CHANGES MODULE 16:
Tackling toxic self-criticism

Self-criticism is the act of becoming aware of our own flaws. It can be a healthy way to increase self-awareness and grow, but if done too much it can become toxic, causing low self-esteem and poor wellbeing. **Toxic self-criticism** is often based on fear, disappointment or is caused by negative echoes from the past. Learning to tackle it takes **self-compassion**. Here are some ideas for doing this:

1. **Pay attention to your thoughts**
   You're so used to hearing your own story that it's easy to become unaware of the messages you're sending yourself. Learn to recognise your thought patterns, when they're scrambling or becoming toxic. It might help to give your "toxic inner critic" a funny name so you can separate out negative thoughts.

2. **Change the channel**
   When you keep replaying a mistake you made in your head over and over again this is sometimes called ruminating. Change the channel. Find an activity that will temporarily distract you from the negative tapes playing in your head.

3. **Think of a compassionate image**
   Imagine something that is gentle, kind and loving that soothes you. Even if the image doesn't work, the focusing can fight the scramble.

4. **Examine the evidence.**
   Your thoughts aren't always true. In fact, they're often exaggerated negatively.
   Balance your thoughts with some gentle questions to yourself about how true your thoughts really are.

5. **Ask yourself what advice you would give to a friend**
   When you're doubting yourself, ask "What would I say to a friend who had this problem?" Listen to those words and direct them to yourself.

6. **Ask yourself: What's the worst that can happen?**
   Often the worst-case scenario isn't as bad as we fear. Reminding yourself that you can handle tough times increases your confidence. It can also decrease much of the dread and negative thoughts that can stand in your way.

7. **Practice self-acceptance**
   Reminding yourself that there's always room for improvement is positive, but telling yourself that you're not good enough can get toxic. Practice accepting the many parts of you - good and bad.

This practice can be easier said and done… Things that may help include:

- Having a mantra (e.g. "I accept the anxious part of myself").

- Imagining the parts of yourself that you don't like as needing love.

- Keeping a "Pride Jar" by writing on small pieces of paper things that you are proud of and keeping them in a jar. Add more when you can, and take them out to read when you're struggling.

- Keep a small box for worries, shame, fears or negative thoughts and imagine the box containing them for you.

- Learn to recognise that some of the parts you don't like may have developed as survival strategies in difficult times. Recognising how they once helped you cope may also help you accept them.

Many of the negative thoughts we have about ourselves have come from the context that we live in. Society tells us we should be a certain way (such as having a stiff upper lip, working a full-time job or being thin). It can be hard to accept the parts of ourselves that do not fit the mould, because the world around us tells us not to. Sometimes questioning the pressures that the world places on us can help us remember that we're not to blame.

Discussion Options
What ways do you find compassion for yourself?
Where do you think some of the negative ideas you have about yourself have come from?

Further reading
- *The Compassionate Mind* by Paul Gilbert (This book breaks down the biological reasons for our emotions and gives an understanding of how to tackle the negative cycles).