you like to develop the tolerance you need to be self-forgiving; how would you like to see this problem that would enable you to be more self-forgiving; as your compassionate self how would you wish to act to enable you to be more self-forgiving; what might you need to do in order to practice becoming more self-forgiving.' (see https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VRqI4lxuXAw). CFT spends a lot of time helping people to construct and imagine themselves at their compassionate best—focusing on attention, using imagination and reason, developing courageous action, learning body awareness, and recognising and acknowledging feelings that arise. Teaching people how to deliberately switch into these imagined states of mind, using breathing exercises to stimulate the vagal nerve, body postures, and various other mental rehearsals, plays important roles in therapeutic change (see Kirby, 2016; Kirby & Gilbert, 2017; Leaviss & Uttley, 2015; McEwan & Gilbert, 2016). CFT also uses a range of acting techniques to facilitate this process (Gilbert, 2010). CFT suggests that by creating compassionate states of mind and using the psychoeducation model, with various imagery and body-based practices, clients are able to discover their own internal wisdom from which they can develop a basis for self-acceptance and self-forgiveness.

Conclusions

Tragically, human brains have evolved in such a way that we have many internal and external conflicts, and dispositions to do harmful things to ourselves and others. Among our recently evolved competencies are ones for knowing self-awareness and self-monitoring. We can become judgemental and condemning of ourselves in ways that stimulate internal threat processing and keeps us in high states of threat/stress. It is unlikely other animals can do this. In addition, shame-based self-criticism creates a sense of difference and disconnection from others.

This chapter has argued that the family of self-monitoring processes such as shame-based self-criticism and self-condemnation can be distinguished from guilt

and self-compassion in regard to the underlying evolutionarily shaped motives for competition or care. Any intervention therefore would likely benefit by exploring the functions of self-criticism because different functions will give rise to different facilitators and inhibitors of self-acceptance and self-forgiveness.

Compassion approaches seek to create particular states of mind which enable people to use their own internal wisdom, strength, and courage to address the issues that require self-forgiveness. Self-forgiveness is not letting oneself off the hook but at times feeling the sadness of remorse more intently. Cultivating our inner capacity for caring and compassionate ways of being with oneself and the dark side of one's nature offers an opportunity for healing and integration (Gilbert, 2017).

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