

The Double Standard Technique

What is the Double Standard?

The Double Standard Technique, developed by Dr. David Burns, is a powerful roleplay method that helps people practice self-compassion.

Often, people hold a **double standard**: they are much harsher and more critical toward themselves than they are toward others. This technique helps you reverse that pattern by imagining what it would be like to treat yourself with the same kindness, understanding, and empathy you would naturally give to a close friend.

Case Example: “I’m a Bad Dad”

Steve, a single dad, shared that he had been struggling with feelings of inadequacy, guilt, and self-consciousness. He had been overworked and doing his best to provide for his son, but heavy traffic and long hours caused him to be late multiple times when picking his son up.

Me: I’d like to show you a helpful tool called the Double Standard Technique. It might help with your thought, “I’m a bad dad.” Want to give it a try?

Steve: Sure.

Me: Great. This is a compassion-based roleplay technique. You’ll play yourself, and I’ll play a close friend of yours who’s just like you. A kind of clone. What name should we use?

Steve: Tom.

Me: Perfect. I’ll play “Tom,” and I’ll share what I’m going through. Your role is to respond honestly, just as you would to a dear friend. Ready?

Steve: Yes.

Roleplay begins

Me (as Tom): Steve, you’re a really good friend, and I always value your thoughts. I was late again to pick up my son from school. I felt really inadequate, guilty, and self-conscious. I told myself, “I’m a bad dad.” Don’t you think that’s true?

Steve: No, that’s not true. You’ve been working hard to provide for your son, and you clearly care about him. Being late sometimes doesn’t make you a bad dad. It makes you human. What matters most is that you love your son and are doing your best.

Me (as Tom): Hearing you say that helps me feel better. But are you just saying it to be nice, or do you actually believe it?

Steve: I really believe it. It’s 100% true. You’re a good dad who’s trying hard, not a bad one.

Me (as therapist): If that's true for me, could it also be true for you?

Steve: Yes, it must be since we're the same person.

How You Can Use This Technique

Step 1. Identify a negative thought running through your mind. Write it down:

Step 2. Imagine a close friend/clone of yourself. They are exactly like you, experiencing the same situation and expressing the thought you just wrote down.

Step 3. Write down how you would respond to that friend:

Step 4. Ask yourself: Do I believe what I wrote in Step 3? Why or why not?

Step 5. Finally, ask: *If this is true for my friend, could it also be true for me? Why or why not?*

The Double Standard Technique is not about blind positivity. It's about learning to treat yourself with the same fairness, kindness, and understanding you already know how to give others.

Important Things to Keep in Mind

- If you find that you don't believe what you wrote, or if it feels true for a friend but not for yourself, pause and reflect on why. There may be good reasons you continue holding

onto the negative thought.

- Sometimes this technique may not be the right fit for you. Another approach might be more helpful in addressing your specific situation.
- In some cases, people are **just as harsh or even harsher to others** as they are to themselves. In those situations, this technique may not work as intended.
- If the technique does work, try practicing it again with a different negative thought. The more you repeat it, the more natural self-compassion can become.